

Evangelical leaders in Utah; will meet with an LDS leader

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SALT LAKE CITY — Evangelical leaders from across the country will be here Thursday for their first ever board meeting in predominantly Mormon Utah, and experts say the significance extends beyond the religious divide.

Chief executive officers of 40 denominations will be in Salt Lake City and Park City for the semiannual meeting of the National Association of Evangelicals. In addition to that gathering, the group said in a statement that it plans to meet with a leader of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, as well as Gov. Gary Herbert.

"We've never met in Utah and the organization started in 1942, so that's kind of a long spell of time to specifically avoid Utah," Rev. Greg Johnson said. "I think the tensions between historic Mormonism and historic evangelicalism probably set the stage for that kind of scenario."

The hope of Rev. Greg Johnson, founder of the Standing Together ministry in Salt Lake City, is that the meetings will further help to resolve tensions and differences between the faiths.

"That tension is real — I don't want to understate it or under-acknowledge it," Johnson said. "(The meeting) enables us to dialogue and communicate, build some relationships, begin some new interactions."

Whether in fundamental doctrine or simple flair, the differences between Mormons and evangelicals have been readily apparent. They have also played out in the political arena — most famously in 2008, when Evangelicals raised concerns about Mitt Romney becoming president. Many supported his rival and Baptist Mike Huckabee.

A recent poll from the Wall Street Journal and NBC showed Huckabee leading Romney by four points as a 2012 favorite among likely GOP primary voters.

Jon Huntsman Jr., another potential LDS presidential candidate and outgoing U.S. ambassador, lags distantly in polling behind those two men.

University of Utah political science professor Tim Chambless says what takes place in Salt Lake City with the politically-charged NAE board could ultimately have some bearing on Romney's 2012 chances.

"The evangelicals, if they are active as they were before, constitute at the Republican National Convention as much as 40 percent of the delegate vote," Chambless said. "On a political level, it's really essential for success — for victory — for Mitt Romney."

Whatever questions can be answered in high-level meetings between faiths certainly would not hurt Romney's cause.

“If the evangelicals have a question or some doubts about Mitt Romney, then maybe they’re not going to support Mitt Romney,” Chambless said.

While the NAE is a politically-active body, its end goal of meeting in Utah is likely not to gauge support a Mormon presidential candidate. There are a number of other items on the board’s agenda — including weighing in on various political issues. Panel discussions and talk about interactions between the faiths, though, will be a significant component of what takes place Thursday.

“We hope this time of dialogue with LDS leaders will deepen our understanding of the Mormon faith and contribute to the ongoing work of evangelicals in Utah,” NAE president Leith Anderson said in a statement.

“For the sake of Christ and his kingdom, we seek to represent biblical evangelism to those who wouldn’t hear or know. We also look for common ground on issues where we can work together.”

Improving relations is something Johnson has worked on for 10 years with his Standing Together ministry.

The 10-year anniversary is being celebrated Friday. Raised a Mormon in Southern California, Johnson turned evangelical in his teens and has since felt strongly about a dialogue between the faiths.

“I would tell you over the last decade, the relational rapport between Latter-day Saints and evangelicals has really improved,” Johnson said. “I think the religious divide has been effectively worked-on.”