

World Vision to recognize employees' same-sex marriages

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(RNS) Christian relief organization World Vision has announced that it will no longer define marriage as between a man and a woman in its employee conduct manual, a groundbreaking change for an evangelical institution and a reflection of the impact that gay marriage is having on religious organizations.

The organization's U.S. branch will recognize same-sex marriage as being within the norms of "abstinence before marriage and fidelity in marriage" as part of the conduct code for its 1,100 employees.

"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," said World Vision's U.S. President Rich Stearns in a letter to employees.

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.

"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," Stearns said. "We have always affirmed traditional marriage as a God-ordained institution. Nothing in our work around the world with children and families will change."

A World Vision spokesperson said Stearns was traveling and not available for an interview. In an interview with *Christianity Today*, Stearns said the organization's board was "overwhelmingly in favor" of the change. But he stressed the decision is not driven by theology.

“This is not an endorsement of same-sex marriage,” he told the magazine. “We have decided we are not going to get into that debate. Nor is this a rejection of traditional marriage, which we affirm and support.

“There is no lawsuit threatening us,” he added. “There is no employee group lobbying us. This is simply a decision about whether or not you are eligible for employment at World Vision U.S., based on this single issue, and nothing more.”

In 2012, Washington state, where World Vision U.S. is based, became one of the first states to legalize same-sex marriage by popular vote. The organization also has employees who attend churches that conduct same-sex marriages, including the Episcopal Church and the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, among others.

In 2011, the U.S. Supreme Court declined to hear a case involving three employees who were 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.

Before he came to World Vision, Stearns was a CEO for Parker Brothers Games and Lenox, the fine-china manufacturer. *New York Times* columnist Nicholas Kristof featured World Vision in 2010, praising Stearns for guiding evangelicals away from focusing so much on sexuality.

In its interview with Stearns, *Christianity Today* writers said, “World Vision hopes to dodge the division currently ‘tearing churches apart’ over same-sex relationships by solidifying its long-held philosophy as a parachurch organization: to defer to churches on theological issues, and focus instead on uniting Christians around serving the poor.”

Stearns said as much in his 2010 book “The Hole in Our Gospel,” when he lamented that Christians have become better-known for what they oppose than what they favor.

“We’re seen to be against homosexuality and gay marriage, against pornography and sexual promiscuity, against alcohol and drug abuse, abortion, divorce, Islam, evolution ... even against those who believe that global warming is a threat,” he wrote.

Stearns said that he seeks unity among Christians fighting poverty.

"This is also not about compromising the authority of Scripture," Stearns told *CT*.

"People can say, 'Scripture is very clear on this issue,' and my answer is, 'Well, ask all the theologians and denominations that disagree with that statement.'"

Criticism from many Christians came swiftly after Monday's announcement.

Russell Moore, president of the Southern Baptists' Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission, took aim at the new policy, writing, "At stake is the gospel of Jesus Christ.

"If sexual activity outside of a biblical definition of marriage is morally neutral, then, yes, we should avoid making an issue of it," he wrote. "If, though, what the Bible clearly teaches and what the church has held for 2000 years is true, then refusing to call for repentance is unspeakably cruel and, in fact, devilish."

Donor bases come and go, he wrote. "World Vision is a good thing to have, unless the world is all you can see."

Retired megachurch pastor John Piper called the decision tragic. "I pray they will repent and turn back to their more faithful roots," he wrote.

Billy Graham's son Franklin Graham, president of the relief organization Samaritan's Purse, said the new policy is "ungodly" while interviewed on Family Research Council's radio program. He suggested that the organization could eventually approved of polygamous relationships.

"It's obvious World Vision doesn't believe in the Bible," Graham said, who also released a statement. "I am sickened over it."

Meanwhile, others were tweeting support, including Denver pastor Nadia Bolz-Weber. "What a day. I think I'll start tomorrow by giving @WorldVisionUSA a big fat donation. Who's with me? I hear they are losing donors. #glt"