

Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (<https://www.ncronline.org>)

March 27, 2014 at 4:21pm

World Vision reverses course on same-sex marriage policy

by Sarah Pulliam Bailey by Religion News Service

After announcing earlier this week it would no longer define marriage as between a man and a woman in its employee conduct manual, Christian relief organization World Vision reversed course Wednesday and said it would no longer recognize the same-sex marriages of its employees.

Heavy criticism from evangelicals may have prompted the reversal. Soon after the earlier groundbreaking decision, the Assemblies of God urged members to consider dropping their support.

The loss of child sponsorships may have also been at play.

Ryan Reed tweeted on Wednesday: "My wife works for WV. In today's staff meeting Stearns announced that so far 2,000 kids dropped."

World Vision's child sponsorships are \$35 a month, which means the organization could have lost at least \$840,000 in annual revenue over the long term.

About \$567 million of World Vision's \$1 billion budget comes from private contributions, according to the 2012 annual report, *Christianity Today* reported.

"We've listened," World Vision president Rich Stearns told reporters. "We believe we made a mistake. We're asking them to forgive and understand our poor judgment in the original decision."

Since its founding, World Vision has always been a Christian organization, Stearns said. "The decision we've made is based on biblical principles."

Supporters made it clear that same-sex marriage was not consistent with the organization's views of the Bible.

"World Vision has been committed to the authority of the Bible ... and we believe what Scripture says about marriage," he said.

He noted how divisive the change has become in the past few days.

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"What we found was we created more division instead of more unity, and that was not the intent of the board or myself."

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

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

When explaining the earlier policy, Stearns said World Vision was deferring to churches because its employees represent more than 50 denominations, including those who conduct same-sex marriages.

When asked whether parachurch organizations such as World Vision should defer to churches on theological issues, Stearns said that the organization's policy on marriage could not defer to churches that do conduct same-sex marriages.

"I think what we are affirming is there are certain beliefs that are so core to our Trinitarian stance, we cannot defer to frankly a small minority of churches that have taken a different position," Stearns said.

The following is the letter the organization sent on Wednesday:

Dear Friends,

Today, the World Vision U.S. board publicly reversed its recent decision to change our national employment conduct policy. The board acknowledged they made a mistake and chose to revert to our longstanding conduct policy requiring sexual abstinence for all single employees and faithfulness within the Biblical covenant of marriage between a man and a woman.

We are writing to you our trusted partners and Christian leaders who have come to us in the spirit of Matthew 18 to express your concern in love and conviction. You share our desire to come together in the Body of Christ around our mission to serve the poorest of the poor. We have listened to you and want to say thank you and to humbly ask for your forgiveness.

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, which says, *"We believe the Bible to be the inspired, the only infallible, authoritative Word of God."* And we also failed to seek enough counsel from our own Christian partners. As a result, we made a change to our conduct policy that was not consistent with our Statement of Faith and our commitment to the sanctity of marriage.

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. 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.

While World Vision U.S. stands firmly on the biblical view of marriage, we strongly affirm that all people, regardless of their sexual orientation, are created by God and are to be loved and treated with dignity and respect.

Please know that World Vision continues to serve all people in our ministry around the world. We pray that you will continue to join with us in our mission to be *"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."*

Sincerely in Christ,
Richard Stearns, President
Jim Beré, Chairman of the World Vision U.S. Board

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