

Boy Scouts ask members detailed questions about gays

By Kirk Johnson, New York Times

The Boy Scouts of America is reaching out to parents and scouts as it decides whether to continue or rescind the group's ban on gay members and leaders. Surveys went out in recent days to 1.1 million scouts and their families around the nation.

The questionnaire goes far beyond a simple yes or no, gays in or gays out. Even sleeping arrangements are addressed.

Should gay and straight scouts, for example, be allowed to share a tent on a camping trip? What role should faith play in scouting, if a church sponsoring a local scout troop has taken a position on the inclusion or exclusion of gays and lesbians in its congregation? Does the scout oath, with its language about staying "morally straight," declare a value about sexual orientation or just a general, admirable code of conduct?

The Boy Scouts said in January that it was considering lifting the ban and allowing local sponsoring organizations to decide membership policies for themselves, but then quickly changed course and said that leaders needed more time and would take up the issue at the national annual meeting in May.

The survey offers possible outcomes should the Boy Scouts decide to keep or change its policy. Some address the widespread fear that the scouting movement could fracture or face an exodus no matter what it does.

"If the Boy Scouts of America makes a decision on this policy that disagrees with your own view, will you continue to participate in the Boy Scouts, or will you leave the organization?" one of questions says. The suggested answers,

fittingly, read like responses to a course on map reading: “I believe I can find a way to continue” is one choice. “I do not believe I can find a way to continue” and “I have not yet made up my mind,” are the others.

A spokesman for the Scouts, Deron Smith, said the answers to the survey would be provided to national leaders before the May meeting. A second round of surveys, he wrote in an e-mail, will be sent soon to about 325,000 people in scouting alumni groups, including members of the National Eagle Scout Association. The survey was developed by a third-party research provider, North Star Opinion Research, with assistance from volunteers and professionals, Mr. Smith said, with “diverse viewpoints.”

“No specific weights have been assigned to any particular element, and the report will be reviewed as a whole,” Smith said.

Some polling experts said the population being sampled – those with a connection to scouting, in the past or present – could create a bias in the findings, since people generally tend to support the status quo of voluntary institutions they are involved with. That could perhaps tilt the results toward keeping the ban on gays if change is perceived as a threat to the organization.

But Christopher P. Borick, director of the Muhlenberg College Institute of Public Opinion, who has two sons in the Scouts, said he thought the wording of the questions seemed relatively neutral and not intended, as he put it, “to provide a certain outcome.”

Borick said that as a scouting father, he is strongly opposed to the ban on gays and hopes to see it lifted. He said that what the survey appears to be looking for is less what course to take than what impact a change, or a continuation of the status quo, might have.

Some questions, for example, address freedom of religious expression. The Scouts organization says that more than 70 percent of all Scout units are chartered by faith-based organizations.

“A troop is chartered by an organization that does not believe homosexuality is wrong and allows gays to be ministers,” one question reads. “The youth minister traditionally serves as the Scoutmaster. The congregation hires a youth minister who is gay. Is it acceptable or unacceptable for this youth minister to serve as the Scoutmaster?”

Another question takes on that same issue from a different perspective.

“David, a Boy Scout, believes that homosexuality is wrong. His troop is chartered to a church where the doctrine of that faith also teaches that homosexuality is wrong. Steve, an openly gay youth, applies to be a member. Is it acceptable or unacceptable for this troop to deny Steve membership in their troop?”

Respondents are asked to provide their opinions on a scale ranging from totally acceptable to totally unacceptable.

But even before May’s national meeting, some donors are already voting about the membership issue – with their wallets.

Last fall, for example, the United Way of Greater Cleveland announced that it would no longer make grants to the Scoutreach program – which works with urban and rural boys – because the ban on gays was in conflict with the organization’s diversity and inclusion policy.

Since then, about \$200,000 in donations to the Cleveland United Way has evaporated, a spokeswoman said. But in a reflection of divided local opinion, a \$20,000 increase in donor-directed contributions to the Boy Scouts arrived as well

– an 11 percent increase from the previous year.

The money question is widespread, as families pledge to withhold further donations or increase them depending on how things go.

“I made a modest \$50 donation to Friends of Scouting this year,” Susan Buchanan, the mother of a 16-year-old scout in Bethesda, Md., wrote in a letter to her local scout council. “I am prepared to quadruple that donation as soon as the ban on gays is lifted.”