

Mr. Wayne Brock
Chief Scout Executive
Boy Scouts of America
1325 West Walnut Hill Lane
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DEAR MR. BROCK,

The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod (LCMS) Office of National Mission has received numerous requests from LCMS Boy Scouts and Scout leaders asking for guidance in responding to the change in policy with regard to membership of young men on the basis of sexual orientation alone announced on May 23, 2013. This letter has two purposes. First, I am requesting from you answers to specific questions with regard to the matter of local control of the religious and moral program of Scout troops. Second, I would respectfully ask for a meeting to be scheduled prior to the end of August between leaders of the LCMS and the Boy Scouts of America. Before asking my questions, please allow me to share my perspective and some very important history of the relationship of the LCMS and BSA.

Together with many members of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod (LCMS), I read with dismay the statement issued by the Boy Scouts of America's National Council (BSA) on May 23. In that statement the Council announced a change in its membership policy, removing any restrictions on youth membership on the basis of sexual orientation or preference while retaining the BSA policy against openly homosexual scout masters and adult leaders.

Let me first emphasize that the dismay of LCMS leaders and members was in no way based on antipathy toward homosexual individuals or those who are struggling with their sexual orientation. LCMS Scout troops do not ask about sexual orientation when they recruit members. There is no LCMS Scouting policy that would forbid a troop from accepting a boy even if he were to make known his same-sex attraction. Decisions about individual membership are made locally on a case-by-case basis.

That is not to deny our firm conviction, grounded in the Holy Scripture, that homosexual desires and behavior are not in keeping with our creation as male and female. On the basis of numerous plain verses of the Bible, we are convinced and publicly teach that all sexual activity outside of the marriage of a man and woman is contrary to God's will, whether that sexual activity is heterosexual or homosexual. Our church teaches that such sins are contrary to the will of God and require God's cleansing forgiveness for Jesus' sake. These convictions are central to the LCMS understanding of biblical truth. Indeed, they are the reason why the LCMS as a church does not exclude individuals who are struggling with same-sex attraction any more than it excludes individuals struggling with other inclinations and behaviors that are sinful. Yet, in welcoming all people, regardless of the particular shape sin may take in their lives, the goal is that we would all repent of our sins, receive the forgiveness Christ alone gives and then encourage and support one another as we seek to amend and reshape our lives by the power of the Holy Spirit in keeping with the truths of Scripture.

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Therefore our reaction to the BSA decision was not because we believe that boys should be excluded from the BSA simply or solely on the basis of same-sex attraction. Our dismay was, rather, based on confusion and concern.

We were, and are, confused about why the BSA considered it necessary to change its stated policy since, clearly, some boys with same-sex attraction have always been involved in Scouting. The previous policy did, however, enable the Scouts to prevent the politicization of sexuality. That, of course, was a right that was retained when it was challenged before the Supreme Court of the United States. As I stated in my letter of March 15, 2013 to Wayne Brock, Chief Scout Executive, when news of the vote about sexual orientation was first announced: “The proposed change will highlight sexuality, which has not been and should not be a matter of focus for Scouts.” That surely is the case, as the flood of reactions, both favorable to and critical of your decision, make clear. Now that BSA has opened the political debate, what will it mean for our church body’s involvement in Scouting?

Secondly, we are concerned. The Boy Scouts of America website states the policy in these words: “*No youth may be denied membership in the Boy Scouts of America on the basis of sexual orientation or preference alone.*” Having specifically protected “sexual orientation” and “preference,” it seems to us—on its face—that the BSA has taken a specific moral position and endorsed a moral judgment and teaching. This strikes us as highly substantive since, prior to this, the Scouts had purposefully left the duty to God undefined and identified and promoted only the general moral values of the Boy Scout Law.

About seventy years ago our church body struggled with the question of whether it should be supportive of Boy Scouts. There were several points of concern, but all of them revolved around a single, most important question: *Did the Boy Scouts organization seek to assume the role of the church in forming the specific religious and moral identity of the boys who were members?* Some LCMS pastors at that time worried that the Scout oath and law asked for a loyalty that should be reserved for God and his law alone. Others were concerned that Scout troops sometimes hosted their own services, presenting a sort of “generic religiosity” rather than the specific beliefs of the Christian church as the LCMS understood them. Above all, concerns were raised about who would have the last word on religious and moral teachings. Would it be Boy Scout headquarters or the church that sponsored the Scout troop?

