

# Questions and Answers About Girl Scouts of the USA (GSUSA) and About Catholic Scouting

This Q & A is based on a dialogue between staff to the bishops' Committee on Laity, Marriage, Family Life and Youth (LMFLY) and Girl Scouts of the USA (GSUSA). It contains information based on the dialogue as well as considerations offered by the LMFLY Committee. Guidance is also provided at the end of this resource in relation to strengthening all scouting programs. This resource is intended to assist Catholic leaders and parents and presupposes the authority of the diocesan bishop over Catholic scouting in his diocese. The information provided should not be taken as exhaustive but represents select points which the LMFLY Committee found important to consider. Further questions should be directed to the appropriate contacts in the diocese.

While Girl Scouts of the USA (GSUSA) is a secular organization, GSUSA has had a long cooperative relationship with the Catholic Church in the United States. In recent years, significant questions have been raised concerning Girl Scouts, which have, in turn, raised questions about Catholic participation in Girl Scouting.

The questions can be grouped around three areas: (1) GSUSA's relationship with organizations such as Planned Parenthood and GSUSA's relationship to its international affiliate the World Association of Girl Guides and Girl Scouts (WAGGGS); (2) GSUSA's policy on matters pertaining to human sexuality, contraception, and abortion; and (3) GSUSA programmatic materials and resources and questions about inappropriate content.

Given these questions, the USCCB Committee on Laity, Marriage, Family Life and Youth (LMFLY) discussed these questions in order to provide information and guidance to dioceses where possible.

Under the direction of the LMFLY Committee, USCCB staff first gathered preliminary information and then dialogued with GSUSA. The exchanges between USCCB staff and GSUSA staff were pleasant, informative and respectful. GSUSA staff was generous with their time, indicated a strong desire and willingness to work more closely with the Catholic Church in the United States, and have posted a link to this question-and-answer resource on their website [here](#).

Below are the fruits of the dialogue between USCCB staff and GSUSA.

## **(1) How is the Girl Scouts movement structured?**

According to Girl Scouts of the USA (GSUSA), the Girl Scouting movement is a federation of interdependent entities. GSUSA is the national organization that grants charters to local councils and provides national direction to the Girl Scouts movement. Every local council operates as an individual 501(c) (3) nonprofit corporation and therefore has certain latitude in

which to deliver Girl Scout programming at the local level. Individual troops, while needing to follow particular volunteer standards and the direction of the council (including their respective service unit), are largely under the direction of the parents/volunteers. This structure allows both troops and councils to incorporate the gifts, strengths and needs of their particular communities. It also can mean that certain decisions or activities by the troops and/or councils may not represent the recommendations or direction of the national level. GSUSA therefore has a particular and limited national authority over local councils and troops.

## **(2) When did GSUSA program content most recently change?**

According to GSUSA, in 2006, the Girl Scouts formally began a structural reorganization as well as a significant revision of programmatic materials.

Materials were revised to emphasize leadership experience and skills, and where needed, these materials have since undergone revision after content concerns were identified. Because of the publishing and circulation cycle, as of March 2014 some revised materials are still in process for complete circulation.

The LMFLY Committee recognized that emphasis on leadership development can offer opportunities for personal growth and formation. Religious recognitions programming and further initiatives at the local level could complement the focus on leadership with an additional focus on classical virtues and values grounded in a Judeo-Christian vision. Use of programming materials at the Catholic troop level would be expected to include appropriate review by Church authority and involve the discretionary judgment of parents of Catholic scouts.

## **(3) Does GSUSA have a policy on issues regarding human sexuality, contraception, and abortion?**

The GSUSA national office articulates a non-position policy when it comes to the topics of human sexuality, contraception (or birth control), and abortion. This national policy of neutrality does not prohibit individual councils or troops from taking a position or sponsoring programming on human sexuality or other topics (either from a secular or religious platform), presuming parental consent and other necessary approvals have been provided. Also, GSUSA understands this national non-position still allows it to research and report on issues related to such topics.

The LMFLY Committee recognized that attentiveness and initiative at the local level could offer positive opportunities. For example, religious recognitions programming and other initiatives at the troop level could provide opportunities to advance healthy formation in chaste living and sound education in human sexuality, presuming appropriate parental consent and approvals. At the same time, attentiveness is needed to avoid programming and initiatives that are not in accord with Catholic teaching. In addition, the Committee shared concerns with GSUSA about

particular areas of research on the GSUSA website related to human sexuality and contraception, given the impossibility of a neutral treatment of such issues. The research remains on GSUSA's website, though a disclaimer has been added.

