

## Christian Girl Guide leaders defy decision to drop God from pledge



The organisation announced earlier this year that it is to replace its traditional pledge with a new wording, removing references to “God” and “country”.

In one of the biggest changes in the movement’s 103-year history, the promise to “love my God” is to be scrapped and replaced with a pledge to “be true to myself” and to “develop my beliefs”.

The group’s patriotic commitment to serving their country is also to be changed to a pledge of allegiance to the “community” in the new promise which comes into force on September 1.

It provoked controversy in some quarters but Gill Slocombe, the Chief Guide, said the new wording should make it easier for the organisation’s 550,000 members to make the promise with sincerity.

But now a group of leaders from Harrogate, North Yorks, have signalled publicly that they plan to defy the leadership and continue to use the old pledge at the groups which meet in their church.

Hazel Mitford, who runs the Guide group at St Paul’s United Reformed Church, in Harrogate; Jayne Morrison, the Brownie leader and Alison Ellison, who runs the Rainbow group for younger girls, announced that they will encourage all girls and leaders in their groups to continue to use the original promise.

In a joint letter with the church’s minister, published in the Harrogate Advertiser, they voiced “dismay” at the change and insisted the movement should keep “God at its core”.

But Jem Henderson, a volunteer leader, who is an atheist has accused the women of forcing her to take the old promise, against her conscience.

She is being supported by the National Secular Society, which campaigns against religion in public life. Last year the group successfully won a legal challenge against the use of prayers before council meetings, triggering a national debate about the role of faith in modern Britain.

Miss Henderson, who describes herself on her blog as a “post punk, feminist poet”, said: “The pack leader’s insistence on keeping the old promise excludes me and any atheist girls from the troop, or

asks us to lie when making the promise, something that surely goes against the Guiding principles.

“This demonstrates that the new promise is just for show, and that the Guiding movement, at least in Harrogate, is still excluding people from secular walks of life.”

Mrs Mitford declined to comment last night but her letter sets out the women’s stance. “The spiritual aspect is recognised in girlguiding and ‘God’ has been part of the promise since it was founded,” they said.

“The divine is fundamental to everything it stands for. No one need join Girlguiding, so removing the reference to God in the interests of inclusivity removes much of what we stand for.”

They added: “Girlguiding has God at its core and anyone who has issue with this is free to start their own organisation.”

Last night a spokeswoman for Girlguiding confirmed that only the new pledge will be recognised and signalled that the rebel leaders could eventually be forced out if they did not comply.

She said: “The members decide to take the promise and to commit to Guiding values, they need to absolutely sure that they believe those values and if they cannot they need to consider their membership of Guiding.”

She added: "It is not September yet so we will cross that bridge when we come to it. We will be working closely with local guiding to make sure that all our members understand what the new promise means to them.

"There will be no alteranative promise as our members made very clear in the consultation that there would be one promise for all."

John Bingham - The Telegraph