

Why World Vision Changed Its Mind On Hiring Gays

Jeff Farmer believes in the righteous mission of World Vision.

Founded by missionary Bob Pierce in 1950, World Vision today is one of America's largest Christian charities with 44,000 staff members in nearly 100 countries and an annual income of nearly \$1 billion.

Dedicated to working with children and their families worldwide to help them "reach their full potential by tackling the causes of poverty and injustice," the international relief organization oversees nearly 1 million sponsored children, provides humanitarian aid during major disasters, fights malaria and other diseases and performs a host of other vital services for people throughout the world.

Since 2011, Farmer has done his part by helping to mobilize multiple denominations representing thousands of churches to join World Vision in its fight against malaria—a disease that kills nearly 2,000 children every day.

"The net result is that over the last 2 1/2 years numerous churches have joined us in the war against malaria and over \$1 million of insecticide-treated bed nets have been sent to Africa," says Farmer, chairman of the Pentecostal/Charismatic Churches of North America. "We are one of many entities around the globe that are fighting malaria, and by working together with World Vision we have seen more than a 50 percent reduction in malaria cases in some areas. It's an incredible result."

But even though Farmer believes in the work World Vision does around the world, he like many other faith leaders were stunned when the Christian organization announced in March 2014 that it would permit gay Christians in same-sex marriages

to work at World Vision.

“When the notice came out that they were modifying their employee conduct policy, I was shocked, blindsided and disappointed—all the things my other colleagues and friends in ministry were,” Farmer says. “But it took only a couple of days for it to become clear to them that they had made a very serious mistake by not consulting with their partners and donors before actually making the policy change. I know the board deeply regrets it.”

Although the World Vision board reversed its decision within 48 hours, the imbroglio raised a number of questions and awakened many faith leaders to the dangers—and pressures—that the rapidly changing culture poses to ministries and churches nationwide and the future of their faith.

Why did World Vision make the change in the first place, why did they really flip-flop on this hot-button issue and what kind of corrective actions has the organization taken since the controversy erupted a year ago?

The hubbub raised a host of questions among a number of faith leaders who have expressed concerns that one of the largest Christian humanitarian organizations in the world has become increasingly liberal over the years. In the wake of the incident, some have questioned the organization’s practice of accepting money from the federal government and the United Nations and others have called into question whether the organization is connected to a growing pro-Palestinian, anti-Israel bias among many believers, especially younger Christians.

Some faith leaders told *Charisma* that they view the incident as a sign that the “Great Falling Away” predicted in the Bible is well underway. Others saw the incident as a “harbinger of the coming storm” of persecution.

“We need to understand that what we see happening with World

Vision is just the opening salvo," says Matt Barber, vice president of Liberty Action Counsel and the founder and editor-in-chief of . "I believe Christian universities, Christian organizations, churches, businesses that are owned by Christians and every individual Christian in very short order will have to make a decision.

"As we see that we are on a trajectory where in the United States the law of the land may soon embrace same-sex marriage as mandatory and somehow constitutional, that those within the church who reject this counterfeit notion will be sanctioned by the government up to and including the loss of tax exemption, loss of any kind of federal funding for Christian universities, loss of Pell grants for students, loss of students being able to avail themselves of federal loans and the potential loss of accreditation for Christian colleges."

Barber says the issue of sex and sexuality and government officials taking a position in opposition to God's desire for human sexuality will be the "single and most clear and present danger faced by the church in the coming months and years."

In the not too distant future, the day will come when the persecution of Christians—now limited mostly to believers in other countries around the world—will occur "in our own backyards and in the streets of our own cities," Farmer says.

"It's been an easy ride up to this point in time, but as our culture loses its moral compass and discards its Judeo-Christian values on which our nation was founded, Christians will find themselves in a position to either stand strong against the current or buckle and flow downstream with the sin and iniquity of our culture," Farmer says.

"Right now, the church is ingrown and enculturated. It is consumer-driven and largely only interested in entertainment. Most Christians never share their faith with anybody. We desperately need a spiritual awakening and revival. It may

very well be the only hope of our nation. And the whole same-sex marriage issue is just one indicator of several of a portent—of a harbinger of the coming storm.”

