

World Vision policy on same-sex marriage sparks debate

March 28, 2014

FEDERAL WAY, Wash.—Within 48 hours, the Christian relief organization [World Vision](#) twice announced changes to its employee policy regarding gay marriage, essentially returning to its original position that prohibits same-sex unions.

In the process, World Vision received the condemnation and applause of Christians on opposite sides of the same-sex marriage issue.



Richard Stearns, seen here during a visit to Zambia, is the U.S. president of World Vision. (Religion News Service photo courtesy of Jon Warren/World Vision)

Initially, World Vision announced its U.S. branch would recognize same-sex marriage as within the norms of “abstinence before marriage and fidelity in

marriage” as part of the conduct code for its 1,100 employees. In 2012, Washington, where World Vision U.S. is based, became one of the first states to legalize same-sex marriage by popular vote.

“I want to be clear that we have not endorsed same-sex marriage, but we have chosen to defer to the authority of local churches on this issue,” World Vision’s U.S. President Rich Stearns wrote in a letter to employees.

“I want to reassure you that we are not sliding down some slippery slope of compromise, nor are we diminishing the authority of Scripture in our work. We have always affirmed traditional marriage as a God-ordained institution. Nothing in our work around the world with children and families will change.”

However, the decision sparked a strong reaction from evangelical Christians opposed to same-sex marriage. The agency reportedly saw a loss of close to 5,000 child sponsorships—a drop of about \$2.1 million a year.

So, the organization reversed course and apologized for misreading donor attitudes about same-sex marriage.

‘We made a mistake’

“We’ve listened,” Stearns told reporters. “We believe we made a mistake. We’re asking them to forgive and understand our poor judgment in the original decision.”

The board voted overwhelmingly for the initial decision and also voted overwhelmingly to reverse itself, he said.

“We hadn’t vetted this issue with people who could’ve given us really valuable input at the beginning,” Stearns said. “In retrospect, I can see why this was so controversial for

The logo for World Vision, featuring a stylized orange and white graphic on the right side that resembles a rising sun or a starburst, with the words "World Vision" in a bold, black, sans-serif font centered below it.

World Vision

many of our supporters and partners around the country. If I could have a do-over, it would’ve been that I would’ve done more consultation with Christian leaders.”

Stearns and board chairman Jim Beré said in a letter to donors World Vision made a mistake and was reinstating its previous policy.

“In our board’s effort to unite around the church’s shared mission to serve the poor in the name of Christ, we failed to be consistent with World Vision U.S.’s commitment to the traditional understanding of biblical marriage and our own statement of faith,” Stearns and Beré said in the apology letter. “And we also failed to seek enough counsel from our own Christian partners.”

The letter said numerous leaders and trusted partners expressed concern about the policy change.

“We are brokenhearted over the pain and confusion we have caused many of our friends, who saw this decision as a reversal of our strong commitment to biblical authority,” the letter said. “We ask that you understand that this was never the board’s intent. We are asking for your continued support. We commit to you that we will continue to listen to the wise counsel of Christian brothers and sisters, and we will reach out to key partners in the weeks ahead.”

Conservatives welcomed reversal of the announced policy change.

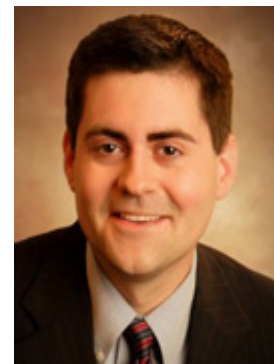
Decision was 'right'

“World Vision’s right decision, as articulated in their board letter, conveys a spirit of Christlikeness and humility in tone and content,”



Al Mohler Russell Moore, head of the Southern Baptist Convention [Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission](#), commented on Twitter. Previously Moore criticized World Vision’s proposal to drop its ban on openly gay employees as anti-gospel.

Albert Mohler, president of [Southern Baptist Theological Seminary](#), applauded the reversal as a “historic and much-welcomed announcement” and “a singularly happy event.”



Denny Burk, associate professor of biblical studies at Russell Moore Boyce College, Southern Seminary’s undergraduate arm, described the letter announcing the policy reversal as “stunning.”


“I was heartened and encouraged by what I read in the letter,” Burk said in a blog posting. “I think this kind of public repentance is courageous, and I

praise the Lord for it.”

Some Christians who support fuller inclusion of gays in church and society saw the relief organization’s decision as a huge step in the wrong direction.

[Rachel Held Evans](#), a popular Christian blogger, had encouraged readers to donate money to make up for child sponsorships World Vision was losing because of its original policy change recognizing employees’ same-sex marriages. After World Vision’s reversal, she noted she understood if people who followed her advice feel betrayed.



“I don’t think I’ve ever been  Rachel Held Evans more angry at the church, particularly the evangelical culture in which I was raised and with which I for so long identified,” she said on her blog. “I confess I had not realized the true extent of the disdain evangelicals have for our LGBT people, nor had I expected World Vision to yield to that disdain by reversing its decision under pressure. Honestly, it feels like a betrayal from every side.”

While World Vision’s base always has been strongest among evangelicals, it also counts on employees and support from churches that now allow same-sex marriage, such as the United Church of Christ and the Episcopal Church.

Evangelical base

“World Vision has been extremely broad in terms of church relations, but

they have an evangelical base,” said David Neff, retired editor-in-chief of *Christianity Today*. “They were trying to figure out how to keep that broad base as things are changing. It was clearly a poorly timed misstep.”

Not all critics of the policy to recognize same-sex marriage were satisfied by its reversal. Tim Wildmon, president of the [American Family Association](#), said the incident shows World Vision needs a leadership shakeup.

“I would say they don’t have any choice but to relieve the chairman of the board of his duties and their president—all those who made this decision to equate homosexual ‘marriage’ with a man and a woman being married,” Wildmon told the AFA media outlet OneNewsNow. “They need to go and start over with a new board.”

World Vision is the second-largest organization listed with the [Evangelical Council for Financial Accountability](#), behind Salvation Army. It also ranks among America’s top 10 charities, with revenue around \$1 billion.

In 2011, the U.S. Supreme Court declined to hear a case involving three employees fired by World Vision, allowing the relief group to maintain its mandatory statement of faith for its workers. A ruling from the U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals sided with World Vision in a case involving three former employees who were fired because they did not believe in the deity of Jesus or in the doctrine of the Trinity.

—Compiled from reports by Associated Baptist Press and Religion News Service