

Rich Stearns is right: Other Christians aren't the enemy

By [Katherine Willis Pershey](#)

March 25, 2014

A few years ago, my family started sponsoring a child through World Vision. I knew that the organization was generally evangelical, and that we are generally not. But this massive parachurch organization does good work, and I trusted them enough for a minuscule portion of that good work to be on our behalf. For 35 dollars a month, we've been contributing to the health, education, and general welfare of a little girl in Haiti, who was born the same day as our older daughter. Whatever theological differences I have with World Vision seem immaterial to this.

Theological differences may be slightly more material for some of the organization's conservative supporters. [In an interview with *Christianity Today*](#) published yesterday, World Vision president Rich Stearns made a surprising announcement: the organization will no longer refrain from hiring Christians in same-sex marriages. Stearns presented this decision as World Vision "deferring to the authority of churches and denominations on theological issues"—as a way to stay out of the fray over same-sex marriage.

Today, they're very much in the fray. Within hours, the *CT* article generated hundreds of comments and a firestorm in social media. Some are thrilled; a lot of conservative evangelicals are not. Many people announced that they would discontinue their participation in World Vision's child sponsorship program—no matter that they may have photos of these children and drawings by them tacked to their refrigerators.

Of course, these kids won't be immediately cut off as soon as a donor revokes a pledge. While World Vision allows individual children to be sponsored—giving a face to the otherwise distant problem of extreme poverty—its aid is focused on communities. Still, I wonder how the furious former supporters will communicate their decisions to the kids. "Dear John," the letter begins. "I know you were looking forward to that new clean water filtration system, but as it turns out..." [The Gospel Coalition published a post by Trevin Wax](#) acknowledging that a withdrawal of support could adversely affect vulnerable children. Wax then proceeds to place the

blame for this squarely on the shoulders of Stearns and World Vision. (For a different evangelical take, see [Nish Weiseth](#).)

I'm pleased with World Vision's decision. Not just for those who are now eligible to work there, and not just for this step toward equality and inclusion in the church. I'm pleased most of all by the rationale behind the decision, and by Stearns's insistence that the decision is indeed a symbol not of compromise, as his critics claim, but of unity.

As a parachurch organization, World Vision recognizes that there is great diversity among its supporters. From the *CT* article:

"Denominations disagree on many, many things: on divorce and remarriage, modes of baptism, women in leadership roles in the church, beliefs on evolution, etc.," [Stearns] said. "So our practice has always been to defer to the authority and autonomy of local churches and denominational bodies on matters of doctrine that go beyond the Apostles' Creed and our statement of faith."

The article notes that some World Vision employees belong to mainline denominations that embrace same-sex marriage. While the more mean-spirited commenters debate whether "Christian" and "gay" are mutually exclusive identifies, I'm touched that a major evangelical organization would affirm the faith and witness of mainline Christians, let alone seek unity with us. So often it seems that the evangelical and ecumenical arms of the body of Christ are utterly disdainful of each other. "We—meaning other Christians—are not the enemy," Stearns told *CT*. "We have to find way to come together around our core beliefs to accomplish the mission that Christ has given the church."

It's a strange and roundabout reason to change a controversial hiring policy, and it's clearly a risk for the organization. The only explanation I can muster? They really mean it.