As Lutheran Christians, our forefathers held strong, unwavering beliefs and promoted a clear and uncompromising understanding of Christian doctrine and life. They did not want to welcome Scout troops if Scout leadership would have the power to promote attitudes or beliefs that either repudiated or questioned any beliefs of the Lutheran church. At the same time, many of those Lutheran pastors saw countless admirable qualities in Scouting. They saw clear advantages for boys who were involved in Scouting and shared most of the values Scouting promoted.

As a result, a series of meetings, conversations, and correspondence between leaders of the LCMS and of the BSA followed throughout more than a decade in the 1930s and early 1940s. At the end of that lengthy period of communications and meetings, Dr. Ray O. Wyland, Director of the Committee on Relationships for the Boy Scouts of America, wrote to Dr. Theodore Graebner, an LCMS leader who had been a participant in the entire series of contacts. He stated:

I fully understand that the participation of the Missouri Synod in the Boy Scout program will be on the basis that each local Church runs its own program without interference from the Brotherhood or the Boy Scouts, and that the spiritual emphasis will be given by the Pastor and his associates. (Letter of December 1, 1943)

In a follow-up letter, dated February 23, 1944, Mr. Wyland stated categorically the following:

There is no Boy Scout authority which supersedes the authority of the local Pastor and the Congregation in any phase of the program affecting the spiritual welfare of Lutheran men and boys in Scouting.

One direct result of the dialogue was the preparation of a manual of policies and procedures called *Scouting in the Lutheran Church* (1943). A particular point of emphasis in the manual is the following:

The policy of the Boy Scout Movement is that its Program shall add to, and in no way detract from, the opportunity of the Church to give to her own boys religious instruction and spiritual experience. Scouting activities must be carried out in such a way that Scouting shall not be placed in the position of competing with any other agency of the Church for the boy's loyalty, but, on the contrary, Scouting should supplement the Church school and other organizations in aiding the Church in her efforts to help the boy lead a truly Christian life (*Scouting in the Lutheran Church*, page 15).

As a further assurance of church control, the manual also states:

Officials of the Church—the Pastor, the Director of Religious Education and the Committee on Religious Education—should clearly understand that they have full authority over their own Scout Units, under the supervision of their own Unit Committees which are appointed by the Pastor, the Church Board, the Committee on Religious Education or the Congregation, as the case may be (*Scouting in the Lutheran Church*, page 23).

It then adds on the same page:

The Church may have a closed Unit wherein all boys are members of the Church. On the other hand, the Church may decide to have an open Unit including Lutheran and non-Lutheran boys of the neighborhood. However, the leadership should be provided by the Lutheran Church.

As a consequence of these assurances, at its national convention in 1944 the LCMS expressly permitted its congregations to be involved in the Boy Scouts if they decided to do so. The number of LCMS troops multiplied quickly from that date, and thousands of boys and young men in the LCMS have benefited as a result. I am one of them having both gratitude for, and fond memories of, my own involvement in Scouting.

This leads to the specific questions to which I request your answer.

1. Is it still the agreement of the BSA to the LCMS, as Dr. Wyland stated some sixty-nine years ago, that no Boy Scout authority will supersede “the authority of the local Pastor and the Congregation in any phase of the program affecting the spiritual welfare of Lutheran men and boys in Scouting”? Even as our initial involvement in Scouting hung on this assurance, please know that it continues to be the central concern for us today.
2. Will a Boy Scout Troop chartered to an LCMS congregation be permitted to have as part of its religious and moral instruction specifically LCMS teaching on the biblical understanding of human sexuality, together with our belief that homoerotic desires and behavior are contrary to the will of God? For example, a Boy Scout Troop chartered to an LCMS congregation were to dismiss from membership a boy who is openly and admittedly homosexual in preference if he expressly rejects the teachings of sexual morality held by the sponsoring congregation?

We have additional concerns and questions, but they could best be addressed in a face-to-face meeting. Toward that end, I request a meeting, at a mutually agreeable date and time, in August 2013. Please have your administrative staff contact Rev. Bart Day, executive director of the Office of National Mission, in order to arrange a time for him and perhaps additional leaders of the LCMS to meet with you at your offices or at some mutually agreeable location. Rev. Day is available at bart.day@lcms.org or 314.996.1730.

I look forward to your reply.

Respectfully,

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SIGNATURE WITHHELD FOR SECURITY REASONS
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Rev. Dr. Matthew C. Harrison, President
THE LUTHERAN CHURCH—MISSOURI SYNOD