

January 8, 2016

Catherine E. Lhamon, Assistant Secretary
U.S. Department of Education, Office for Civil Rights
Lyndon Baines Johnson Department of Education Building
400 Maryland Avenue, SW
Washington, DC 20202-1100

Re: Statement of exemption under 20 U.S.C. § 1681(a)(3) and 34 C.F.R. § 106.12

Dear Ms. Lhamon:

It has come to Southwestern Assemblies of God University's attention that the Department of Education has recently taken the position that 20 U.S.C. § 1681(a), Title IX's rule against discrimination on the basis of sex, now bars differential treatment based on "gender identity." The Department's new interpretation of Section 1681(a) conflicts with Southwestern Assemblies of God University's religious tenets and our ability to carry out our religious mission. In the course of our review, Southwestern Assemblies of God University has identified other potential interpretations or applications of Section 1681(a) that likewise conflict with our religious mission. Therefore, as the highest-ranking official of Southwestern Assemblies of God University's administration, I write to inform the Department of Education that Southwestern Assemblies of God University qualifies for the religious exemption under 20 U.S.C. § 1681(a)(3) and 34 C.F.R. § 106.12 because of its affiliation with the Assemblies of God. I also write to explain how certain provisions, as they may be interpreted by the Department, conflict with specific tenets of Southwestern Assemblies of God University and the Assemblies of God.

Southwestern Assemblies of God University qualifies for Title IX's religious exemption.

Southwestern Assemblies of God University is an educational institution affiliated with the Assemblies of God, a religious organization. The following explains why Southwestern Assemblies of God University qualifies for the exemption set forth at 20 U.S.C. § 1681(a)(3) and 34 C.F.R. § 106.12 as these provisions have been interpreted and applied by the Department of Education.¹

¹ See U.S. Dep't of Ed., *Explanation of HEW Form 639 A* (March 1977) at 3-4, available at <http://freepdfhosting.com/88b629f888.pdf>.

The General Council of the Assemblies of God (“General Council”), the highest governing body of the church, has established the Alliance for Assemblies of God Higher Education (“Alliance”) and tasked the Alliance with developing educational, spiritual, and theological standards for schools that wish to be affiliated with the church.² To fulfill this mandate, the Alliance developed Endorsement Criteria that are intended to facilitate the development of educational institutions that are committed to the Assemblies of God’s mission, to the integration of faith and learning in the Pentecostal tradition, and to academic excellence.³ The purpose of the Endorsement Criteria is to insure doctrinal fidelity and institutional conformity to Assemblies of God standards of morality.

Southwestern Assemblies of God University is endorsed by the Alliance and is committed to maintaining this status by carefully following the Alliance’s Endorsement Criteria.

Consistent with the Alliance’s Endorsement Criteria, Southwestern Assemblies of God University’s mission documents commit Southwestern Assemblies of God University to the formation of mature Christian character and spiritual life, the development of loyalty to the doctrines and principles of the Assemblies of God, and the preparation of leaders for the Kingdom of God and the Assemblies of God.

The Alliance’s Endorsement Criteria also shape how Southwestern Assemblies of God University selects its leadership, faculty, administrators, and students. At least 90% of Southwestern Assemblies of God University’s board members are affiliated with the Assemblies of God and the remaining board members affiliated with another Pentecostal church. Under the Endorsement Criteria, Southwestern Assemblies of God University may not deviate from these standards without permission from the Alliance.

Additionally, the Alliance’s Endorsement Criteria require Southwestern Assemblies of God University’s faculty, administrators, and students to be members of an Assemblies of God church or otherwise espouse a personal belief in the basic tenets of the Christian faith as understood by the Assemblies of God.

Consistent with Alliance standards, Southwestern Assemblies of God University asks all applicants for on-campus programs to affirm that they are born-again Christians, that they desire to be involved in Christian service, and that they agree with the accepted essentials of the Christian faith as held by the Assemblies of God. Applicants must also provide a letter of recommendation from a pastor.

² See The Alliance for Assemblies of God Higher Education, *Our Purpose*, <http://colleges.ag.org/about/mission.cfm>.

³ See The Alliance for Assemblies of God Higher Education, *Endorsement Criteria*, Rev. 2010, available at <http://colleges.ag.org/pdfs/Final%20Criteria.pdf>.

