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A new direction

RELIGION | Organizers of a Christian alternative to the Boy Scouts unveil their program

by Warren Cole Smith
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NASHVILLE, Tenn.—More than 1,200 people from 44 states are gathering this weekend in Music City for the inaugural meeting of Trail Life USA, a new group that hopes to be a Christian alternative for the Boy Scouts of America. Organizers say Trail Life USA will be an outdoor scouting-like program designed for boys ages 5-17 that will focus on adventure, character, and leadership.

“We’re here to honor the legacy of the Boy Scouts of America,” said radio personality Bill Bunkley, master of ceremonies for the event. “But now, quite frankly, we are called in a new direction.”

This meeting is the culmination of intense planning that began just over two months ago when a steering committee gathered in Louisville, Ky., to discuss the feasibility of starting a new organization after the Boy Scouts of America (BSA) changed its membership policy in May to allow openly homosexual youth to participate in its program. Since then, the new group has created a constitution and bylaws, a logo, and other organizing documents and procedures.

According to Mark Hancock, vice chairman of the board and the convention’s host, said, “For this to happen in 68 days, that doesn’t happen by the power of men.”

John Stemberger, chairman of the board of directors for the new group, said in his opening address he would deal with what he called “the proverbial elephant in the room,” the relationship between Trail Life USA and BSA.

“First of all, we’re not an anti-BSA organization,” Stemberger said. “We’re not an anti-anything organization. We honor the legacy of the Boy Scouts of America and the contributions it has made to us and our families. The men and boys we have left behind are not our opponents. They are our brothers and our friends. I encourage you to interact with them with charity and good faith.”

He added, though, “Many of us feel anger and betrayal.” Stemberger said charity requires him to “continue to expose the real dangers and risks that the [BSA’s] new membership policy poses to boys. Real men value integrity above institutions.”

He said Trail Life USA would be open to boys of all religious faiths, but it would be an explicitly Christian organization.

“Adults must sign a statement of faith and submit to a background check,” Stemberger said. “We will have a strong outdoor component, and ranks from the Boy Scouts will be transferable.”

The top award in Trail Life USA, the equivalent to the BSA’s Eagle Award, would be the Freedom Award.

“Our vision will be to become the premier national character development organization for young men,” Stemberger said, “which produces godly and responsible husbands, fathers, and citizens.”

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Photo by Warren Cole Smith

A prospective Trailman shows off a T-shirt displaying Trail Life USA’s logo.

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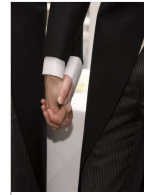
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