



UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

OFFICE FOR CIVIL RIGHTS

THE ASSISTANT SECRETARY

July 29, 2015

Dr. Gregg Chenoweth  
President  
Bethel College  
1001 Bethel Circle  
Mishawaka, IN 46545

Dear Dr. Chenoweth:

I write to respond to your May 1, 2015, letter to the U.S. Department of Education, Office for Civil Rights (OCR), in which you requested a religious exemption for Bethel College (College) of Mishawaka, Indiana, from Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972 (Title IX), 20 U.S.C. § 1681. Title IX prohibits discrimination on the basis of sex in any education program or activity operated by a recipient of Federal financial assistance.

The implementing regulation at 34 C.F.R. § 106.12 provides that Title IX does not apply to an educational institution controlled by a religious organization to the extent that application of Title IX would be inconsistent with the controlling organization's religious tenets. Therefore, such educational institutions are allowed to request an exemption from Title IX by identifying the provisions of Title IX that conflict with a specific tenet of the religious organization. The request must identify the religious organization that controls the educational institution and specify the tenets of that organization and the provisions of the law or regulation that conflict with those tenets.

Your request explained that the College "is a private, Christian evangelical College" that was "established in 1947, as a Christian liberal arts college by the Missionary Church." According to your letter, the College's Articles of Incorporation require "that the controlling majority of the Trustees governing the College must be members in good standing of the Missionary Church" and the Bylaws of the College require "that the President of the Missionary Church shall be an ex-officio member of the Board. In addition, the President of Bethel College is an ex officio member of the denominational Board of Trustees." Your letter explains that most of the tenets of the Missionary Church are codified in the Missionary Church Constitution (Constitution). The College uses the Constitution "as a reference for behavioral and doctrinal standards expected of the College, its students, faculty, and other employees...and follows Biblical principles in its policies and practices applicable to Christian education, and to its students and employees." You

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further state that students “are required to attend chapel regularly” and that “The Covenant of Lifestyle requires students and employees to follow the Code of Conduct established by the College,” which “incorporated the Christian standards of behavior directed by Biblical principles and the tenets of the Missionary Church.”

Your letter requests a religious exemption from the provisions of Title IX to the extent those provisions “would require the College to allow males and females to reside in the same housing, to visit within the housing of the opposite sex without restrictions, to allow an unmarried male and female to live together, or to allow a person with gender identity issues to be treated as a member of the sex which they have assigned to themselves...” or “would require that the College not discriminate in discipline, admissions, hiring, and employment decisions, in matters such as employment leaves for pregnancy, childbirth, and elective termination of pregnancy, or on the basis of pre-marital sex, unmarried pregnancy, extra-marital sex, or homosexual activity.” In support of this request, you cite to the Constitution and Biblical principles that state “that God created two sexes, male and female; that marriage is between one man and one woman; and that extramarital sex, premarital sex, and the practice of homosexuality are sinful behaviors, and therefore prohibited.” Your letter further explains that it is the position of the College, “based upon its religious beliefs taken from Biblical principles and the Doctrine of the Missionary Church, that a person cannot change his or her birth sex.” Finally, you state that the “College’s Christian religious beliefs, which are based upon the Bible and the tenets of the Missionary Church, also prohibit elective abortion, pre-marital sex, extra-marital sex, and homosexual behavior for students and employees.”

You state that, for these reasons, the College is requesting an exemption from the following regulatory provisions “so that the College may discriminate on religious grounds in regard to its students and employees, in keeping with its religious beliefs and the tenets of the Missionary Church:”

- 34 C.F.R. § 106.21(b)(iii) (governing admission);
- 34 C.F.R. § 106.21(c) (governing admission);
- 34 C.F.R. § 106.31(b)(4) (governing different rules of behavior or sanctions);
- 34 C.F.R. § 106.32 (governing housing);
- 34 C.F.R. § 106.33 (governing comparable facilities such as restrooms and locker rooms);
- 34 C.F.R. § 106.40 (governing different rules based on marital or parental status of students);
- 34 C.F.R. § 106.41 (governing athletics);
- 34 C.F.R. § 106.51(a) (governing employment);
- 34 C.F.R. § 106.51(b)(6) (governing employment); and
- 34 C.F.R. § 106.57 (governing the consideration of marital or parental status in employment decisions).

The College is exempt from these provisions to the extent that they prohibit discrimination on the basis of marital status, sex outside of marriage, sexual orientation, gender identity, pregnancy, or abortion and compliance would conflict with the controlling organization's religious tenets.

Please note that this letter should not be construed to grant exemption from the requirements of Title IX and the regulation other than as stated above. In the event that OCR receives a complaint against your institution, we are obligated to determine initially whether the allegations fall within the exemption here granted. Also, in the unlikely event that a complainant alleges that the practices followed by the institution are not based on the religious tenets of the controlling organization, OCR is obligated to contact the controlling organization to verify those tenets. If the organization provides an interpretation of tenets that has a different practical impact than that described by the institution, or if the organization denies that it controls the institution, this exemption will be rescinded.

I hope this letter responds fully to your request. If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to contact me.

Sincerely,



Catherine E. Lhamon  
Assistant Secretary for Civil Rights  
U.S. Department of Education