

## Mormon Church Defends Strict Utah Liquor Laws



In this Feb. 26, 2013, file photo, manager Dustin Humes fixes a drink in a small room which is out of the view of patrons at Vivace Restaurant, in Salt Lake City. The Mormon church has issued a sweeping defense of Utah's famously strict liquor laws, drawing a line against tourism, restaurant and bar industry advocates who have helped ease alcohol regulations in recent years. Ahead of the upcoming legislative session, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints posted to its website a hefty multimedia policy statement urging lawmakers to uphold rules that church leaders say are "closely tied to the moral culture of the state." (AP Photo/Rick Bowmer, File)

SALT LAKE CITY (AP) — The Mormon church has issued a sweeping defense of Utah's famously strict liquor laws, drawing a line against tourism, restaurant and bar industry advocates who have helped ease alcohol regulations in recent years.

Ahead of the upcoming legislative session, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints posted to its website a hefty multimedia policy statement urging lawmakers to uphold rules that church leaders say are "closely tied to the moral culture of the state."

The posting features an explanation of the church's stance, a video interview with one of the faith's top leaders and graphic presentations of supporting statistics.

"It's very important that we avoid an alcohol culture," said D. Todd Christofferson, of the Quorum of the Twelve, the church's second-highest governing body, in the video.

Experts say church leaders are flexing their considerable political muscle with a move that could have a chilling effect on efforts to change state liquor laws this session.

"In Utah politics, no one wants to go up against the LDS church," said Damon Cann, a political scientist at Utah State University.

The majority of Utah legislators are Mormons and an estimated two-thirds of the

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state's residents belong to the faith.

Avoiding alcohol is a fundamental part of being considered a fully practicing member of the Mormon church, religious experts say. Those who drink alcoholic beverages can't worship in temples and face social stigma, said Matthew Bowman, assistant professor of religion at Hampden-Sydney College in Virginia.

In Utah, liquor licenses are issued to restaurants based on state population quotas, creating a long waiting list. In establishments that do serve alcohol, portion sizes are tightly controlled. And in some restaurants, drinks must be mixed in a backroom or behind a partition that detractors have come to call a "Zion curtain." Other alcohol sales are limited to state-run liquor stores, where beer is not refrigerated and ancillary items like margarita mix aren't sold.

Christofferson said the church is not proposing banning alcohol and doesn't want to impose its rules on the entire state. But, he said, the state's current laws strike the right balance between allowing people to drink while limiting social costs of alcohol abuse.

"We've got a reasonable system and it seems to be working, and I believe that the efforts to chip away at this that have gone on for years and years are counterproductive," Christofferson said.

Utah's rules governing the sale of beer and alcohol have slowly loosened as tourism and business leaders have worked to "normalize" the laws to make the state more friendly to out-of-state visitors. In 2009, for example, the state did away with a requirement for bars to operate as members-only social clubs.

Lawmakers haven't announced any major proposals to loosen Utah's liquor laws during the 2014 legislative session, which starts Monday. But tourism and restaurant associations have made clear their intention to continue pushing for "normalizing" the state's liquor rules to attract more tourists and chip away at the outside perception the Utah's rules are abnormal.

In the video, Christofferson disputes the notion that Utah's liquor laws are significantly different from those in other states and points to statistics to back the church's assertion that the current system keeps people safe.

Utah had the lowest number of alcohol-related traffic deaths per capita in 2012, the church points out, citing federal highway statistics.

The church's stance comes as no surprise. Mormon leaders have long worked to defeat efforts to relax the laws and commonly take public stances on moral and public safety issues.

But, the decision to have an apostle front the cause is noteworthy and "ups the ante," Cann said.

The church didn't say why they chose this year to roll out the campaign, but Morgan

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Lyon Cotti of the University of Utah's Hinckley Institute of Politics said it's reasonable to presume the church felt the efforts to ease laws had reached a tipping point.

Despite the church's statement, Scott Beck, president of Visit Salt Lake, remains optimistic that legislators will continue to be open to finding ways to make liquor laws more suitable for urban and tourist areas.

"We agree that we have a culture that should be celebrated. That's part of what we do," Beck said. "But we hope there is dialogue about the opportunity to normalize some of our liquor laws."

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