

 SEARCH

The Salt Lake Tribune

SUBSCRIBE

LOG IN

SUBSCRIBE




Surprise! The LDS Church can be seen as more 'pro-choice' than 'pro-life' on abortion. Here's why.

(Illustration by Christopher Cherrington | The Salt Lake Tribune)

By Peggy Fletcher Stack | June 1, 2019, 3:01 p.m. | Updated: June 2, 2019, 11:27 p.m.

It may seem counterintuitive to some, but The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints leans more toward “pro-choice” on abortion than strictly “pro-life” — and even many devout members don't fully grasp that.

That's partly because, in recent decades, the church has aligned itself on several social issues with conservative religions, which leads anti-abortion activists to presume Utah's predominant faith would favor every effort, including [Alabama's new law](#), to make abortion illegal at virtually any point and for any reason. They believe Latter-day Saints naturally would cheer the undoing of the landmark 1973 *Roe v. Wade* ruling. 

protesters from the religious right frequently show up carrying signs chastising Latter-day Saints for not being anti-abortion.

At the same time, the LDS Church's position is hardly "pro-choice" — at least in the "rather unnuanced way that permeates public discussion," says ethicist Courtney Campbell, a Mormon professor of religion and culture at Oregon State University in Corvallis, but "rather in the sense that ecclesiastical leadership emphasizes its role in 'teaching correct principles' ... and relies on the informed judgments of 'competent' medical practitioners, permits compassionate exemptions and ultimately defers to moral agency."

The church's stance, says Campbell, who has a forthcoming book on Latter-day Saint medical ethics, "provides more latitude for choice, rather than an absolutist pro-life prohibition, such as is present in the Alabama law."

If Utah legislators — who have also taken [recent steps to limit abortions](#) — pushed for a "fetal heartbeat law like Georgia, Kentucky, Arkansas and Louisiana," he says, "I don't know if the church would feel inclined to support it."

Instead, the church "can engage in a whole range of education and policy initiatives, such as access to basic health and maternity care which affirm women's equality, that



Mormon people support making abortion legal, safe and rare, says Angela Clayton of

Scottsdale, Ariz., a blogger with [By Common Consent](#). “This is one issue where both [the Democratic and Republican] parties’ views are potentially consistent with the church’s stance.”

The church “does not require that abortion be illegal,” she says, “merely that it be taken very seriously.”

Roe v. Wade is “not contradicted by the church's policy,” Clayton says in an upcoming episode of The Salt Lake Tribune’s [“Mormon Land”](#) podcast.

The church’s policy “is enabled by Roe v. Wade,” she adds. “The church can be more strict than Roe v. Wade allows for its church members without applying that standard to other citizens that are not members of the church. ... But, again, we should err a little bit more on whatever we believe is the right moral choice.”

Latter-day Saints who, under the faith’s guidelines, make the wrong choice and have an elective abortion “may be subject to church discipline.”

Is there any hope for them? “The answer is yes!” [Nelson wrote in October 2008](#), quoting the church’s policy that “as far as has been revealed, a person may repent and be



Mormon founder Joseph Smith offered a revelation, as recorded in [Doctrine and Covenants Section 59](#), stating, “Thou shalt not ... kill, nor do anything like unto it.”

That passage and others have provided the underpinning for the church’s opposition to elective abortions for more than a century, Lynn D. Wardle, a Brigham Young University law professor writes in [“Teaching Correct Principles: The Experience of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints Responding to Widespread Social Acceptance of Elective Abortion.”](#)

More than 20 public sermons strongly condemning abortion were delivered by church leaders between 1857 and 1885, Wardle writes.

Smith’s immediate successor, Brigham Young, decried abortion (which he compared to “infanticide”) Wardle writes, as being “used by married persons to prevent the expenses and responsibilities of a family of children.”

(Tribune file photo) Brigham Young, second president of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints

A century later, in the 50 General Conferences between October 1970 and April 1995, the BYU lawyer reports, church leaders delivered more than 75 sermons addressing the practice and legalization of elective abortion.

Weeks after the 1973 Roe ruling, the church issued a [statement](#), saying, “Abortion must be considered one of the most revolting and sinful practices in this day, when we are witnessing the frightening evidence of permissiveness leading to sexual immorality.”

In that moment, however, the church’s position still allowed for exceptions, including, “where, in the opinion of competent medical counsel, the life or good health of the mother is seriously endangered or where the pregnancy was caused by rape and produces serious emotional trauma in the mother.”



1 neology of the soul

Mormon beliefs about God and humanity are unlike most other Christian views regarding when life begins and the relationship between the body and the spirit.

It teaches that souls were not created by God but have always existed independently and will exist infinitely into the future.

Young taught that the spirit entered the body with the baby's "quickenings," or first breath, an idea also promoted by outspoken Latter-day Saint leaders, including [the late apostle Bruce R. McConkie](#).

Others see "quickenings" as when the mother first feels her fetus move, which varies from woman to woman.

For Latter-day Saints, the notion of when the spirit enters the body is a tad "murky," Clayton says.

The church has never taken an official position on the question.

For those who think that "the fetus is already a soul containing a human spirit, they see [abortion] as murder because that spirit 'dies,' and its mortal probation is over," Clayt ✕

spirit of an aborted fetus would go to another body instead.”

And for rigid “pro-life” Latter-day Saints who call abortion murder, they are resorting to “theological hyperbole,” she writes in her [blog](#), “because we don’t share a set doctrine that the spirit resides in the body in utero. Theologically, at least, our stance on abortion is more neutral and less fraught than that of other conservative religions.”