Student life at Southwestern Assemblies of God University is also shaped by our commitment to Alliance standards. Southwestern Assemblies of God University shares the Assemblies of God's conviction that Christian colleges and universities should form their students both academically and spiritually. Faithful to the Endorsement Criteria, Southwestern Assemblies of God University helps stimulate students' appreciation for the Word of God and encourages students to pursue spiritual maturity and excellence. Southwestern Assemblies of God University is dedicated to strengthening our students' appreciation of and attachment to the Christian Church, especially the Pentecostal tradition and the Assemblies of God. Each student is required to be involved in a ministry for at least two semesters, with more expected of students in ministry-related majors.

As part of our commitment to developing a robust Christian community, and consistent with the Alliance's standards, Southwestern Assemblies of God University holds at least three chapel services each week, which are mandatory for students. Southwestern Assemblies of God University also has enforceable church and chapel attendance policies for administrators and faculty.

Because Southwestern Assemblies of God University adheres to the Endorsement Criteria, it is eligible for financial support from the Assemblies of God. The Alliance develops financial resources for endorsed colleges in cooperation with the Assemblies of God Trust. The Alliance also develops educational resources and runs conferences to help affiliated schools better serve their mission and their students.

In light of all the above, Southwestern Assemblies of God University is entitled to the exemption set forth at 20 U.S.C. § 1681(a)(3) and 34 C.F.R. § 106.12.

Certain applications of 20 U.S.C. § 1681(a) and 34 C.F.R. 106 conflict with Assemblies of God doctrine and practice.

Southwestern Assemblies of God University is compelled to submit this statement because it believes that its religious convictions, informed by its relationship with the Assemblies of God, conflict with some of the ways that the Department of Education may interpret or may seek to enforce 20 U.S.C. § 1681(a). Specifically, Southwestern Assemblies of God University is concerned with the Department's assertion that Section 1681(a) prohibits distinctions on the basis of sexual orientation, gender identity, or more generally on the basis of the Assemblies of God's teachings about marriage and biblical standards for sexual conduct.⁴

As a Christian institution, Southwestern Assemblies of God University believes that all matters of faith and conduct must be evaluated on the basis of Holy Scripture,

⁴ The religious convictions set forth below are established by the Assemblies of God in its Constitution and Bylaws, available at http://ag.org/top/about/constitution_bylaws.cfm, and in Position Papers approved by the General Presbytery of the Assemblies of God, available at http://ag.org/top/Beliefs/position_papers/.

which is our infallible guide (2 Timothy 3:16-17). As a school founded in and inspired by the Assemblies of God tradition and endorsed by the Alliance, Southwestern Assemblies of God University looks to the General Council and the General Presbytery of the Assemblies of God to help us interpret Scripture.

Human Dignity: The Assemblies of God believes that God created humankind in His image and that people receive their essential dignity from the fact that they are created in God's image and are loved by Him (Genesis 1:27). This dignity does not depend on whether someone is single or married or on whether someone suffers from any particular temptation to sin (1 Corinthians 7; Romans 5:8).

Abortion: The Assemblies of God believes that human beings bear the image of God and receive their essential identity and dignity before we are born (Luke 1:31-44; Acts 7:19; Job 31:15; Psalm 139:13-16). As such, the Assemblies of God believes that abortion is the killing of innocent human life and is therefore prohibited by the Ten Commandments and elsewhere throughout Scripture (Exodus 20:13, 21:22-24; Matthew 19:18; Romans 13:9).

Marriage: The Assemblies of God defines marriage as the permanent, exclusive, comprehensive, and conjugal "one flesh" union of one man and one woman, intrinsically ordered to procreation and biological family, and in furtherance of the moral, spiritual, and public good of binding father, mother, and child. The Assemblies of God teaches that the purpose of Christian marriage is to reflect the love, purity, and permanence between Christ and the Church (Ephesians 5:23-33).

Sexual Conduct: The Assemblies of God believes that God has designed sexual intimacy for marriage and that sexual acts outside of marriage are sinful. Such acts include but are not limited to adultery, fornication, incest, bestiality, pornography, prostitution, voyeurism, pedophilia, exhibitionism, sodomy, polygamy, polyamory, or same-sex sexual acts. (Exodus 20:14; Leviticus 18:7-23; 20:10-21; Deuteronomy 5:18; Matthew 5:27-28; 15:19; Romans 1:26-27; 1 Corinthians 6:9-13; Galatians 5:19; Ephesians 4:17-19; Colossians 3:5; 1 Thessalonians 4:3; Hebrews 13:4).

Sexual Orientation: The Assemblies of God affirms the sexual complementarity of man and woman and teaches that same-sex sexual attractions are temptations to sin and should therefore be resisted. (Genesis 1:27; 2:24; Matthew 19:4-6; Mark 10:5-9; Romans 1:26-27; 1 Corinthians 6:9-11).

