

Gays welcome

A knotty problem is resolved. Merit badges all round



Around the new campfire

When Robert Baden-Powell, the chief scout of the British empire, wrote the scout oath in 1908, he did not include a promise to be “morally straight”. This was added later to the American version. The editors should have known better—ambiguous phrases in sacred texts often bedevil Americans.

Until now, that vague reference was used to justify a ban on gay young men becoming scouts. The policy, though, seemed to stem not from the oath but from the Boy Scouts’ close association with religious groups, which sponsor about 70% of scout units. Many of these consider homosexuality a sin.

Now the growing public acceptance of homosexuality has left the Boy Scouts looking intolerant. During last year’s presidential campaign, both Barack Obama and Mitt Romney called for an end to the ban on gay scouts. Meanwhile, some corporate sponsors—Intel, Merck and UPS, among others—have withdrawn their support because of the ban.

So, after much debate, the Boy Scouts decided at their annual meeting in May to accept openly gay scouts, starting next year. Over 60% of scout leaders were in favour. Just as important, two of the largest sponsors of scouting—the Mormons and the United Methodists—indicated that they would not obstruct the new policy.

The decision has split the membership. But while the adults bicker, the kids carry on. Pascal Tessier, a gay 16-year-old scout from Kensington, Maryland, feared his scouting career would be cut short by the ban. Now he will be allowed to finish his work towards Eagle Scout, the highest rank in scouting. “Sexuality doesn’t have any place in scouting,” says Mr Tessier, “so why would they put it there?”

But critics claim the instigators are gay activists with their own “immoral” agenda. “Frankly, I can’t imagine a Southern Baptist pastor who would continue to allow his church to sponsor a Boy Scout troop under these new rules,” said Richard Land of the Southern Baptist Convention. Some parents have considered creating an alternative group.

Even before this latest controversy, the Boy Scouts had been struggling. At 2.7m, their numbers are roughly half what they were in 1972, the peak year. Child-abuse scandals and a failure to attract minorities have also tarnished their image. Meanwhile, the dispute over gays lingers on. Although openly gay scouts will soon be allowed to sit round the campfire, gay leaders are still forbidden. Once Mr Tessier turns 18, Eagle Scout or not, his scouting life will be over.

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