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FOREIGN DESK

NON-CHRISTIANS NEED NOT APPLY

Krista J. Kapralos | January 11, 2010

World Vision is one of the largest recipients of U.S. government overseas development grants. In hiring, it gives preferential treatment to Christians. Obama vowed to change that. So why hasn't he?



For decades, World Vision has fought poverty and famine in countries such as Sudan, visited by anti-hunger crusading former Congressman Tony Hall in 1998. Critics fault the organization for giving preferential treatment to Christians when staffing its \$250 million in programs funded by U.S. taxpayers. (Photo by Corinne Dufka / Reuters)

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Bamako, Mali — For a year and a half, Bara Kassambara kept his mouth shut.

Every day, all of his coworkers paused for prayer time. There were frequent Bible studies, and constant talk about Jesus. Kassambara attended the required events, but otherwise quietly focused on his work: bringing clean water to rural Mali.

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"I think many people at World Vision just believed that I was a Christian," said Kassambara, a Muslim in a predominantly Islamic country.

Fluent in English and with years of development work on his resume, World Vision hired Kassambara to work on the West Africa Water Initiative — a project to provide safe drinking water stave off water-borne diseases that run rampant in the region.

It was a rare hire for World Vision, Kassambara said; he only got the job because it was a temporary position. When World Vision stepped down as lead agency on the project in late 2008, Kassambara took a similar job with another organization.

"The goal of World Vision is clearly written: To promote Christianity worldwide," Kassambara said. "I knew this was going on. I knew the rules of the game. If their goal is to promote Christianity, why should they hire a Muslim?"

World Vision, based outside of Seattle, is one of the largest recipients of development grants from the U.S. Agency for International Development, the federal government's foreign aid arm. The organization received \$281 million in U.S. grants in 2008, up from \$220 million in 2007 and \$261 million in 2006, according to World Vision documents. Those grants, amounting to about a quarter of the organization's total U.S. budget, came in the form of both cash and food.

World Vision International employs about 40,000 people globally.

Charity Navigator, which ranks charities based on efficiency, lists World Vision as a "super-sized charity," with \$1.1 billion in expenses in 2008, and gave it four stars — the best possible ranking. Throughout Mali, Christians and Muslims alike praise World Vision for bringing food and clean water to hungry people — the organization "extends assistance to all people, regardless of their religious beliefs," according to its [website](#). Malians credit the organization with staving off starvation and helping rural villages develop agriculture. If the group ever leaves Mali, people there say they would be devastated.

World Vision officials say the organization does not proselytize, just that they decline to separate their work from their faith. "We do want to be witnesses to Jesus Christ by life, word, deed and sign," says Torrey Olsen, World Vision's Senior Director for Christian Engagement. That wouldn't be possible, he says, unless the organization's workers were Christians.

Under U.S. law, World Vision points to civil rights protections that allow religious organizations to hire employees based on their faith. This is an uncontroversial protection of religious freedom, given that churches obviously need Christian staff to carry out their missions, just as synagogues need Jews and Mosques Muslims.

But such religious institutions are typically funded by their followers. The controversial question is whether it's a violation of the First Amendment to exclude on the basis of religion when U.S. taxpayers are footing the bill, a practice that became increasingly common during the Clinton and George W. Bush administrations.

As a candidate, President Obama promised to end such discrimination. So far, he has not.

And so for now in Mali, World Vision's hiring practices mean that for many of the best qualified candidates, most jobs are off-limits.

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Kassambara said he didn't deny being a Muslim when asked, but kept quiet about his faith because a job with a stable, well-funded employer like World Vision is a rarity in this landlocked nation, one of the world's poorest. There are few decent jobs here, and the government struggles to keep its most educated citizens from moving abroad.

World Vision only hires non-Christians if a qualified Christian can't be found. According to its [website](#), "World Vision U.S. has the right to, and does, hire only candidates who agree with World Vision's Statement of Faith and/or the Apostle's Creed," referring to an oft-quoted Christian doctrinal statement.

Fabiano Franz, World Vision's national director for Mali, says that jobs held by non-Christians are considered temporary. "There's no encouragement for a career here if you're not a Christian," he says.

Franz argues that separation of church and state is an American concept that doesn't translate well to many other cultures. In Mali, and in other countries throughout the world, he says, faith is integrated into daily life. An attempt to separate faith and practice in Mali, he says, would be foreign and confusing to those receiving aid. "If you're a committed Christian, you shouldn't have this separation between your faith and your work," he says.

