

MY DUTY TO GOD AND MY COUNTRY

How the first point of the Scout Oath can improve our world

by Michael Phelan

A popular song of the sixties declared "what a lovely, lovely world this would be if everyone learned to live together." Movements to make the world a better place have existed for thousands of years. Today, despite problems with crime, predominant religions of the world still attract new members and teach them to live by certain standards, laws, and guidelines. By adhering to these teachings, members are aided in improving their own lives and, as a result,

the lives of those with whom they come in contact. A brief view of teachings of the world's three major beliefs shows the commitment required of its members.

Islam teaches that God, the creator of the whole universe, forbids lying, stealing, adultery, and murder. In addition, the Koran (Islam's holy book from the Arabic word meaning "recitation") teaches many great virtues such as honor for parents, kindness, honesty, patience, and courage.

Judaism teaches that there is one God who wants His people to be just and merciful. A person

serves God by studying the scriptures and practicing what is taught. Serving God and fellow man is central to Judaism. Almost all civil law in Western society is based on Jewish scriptures, known to non-Jews as the Old Testament. The Ten Commandments, given to Moses on Mount Sinai, is basic to Western law.

Christianity, which has its foundation in Judaism, also embraces the Ten Commandments. To be an obedient Christian, one must serve God with heart, might, mind, and strength, and love one's neighbor as one's self.

If all people were to live the principles set forth in Islam, Judaism or Christianity, this

world would have no need for welfare, prisons, or law enforcement officials. Indeed, as the song declared "what a lovely, lovely world this would be!"

As Scout leaders, we believe we can improve the world by molding positive character traits in the boys with whom we work. One of these traits is doing "good" to our fellow man, known as the "good turn." Additional guidance for correct living is embodied in the principles set forth in the Scout Oath and Scout Law. If people, on their honor, would do their best to do their duty to God and country and to obey the principles enumerated in the Scout Law, an outpouring of peace and goodwill would fill the world with

love such as the earth has never before seen.

Duty to God and religious responsibility were close to the mind of Baden-Powell when he developed the principles and methods of Scouting. Here are some quotes from B-P regarding religion and duty to God:

"Scoutcraft is a means through which the veriest hooligan can be brought to higher thought and to the elements of faith in God; and, coupled with the Scout's obligation to do a Good Turn every day, it gives the base of Duty to God and to Neighbor on which the parent or pastor can build with greater ease the form of belief that is desired. This is in addition to the realization of God the Creator through

Redefining your Troop's Religious Program

by Virgil Burke

For many Troops, an outside observer would likely conclude that there are only 11 points to the Scout Law, and a 12th optional one, *reverent*, to be used if the Troop has someone who is particularly "religious," who insists on doing something about it. But this is not the way the program is meant to be run. In its by-laws, the Boy Scouts state that no boy can grow into the best kind of man without giving attention to his duty to God.

Part of the problem may be that many leaders are not comfortable themselves in sharing and outwardly proclaiming their own faiths. Part of it may be a passive acceptance of the position of a lot of our society which states that whatever you want to believe, and however hard you want to believe it, is just fine. Another part may be a misunderstanding of Boy Scout guidelines. "Non-sectarian" in the rules and regulations does not mean Godless!

Baden-Powell had no such reservations. For Baden-Powell, "There is no religious side to the movement. *The whole of it is based on religion, that is, on the realization and service of God.*" (Italics added.) That is pretty direct.

How does your Troop measure up to that? No matter how you rate, there are some things built into the Scouting program that, if any Troop uses them correctly, can hardly fail to help improve its performance in making the 12th Point of the Scout Law an integral part of its program. This article will give a few basic beginning steps in achieving this.

The Scoutmaster must set the tone, for that tells the Troop that the 12th Point is not only important, but essential. Scoutmasters who give the matter much thought realize that reverence is the point on which all the others are built. Our duty toward our Creator works itself out in the way we treat other people. The Scoutmaster must be able to recognize this, and be willing to build up reverence to God as the most important point of the Scout law and the first duty of the Scout Oath.

