

ASSOCIATION OF BAPTISTS FOR SCOUTING



PRESIDENT'S STATEMENT ON MEMBERSHIP POLICY CHANGE

Having watched the news coverage and read numerous emails from concerned Baptists and Scouters, I contacted the Membership Impact Department at the National Office of the Boy Scouts of America, proposing an interpretation of the changes in the membership guidelines. Below is the text of what I offered as my interpretation.

First, it is my understanding that the resolution clearly states that all sexual activity among Scout-aged youth is contrary to Scouting virtues, and I take that to mean that so long as it is uniformly and equitably applied, a unit could have its own list of behavioral expectations regarding sexual abstinence as a condition of membership.

Secondly, it is my understanding that the resolution only says that youth may not be denied membership solely on the basis of the youth's self-perceived sexual orientation. It does not say that a youth may not be denied membership if his behavior becomes a distraction to the program or the performance of the unit, or if his behavior casts a poor reflection on the reputation of the chartered organization.

Thirdly, the resolution, as I understand it, does not require that a church-chartered unit affirm the moral acceptability of same-sex attraction.

Fourth, the resolution does not preclude the right of the church to ask adult leaders to exemplify by word and example the positive nature of traditional, heterosexual marriage as their recognized standard what it means to be morally straight with the goal of influencing youth in the unit to appreciate and appropriate that as part of their personal values system.

The response I received from the Boy Scouts of America was that this interpretation was correct in every point so long as a chartered organization did not try to use it to exclude a boy solely on the basis of his perceived sexual orientation. The BSA is working on a list of behavior expectations of its own, but I was also told that chartered organizations could craft their own codes of conduct and that they could be stricter than the one BSA creates, so long as it does not violate the new membership policy. In short, Baptist churches that charter Scout units have the power to enforce a code of conduct on the boys that precludes their ability to engage in any kind of sexual activity and to bring disciplinary measures to bear on youth who violate the code of conduct, even to the point of removing them if their behavior becomes detrimental to the unit or the reputation of the charter organization.

Given this interpretation of the situation, I believe that it is possible, even desirable, for Baptist churches to continue to utilize Scouting as an outreach ministry of the church. How it is done, however, must change. No longer can a church simply give meeting space to the Scouts. Churches must take a proactive approach to Scouting and involve members of the local congregation alongside Scout parents as leaders, set expectations for leaders consistent with the values of the church, and create an atmosphere of Scouting that is true to the vision of Lord Baden-Powell where everything done in Scouting is done with a focus on duty to God. In this way churches can turn what looks like a negative into a positive, having an influence in shaping the values of another generation, and even reach youth that might not otherwise be reached with the gospel.

A. J. Smith
President, Association of Baptists for Scouting