

Religious groups shape Boy Scouts debate

by [Adelle M. Banks](#) in the [March 6, 2013](#) issue

The decision by the Boy Scouts of America to postpone any change in policy about gay membership was fueled by an “outpouring of feedback.” Much of that reaction came from a sector with strength in numbers: the religious groups that compose the majority of the Scouts’ chartered organizations.

On February 4, two days before the announcement by the BSA, its Religious Relationships Task Force met for a regularly scheduled meeting with an unexpected topic on the agenda: a possible drop of the Scouts’ ban on gay members and leaders.

Larry Coppock, the United Methodist Church’s national director of Scouting ministries, said the group—including Christian, Jewish, Muslim and Buddhist representatives—unanimously requested that Scouting executives give them more time to consider the possibility. “There’s a lot of passion around this,” he said. “There’s a lot of differences of opinion.”

They got what they asked for, Coppock said February 6, though he could not say how much influence their particular petition had. John Halloran, chairman of the National Catholic Committee on Scouting, said he believed the task force’s action was “a contributing factor.”

Organized religion has an undeniable influence on the Boy Scouts, a group that includes “my duty to God” in its oath. According to the BSA, religious organizations constitute 70 percent of its sponsoring organizations. Mormons, United Methodists and Catholics—the three largest groups—sponsored more than 1 million of the current 2.6 million Scouts in 2011.

As in other denominations, Mormon officials are “following this proposed policy change very closely. We believe the BSA has acted wisely in delaying its decision until all voices can be heard on this important moral issue,” said Michael Purdy, a

spokesman for the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

Beyond specific churches, religious liberty advocates and conservative Christian supporters of traditional families voiced concern about the Scouts' proposed policy change.

"The legal and religious liberty implications of a bad decision would have been huge," said Kelly Shackelford, president of Liberty Institute, which sent a letter from conservative legal groups to the BSA warning that the absence of a national ban on gays could result in "crippling" lawsuits against local groups that retain a ban. "We are hopeful the board will make a good decision protecting this great organization."

More than 40 conservative organizations took out an ad in *USA Today* urging the BSA to "stand firm for timeless values."

One of those groups, Texas Values, held a rally attended by hundreds outside the BSA headquarters in Irving, Texas, just as the postponement decision was announced. "There's no doubt that the faith communities that have gotten involved in this issue have made a difference," said Jonathan Saenz, president of Texas Values. "We're very encouraged to see so many people of religious faith step up and be leaders and do what's right."

But not all religious leaders—on either side of the debate—are satisfied with the postponement.

"It is not enough that they postpone a decision," said Tony Perkins, president of the Washington-based Family Research Council, which also signed onto the *USA Today* ad. "Instead, the BSA board should publicly reaffirm their current standards, as they did just last July."

Susan Russell, a gay rights activist and a priest at All Saints Episcopal Church in Pasadena, California, said the Episcopal Church has been calling on the BSA to be open to gay members and leaders since 2000.

"And now the Boy Scouts 'need more time' to send the message to young gay American kids that they are just as loved, valued and important as their straight friends and neighbors?" she asked. "The time is now to end discrimination against our kids."

Mike Schuenemeyer, the United Church of Christ's executive minister for gay and lesbian concerns, expressed a similar reaction to the BSA delay. "Their decision today is a failure of leadership to do what is right," said Schuenemeyer, whose denomination called for a policy change in 2003. "It is time for the Boy Scouts to change their policy."

Some denominations have alternative programs for boys. The Southern Baptist Convention, which was already retooling its own Royal Ambassadors program when the Scouts' policy was first floated, wants the Scouts organization to stick with its current policy.

"We're pleased that apparently it's not going to be left in the hands of a few powerful corporate board members, but rather they're going to allow all of the charter organizations to have a vote," said Roger Oldham, a spokesman for the SBC Executive Committee.

Alvin Townley, an independent national Scouting advocate, said there's no question that the diverse opinions of faith groups will weigh heavily on the deliberations of Scouting's leadership.

"Certainly Scouting wants to honor the opinions of our religious charter partners—who actually 'own' Scout units—and as you can imagine, those churches, synagogues and mosques have widely differing views on where Scouting should go," said Townley, author of *Legacy of Honor: The Values and Influence of America's Eagle Scouts*. "Everyone wants to ensure we make this decision carefully, in consultation with our members and partners." —RNS

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