

Catholic bishops to scrutinize Girl Scouts

by [David Gibson](#)

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c. 2012 Religion News Service (RNS) The nation's Roman Catholic bishops are reviewing the church's long-standing ties to the Girl Scouts of the USA after complaints that some of that venerable organization's programs might contradict church teachings on contraception and abortion.

The inquiry by the Catholic bishops has been ongoing for two years and was prompted by persistent reports, circulated on the Internet and by some social conservatives, that the Girl Scouts of the USA has ties to Planned Parenthood or, for example, endorses material on sexuality that the church would not approve.

Girl Scout leaders have denied the claims, but the bishops decided to continue their inquiry. In a March 28 letter to his fellow bishops, Bishop Kevin C. Rhoades, chairman of the Committee on Laity, Marriage, Family Life and Youth, wrote that "important questions still remain and need to be examined."

Rhoades, bishop of the Fort Wayne-South Bend diocese, praised "the good service that so many of our Catholic Girl Scout Troops have provided and continue to provide at the local level," but he asked bishops to pass along concerns and reports they have heard about the GSUSA, which marks its centenary this year.

For years, conservatives have said the Girl Scouts of the USA supports Planned Parenthood, and have also objected to their membership in the World Association of Girl Guides and Girl Scouts, known as WAGGGS. That organization has advocated for emergency contraception for women in developing countries, and GSUSA is one of the 145 member organizations of WAGGGS.

Last year, a Colorado troop prompted complaints when it accepted a 7-year-old transgender child who was born a boy but was being raised as a girl. Others are upset that the Girl Scouts have materials that provide links to groups like the Sierra

Club, Doctors Without Borders and Oxfam, some of which support family planning and contraception.

GSUSA leaders say they have no partnership with Planned Parenthood and that the organization does not take positions on sexuality, birth control and abortion.

But some bishops and parish priests have complained about the GSUSA or banned Girls Scouts from church property. About 500,000 of the 2.3 million Girl Scouts in the U.S. are Catholic, so the organization cannot afford to lose its historic ties to the church.

"There had been some complaints about the Scouts, and the bishops couldn't turn a deaf ear," Sister Mary Ann Walsh, a spokeswoman for the bishops, told The Washington Post. "So they want to know, what's the story?"

Church officials involved with the investigation say the Girl Scouts have made some changes in their materials and both sides say they think some complaints are overblown and that the relationship will remain intact.

"For nearly 100 years, we have partnered with the Catholic Church to support the growth and development of millions of girls," Anna Maria Chavez, a Catholic who has been the Girl Scouts CEO since last November, told Catholic News Service last month. "It is a wonderful legacy and we're grateful for the opportunity to participate in the process that will only enhance our partnership."

Chavez told CNS, which first wrote about the bishops' review, that she and other GSUSA leaders have been meeting with church officials in Washington and around the country to resolve any concerns.

But there is a strong push among the bishops to ensure that no church organization has even remote connections to doctrinally problematic groups. And conservatives do not seem assuaged by the reassurances.

"A collision course is probably a good description of where things are headed," Mary Rice Hasson, a visiting fellow in Catholic studies at the Ethics and Public Policy Center, a conservative think tank in Washington, told The Associated Press this week. "The leadership of the Girl Scouts is reflexively liberal. Their board is dominated by people whose views are antithetical to the teachings of the Catholic Church."

"I know we're a big part of the culture wars," the Girl Scouts' spokeswoman, Michelle Tompkins, told The AP. "For us, there's an overarching sadness to it. We're just trying to further girls' leadership."