The Harbinger of a Coming Storm

In the year since the World Vision brouhaha erupted, churches, ministries and believers have been drawn into the maelstrom of the intensifying culture war—much of it centered upon homosexuality, same-sex marriage and similar issues. As the nation’s Judeo-Christian values are flipped on their head, Christians willing to take a stand for biblical values have become the new targets of discrimination.

One of the most high-profile examples occurred last fall when Houston’s lesbian mayor, Annise Parker, attempted to subpoena five pastors’ sermons in a case involving a controversial transgender rights ordinance. The incident garnered national attention and outrage from Americans who saw this as an infringement on the pastors’ First Amendment rights.

This was just one of numerous similar incidents across the nation in a year that saw a growing number of states—36 now—has legalized same-sex marriage. Dozens of Christian bakers, photographers, florists, county clerks and magistrates have suffered backlash for refusing to participate in these marriages. Meanwhile, others are facing economic losses and even jail time for their conscientious objections to a form of marriage prohibited by their sacred religious beliefs.

“This year has been one of the most dramatic years in the moral transformation that is overtaking America and much of the world,” Rabbi Jonathan Cahn, author of *The New York Times* best-selling books *The Harbinger* and *The Mystery of the Shemitah*, told those gathered recently at The International Alliance of Messianic Congregations and Synagogues conference in Orlando, Florida. “America’s rejection of biblical values has accelerated. (A year ago) eight states had ended the

biblical definition of marriage. Only one year later, the number of states that have done that is 36. Only 14 states are left standing and they are all under attack.

“This is the fastest growing moral transformation in world history since the Garden of Eden. It’s a symptom of something deeper—of a civilization’s rejection of its spiritual foundation and this phenomenon is manifesting in other forms, including the growing acceptance of cohabitation without marriage. The latest statistics are that the percentage of children born out of wedlock to the new generation—millennials—is now 57 percent. Six out of every 10 children don’t know what marriage is. The other form in which this is manifesting is the ascent of atheism and of atheists’ challenges of the faith and the continual removing of God and the name of Messiah from the public square and from mainstream culture. We’re now seeing the rise of satanic challenges to the faith. This year we saw satanic displays on grounds which once held Nativity scenes.”

The World Vision Flip-Flop

This rapid moral transformation comes a year after World Vision President Richard Stearns shook the foundations of the world’s largest faith with the announcement in March 2014 that one of the nation’s top 10 charities had modified its employee standards of conduct policy 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,” Stearns wrote in a March 20, 2014 letter to World Vision staff. “We have chosen not to exclude someone from employment at World Vision U.S. on this issue alone.”

Stearns, the former chief executive officer for Parker Brothers Games and Lenox, went on to explain the thinking

behind the board's decision.

Over the past decade, perhaps the single "stormiest" issue within the church has been the debate over same-sex marriage, wrote Stearns, whose para-church organization has staff from more than 50 denominations—some of which have sanctioned same-sex marriages or unions in recent years.

"We have watched as this conflict has torn apart whole denominations, individual congregations, Christian colleges and even individual Christian families," Stearns wrote. "The net effect of this conflict has been devastating—tearing apart the body of Christ. It is truly 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."

The publication of the letter on March 24, 2014 by *Christianity Today*, along with an interview with Stearns, ignited a theological firestorm.

At the time, Franklin Graham, president and chief executive officer of the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association and Samaritan's Purse, said he was "shocked" by the decision: "The Bible is clear that marriage is between a man and a woman. My dear friend, Bob Pierce, the founder of World Vision and Samaritan's Purse, would be heartbroken. He was an evangelist who believed in the inspired Word of God. World Vision maintains that their decision is based on unifying the church—which I find offensive—as if supporting sin and sinful behavior can unite the church."

George O. Wood, general superintendent of the Assemblies of God—one of the nation's largest and fastest-growing denominations—urged members to shift donations away from World Vision to Assemblies of God World Missions and other Pentecostal and evangelical charities that "maintain biblical

standards of sexual morality.”

