



National Federation for Catholic Youth Ministry (NFCYM) and Girl Scouts USA (GSUSA)

Position Update: January 28, 2011

Background

Several issues have arisen in the past two years that have caused some leaders and organizations to question the relationship between GSUSA and the Catholic Church and the GSUSA and NFCYM, through our National Catholic Committee on Girls Scouts and Camp Fire (NCCGSCF). This position update identifies the main issues and the official NFCYM and GSUSA responses based on our mutual communications, knowing that not all issues affect every diocese or council.

The formal relationship between GSUSA and the Catholic Church dates back to at least 1914 when Cardinal Gibbons endorsed the work of Girl Scouts and their relationship with the Catholic Church. In 1975 a formal plan of cooperation was signed between the Representative for Youth Activities in the Department of Education at the United States Catholic Conference and GSUSA. In 1988 the Secretariat for Laity and Family Life was assigned to serve as liaison to GSUSA.

In 1982 the NFCYM was incorporated as a ministry organization, which included the NCCGSCF as a constitutive member and GSUSA as a collaborating member. The NFCYM assumed all responsibility for Catholic religious recognition programs serving Girl Scout and Camp Fire units. Building on the relationship created through USCC, the NFCYM entered into a plan of cooperation with GSUSA in 1997, through our NCCGSCF. This plan highlights the role of GSUSA in providing information on religious recognition programs developed by NFCYM to all councils and troops and the need for continuing dialogue to assure respect for Roman Catholic religious practices and teachings and Girl Scouting's basic principles. The 1997 Plan of Cooperation was updated in 2005 and includes a grievance process for when issues arise and recommendations for strengthening communication between GSUSA leadership and youth ministry leadership at the parish, diocesan, and national levels.

There is significant history to the relationship between the Catholic Church and her agents for youth ministry and GSUSA. This is a relationship that needs to be continually reviewed and strengthened.

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Current Issues

In 2010 several issues arose concerning GSUSA triggered by a March meeting at the United Nations where GSUSA supposedly distributed inappropriate materials on human sexuality and a campaign was begun to have the Catholic Church and all her agencies sever ties with GSUSA. These issues included the GSUSA relationship with the World Association of Girl Guides and Girl Scouts (WAGGGS) and the GSUSA relationship with Planned Parenthood, both of which called into question GSUSA's position on providing resources and programs on human sexuality. The fundamental accusation is that GSUSA distributes materials reflecting an official stance contrary to the teachings of the Catholic Church on marriage, abortion, contraception, and sexuality.

Our practice as an organization is to investigate such matters by going directly to the sources involved so we contacted GSUSA and several of those who had made accusations concerning the UN meeting. In a March 16 e-mail to NFCYM membership we shared the GSUSA response to the UN meeting, which included in part:

“The Girls Only Workshop was hosted by GSUSA, UNICEF’s Working Group on Girls, Girls Learn International, and The Grail. The meeting was only open to the girls and participating sponsors. The girls received a copy of the only document they were working on, titled *The Girls Statement*. No other documents were given to the girls as part of the event. The room in question was also used to host other events over the course of the multi-day conference. Prior to our girls entering the room, we did not ‘sanitize’ the room to ensure that no trash or other items were left behind. GSUSA was not contacted by C-Fam regarding its initial story to discuss the facts of this event. Had they applied these basic journalistic standards, the true details of this event would have been reported.”

NFCYM was satisfied with the GSUSA account of the UN meeting. However, the accusations about the UN meeting served to spur a multitude of articles, e-mails, and phone calls. Coupled with ongoing concerns about GSUSA's relationship with Planned Parenthood, NFCYM leadership arranged a meeting with GSUSA leadership in Washington, DC in November 2010. NFCYM staff, Joan Treacy from NCCGSCF and NFCYM's Board of Directors, and Sr. Eileen McCann from the Secretariat for Family, Laity, Women and Youth at USCCB met with three national GSUSA leaders with a two-part agenda:

1. To identify and clarify the critical accusations about GSUSA's relationship with Planned Parenthood and their advocacy of resources contrary to Catholic teachings on human sexuality, family and marriage;
2. To review the relationship between NFCYM and GSUSA in the promotion of our religious recognitions programs.

At that meeting we asked for an official statement clarifying their relationship with WAGGGS and Planned Parenthood and their approach to education in human sexuality. Their December 3 statement emphasizes the primacy of parents in all matters concerning human sexuality and denies any formal relationship with Planned Parenthood.

This statement reinforces our 2005 Plan of Cooperation, where it is written:

“GSUSA policy is not to take a stand on or advocate for or against any issue regarding a girl’s health and sexuality, especially outside the confines of Girl Scout programs. We also believe that parents have the primary responsibility for the safety and well-being of their girls within the context of Girl Scout programs. These policies enable the Girl Scout program to fully respect and yet remain responsive to the varying beliefs of individual girls and their families. Importantly, when a council or troop offers programs that address many of these issues, they are offered with the fully informed consent of the parents or guardians of the girls who choose to participate.”

Many Catholic Girl Scout leaders are feeling torn between their commitment to Girl Scouting and their commitment to their Catholic teachings because of the real or perceived relationship between GSUSA and organizations like Planned Parenthood. The NFCYM approach to this complex issue has been one of engagement, rather than detachment or withdrawal. NFCYM, through NCCGSCF, needs to stay connected to GSUSA not only because thousands of Catholic girls and Catholic adult leaders are involved in scouting, but because Girl Scouting—like Boy Scouting—provides excellent character development for young people through their programs. NFCYM can only influence secular organizations by staying in relationship with them . . . by being at the table.

In addition to releasing their public statement, GSUSA has taken two other actions:

1. On Thursday, January 27, GSUSA conducted a conference call with their council executives to assist them in working more closely with faith based organizations. NFCYM sees that as a significant action in promoting our religious recognition programs.
2. GSUSA has agreed to a follow-up meeting between their national leadership and NFCYM leadership this summer to continue to review and assess our relationship and the critical issues.

NFCYM will continue to closely monitor any new issues that arise and, through our NCCGSCF, continue to engage GSUSA leadership in their active support of NFCYM religious recognition programs.