

Kentucky Baptist home considers hiring homosexuals

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MOUNT WASHINGTON, Ky. (ABP)—After a dozen years defending lawsuits stemming from firing a lesbian worker in 1998, a Kentucky Baptist childcare agency is considering dropping its ban on hiring gay employees.



[Sunrise Children's Services](#) President

Bill Smithwick

Smithwick is recommending the change, up for vote at a called trustee meeting.

"The core question is not about separation of church and state or government money," Smithwick said in a statement [reported](#) by the *Louisville Courier-Journal*. "The question is whether we will walk away from the pain, suffering, loneliness and brokenness of the kids we serve and have served since 1869."

Since 2000, the [Kentucky Baptist Convention](#) agency has been embroiled in a lawsuit with the American Civil Liberties Union and Americans United for Separation of Church and State over the use of taxpayer funds by faith-based organizations that proselytize.

In March, the state of Kentucky agreed to settle the suit, but Sunrise [opposes](#) the settlement, claiming it singles them out for scrutiny not

required for other agencies that contract with the government to provide social services.

Early in the proceedings, courts upheld the right of the agency formerly known as Kentucky Baptist Homes for Children to fire Alicia Predreira as a family specialist at Spring Meadows group home in Mount Washington, Ky., after a photo of her and her same-sex partner appeared in a display at the Kentucky State Fair.

Expecting law for protection of gays in the workplace

Now, Smithwick says, it is a matter of time before Kentucky will declare protection for gays in the workplace a civil right, and Sunrise either will comply or lose state funding that accounts for about 85 percent of the agency's \$27 million budget.

In a story published Oct. 22 in the [Western Recorder](#), Smithwick said his agency could not operate without government money. "If we lose our contract, we're out of business," he said.

"I would rather homosexuals see the love of God through us than be denied employment by us," Smithwick said in a PowerPoint presentation to the agency's trustees in August, quoted by Baptist Press. "I would rather see the ministry continue to help kids and share the gospel than close."

If adopted, the policy likely will affect Sunrise's relationship with the Kentucky Baptist Convention, which provides about 4 percent of its budget and elects all its trustees. The [Kentucky Baptist Convention annual meeting](#) is scheduled Nov. 12, at Lone Oak First Baptist Church in Paducah, four days after the anticipated vote by Sunrise trustees.

Praying that board makes 'unpopular' decision

Convention president and Lone Oak Pastor Dan Summerlin said in a

statement on the Kentucky Baptist Convention website he is praying Sunrise board members “would make the courageous, if culturally unpopular, decision to maintain the current hiring practice.”

“The key question is: ‘Do trustees want to be a Baptist agency or a secular institution?’” Summerlin said. “I pray they will consider their history and heritage as they seek an answer to that vital question.”

Kentucky Baptist Convention Executive Director Paul Chitwood said in [a blog](#) Smithwick’s recommendation “ignores the investment of untold tens of millions of Baptist dollars and surrenders the very reason Sunrise came into existence as Kentucky Baptists’ gospel-centered ministry to orphans and neglected children.”

“If the trustees decide to follow Smithwick and surrender biblical values to maintain government funding, then clearly they will have forsaken the Baptist character of Sunrise and become the equivalent of any secular corporation that contracts with the state to provide child care,” Chitwood said.

Former Kentuck Baptist president ‘heartsick’

Hershael York, a pastor and professor at [Southern Baptist Theological Seminary](#) and past president of the Kentucky Baptist Convention, said in an op-ed submitted to the Western Recorder that he is “heartsick” to think Sunrise would consider hiring people who are gay to work in an agency of the state convention.

“Through a dozen years of lawsuits and legal challenges, the Baptists of the commonwealth have stood with Sunrise because the biblical principles on which that ministry was founded were not for sale,” York said. “Now Mr. Smithwick is asking his board to run up the white flag of surrender to the spirit of the age, all in the name of doing ministry on our behalf.”

Begun by women of Walnut Street Baptist Church as an orphanage for children in the wake of the Civil War, Sunrise Children's Service now provides care for nearly 2,000 abused and neglected children who have been removed from their homes. Early on, the agency relied solely on Baptist support but began accepting government funding when child-welfare legislation in the 1970s dramatically increased the costs of caring for juveniles.

Sunrise should follow the example set by Catholic Charities of Illinois, Chitwood said. The Catholic agency lost more than \$30 million in government funding and gave up its adoption services rather than place children with same-sex couples.