“Far from promoting Christian unity, the policy change enlists World Vision on the liberal Protestant side of the same-sex marriage debate as opposed to that of Pentecostal and evangelical churches in the U.S., not to mention Pentecostal and evangelical churches worldwide,” Wood said.

Albert Mohler, president of The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, described the incident as one of the “major turning points” in a moral revolution that is upending the nation’s Judeo-Christian foundations.

Moore wrote the incident had put the gospel of Jesus Christ at stake: “We’ve entered an era where we will see who the evangelicals really are, and by that I mean those who believe in the gospel itself and all of its grace. And many will shrink back.”

Then, only two days after the announcement, the World Vision board reversed its decision, acknowledging it “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.”

“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,’ ” Stearns wrote.

Evangelical Leaders Applaud World Vision’s Reversal

After reversing the policy, numerous faith leaders applauded World Vision’s decision, including Graham, Wood and Moore.

"In our country today, there is tremendous pressure on Christians, churches and Christian organizations to lower our moral standards," Graham said. "God is clear in His Word, and His standards never change."

Wood called on the Assemblies of God's 68 million worldwide members to continue giving their support to World Vision "with prayers and finances, along with other Pentecostal and evangelical charities that have similar humanitarian missions."

"Scripture teaches that when fellow Christians have repented, their brothers and sisters should 'forgive and comfort' so that they will not be 'overwhelmed by excessive sorrow,' " Wood said.

Moore says World Vision's response was "exactly right."

"I have spoken with Rich Stearns multiple times in the months since the decision and I think World Vision handled this exactly the way we would expect them to handle it as Christians," Moore says. "The apology that World Vision released was refreshingly amazing to me. It was not the typical non-apology apology that one often sees in the midst of controversy—'Forgive us if we offended anyone' kind of apology.

"It was a real apology that was backed up with concrete steps toward rectifying the situation. I think that while the initial decision was lamentable and was rightly condemned, I think we should give World Vision and Rich Stearns a great deal of credit for the way they have led in the aftermath, demonstrating what humble repentance of leadership ought to look like."

Since the controversy erupted, World Vision has lost about 10,000 of its child sponsorships, World Vision spokeswoman Cynthia Colin says.

"We are continuing to work with sponsors who canceled to see if they would consider returning, and in many cases several have come back or offered to cover the loss of sponsorships due to the policy change," Colin says. "This is a top priority for World Vision and we are committed to getting new sponsors for children who need them. In fact, our staff is working diligently every day to build relationships with potential new sponsors who share our concern and heart for children."

World Vision Is Strengthening Its 'Theological Perspectives'

In the last year, the organization has taken several steps "to strengthen our theological perspectives," according to a World Vision statement provided to *Charisma*.

Two World Vision board members—Jacqueline Fuller, director of corporate giving for Google Inc., and Google Vice President John Park—have resigned. Three have rotated off due to normal term limits. In addition, National Association of Evangelicals President Leith Anderson and Navigators International President Emeritus Jerry White both accepted invitations to join the board. Joan Singleton is now the chair of the board.

"World Vision United States and its board always held to the biblical value of marriage being between a man and a woman," according to the World Vision statement. "But as a result of recent events, each board member formally reaffirmed this belief during a board meeting in May. The board has also made changes to its decision-making process. These changes are intended to ensure that World Vision U.S. adheres to Scripture, our Statement of Faith, and that we continue in our long history of bearing witness to the good news of the kingdom of God through our humanitarian work."

In a follow-up statement, Stearns wrote that World Vision is thankful to all its partners and supporters who "lovingly pointed out to us how we had made a mistake."

“Going forward, we have already made numerous changes to further affirm our Christian identity and ensure that future mistakes will be avoided,” Stearns wrote.

While the changes World Vision has made have largely quelled the outcry, the underlying controversy surrounding same-sex marriage has become even more heated in the year since the fracas exploded.

Same-Sex Marriage Support at Record High

As recent polls found support for same-sex marriage has reached a high of 55 percent, faith leaders expressed growing alarm at just how quickly the culture is changing, the pressures the same-sex marriage debate is placing on churches and ministries and what the ultimate ramifications will be for Pentecostals, charismatics and evangelicals.

