

Hear from Rich about Change in Practice: How we live out the intent of World Vision's Conduct Policy

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Because of your valuable role in our ministry, I want to communicate the reasons for a recent change that the World Vision U.S. board made to our employee conduct policy. Before I explain in detail, I want to reassure you that World Vision's core values and ministry have not and will not change.

By way of background, our board of directors is recognized as one of the leaders among Christian organizations in the U.S. It includes deeply spiritual and wise believers, among them several pastors, a seminary president, and a professor of theology. Since this policy change involves the sensitive issue of human sexuality, the board spent several years praying about and discussing this issue.

The board affirmed that World Vision U.S. will continue to expect abstinence before marriage and fidelity within marriage for all staff. The board will also continue to require that every employee agree to the doctrinal issues enshrined in the Apostles' Creed and/or World Vision's own Statement of Faith.

But since World Vision is a multi-denominational organization that welcomes employees from more than 50 denominations, and since a number of these denominations in recent years have sanctioned same-sex marriage for Christians, the board—in keeping with our practice of deferring to church authority in the lives of our staff, and desiring to treat all of our employees equally—chose to adjust our policy. Thus, the board has modified our Employee Standards of Conduct to allow a Christian in a legal same-sex marriage to be employed at World Vision.

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. We have chosen not to exclude someone from employment at World Vision U.S. on this issue alone. Let me explain the thinking behind our board's decision.

Over the past decade perhaps the single “stormiest” issue within the church has been the debate over same-sex marriage—the question of whether churches should sanction the decision of two Christian individuals with a same-sex orientation to make a lifelong commitment of fidelity to each other in a legal marriage. We have watched as this conflict has torn apart whole denominations, individual congregations, Christian colleges, and even individual Christian families. The net effect of this conflict has been devastating—tearing apart the Body of Christ. It is heartbreaking to watch.

The board and I wanted to prevent this divisive issue from tearing World Vision apart and potentially crippling our ability to accomplish our vital kingdom mission of loving and serving the poorest of the poor in the name of Christ.

Through our many discussions and much prayer, we began to discern some clarity around this issue. You see, World Vision's mission is not the same as that of our local churches; nor are we a body of theologians whose responsibility is to render biblical advice and interpretations of theological matters. We are, as our mission statement so clearly expresses, "an international partnership of Christians whose mission is to follow our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ in working with the poor and oppressed to promote human transformation, seek justice, and bear witness to the good news of the Kingdom of God." And it is this mission that unites us—Baptist, Pentecostal, Seventh-day Adventist, Lutheran, Episcopalian, Roman Catholic, Presbyterian, Orthodox, nondenominational, etc.—more than 50 different expressions of the Christian faith represented within WVUS alone. In fact, for 60 years the Christian mission of World Vision has been a platform uniting followers of Christ around the world.

As World Vision employees, we are first and foremost united in our response to Jesus' call to follow Him and to serve the poor. This unity gives us space to acknowledge a range of views on issues among the Christian churches we attend and the denominations we represent. Those issues include methods of baptism, divorce and remarriage, views on evolution, the role of women in church leadership, and whether birth control is acceptable. At World Vision we hold a strong view of the authority of Scripture in the life of the church and in the lives of each of us as followers of Christ, but we intentionally choose not to require specific beliefs or practice in any of these debated issues as conditions of employment at World Vision U.S. In other words, we don't have a list of issues on which we mandate agreement as a litmus test for hiring. Instead, we leave these areas under the authority of the various church bodies to which each of us belongs and to the freedom of all of our employees to discern for themselves, fully understanding that there is a range of views within and among our churches.

World Vision requires that everyone we hire, without exception, must affirm that they are a sincere follower of Christ—that's our non-negotiable condition of employment. Every World Vision U.S. employee must affirm our Statement of Faith and/or the Apostles' Creed, acknowledging the deity of Christ, Christ's death, burial, and resurrection, and His atonement for our sins. And we choose to unite around these foundational Christian beliefs and our Christ-given mission, putting other differences aside.

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. We are the same World Vision you have always believed in.

Each of us has his or her own views on a wide range of potentially divisive issues, and the board and I are not asking anyone to change their personal views. We are asking, rather, that you not let your differences on this issue or others distract us from our work. We are asking you to unite around our sacred and urgent mission in the world and to treat those who don't share your exact views with respect. If we cannot love one another, how will we show Christ's love to the world? Jesus prayed for just this when He asked that His followers

“may be brought to complete unity. Then the world will know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me” (John 17:23).

I urge each one of you to respect the heartfelt wisdom of our board and to fix your eyes on Jesus. In His eyes you will see His deep love for the poor—and His deep love for you and each one of your co-workers.

Richard Stearns

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