

British bishop welcomes Scouting document, ‘My Body, My Choice’

LONDON - A British bishop has welcomed a Scouting document that, among other things, allows for Scouts ages 14 and older to be taught about condoms.

The document, “My Body, My Choice,” was produced by the Scout Association, the national Scouting organization, with the help of Brook, a sexual health charity, following requests from Scout leaders. It was published April 4.

Bishop Richard Moth of Britain’s military diocese, the liaison bishop for Catholic Scouting, said in an April 12 statement that “the recognition given in the document to the place of abstinence in combating the problems of STIs (sexually transmitted infections) and teenage pregnancy is welcomed.”

“We also appreciate that Scouting recognizes the importance of the religious beliefs of young people and the wishes of their parents regarding the formation being offered,” the bishop said.

The Scout Association, he added, had also agreed to make widely available a document for Catholic Scouts called “Cherishing Human Sexuality,” produced by the National Catholic Scout Fellowship.

This, he said, “sets out Catholic teaching in this area” by drawing on “Cherishing Life,” a 2004 document by the Bishops’ Conference of England and Wales.

One section of “My Body, My Choice” deals specifically with condom use and recommends that “young people should be able to feel what a condom is like.” It also says they should be instructed in “how to put on a male condom correctly” and how

to recognize if the condom is too old for use.

The materials are for use in a “relaxed and informal environment” by 40,000 Explorer Scouts, ages between 14 and 18 years, of whom half are girls. It includes contact details for abortion providers and for sexual health clinics.

Notes for Scout leaders included in “My Body, My Choice” state that the United Kingdom has the highest rates of sexually transmitted diseases and teenage pregnancies in Europe, with nearly one in five girls saying they have been pregnant at least once by the age of 18; a third of those ended their pregnancies with abortions.

The materials also invite leaders to ask Scouts to write an A to Z of “all terms they know relating to sex and relationships,” then to discuss the words in groups. An activity called the “Post Box” involves Scouts writing down questions about sex, then anonymously placing them in a box for group discussion at the next meeting.

Scouts will be taught about sexually transmitted diseases by matching diseases to symptoms and by playing the “Fluid Exchange Game,” in which the mixing of colored water will be used to demonstrate just how quickly infections can spread.

Simon Carter, spokesman for the Scout Association, told Catholic News Service in an April 13 telephone interview that “My Body, My Choice” follows the 2008 publication of a document called “Promoting Good Sexual Health Within Scouting,” designed to help Scout leaders identify what is allowed by law and how adults should respond if a Scout approaches them with questions on sexual matters.

He said that Scout leaders had complained that “sign-posting and guidance was not enough” and more information was needed.

But Carter said the Scout Association was aware of the wide variety of faiths from

which its members were drawn and was careful to present abstinence as “an equally valid strategy for young people ... as active engagement in sex.”

“We are starting from a position of saying young people need advice and guidance in this area and if a young person’s faith says abstinence is the way forward, then we support that,” he said.

Father Jonathan How, Catholic chaplain of Surrey Scouts, in southern England, and author of “Cherishing Human Sexuality,” told CNS in an April 12 telephone interview that the Scout Association “is within its rights in a modern society to respond to the requests of its members who have asked for a resource of this kind.” But he said that since 2008 the Catholic fellowship was uneasy about the focus on sexual health and decided to produce a different document with a more integral Catholic response.

He said the Scout Association said it would circulate the Catholic document and would make it available with its own resources by posting it on its website, which was due to be re-launched April 15.

Father How praised the Scout Association as “almost unique” among nonreligious organizations in recognizing the role of abstinence and the religious beliefs of young people and their families.