What about fetuses that are miscarried or stillborn?

“Church policy is that miscarriages aren’t put on family records and thus, in one sense, don’t count as people,” Provo blogger Clark Goble writes at [Times and Seasons](#).

Stillborns — typically death in the third trimester or at time of birth — “are and can be given a name,” Goble writes. “While this tends to suggest that the church assumes third trimester fetuses are fully people, it’s also largely a policy open to change and not intended as a doctrinal claim.”

The line between miscarriage and stillbirth is also “extremely blurry,” he writes, “and mostly up to the family’s discretion.”

Who makes the call?

The church’s position is that abortion is allowed for those exceptions only after the



That worries Clayton.

“I'm not saying don't consult ever with a bishop, but I certainly don't think that your average bishop is an infallible guide for this kind of decision,” she says on the podcast. “I also think the term ‘persons responsible’ might give undue equal weighting to both the husband and the wife.”

To Clayton, it is primarily the woman's decision “in conjunction with a competent physician and also prayer,” she says. “I don't discount the value of divine intervention and prayer and personal revelation in this kind of matter.”

But giving that amount of weight to a bishop's consultation — someone likely with little to no training who probably has his own personal biases and ignorance — “frankly, is a terrible instruction for a lot of bishops out there.”

It's not that fathers should have no role in the decision, Clayton says, “but I do think that the woman is the one who is pregnant and needs to have the ultimate say.”

Talk and listen

Mormonism's speculation about when spirits enter bodies allows for a lot of openness



a baby dreams.

There are lots of bodies and lots of spirits, she muses, so it leaves open the possibility that if one body doesn't work, another one might.

Ostler believes Young was responding to the circumstances of his time when lots of babies were stillborn. "It was a comforting theology," she says, "and practical, too."

Today, technology can keep babies alive earlier and earlier in gestation.

"I wouldn't underestimate the impact of being able to see through ultrasounds, etc., a little human developing," Ostler says. "If it starts to look like me, I'm going to care for it more."

Still, Latter-day Saints can't ignore the social context surrounding women who choose to abort. "There are a lot of factors impinging on her choice."

If the church wants women not to abort their fetuses, she says, "we should be taking really good care of those who carry them to term."

Much better sex education and access to birth control would help, Ostler says.

Having dealt with infertility herself and wanting so badly to bring children into the world (having kids was an "earned experience," she says), the Utah County mom "is

×

about the “sanctity of life and how we are going to deal with potential lives.”

She also hopes more conservative believers will understand why others see the politics of abortion as misogynistic and controlling of women’s bodies.

But it is “impossible to communicate” between the opposite poles when advocates on both sides are so firmly entrenched, she says. “We need to find more practical ways to engage in the middle ... in real, not just abstract ways.”

A good starting place might be to listen to the stories of women who have had abortions, Ostler says, and to realize that even some conservative faiths like Mormonism — while deploring elective abortions — still recognize the need for choice.


pstack@sltrib.com
Follow @religiongal

[Donate to the newsroom now.](#) The Salt Lake Tribune, Inc. is a 501(c)(3) public charity and contributions are tax deductible

 [Comments: \(0\)](#)

RELATED STORIES

POLITICS

LDS Church is assigning ‘specialists’ to help members become more politically active. 

wedding businesses brace for change — new Latter-day Saint marriage policy is already impacting couples' plans

RELIGION

Latter-day Saint women's leader discusses how to deal with dismissive male authorities

RELIGION

This week in Mormon Land: Relief Society video aims for diversity, Nelson unveils next big trip, website drops nickname — sort of

RELIGION

'Mormon Land': New LGBTQ play explores struggles of Mama Dragons as they balance faith and family

THE LATEST

Losing 3-1 last year forged a group of Jazz players who trust each other, and the team plays better as a result

For the first time since the pandemic began, Downtown Farmers Market reopens to its normal array of vendors — and crowds



Cole Stangler: France is becoming more like America. It's terrible.

QAnon? The 'big lie'? What might it take to get Latter-day Saints to stop believing in them?

CONNECT

- Facebook
- Twitter
- Instagram
- YouTube
- RSS

SUBSCRIPTIONS

- Subscribe to print + digital
- Subscribe to digital only
- Free digital for print subscribers
- Email newsletters
- Login to your print account
- Login to your digital account
- Subscription FAQs
- Help and contact info

ABOUT US

- History and mission
- Our nonprofit model
- Board and advisers
- Officers and staff
- First Amendment Society
- Donors and tax filing
- Privacy policy
- California privacy
- Editorial policies and ethics

MORE

- Advertise with us
- Legal notices
- Store
- Podcasts
- Archives
- Story tip line
- Support The Tribune
- Donate
- Cookie Preferences

ABOUT US

TERMS OF SERVICE

SUPPORT

WEEKLY PRINT EDITION



ADVERTISEMENT

NEWS THIS

CONTACT US

APP STORE

HELP

GOOGLE PLAY

COOKIE PREFERENCES

DONATE

Report a missed paper by emailing subscribe@sltrib.com or calling 801-237-2900

For e-edition questions or comments, contact customer support 801-237-2900 or email subscribe@sltrib.com

sltrib.com © 1996-2021 The Salt Lake Tribune. All rights reserved.

The Salt Lake Tribune
Independent. Nonprofit. Pulitzer Prize winner.

