The LDS Church issued a statement Monday afternoon saying that weapons, concealed or otherwise, have no place in a church.

While some legislative leaders may have been leaning toward changing the current unrestricted concealed weapons permit law, the statement by the largest church in the state may swing the tide. House Speaker Mel Brown and Senate President Lane Beattie, after each heard the church's statement, said they agree with it and imagine some kind of amendment to the current law giving individual church leaders the power to control what happens on their property will be introduced in the 1997 Legislature. More than 80 percent of the Legislature are members of the LDS Church.

Gov. Mike Leavitt said Tuesday morning that he agrees with the LDS Church's statement and would support a change in the state's concealed weapons law that would allow leaders of churches to ban weapons from their buildings.

Rep. Michael Waddoups, R-Bennion, who sponsored the unrestricted permit law two years ago, said he may well support a change in the law to allow churches to decide if permit holders will be allowed to carry their weapons on church property. "That makes sense to me, it is private property," said Waddoups.

But don't expect at least one fire-arm rights group, the Utah Shooting Sports Council, to agree. At least not right away.

Scott Engen, council president, said he's disappointed in the LDS Church's stand, adding it may make some loyal church members decide whether they want to protect themselves or attend church.

The statement, issued by the LDS Church's public affairs department, reads: "Churches are dedicated for the worship of God and as havens from the cares and concerns of the world. The carrying of lethal weapons, concealed or otherwise, within their walls is inappropriate, except as required by officers of the law."

Enforcement of a no-guns-in-church law could be difficult, said Brown. "(The guns) are concealed. You can't see them. My guess is if you had a (concealed weapons) permit, brought a weapon to church and were caught you could lose your permit," the speaker said.

Three weeks ago, state Public Safety Commissioner Doug Bo-drero addressed an interim study committee of the Legislature saying there is a conflict in current law concerning concealed weapons. On the one hand, said Bo-drero, the concealed weapons law gives permittees (who are investigated and certified by his department) "unrestricted" use of the permit. To gun advocates, that means permit holders can take their guns anywhere, with the current exceptions of inside court rooms, jails, prisons and on commercial airplanes. As Engen and others testified before the committee, that means they can carry their weapons into schools or private businesses that cater to the public, like grocery stores.

On the other hand, the Constitution also gives property owners rights, said Bodrero. Already, Blockbuster Video stores in Utah have posted signs banning guns, regardless of
whether the customer is a permit holder or not. Just this week, the Granite School District notified teachers and employees that under their employment contract they can't bring guns, whether they have a concealed weapons permit or not, to school. Bodrero said it's his personal opinion that guns shouldn't be in churches and perhaps not in schools, either.

``I'm very, very disappointed in the LDS Church,'' said Engen. ``The church has created a situation whereby their devoted members, who comply with the law and their right to legal self-protection (by getting a permit), to choose between obedience with church edict and self protection.'' Since the church's statement deals with weapons, not professions, Engen said it shouldn't exclude police officers from bringing weapons into the church or with security personnel with high-ranking church leaders. ``They shouldn't have their weapons'' in church either, he said.

By allowing church leaders' security personnel to carry concealed weapons in church buildings but not permit holders, said Engen, ``it appears some members (of the church) are more equal in their fundamental rights (to bear arms) than others.''

He added that the LDS Church's statement flies in the face of historical persecution of church members by others. ``From day one'' church members have had to defend themselves, he said. Engen said he couldn't say if the council would oppose amendments to the current law next year. ``That will be for the governing body of this organization to decide later'' after they've seen specific amendment language, he said.

Already leaders of other religious denominations in the state have called for changes to the law to allow church leaders to ban concealed weapons from their buildings. The LDS Church didn't issue a statement immediately after the issue was raised by Bodrero, but took time to consider it, said church spokesman Don LeFevre.

Waddoups said he knows of one lawmaker who has already asked legislative attorneys to draft a bill that would allow school districts to decide if concealed weapon permit holders can bring guns to school.

``I don't know if I can support that,'' said Waddoups. On a case-by-case basis, it may be appropriate for a teacher to bring a concealed weapon to school to protect herself, he said.

Beattie said gun control ``should be a statewide policy, not piecemeal district by district. Guns should not be in schools.'' School security should be a matter of law enforcement, he added.

Leavitt spokeswoman Vicki Varela said if current state law restricting guns in schools isn't strong enough, Leavitt would be receptive to changing the law to make it clear no guns in schools.