

# Southern Baptists condemn gay Scouts policy but won't force a boycott

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(RNS) Southern Baptists overwhelmingly voted Wednesday (June 12) to stand with churches and families that drop ties with the Boy Scouts of America over its decision to allow openly gay Scouts, and urged the BSA to remove leaders who supported the change in policy.

Members of the nation's largest Protestant denomination, gathered on the final day of their annual meeting in Houston, also acknowledged the right of churches to remain in Scouting, urging them to "seek to impact as many boys as possible with the life-changing Gospel of Jesus Christ."

While expected, the Baptists' resolution stopped far short of calling for an all-out boycott, as they did in 1997 with the Walt Disney Co. to combat what they saw as the company's gay-friendly policies. That boycott was ended in 2005.

"This isn't Disney redux, as some media predicted," tweeted Russell Moore, the new head of the SBC's Ethics & Religious Liberty Commission, calling the move "wise, balanced, and gospel-focused."

Nonetheless, Baptists expressed their "continued opposition to and disappointment" with the recent change in policy. The lengthy resolution notes their concern that some BSA officials and gay advocates expect the May decision will eventually lead the Scouts to allow openly gay adult leaders.

“We encourage churches that choose to sever ties with the Boy Scouts not to abandon their ministry to boys but consider expanding their Royal Ambassadors ministry, a distinctively Southern Baptist missions organization to develop godly young men,” the SBC delegates said in their statement.

BSA spokesman Deron Smith said his organization has “deep respect” for the Southern Baptists but stressed that the new policy is about accepting a boy with same-sex attraction, not condoning homosexuality.

“We believe the BSA policy is fully consistent with how Southern Baptist Churches respond to young people in their congregations, and (it) allows them to maintain their beliefs about homosexuality and minister to children who are still learning and developing,” he said shortly after Wednesday’s vote.

Baptists, including Southern Baptists, are the BSA’s sixth-largest sponsor, with close to 4,000 units and more than 108,000 members.

Baptist delegates in Houston voiced a range of opinions on the appropriate next steps for the denomination. Wes Taylor, a pastor from Palatka, Fla., who was an Eagle Scout, supported the resolution.

“I think Scouting is a great movement, but unfortunately I’m very sad to say that it seems as though they are moving away from the principles that it was founded upon,” Taylor said, arguing that young boys would now be “exposed to something that is ungodly and unacceptable.”

Charlie Dale, pastor of Indian Springs, Ala., church, was concerned about the message the resolution would send.

“I think the Boy Scouts have said that they are against all sexual activity of any boy,” he said. “So I don’t think they’re condoning homosexuality. I think that this is not going to help the cause of Christ — this resolution.”

Delegates considered stripping language that acknowledged that some Southern Baptist churches might choose to remain tied to the Scouts. But David Dykes, a member of the resolutions committee and a pastor from Tyler, Texas, said that’s not the way SBC rules work.

“We do not believe we have the authority to tell churches exactly what to do and this resolution allows churches to go whichever direction the Holy Spirit leads them,”

he said.

Some prominent Southern Baptist leaders, including former SBC President Bryant Wright and SBC Executive Committee chairman Ernest Easley, have already announced plans to break ties with the Scouts.

Other religious leaders urged the Southern Baptists not to completely abandon the Scouts.

R. Chip Turner, chairman of the BSA's Religious Relationships Task Force, wrote an open letter to Southern Baptists asking them to realize that Scouting troops remain a place for evangelism.

"As 'fishers of men,' are we not to go where the fish are located?" Turner asked after the BSA vote. "In the case of church-based Scout units, there are unreached people already in your buildings!"

A.J. Smith, president of the Association of Baptists in Scouting, also supported continued ties to the Scouts, saying troop-chartering churches can enforce a conduct code that prevents "any kind of sexual activity" and can remove those who violate it.

"I believe that it is possible, even desirable, for Baptist churches to continue to utilize Scouting as an outreach ministry of the church," said Smith, whose association includes Southern Baptists.