#### **(4) Does GSUSA have an official relationship with Planned Parenthood?**

GSUSA has stated that it has no official relationship with Planned Parenthood. It has also acknowledged that, due to the structure of GSUSA and the Girl Scouting movement, the national office (GSUSA) does not have the authority to prohibit local councils or troops from collaborating with or forming their own local relationships with Planned Parenthood (or other organizations) as long as parental consent and other necessary approvals have been provided.

The LMFLY Committee considered the possibility of local councils or troops collaborating with or forming a relationship with Planned Parenthood to be an area of serious concern deserving close attention at the local level. As noted below, conversations between dioceses and Girl Scouts councils, and the establishment of a memorandum of understanding, may be helpful toward clarifying local practices and ensuring that Catholic troops are free from any programming or activities contrary to Catholic teaching.

#### **(5) What about GSUSA's membership position with regard to youth who identify as "transgender"?**

Regarding the situation of youth who identify as "transgender," GSUSA has provided an FAQ on its website noting its case-by-case approach to this issue. The answer to the FAQ reads as follows: "Girl Scouts is an inclusive organization and is proud to be the premiere leadership organization for girls in the country. Placement of transgender youth is handled on a case-by-case basis, with the welfare and best interests of the child and the members of the troop/group in question a top priority. That said, if the child is recognized by the family and school/community as a girl and lives culturally as a girl, then Girl Scouts is an organization that can serve her in a setting that is both emotionally and physically safe."

The LMFLY Committee affirmed the intention to reach out with care and support for vulnerable youth as noble and commendable. However, the general use of terms such as "sexual orientation" and "transgender youth" often does not include the important distinction between the person as a whole, the inclinations of a person, and a person's actions. A concern is that any further development of guidance in these areas may not be informed by an adequate anthropology or understanding of the human person. Concerns about the use of the term "transgender youth" and the problematic anthropology undergirding such use have been communicated to GSUSA.

Catholic troops, with the support of the local council, must be able to fully abide by Catholic teaching, particularly as it relates to the intrinsic dignity of every human person, to the gift and dignity of human sexuality, male and female, and to the distinction between person, inclination,

and action. The USCCB's [Ministry to Persons with a Homosexual Inclination: Guidelines for Pastoral Care](#) (2006) is an important reference.

## **(6) What is the World Association of Girl Guides and Girl Scouts (WAGGGS)?**

WAGGGS is an international association of scouting organizations dedicated to girls and young women. Member organizations represent themselves (and sometimes their nation) in WAGGGS. The relationship between WAGGGS and its member organizations is similar to GSUSA's relationship to local Girl Scout councils.

As an international association, WAGGGS partners with many national, regional and international organizations, such as the United Nations.

## **(7) Does WAGGGS promote so-called "sexual and reproductive health/rights"?**

According to information shared by WAGGGS with GSUSA, WAGGGS has acknowledged that, through particular member organizations, delegates, or WAGGGS' own communications, it promotes and advocates for the education of girls and young women in the area of so-called "sexual and reproductive health/rights." WAGGGS has indicated that its general emphasis is to advocate for the well-being of the world's most marginalized girls and to promote education on a variety of matters. WAGGGS has also indicated that it does not have a position on abortion.

WAGGGS' website includes various references to topics related to "sexual and reproductive health/rights," some in specific reference to positions taken by member organizations or WAGGGS delegates. Similarly to GSUSA, WAGGGS has indicated it has a particular and limited authority over member organizations and the personal positions of delegates.

While the LMFLY Committee affirmed the vital importance and value of proper education and formation in love, chastity, and human sexuality for all young people, including those who are poor or marginalized, the Committee recognized to be morally objectionable any type of promotion, advocacy, or education on "sexual and reproductive health/rights" as this phrase is commonly understood, especially since the phrase often includes abortion. For example, while WAGGGS has indicated that it does not have a position on abortion, the very use of the term "sexual and reproductive health/rights" often includes problematic positions and agendas at odds with the respect for the gift of human life and the dignity of human sexuality (e.g., positions that do not support abstinence-only education and that advocate for contraception/sterilization as well as abortion). WAGGGS' delegates from member organizations have taken problematic positions on other issues as well—positions that WAGGGS has not explicitly distanced itself from. These concerns have been communicated to GSUSA.

