

Key churches support Scouts' policy on gays

by [Adelle M. Banks](#) in the [June 26, 2013](#) issue

After Boy Scout leaders took their long-awaited vote in late May to permit openly gay boys to be members, some church leaders predicted there will be a swift exodus of church groups from the Scouting organization.

"We believe that the BSA policy change will lead to a mass exodus from the Boy Scout program," the Assemblies of God denomination declared minutes after 61 percent of 1,400 delegates to the Boy Scouts of America meeting voted May 23 to change the policy.

In balloting that was seen as a potential watershed in the culture wars, not even the compromise resolution worked out months earlier by the BSA, which allows gays to be Scouts but bars gays from serving as Scout leaders, appeared to satisfy evangelical church leaders.

"We're absolutely not telling them you have to endorse homosexuality," said R. Chip Turner, national chairman of the BSA's Religious Relationships Task Force. "You may not deny that membership based on that one characteristic."

Turner acknowledged there will likely be fewer units, notably among religious groups, which have composed about 70 percent of BSA sponsoring organizations. Other conservative leaders, including Liberty Counsel chairman Mat Staver and Southern Baptist ethicist Richard Land, are also talking about a "mass exodus" in response to the change, which takes effect on January 1, 2014.

However, three large church bodies in the U.S. that have traditionally supported the Boy Scouts—Mormons, United Methodists and Roman Catholics—have said they will continue to work with the BSA.

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, which sponsors more BSA troops than any other organization, "will continue to sponsor Scout units for its congregations in the United States," said spokesman Eric Hawkins. He does not expect any to disband.

United Methodist Scouting officials, the BSA's second-largest sponsor, are continuing to support the BSA, as are youth organizations such as Girl Scouts, 4-H and Big Brothers. About 6,700 Methodist

churches currently sponsor Boy Scout groups.

The U.S. Catholic Church's top liaison to the Boy Scouts of America is telling Catholic Scout leaders and troop sponsors that the BSA's new policy welcoming gay Scouts "is not in conflict with Catholic teaching" and they should continue to support scouting programs.

"Scouting is still the best youth-serving program available to all youth," Edward P. Martin, chairman of the National Catholic Committee on Scouting, wrote in a May 29 letter addressed to "fellow Catholic Scouters."

"We should be encouraged that the change in BSA's youth membership standard is not in conflict with Catholic teaching," Martin said, asking that "Catholic Scouters and chartered organization heads not rush to judgment."

Martin said that despite some concerns, the NCCS had taken a neutral stance on the resolution adopted on May 23 by the BSA's National Council.

Both the Assemblies of God and the Southern Baptists have alternative programs that could attract members who are thinking of leaving the Scouts. The Assemblies put its statement on the website of its Royal Rangers, which includes boys in kindergarten through 12th grade.

Some individuals, on the other hand, already say they are leaving the BSA.

"Our family (members) are evangelical Christians," said Mari LaCom, who attends a congregation of the Evangelical Free Church near Chatsworth, California, and expects her son will no longer pursue the rank of Eagle Scout. "This is the reason our church will no longer be chartering our troop or have Scout Sundays. What do gay Boy Scouts grow up to be? Gay Boy Scout leaders."

But religious supporters of the BSA vote say they are celebrating—and expecting more progressive congregations to sponsor Scout troops—while holding out hope that the Scouts eventually will approve gay leaders.

"It's a good message to say youth are youth and can be involved with Scouting, and the difficult part is, does someone suddenly become immoral and unable to serve once they turn 18?" asked Ross Murray, director of news and faith initiatives for the pro-gay organization GLAAD.

Mike Schuenemeyer, the United Church of Christ's executive minister for gay and lesbian concerns, said he expects more UCC congregations to get involved in Scouting. —RNS

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