"We're very clear from the beginning about hiring Christians," Franz says. "It's not a surprise, so it's not discrimination."

So is it Constitutional?

Despite U.S. civil rights laws that protect against discrimination where tax dollars are at use, World Vision officials cite an exemption for religious organizations in the 1964 Civil Rights Act in defense of their longstanding policy.

Critics argue that the exemption doesn't apply to World Vision and other groups that accept federal dollars. They say their position is supported by the First Amendment, which forbids the government from favoring (or disfavoring) a particular faith, or from favoring (or disfavoring) religion in general over secularity. This, critics argue, should constrain tax revenue from flowing to groups that hire based on religion.

Safeguards against such awards, however, have been eroded in recent decades, beginning with a Clinton-era provision known as "Charitable Choice." This allowed religious groups to apply for social service grants, but barred overtly-religious agencies from receiving funds. Several Bush-era policies pushed the envelope further, in ways that critics say undermine foundational American anti-discrimination laws.

In 2001, President George W. Bush removed restrictions preventing religious groups from receiving federal funds, and his administration was sympathetic to federal grantees that discriminated by faith. In 2007, the Justice Department's Office of Legal Counsel issued a memo on a \$1.5 million awarded to World Vision. The memo stated that, even though the 1974 federal statute under which the money was being granted specifically prohibited discrimination on the basis of religion, World Vision would be *permitted* to discriminate, as a result of the 1993 Religious Freedom Restoration Act.

Critics say that World Vision leads faith-based agencies in an effort to "engage in government-funded religious discrimination," according to Aaron Schuham of Americans United for the Separation of Church and State. "It has seized upon every available legal argument to undermine civil rights protections."

Schuham's organization and other opponents of the Bush-era policies on the issue are hopeful that

President Barack Obama will tighten the reins on World Vision and other religious groups. In a July 1, 2008 speech on faith in America delivered in Zanesville, Ohio, candidate Obama said "if you get a federal grant, you can't use that grant money to proselytize to the people you help and you can't discriminate against them – or against the people you hire – on the basis of their religion."

So far, Obama has not tried to change any policies governing faith-based agencies. On the contrary, critics such as the ACLU and Americans United worry that he embraced them in February, when he appointed Richard Stearns, president of World Vision's U.S. operations, to his advisory council for the Office of Faith-Based and Neighborhood Partnerships.

"There is a force for good greater than government. It is an expression of faith," Obama said then.

A number of evangelical organizations have advocated for religious discrimination, but World Vision is widely considered to be the main force behind the effort.

In a **September letter**, more than 50 groups pressed Attorney General Eric Holder to withdraw the memo. The petitioners included a Baptists, Methodists, and a handful of prominent Jewish organizations — including the Rabbinical Assembly and the Jewish Council for Public Affairs — as well as civil rights groups such as Americans United for the Separation of Church and State and the American Civil Liberties Union.

"When a religious organization uses their own funds, they have the right to discriminate on the basis of religion," Schuham says. "But that shouldn't apply to government-funded positions."

After multiple requests, the White House did not offer a comment on the issue.

World Vision's hiring policy is nothing new. Officials at the organization said they've received federal funds for decades, all while giving Christians preference when filling positions. For many years, these hiring practices were illegal, says Christopher Anders of the American Civil Liberties Union, but they went largely unnoticed until the Bush administration publically supported them.

"They were ignoring federal restrictions (against discriminatory hiring), and sometimes the federal agencies giving them money weren't doing anything to put restrictions on them," Anders said. "Once Bush took office, the issue got a lot more attention,"

A matter of survival

Foreign leaders in the poorest corners of the world are unlikely to argue with World Vision's policies, even if it means that locals are denied jobs, said William Miles, a Northeastern University professor and expert on West Africa.

"The notion of the separation of church and state doesn't transfer well to Africa," Miles said. "Even for those countries that call themselves secular, they don't practice secularism in the way that we understand it. They don't try to reduce the influence of any particular religion, and any source of development aid is welcomed, even if it has a religious provenance."

In Mali, where positions with foreign aid agencies are often the most lucrative gigs available, a regular paycheck from World Vision is considered by many to be the gold standard.

Ali Kodio, 27, lives in Koro, a dusty rural town on Mali's eastern edge, where World Vision has a large field office. Kodio strolls down sandy streets on the lookout for foreigners, whom he directs to a friend's small guesthouse in exchange for cold beer and a shaded place to sit in the heat of the day.