Last year, Gallup released a poll that found acceptance of gay marriage had hit a new high even as same-sex marriage advocates had won a string of more than a dozen victories over the last year, most recently in Pennsylvania and Oregon, where federal judges struck down bans on gay marriage.

When Gallup first asked Americans questions about same-sex marriage in 1996, 68 percent were opposed to recognizing marriage between two men or two women, with 27 percent supporting it. Since then, support has steadily grown, reaching 42 percent in 2004 when Massachusetts became the first state to legalize same-sex marriage. Currently, 36 states have legalized same-sex marriage.

The latest Gallup poll shows that a growing number of mainline Protestant denominations have shown support for gay marriage. The United Church of Christ was the first mainline denomination to affirm equal marriage rights for same-sex couples. In June, The Presbyterian Church (USA) voted to allow its ministers to perform gay weddings in states where it's legal. Other denominations that have sanctioned same-sex

marriages include The Episcopal Church and the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America.

Meanwhile, a survey released last summer by the First Amendment Center found 61 percent of Americans believe the government should require religiously affiliated groups that receive government funding to provide health care benefits to same-sex partners of employees, even when the religious group opposes same-sex marriage.

“What’s somewhat surprising, however, is the strength of that support in the face of religious objections,” wrote Charles C. Haynes, director of the Religious Freedom Education Project at the First Amendment Center at the Newseum Institute in Washington, D.C., in a prepared statement.

“When the first legal same-sex marriage was performed in Massachusetts 10 years ago, conservative religious groups were able to mobilize voters to approve laws and constitutional amendments in many states—including deep-blue California—banning gay marriage. Now the tide has turned—not only in the courts ..., but also in the court of public opinion.”

Is the Great Falling Away Underway?

Dr. Michael L. Brown, an author, host of the nationally syndicated talk radio show “The Line of Fire” on the Salem Radio Network and the president of the FIRE School of Ministry, says these developments are “part and parcel of a larger picture of apostasy from biblical values in the name of progress, tolerance and enlightenment.”

“In point of fact, this (the World Vision controversy) is just another step down the slippery slope,” Brown says. “America today has greatly devalued marriage in many ways from no-fault divorce to massively-increased cohabitation to TV shows glorifying teen mothers and polygamy and polyamory and even adult incest. So the push to redefine marriage is part of the

ongoing sexual revolution and rebellion against the authority of Scripture.”

In terms of the spiritual battle behind this phenomenon, Barber says it stands to reason that Satan would “go straight for the very definition of what it is to be human.”

“We are created in the image and likeness of God,” Barber says. “Our means of procreation given to us by God is human sexuality within the bonds of marriage. The nuclear family is the first form of government within which our children learn to be good citizens and learn the truth of Scripture, and so it stands to reason that Satan would go for the very nature of humanity and two of the most important institutions within humanity—marriage and the family—and that he would seek to destroy those institutions, which make no mistake is the goal behind counterfeit same-sex marriage and doing away with the mother and father as a prerequisite for what is defined as parenthood and family.”

As far as whether believers should continue to support World Vision, Brown says he’s encouraged that the Christian community has “cheered them on to do the right thing—caring for the poor, the hungry, the oppressed and caring for needy children. These things are very precious in God’s sight and should be very precious to all.”

“We need to cheer them on to re-examine the path of error that they took,” Brown says. “Some may have to resign leadership positions. Some may have to resign from the board to show true repentance and then they need to rebuild their solid evangelical foundations theologically and morally so that they could go on doing the wonderful work that they are doing.

“Our attitude should be one of instant forgiveness. I have proposed that they put in writing as part of their very foundational charter some of these moral values so that it would mean that the only way they could change these things is

by saying, 'We are no longer evangelical, we have departed from our roots and we are now a non-biblical organization in terms of absolute authority.' "

Why World Vision Is Accepting Government Funds

In recent years, part of the criticism of World Vision has involved its practice of accepting money from the U.N. and the federal government.

