

**TOWARDS A FRESH EMBRACE OF OUR
CHRISTIAN IDENTITY**

world relief 

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Introduction — April 2019

From time to time it is necessary to refresh and evaluate our commitment to the Scripture-based-values that guide World Relief's everyday activities, to sharpen the edges of Gospel truths that can become blunt and to remind ourselves why we are doing what we are doing. These *Affirmations* are not a departure from our past convictions nor are they exhaustive. Rather, they represent a fresh and contemporary articulation of our deeply held values that have been expressed through our US and international ministry. Building on our historic foundation they reflect our engagement with our contemporary environment and evidence our understanding of our journey that continues to unfold as the Holy Spirit leads us forward into a fuller embrace of our mission and vision.

We offer these affirmations recognizing that we are not living up to them but as broken, imperfect people part of an imperfect organization in a broken world, we aspire to see these affirmations become praxis for us individually and also for World Relief globally. We offer these affirmations also in recognition that we live in perilous and polarizing times globally connected in a world with different faith traditions and cultures and increasingly pluralistic characteristics and norms. Governments are in crisis around the world and leaders in many nations have lost credibility and moral authority due to corruption and the evident placing of self-interest over national interest. Sadly, the church is not immune to these kind of leadership failures that plague many institutions. We believe the souls of the nations and the integrity of our faith are increasingly at stake. We speak out now to remind ourselves of our responsibility as Christ-followers to be Salt and Light to a world prone to decay and darkness and embrace Integral Mission as foundational for our onward journey, a journey characterized by *ordinary people in community as the church seeing people as Jesus saw them, naturally doing and teaching the things Jesus did in the way Jesus did with the attitude Jesus had and with the objectives and outcomes Jesus had. In prayerful dependence on God we seek to live out this calling.*

We acknowledge that there is huge risk involved in proceeding on this path of obedience to God because speaking with a prophetic voice always has consequences. We also recognize the temptation to self-righteousness and we therefore accept the responsibility to speak the truth in love and to name and warn against temptations, racial and cultural captivities, false doctrines, and political idolatries—knowing our own complicity in them. We speak out because:

- Scripture demands that speaking with a prophetic voice is mandatory for anyone who wants to live a consistent Christian life, especially dedicated to serving the vulnerable;
- Unbiblical practices and beliefs undermine gospel integrity and render the very core of our ministry to the vulnerable ineffective.
- *We believe the gospel cannot be powerful through us unless it is first powerful in us.*

Therefore, to accomplish this and to call others to support this vision, we affirm the following, believing that it is imperative for the restoring of the souls of peoples and nations, the restoration of the public integrity of our faith and the flourishing of the vulnerable. *These affirmations are neither exhaustive nor final. This is a living expression of our calling as we understand it and will be further refined as God matures our understanding of his nature and call to us.*

Note on 2022 Addendum: The original document was approved in April 2019 with seven affirmations. The eighth affirmation was added in May 2022.

AFFIRMATION I: Our Christian Faith — the Center of our Identity

WE AFFIRM THAT our Christian faith is at the center of our identity, motive and manner of being, and that it is God's redemptive work through Christ that brings us first to be at peace with Him and then at peace with ourselves and others. With humility, yet without apology we embrace the unique claims of Christ when He said, *"I am the Way, the Truth and the Life. No one can come to the Father except through Me."* (John 14:6.) We affirm that the gospel is not limited to personal conversion to Christ which is essential, but also includes social transformation and involvement as taught by Jesus in Luke 4:18-21. We are respectful when unconditionally and without discrimination working with people from various religions, cultures, and backgrounds but not at the expense of our relationship with the living God or witness to the transformation that only Christ can bring. And while we reject the abuse of power by proclaiming the Gospel from a position of power when serving the vulnerable as categorically wrong and unethical, we pray that at some point in their journey all will personally experience the fullness of Christ's unconditional and transformational love.

Our approach to development is viewed and implemented through the lens of our faith as understood through the Bible, God's word, which is our guide in the areas of faith and conduct. We joyfully stand upon Christ's promise when He said, *"I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who remain in me, and I in them, will produce much fruit. For apart from me you can do nothing."* (John 15:5)

AFFIRMATION II: Created in God's Image (Imago Dei)

WE AFFIRM that every human being is created in the image and likeness of God: *Then God said, 'Let us make mankind [human beings] in our image, in our likeness . . . So God created mankind [human beings] in his own image, in the image of God (Imago Dei) he created them; male and female he created them (Genesis 1:26-27.)* Neither gender can image God independent of the other nor express the fullness of God's nature, which is best discovered in male and female living, loving and leading together. While holding to our convictions rooted in historic Christian doctrine, we affirm the dignity and rights of all people as made in the image of God and as objects of his grace and mercy. This image and likeness, the *Imago Dei*, confers a divinely decreed dignity, worth, and God-given equality to all, including the elderly, the infirmed, the unborn, the marginalized and the oppressed and is unconditional of sexual orientation or gender identification. We acknowledge entrenched systems of economic, racial and ethnic discrimination that is prevalent not only in the USA but in the regions where World Relief works and the resulting generational pain and injustice and militates against the biblical teaching of the *Imago Dei*.