## **(8) What is the relationship between GSUSA and WAGGGS?**

GSUSA is an active and supportive member of WAGGGS which GSUSA describes as a convener of the global sisterhood of Girl Guides/Girl Scouts. According to GSUSA, WAGGGS creates opportunities for girls to come together and learn about their peers around the world and the value of global citizenship. Further, GSUSA indicates that girls also access global leadership and service opportunities through WAGGGS.

With regard to concerns that have been raised over the last few years, GSUSA has worked with WAGGGS to review particular materials, programming, and events that would involve Girl Scouts, and GSUSA has also indicated that it only participates in select WAGGGS programming. GSUSA has noted, however, that it does not have the ability or purview to criticize, explicitly distance itself from, or change particular advocacy positions within WAGGGS.

Each year, GSUSA contributes over one million unrestricted dollars in membership dues to WAGGGS. The amount is based on the number of members in GSUSA and comes from investment income. GSUSA does not use its own membership dues or other contributions to pay for WAGGGS dues. It has also noted that revenue from cookie sales remains within councils and troops. In response to questions raised about the fact that WAGGGS dues are unrestricted, GSUSA has responded that it cannot change its yearly WAGGGS membership dues into restricted monies or receive a financial report from WAGGGS indicating where such monies have been applied. WAGGGS has indicated to GSUSA that less than 3% of its budget is allocated towards advocacy efforts which cover a number of topics, including basic education and health care.

The LMFLY Committee recognized that both GSUSA and WAGGGS have been responsive to particular concerns. However, GSUSA's limited purview to address particular positions within WAGGGS that are objectionable based on Catholic teaching and the natural moral law (e.g., "sexual and reproductive health/rights") is a concern. In addition, with regard to the unrestricted membership dues, any monetary amount applied to advocacy or educational efforts deemed problematic is still a concern.

In sum, GSUSA's relationship with WAGGGS over the years is understandable given the history and purpose of the organizations; however, the current relationship remains a concern due to WAGGGS' problematic promotion of "sexual and reproductive health/rights" and other matters.

## **(9) What options can troops and individuals consider in response to concerns with WAGGGS?**

Various options exist for troops and individuals. Participation in WAGGGS events and in specific fundraising for WAGGGS can be discouraged. Further, as GSUSA notes, girls can choose not to wear the WAGGGS pin. Currently, the Committee on Laity, Marriage, Family Life and Youth is

recommending both of the above options for consideration by dioceses and Catholic troops. In place of wearing the pin or participating in WAGGGS activities and events, troops might encourage prayer for girls and young women around the world, foster awareness of authentic channels of outreach and service, propose concrete initiatives and projects of service and solidarity, and in general promote alternative activities and service in accord with the authentic dignity and vocation of women. As noted above, the Committee recognizes that the broader question of the Girl Scouts' relationship with WAGGGS, in view of particular WAGGGS' positions and the matter of unrestricted membership dues, remains an area of concern. For further questions or guidance, please contact your local diocese.

### **(10) What guidance can be considered at the local level to promote, foster and safeguard Catholic scouting for boys and girls?**

There are various ways that Catholic scouting and scouting in general can be fostered. The following are some considerations. Again, for every diocese, the diocesan bishop has authority and discretion when it comes to supporting and directing Catholic scouting within the diocese.

- **Strengthen the connections between scouting and youth ministry and religious education programs.** This can include utilizing religious recognition patches and programs and advancing initiatives such as age-appropriate chastity formation, as well as a stronger collaboration with parish and diocesan youth ministry offices. For example, the National Federation for Catholic Youth Ministry (NFCYM), through its National Catholic Committee for Girl Scouts and Camp Fire (NCCGSCF), provides scouting with Catholic religious recognition programs, which allow young people in elementary and high school to explore and become more involved in their faith. Programs are designed to support and complement the catechetical and sacramental preparation efforts of Catholic parishes and schools. Similarly, the National Catholic Committee on Scouting (NCCS) provides boy scouting with Catholic religious emblem programs and activities.
- **Provide guidance and formation for priests and seminarians.** Opportunities for continuing education and formation of priests and seminarians on Catholic scouting's relationship to the pastoral life and Catholic identity of the parish or school, particularly to youth ministry, would be valuable.
- **Foster clear communication and understanding at the local level.**
  - Ensure communication and foster understanding between appropriate diocesan contacts and the local scouting council.
  - For example, some dioceses have found that a memorandum of understanding (MOU) with the local council is a helpful way to establish mutual understanding and expectations so that every Catholic troop is free from any programming or activities contrary to the Church's teaching.