The above is not to say that the Scoutmaster is the only one responsible for the 12th Point in the program of the Troop, or that he has to do it himself alone. Just as some Scoutmasters will be better at teaching knots than

others, so some will be better at doing the "God stuff" in the Troop. But we would not accept a Scoutmaster who says, "I'm not real good at knots, so my Troop isn't going to do any." We would expect him to work at it himself, and to find an assistant who is good at knots, and have that assistant help with the knot work.

That assistant in charge of "God stuff" is called a Chaplain. The Chaplain is a registered position on the Troop Committee. The Scoutmaster and the Troop Committee should work hard at finding one. How to go about doing that depends partly on your sponsor.

If the Troop is sponsored by a church, the first step would be to tell the Chartered Organization Representative or the Pastor that the Troop wants a Chaplain. Take a copy of the job description along with you. Point out that, in most religious sponsoring institutions, the Troop Chaplain does not have to be an ordained minister. A lay person will do just fine, if you have the right one. It can also be pointed out that this gives the church an easy way to get the message of the church to the Scouts and their families.

If the Troop is not sponsored by a church, first try your own Committee members and parents. Someone among them might be very willing and capable of doing the job. If not, try the church down the street. Point out to that church's pastor that you are offering him or her an opportunity to influence the spiritual lives of young men, many of whom are not reached by any church. If he is not interested, "shake the dust off your feet" from that church, and go the next one down the street. Some church is going to have the vision to grab the chance to minister to your Scouts.

In addition to recruiting a Troop Chaplain, recruit a Chaplain Aide for the junior leader team. This should not be a giveaway job. That is, do not have someone 12 years old be Chaplain Aide because he needs a job and Chaplain Aide is the only one not already filled. If you can recruit a young man who is devout in his own religious obligations, and is a mature and caring young man, he can be a constant resource, not only for encouraging earning religious awards, saying grace at meals and prayers on Sunday morning campouts, etc., but also for counseling other Scouts. There will be times when that

young man can get through to a boy better than an adult can. And that does not mention the tremendous example he can be in taking the 12th Point and his duty to God seriously and living it out in front of the Troop.

Then recognize that young man. Make him part of the Patrol Leader Council meetings to make sure that the 12th Point is observed in all of the Troop's activities. Let him give annual Troop presentations on religious awards programs. Let him open or close Courts of Honor with an invocation or benediction. Hold him to a high standard, then hold him up as a high example.

Now turn the Chaplain and Chaplain Aide loose. Let them, along with the Patrol Leader Council, evaluate your program.

Is Scouts' meeting their religious obligations and living up the their duties to God part of your advancement program, Scoutmaster conferences, and Boards of Review?

Is grace said at every meal, at home and at campouts?

Is there an invocation and/or benediction said at Courts of Honor and Scout Banquets?

Is some kind of devotional or service done at campouts when away from church on Sunday morning or Sabbath?

How many Scouts have earned their religious awards? If not many, why aren't there more?

This list could go on and on.

Duty to God and Reverence for God were not afterthoughts or add ons in the Scouting program. They were foundational elements in the mind of Baden-Powell from the very first. They should not be afterthoughts or add ons in the programs of today's Troop programs, either. The 12th Point of the Scout Law should be given at least as much emphasis in the day to day program as knots, hiking, or campouts. It is up to each and every leader in Scouting to work to make this happen. And when it happens, be prepared, because you will be amazed at the results!

Virgil Burke is a lifelong Scouter, and has held virtually every possible position at the Cub Pack, Scout Troop, and Explorer Post levels, as well as numerous positions at the District and Council levels. He was awarded the God and Service Award in 1997 by his home church, Budd Park Christian Church (Disciples of Christ). He lives with his wife Robin and their five children in Kansas City, Missouri.