We affirm that in Christ, there is to be no oppression or discrimination based on race, gender, religious identity, or class (Galatians 3:28) and are therefore committed to honoring, loving and serving people around the world regardless of sexual identity, sexual orientation, beliefs about gender roles or any other factor. When we fail to overcome these oppressive obstacles, fail to recognize the interconnectedness of these discriminatory practices and even perpetuate them, we have failed in our vocation to the world — to proclaim and live the reconciling gospel of Christ. Therefore our commitment to this doctrine of the *Imago Dei*, compels us to acknowledge that:

1. Every life reflects the Imago Dei and matters to God and therefore to us. With David we affirm that God *"created my inmost being; you knit me together in my mother's womb. I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made; . . . My frame was not hidden from*

you when I was made in the secret place . . . Your eyes saw my unformed body; all the days ordained for me were written in your book before one of them came to be” (Psalm 139:13-16.) Therefore, our implementation strategies reflect our desire to value life from conception to the grave whether it is through maternal health interventions, economic empowerment, Peace Building activities or any other intervention.

2. *Racial bigotry and ethnocentrism* expressed through racism as well as any form of nationalism that becomes a substitute for our ultimate loyalty to Christ and His Kingdom, is a brutal denial of the image of God and therefore we reject race or racial categories used to deny people their dignity and worth. In the face of bigotry, silence is complicity and any doctrines or political strategies that use racist resentments, fears, or such language must be named as public sin. Racial and ethnic bigotry must be antithetical for those belonging to the body of Christ and hold that all are created in the image of God because it denies the truth of the gospel we profess and is a preamble to serious discrimination against the vulnerable and can even lead to genocides. We want to participate with the Holy Spirit as He builds here on earth a people that will be resembled in heaven in the future described by John the apostle, *After this I looked, and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and before the Lamb. They were wearing white robes and were holding palm branches in their hands.* (Revelation 7:9).
3. Our embrace of the Imago Dei necessitates that we proactively pursue *gender equality* in our organization and all aspects of our work. We reject the idols of *male superiority and sexism* embraced by the cultures of the countries we work as well as in the USA as irreconcilable for followers of Christ. We grieve *misogyny, mistreatment, violent abuse, sexual harassment, and assault of women* that is prevalent locally and globally in our culture and politics, even, in our churches. We lament when such practices seem publicly ignored, and thus privately condoned, by those in high positions of leadership, especially those in pastoral authority. *We stand for the respect, protection, and affirmation of women in our, communities, churches, politics, workplaces, and families* because of our commitment to the doctrine of the Imago Dei. We support the courageous truth-telling voices of women, and are willing to speak out and confess sexism as a sin, requiring our repentance, resistance and corrective actions including wherever World Relief works.

AFFIRMATION III: Addressing Poverty and Greed

WE AFFIRM THAT How we treat the hungry, the thirsty, the naked, the stranger, the sick, and the prisoner is how we treat Christ himself. (Matthew 25: 31-46) *“Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.”* Proverbs 21:13 teaches us that there is a direct relationship between how we treat the poor and our own welfare as a community and as individuals, *“Those who shut their ears to the cries of the poor will be ignored in their own time of need.”*

Therefore, while we affirm that work is a vocation and that the laborer is worthy of his labor (I Tim 5:17-18) as well as that wealth is given to be shared generously and can be a means for “storing up treasures in heaven” (I Tim 6:17-19), we reject greed, and an inordinate desire for material wealth or gain, causing one to ignore the realm of the spiritual and at the cost of others. Jesus addressed people about greed who had very few possessions and it is therefore incumbent upon us to also address this sin that hides itself so well in our affluent societies. Greed is natural to our hearts;

generosity is God's heart. Jesus calls us to generosity and we are committed to heed his call and follow his example who *"though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich."* (2 Corinthians 8:9)

We further recognize the entire system of poverty and acknowledge the network of individual, spiritual, structural and relational barriers that can keep communities trapped in poverty. From our organizational competency areas, our efforts at advocacy and empowerment address both immediate needs and the long-term systemic causes of these problems as God calls us to protect and seek justice for those who are poor and vulnerable, especially women and children.

