

After tumult, World Vision reverses decision to hire staff in same-sex unions

by [Sarah Pulliam Bailey](#) in the [April 16, 2014](#) issue

Christian relief organization World Vision has reversed its decision after announcing that it would no longer define marriage only as between a man and a woman in its employee conduct manual.

On March 24 the organization's U.S. branch, based in Washington State, had said that it would recognize same-sex marriage as being within the norms of "abstinence before marriage and fidelity in marriage" cited in the conduct code for its 1,100 employees.

World Vision's U.S. president Rich Stearns said, in a letter to workers, "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 has employees who attend churches that conduct same-sex marriages, including the Episcopal Church and the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, among others.

And in an interview with *Christianity Today* before what appeared to be a groundbreaking change for an evangelical body, Stearns said that World Vision's board was "overwhelmingly in favor" of the change.

But the step immediately drew heavy criticism from conservative Christians. After the initial announcement, the Assemblies of God urged its members to consider dropping support.

Ryan Reed tweeted on March 26, "My wife works for WV. In today's staff meeting Stearns announced that so far 2,000 kids [were] dropped." World Vision's child sponsorships are \$35 a month, which means the organization could have lost at least \$840,000 in revenue over the next year.

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

"We've listened to supporters who were concerned about the conduct change in policy," Stearns told a reporter. "We believe we made a mistake. We're asking them to forgive and understand our poor judgment in the original decision."

The board reverted to its long-standing policy. "World Vision has always been a Christian organization since its founding in 1950," said Stearns. He said supporters pointed out that the changed stance was not consistent with what the Bible says about marriage.

"The last couple of days have been painful," he said. "We especially feel pain for confusion that we caused. What we found was we created more division instead of more unity, and that was not the intent of the board or myself."

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

"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 2,000 years is true, then refusing to call for repentance is unspeakably cruel and, in fact, devilish."

Retired megachurch pastor John Piper called the first 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" when he was interviewed on Family Research Council's radio program. He suggested that the organization might eventually approve of polygamous relationships.

"It's obvious World Vision doesn't believe in the Bible," Graham said, adding, "I am sickened over it." —RNS