Koro has a growing Christian community, Kodio said, mostly because of World Vision's influence.

"My sister's husband is a Muslim, and he is a driver for World Vision, and when my sister got sick, World Vision took her to the hospital and paid her bill," Kodio said.

The whole family is grateful that the man works for World Vision, but no one expects that he'll ever be promoted, Kodio said. "Everyone knows that World Vision is a Protestant organization, and that they want people to become Protestants," he said.

It's not enough to believe in Christ, said Lossi Djarra, 46, who lives with his wife and their seven children in the central Malian city of Bla, where World Vision has a strong presence. Djarra said he applied for a job as a security guard with World Vision, but a Protestant man was hired.

"It makes people angry," Djarra says. "If you're not in their church on Sunday, you won't get the job. People don't have a chance." Even for projects that have no religious component, World Vision carefully screens job applicants.

The organization's religious discrimination slowed work on the West Africa Water Initiative, said Nicole Cece, who works on the project for Cornell University's Institute for Food, Agriculture and Development. Cece shares office space at World Vision's Mali headquarters.

When World Vision, then the lead agency on the project in a group of non-profits, set out to hire someone to help her and others work on the project, the effort stalled, Cece said.

"There was a question of Christian commitment," Cece said.

Kassambara said he only knew of one or two other Muslims who work for World Vision in Mali. For many Muslims, he said, even sitting at a desk in a World Vision office would present challenges.

"A lot of Muslims believe they should not even touch a Bible, or discuss the Bible," he said. "In order to work at World Vision, you must be willing to be surrounded by Christianity."

Editor's note: This article has been updated to clarify several points. The subhead was changed from "[World Vision] only hires Christians" to "In hiring, [World Vision] gives preferential treatment to Christians." In the nineteenth paragraph we clarified the description of how the First Amendment applies to religion. In the twenty-first paragraph, we corrected the text to indicate that the Office of Legal Counsel's memo applied specifically to a World Vision grant.

Comments

2 Comments.

Post Comments

cynthia colin, February 12, 2010 15:20 ET

In addition to the editor's note, I would like to point out the following corrections to this article:

1. World Vision prefers Christians as employees while serving people of all faiths.
2. The organization hires non-Christians for temporary positions as needed and about 20 percent of World Vision International's staff is non-Christian. World Vision also does not infringe upon the rights of its non-Christian employees to worship freely in the workplace around the world. Also, while the West Africa Water Initiative referenced in the article received grant money from USAID, World Vision's participation was privately funded. The organization's hiring policy is the same for both publicly and privately funded projects.
3. World Vision also asked the Global Post to ask Mr. Anders to cite cases for the statement: "For many years these hiring practices were illegal " and to name which FBOs and federal agencies were ignoring those restrictions, unbeknownst to the ACLU. If he cannot cite such law, then the statement about the Bush executive order is false: there were no legal restrictions to be removed by President Bush's order. This order was enforcing the law as it existed, not "removing restrictions" or changing it. President Bush's order simply clarified what the law had been under President Clinton and the First Amendment and still is -- faith-based social service grant applicants are entitled to equal treatment in awarding federal grants, no better, no worse than secular applicants.
4. Lastly, World Vision would like to know if the Global Post received a response from the ACLU regarding restrictions enforced prior to 2001. If not, we trust that the editors will do as they agreed and update the article indicating they could not cite a specific example and add the paragraph by professor "Chip" Lupu, an expert on faith-based issues, that notes his position.

[reply](#)

kristak, February 16, 2010 13:11 ET

The article does not dispute World Vision's service of people of all faiths, nor the agency's hiring of non-Christians for temporary positions and as needed.

Analysts widely credit Bush with removing obstacles that could have impeded faith-based agencies from receiving federal funds. According his 2001 executive order, "The purpose of the executive department Centers will be to coordinate department efforts to eliminate regulatory, contracting, and other programmatic obstacles to the participation of faith-based and other community organizations in the provision of social services." See the full text of the order here: http://frwebgate.access.gpo.gov/cgi-bin/getdoc.cgi?dbname=2001_register&...

As evidence of organizations that disregarded hiring laws, the ACLU cites evidence in its 2004 lawsuit against the Salvation Army, including internal agency memos that detailed the agency's long-standing faith-based hiring preference.

Krista Kapralos

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