We embrace the truth that those who happen to have a position of privilege in society must steward that power for the common good and the advancement of the Kingdom.

AFFIRMATION IV: Solidarity with The Stranger/Vulnerable

WE AFFIRM THAT Our treatment of people who are oppressed, strangers, outsiders, or otherwise considered marginal and displaced, also called the vulnerable, is a test of our obedience to God, who declared and demonstrated His love and concern for these very people. Our proclamation of the lordship of Jesus Christ is at stake in our solidarity with the most vulnerable. Therefore, we do not accept the neglect of the well-being of under-resourced families and children and are committed to alleviate the plight of the most vulnerable globally especially the displaced.

While we share a patriotic love for our countries, we reject *xenophobic, ethnic nationalism or national identity that excludes or minimizes the stranger and the foreign born*. We reject it because it promotes the fallacy of any ethnic, cultural, gender or national group's self-sufficiency, and promotes loyalty to and the self-interest of one's group as an end in itself. That loyalty is intended for Jesus alone, who calls us to love our neighbor as well as our enemies, and not only "our own" and to live out the fruit of the Spirit under all circumstances and to all individuals. As Christ followers, we are commanded to show charity and hospitality to strangers and sojourners without discrimination and to care for the distraught and downtrodden. As Christians we have a special mandate to engage with the refugee crisis. Consequently, World Relief stands in solidarity with the stranger and the foreign-born and confess, *"Our citizenship is in heaven. And we eagerly await a Savior from there, the Lord Jesus Christ."* (Philippians 3:20)

We grieve and strongly deplore the growing levels of conflict, exploitation and violence that impoverish, displace, and increase the vulnerability of populations around the world, and attacks on, abuse, exploitation, or neglect of immigrants and refugees. We are grieved that they are being made into cultural and political targets, and often exploited for political and financial expediency without real long-term interest or care for the people that are suffering in situations that continue to deteriorate rather than improve after the "media moment" is over. We believe that God makes the treatment of the "strangers" among us a test of faith (Leviticus 19:33-34) and that it is part of our prophetic calling to remind churches of this. Therefore, we will especially focus our work where marginalized individuals are being victimized, lend our Christian conscience to their cause and choose our church partners accordingly.

AFFIRMATION V: The Church

WE AFFIRM THAT the local church has been called to serve with the poor and oppressed and this commitment is central to Christian discipleship, to which 2,000 verses in the Bible attest and is central to restoring shalom to the community — physical, emotional, relational and spiritual. Therefore we recognize and respect the local church — the local fellowship of believers as manifested in the communities we work. Our work strengthens these local fellowships in its desire to be faithful to this calling and we are strengthened by our interaction with the local churches. Where there is no church, we work to represent the global church in a faithful manner, pushing the darkness back. We will continue to tirelessly work for unity within the Body of Christ. Unity within the church is not an option but an imperative, the very thing that Jesus prayed for in John 17:21-22: *“I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you.”* We also recognize the power dynamics that are at play when global north organizations engage with churches and organizations in the global south and therefore we enter as guests, co-labor as partners and by God’s grace continue as friends.

AFFIRMATION VI: Speaking the Truth

WE AFFIRM that truth is morally central to our personal and public lives. Truth-telling is central to the prophetic biblical tradition, and includes speaking the Word of God into societies and speaking the truth to power. The foundational confession of World Relief’s Integral approach is that Jesus is LORD of all and we honor that through our deep commitment to the seamless integration of the proclamation and the demonstration of the gospel. It was central for the early church and needs to again become central to us. If Jesus is Lord, then Caesar was not — nor any other political ruler since. If Jesus is Lord, no other authority is absolute. Jesus Christ, and the kingdom of God he announced, is the Christian’s first loyalty, above all others. We pray, *“Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven”* (Matthew 6:10). Our faith is personal but never private, meant not only for heaven but for this earth. Falsehood can enslave us, but Jesus promises, *“You will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.”* (John 8:32) The search and respect for truth is crucial to anyone who follows Christ as well as to speak truth into situations where corruption and dishonesty are manifested. Jesus is the light in our darkness. *“I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.”* (John 8:12) We want His light to shine on us as well as shine through us.

Therefore, we respectfully speak the truth in love at all times, balancing the tension between the command to honor those in authority whether in the USA or in the countries where we work (Romans 13:1-3) and to also speak for those whose voices are suppressed. This means that at times we must prophetically address corruption that harms the lives of others and the Kingdom, especially the oppressed and displaced. This we do with the willingness to suffer the consequences that may follow and at times remain silent cognizant of the fact that speaking into a situation as outsiders into a foreign culture may do more harm than good.

