

Some US Churches Cut Ties as Boy Scouts Drop Ban on Gay Youth

Some U.S. religious leaders are cutting ties with the Boy Scouts of America, saying they will no longer permit local troops to meet at their churches in reaction to the group's decision to allow openly gay youth members.

The swift withdrawal of support by some conservative churches in states such as Alabama, Georgia and Kentucky comes after the May 23 vote by the group to end the century-old ban, effective Jan. 1.

Ernest Easley, senior pastor of Roswell Street Baptist Church in Marietta, Georgia, said his church will no longer sponsor the troop it has backed since 1945 due to the new policy.

"It is extremely sad," Easley said. "I'd never dreamed that I'd be standing in front of a group preaching on Sunday, encouraging parents to pull kids out of Boy Scouts of America."

The Boy Scouts has deep ties to churches all over the country, with about 70 percent of the group's more than 100,000 units chartered by faith-based organizations.

Leaders of the Southern Baptist Convention, the largest U.S. Protestant denomination, said they expect a resolution against the policy to be issued by attendees at the group's annual meeting in Houston next month.

"Baptists have stayed where they should and scouts have left us," said Frank Page, president of the Southern Baptist Convention Executive Committee and a former scout. "We believe there is an objective right and an objective wrong."

Not all religious organizations reacted against the new policy. The Mormon Church, the largest sponsor of scouting troops nationwide, with about 430,000 youth members, expressed support for permitting gay scouts. The United Methodist Church, the second-largest sponsor, also plans to continue its role in scouting.

The Boy Scouts left its prohibition on openly gay adult leaders in place.

"We made a decision we would not discriminate against any children," said Wade Griffith, pastor at Liberty Crossings United Methodist Church near Birmingham, Alabama, which sponsors a troop with nearly 50 scouts.

"Any time the gospel is used to hurt the most vulnerable people, like children, or if they are used in a moral battle, it is wrong," Griffith said. "Whether they are gay or straight, the children are going to lose in this."

Search for New Sponsors

Boy Scouts of America cannot yet quantify the impact of the amended policy, said spokesman Deron Smith. He said the organization will work with troops to find new sponsors in cases where current supporters choose not to renew their charters.

The chairman of the national scouting committee for the Catholic Church, the third-largest sponsor of scouting troops, encouraged church members to avoid rushing to judgment.

"My hope is that we deal with the challenge in the spirit of Christian charity toward all," Edward Martin, chairman of the National Catholic Committee on Scouting, said in an open letter this week.

Some churches that backed the end of the ban may pick up charters dropped by critics of the policy, said Ross Murray, a

spokesman for the gay rights group GLAAD.

"The denominations that sponsor the vast, vast majority of scouting groups are either neutral to positive on ending the ban on gay scouts," Murray said.

In addition to troops chartered by faith-based organizations, 22 percent of Boy Scout units are supported by civic organizations and nearly 8 percent are affiliated with educational organizations.