In fiscal year 2013, World Vision received \$982 million in total revenues, including 61 percent (\$599 million) in individual child sponsorship and other private donations, 13 percent (\$123 million) in U.S. government cash grants and food, 6 percent (\$56 million) in U.N. cash grants and food and 1 percent (\$8 million) from interest income. World Vision U.S. board policy has limited government funding to less than 35 percent of overall revenue "in order to maintain our willingness to walk away from such funding if it were ever to impede our ministry," Colin says.

"I've always been opposed to Christian ministries taking government money for precisely this reason," says Russell Moore, president of the Southern Baptist Convention's Ethics & Religious Liberty Commission. "Caesar tends to attach strings to his coin and the church shouldn't need a government bailout. And so I think that things are going to become increasingly difficult for Christian ministries that are depending upon federal dollars—now that the sexual revolution is being codified into law."

But Colin says World Vision accepts funding from governmental agencies because it is an additional source of revenue to help the organization achieve its mission to care for the "world's most vulnerable children, their families and their communities, in the name of Jesus Christ." Federal funding is most often designated to pay for food programs, disaster relief and other development programs. Funding from private

donors enables World Vision to do its Christian ministry programs in all project areas.

“Our decision had nothing to do with seeking government grants,” Colin says. “World Vision U.S. has always qualified for government grants and there is no threat to these grants. We qualified for federal grants before the policy change and still do today. The initial decision and return to original policy did not affect our qualification.

“The First Amendment as well as federal and state statutes protect the religious freedoms of churches, mosques, synagogues and thousands of faith-based ministries like World Vision to hire people who share the same faith. WVUS accepts federal grants (not federal contracts) and is protected under federal law from being discriminatorily disqualified from federal grant competition for exercising our legal right to hire those who share our Christian faith and standards.”

An Unbalanced Bias?

In terms of criticism that World Vision may be contributing to a growing pro-Palestinian, anti-Israel bias among some Christians, Brown says this criticism started in the 1980s when Israel invaded Lebanon and “World Vision changed its stance and has increasingly become anti-Israel and pro-Palestinian in a very unbalanced way.”

“I understand they do not support any Jewish children within Israel, they feel that Israel is a country like Germany in terms of resources and therefore can care for its own,” Brown says. “And World Vision is frequently critical of Israel’s actions to protect itself. For many years, World Vision has issued statements that have caused grave concerns regarding these things and in our view they have been terribly imbalanced and one-sided in their approach.”

Brown says this aligns with a “disturbing tendency” among liberal Christian denominations that are “almost always pro-

Palestinian, pro-abortion and pro-homosexuality.”

“It seems that when there is a fundamental departure from scriptural authority, the liberal church comes down on the wrong side of these issues and that is why I was not totally surprised when World Vision did what it did.”

But Colin disputes this claim, saying the Christian relief and development organization is dedicated to the well-being of children worldwide.

“We work in nearly 100 countries, serving all people, regardless of religion, face, ethnicity or gender,” Colin says. “For many years, World Vision has had a special concern for Palestinian Christians and the Christian church which has been rapidly shrinking—clearly a product of the turmoil in this troubled region of the world.

“We believe that all children of the Holy Land—be they Israeli or Palestinian—have the right to live in safety, free from violence, fear and want.”

Time to Stand Up for What Is True and Right

In the wake of the controversy over same-sex unions, Brown says Christians need to realize that “this is a time of serious apostasy, this is a time of the rising up of God-mockers in an unprecedented way and now a very important time for us to rise up and stand for what is true and right.”

“This is the time to get away from our watered-down, seeker-sensitive, keep-everybody-happy church mentality, and get back to preaching the gospel,” Brown says. “I think we need to recognize that as the church has sought to get comfortable in America and build our lovely kingdom, Satan has been on the warpath through abortion, through the sexual revolution, through division and so many other things he’s sought to attack us with.

“It’s time for a wake-up call. If we were being earnest and really going after the Lord, I believe there would be a massive Jesus revolution among young people and a great outpouring of the Holy Spirit. Let’s get our own houses in order with the sin in our midst. Let’s get our own marriages and families in order. And finally, let’s preach the truth. Let’s seek God earnestly and let’s believe Him for a mighty outpouring of the Spirit in this generation.”

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World Vision President Richard Stearns writes a letter to Charisma explaining their recent change in policy at .