We also tell our story with integrity because how we tell the story of our work, and what we choose to say, is a sacred trust between World Relief and the churches, communities, peers, donors, and the poor who work together with us. What we say about the work to all parties will be true and transparent, demonstrating the complexity of poverty alleviation, and give credit

everywhere credit is due. What we communicate will honor the view and the voice of those we serve, and will reflect humility and a teachable heart by sharing even hard lessons learned.

AFFIRMATION VII: Creation Care

WE AFFIRM that *“the earth is the Lord’s, and everything in it, the world, and all who live in it”* (Psalm 24:1) and therefore our biblical mandate to be stewards of the earth’s resources, toward genuine global development that brings human flourishing for all creation. Global poverty, environmental damage, violent conflict, weapons of mass destruction and deadly diseases in some places ultimately affect all places. From the very beginning, caring for the earth that God created has been a fundamental part of our role as humans when, “The Lord God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it.” (Genesis 2:15) God also expect us to exercise environmental stewardship, warning us that, “if you defile the land, it will vomit you out...” (Leviticus 18:26, 28) and warned strongly against polluting the earth (Numbers 35:33-34). Preservation of trees are also directly addressed and encouraged (Deuteronomy 20:19).

Environmental stewardship is also a justice issue because the poorest people in the world are the most impacted by environmental neglect. When the rain does not come, people starve. When soil erodes, families go hungry. When water gets polluted, children get intestinal disease. When all the trees are cut, women and children walk hours for firewood. When the land is deforested, watersheds no longer function, causing rivers and streams to dry up. When the rain does come, deadly landslides ensue. Preserving and sustainably using those assets, so as not to further degrade those ecosystems — serving creation as a steward — becomes central to serving these people particularly of those who gain their sustenance through agriculture or other vocations that directly depend on good stewardship of the earth’s natural resources.

As Christ followers we are committed to do our part whether it is establishing recycling programs in our offices or speaking prophetically into this domain, to encourage wise political leadership to deal with this. We will proactively build processes into our programs that reflect our commitment to environmental stewardship and the well-being of all populations and specifically the vulnerable.

AFFIRMATION VIII: Human Sexuality

World Relief derives its vision of Christian faith and practice from the Bible. Our understanding of human sexuality flows from the convictions that we are created in God’s image, we are invited to share in God’s love, our bodily existence is a blessing, and our sexuality is intended as a wonderful gift.

We believe that marriage is a sacred, God-ordained covenant between a man and a woman. We affirm that sex is exclusively intended for marriage as an expression of love and as the means to create new life. Scripture also describes faithful singleness as honorable to God. The divine gift human sexuality is woven into our being and can be upheld by fidelity in marriage, chastity outside of marriage, and friendship in community.

We ask all our staff to live out their faith in all areas of life. We believe a robust commitment to Christian living includes human sexuality as expressed in this biblical framework. We acknowledge that we are all in a different place in our spiritual journey. Hence, we expect employees to be respectful of co-workers on their respective journey as followers of Jesus showing kindness,

gentleness, and compassion. We are committed to grow together in the unity of Christ, promoting healthy dialogue, and working together on our shared commitment to empower the church to serve the most vulnerable.

We acknowledge that people within and connected to the LGBTQIA+ community have experienced, even by the actions of Christians, incredible pain, heartache, and isolation. As followers of Jesus, we wish to protect all people's dignity, including LGBTQIA+ individuals. As a deep conviction of our faith, we seek to follow the example of Jesus by serving all people, condemning no one, and loving all. We recognize that all people are created in the image and likeness of God. This image and likeness, the Imago Dei, confers a divinely decreed dignity and worth to all that is unconditional of sexual orientation or gender identification.

CONCLUSION

World Relief is determined to go where we have never gone before, and we are positioned to do so because of our Integral Mission approach with its distinct expressions for the different contexts where we work. Despite our own human and institutional weaknesses, God's call, His strength, and His mercy make us powerful to carry out His Integral Mission, the Gospel of Jesus Christ. In Joshua 1:9 God told Joshua, *"Be strong and courageous. Do not be frightened and do not be dismayed, for the LORD your God is with you wherever you go."* (Joshua 1:9) Like Joshua, we are called to be strong and courageous in the face of a volatile, uncertain, complex, and often ambiguous world. These affirmations will guide us on the journey ahead, a journey that God called us on.

Our motivation for living out these affirmations is the same as expressed by Joshua: *"So that all the nations of the earth may know that the LORD's hand is powerful and so that you may fear the LORD your God forever."* (Joshua 4:24) That is why we are willing and determined to go beyond where we have gone before for the global glory of God.