Sexual Identity: The Assemblies of God believes that God created humankind in His image, male and female, sexually different but with equal personal dignity. The church supports the dignity of individual persons affirming their biological sex and discouraging any and all attempts to physically change, alter, or disagree with their predominant biological sex—including but not limited to elective sex-reassignment, transvestite, transgender, or nonbinary "genderqueer" acts or conduct. (Genesis 1:26-28; Romans 1:26-32; 1 Corinthians 6:9-11).

Sexual Equality: The Assemblies of God believes that men and women have equal dignity before God and does not make any distinction between the sexes when selecting people for ministry or spiritual leadership positions. Having observed that God pours out His Spirit upon both men and women, the Assemblies of God concludes that God gifts both sexes for ministry in His Church.

Southwestern Assemblies of God University believes and embraces these teachings and has integrated them into its standards for its administrators, faculty, and students. In order to help foster these standards and to help ensure that Southwestern Assemblies of God University is a place of nourishment, Southwestern Assemblies of God University has adopted a student policy manual that clearly outlines policies regarding expectations for student behavior, accountability, rules and disciplinary actions, and other general expectations for student life on campus.

None of this to say that Southwestern Assemblies of God University or the Assemblies of God excludes anyone based on their past sins or based on their temptations. The Assemblies of God believes that all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God and should seek redemption through confession, repentance, baptism, and faith in Jesus Christ. We welcome and treat with respect, compassion, and sensitivity all who experience same-sex attractions or confess sexually immoral acts and are committed to resisting sexual temptation, refraining from sexual immorality, and transforming their behavior in the light of biblical teachings. (Matthew 11:28–30; Romans 3:23; 1 Corinthians 10:13; Ephesians 2:1–10; Hebrews 2:17–18; 4:14–16). However, in keeping with our biblical beliefs about sexual morality, Southwestern Assemblies of God University cannot in good conscience support or encourage an individual to live in conflict with biblical principles. Any individual who violates campus standards for biblical living is subject to discipline, including expulsion.

Southwestern Assemblies of God University believes that its policies and practices, informed by Assemblies of God teachings, do not discriminate on the basis of sex—that is, between men and women—and therefore do not violate Title IX. However, at the same time, I understand that Southwestern Assemblies of God University's faithful application of the religious tenets set forth above may conflict with the way that the Department may interpret or seek to apply certain provisions of 34 C.F.R. 106. Those potential conflicts are set forth below.

ADMISSIONS AND STUDENT DISCIPLINE:

Based on the convictions listed above, Southwestern Assemblies of God University believes that it cannot fulfill its God-given mission and build an intentional Christian community if it cannot require students to embrace and do their best to follow the Assemblies of God's teachings about sexual morality and sexual identity. These convictions shape Southwestern Assemblies of God University's admissions policies and student discipline policies. I understand that the Department may

President Kermit S. Bridges, D.Min.

contend that Southwestern Assemblies of God University's faithful application of the religious tenets set forth above violates Sections 106.21 and 106.31(b)(4). To the extent that is so, Southwestern Assemblies of God University is exempt from these provisions.

HOUSING, RESTROOMS, AND LOCKER ROOMS.

Based on the convictions listed above, Southwestern Assemblies of God University expects all students to embrace their God-given biological sex. This expectation shapes Southwestern Assemblies of God University's policies regarding student housing, restroom and locker room use, and participation in athletic programs. I understand that the Department may contend that Southwestern Assemblies of God University's faithful application of the religious tenets set forth above violates Sections 106.32, 106.33, and 106.41. To the extent that is so, Southwestern Assemblies of God University is exempt from these provisions.

MARRIAGE, SEXUAL CONDUCT, AND ABORTION:

Based on the convictions listed above, Southwestern Assemblies of God University expects all students, faculty, and administrators to honor the Assemblies of God's teachings on marriage, sexual conduct, and abortion. I understand that the Department may contend that Southwestern Assemblies of God University's faithful application of these doctrines may conflict with Sections 106.40, 106.51, and 106.57. To the extent that is so, Southwestern Assemblies of God University is exempt from these provisions.

Thank you for your attention to this matter.

Sincerely,



Kermit S. Bridges, D.Min.
President
Southwestern Assemblies of God University

KSB/pb

Copies:

Rev. Rick DuBose, Chairman, Southwestern Assemblies of God University Board of Regents

Dr. George O. Wood, General Superintendent, General Council of the Assemblies of God

Dr. Marilyn Abplanalp, President, Alliance for Assemblies of God Higher Education