

Responsive Philanthropy

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Focus On the... Election?

*James Dobson
Makes a Big Step
To Connect Religion
And Partisan Politics*

By John Russell

For nearly 40 years I have been watching a nonstop, withering attack from social and political liberals that is tearing families apart, undermining marriage, belittling Christian values and endangering our children. Most of what we as Christians believe is now either viewed as passé or openly ridiculed. It's time to say, "Enough is enough!"

— James Dobson, Focus on the Family Action fundraising flier, May 2004

With these words, one of America's most respected and well-known spiritual leaders moved his organization even farther into the political fray. Citing the advocacy restrictions under Focus on the Family's 501(c)(3) tax-exempt status, Dobson recently founded Focus on the Family Action, a 501(c)(4) political organization dedicated to "the defense of moral values and the family."

The move is both a sign of culturally combative times as well as the culmination of the politicization of Dobson. The child psychologist who dispenses fatherly advice on the radio has given way to a full-fledged policy agenda that rivals the country's largest advocacy organizations. And it is an agenda that will gain new strength and funding through the establishment of Focus on the Family Action (FOFA).

This overt shift toward political involvement is especially pertinent in light of NCRP's recent research into conservative public policy grantmaking. Focus on

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c(3) Donor Base Creates Poll Opportunity

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the Family (Focus) ranked 21st among grantees receiving the most money from the 79 foundations studied in NCRP's *Axis of Ideology* report, banking \$3,075,400 from 1999-2001. Additional research into private foundation support puts the group's total foundation receipts at approximately \$11.5 million, including grants from 2002. As the single-largest recipient of foundation support in *Axis's* social issues area, Focus has played a major role in efforts by conservative grantmakers to influence public policy. It is also a testament to the right's use of flexible funding, with more than 70 percent of Focus's grants being classified as general operating support.

These foundation investments, along with the huge public following for Dobson, make the creation of a 501(c)(4) a powerful political tool. Under its 501(c)(3) status, Focus built a fundraising juggernaut with up to 7 million members and more than \$100 million in annual revenues. By founding a 501(c)(4), Dobson will likely tap this base for additional dollars that can be used for explicitly political purposes as well as to lobby Congress and get evangelicals to the polls this November.

While prominent religious leaders using their influence to affect policy is nothing new, Dobson has been traditionally (and, perhaps, erroneously) seen as staying out of such matters. As Jerry Falwell and Pat Robertson became the mainstream public face of evangelical politics over the last two decades, Dobson has been content to spread the pro-family message through his radio programs and publications. But in recent years, he has gradually abandoned the relative nonpartisanship of his activities.

The U.S. Supreme Court decision in *Lawrence v. Texas* (making sodomy laws in the United States, which generally targeted gay men, unconstitutional and unenforceable) and the subsequent decision by the Massachusetts Supreme Court legalizing same-sex marriage, appear to be the catalyst for Dobson and other evangelical leaders' recent political fervor. After years of outspoken support for a more traditional family unit, Dobson sees the extension of marriage rights to gay and lesbian couples as the latest in a series of cultural-political insults, including no-fault divorce, the continued legalization of abortion, the removal of prayer from public schools and the

proliferation of sexual imagery in the media.

Even without the formation of FOFA, Dobson's media ministry has created a large pulpit from which to preach. According to Focus, the daily broadcast of his Focus on the Family radio program reaches 7 million people and his monthly newsletter has a circulation of 3 million. The organization's Colorado Springs headquarters has become a tourist attraction, with an estimated 120,000 visitors per year. The facility includes a children's park and exhibits based on the radio dramas that Focus produces. The cafeteria alone yields \$527,285 in revenue.

The Focus empire also includes a wide array of magazines targeted at various audiences, especially children and teens. In 1986, Focus launched *Citizen Magazine*, a current events and political publication with an evangelical focus modeled after more mainstream publications like *Time* or *Newsweek*. Headlines from the May 2004 issue include "How to: Use Zoning Laws to Deter Pornographers" and "Moms and Dads Want Schools to Teach Abstinence." The convergence of "family values" and politics is also present on the magazine's Web site, which is part of the general Focus Web site. It includes position papers on issues such as public education, abortion, homosexuality, and gambling.

Dobson's following is no doubt tied primarily to his expertise and advice on parenting, which makes up the majority of his writings and on-air advice. But outside of the media ministry, Focus on the Family has developed an extensive lobbying and advocacy component. Although no longer active in the organization, Dobson founded the Family Research Council (FRC) in the 1980s to rally support for a constitutional amendment banning abortion. FRC, with a budget of nearly \$10 million, has since grown into the country's premier advocacy organization specializing in socially conservative issues. Former FRC President and Dobson protégé Gary Bauer ran for president in 2000 on a platform that mirrored the organization's positions.

Focus on the Family and FRC have also nurtured a network of "Family Policy Councils" in 34 states. These advocacy organizations lobby in state capitals and have experienced success in passing informed-consent abortion laws and

In 2003 IRS documents, Focus reported spending \$432,627 on lobbying activities. If even a fraction of Dobson's supporters donate to FOFA, his lobbying capacity would increase dramatically.

anti-gay marriage legislation as well as in influencing localities on such issues as the teaching of creation in public schools. While Focus does not provide financial assistance to these groups, their combined budgets for 2002 totaled \$13,162,000, a number comparable with the combined budgets of the State Public Interest Research Groups, a prominent liberal advocacy organization with affiliates in 26 states.

Beyond policy and lobbying, Focus is also making attempts to enter the social services arena through its support of Pregnancy Resource Centers. These clinics provide counseling and support to pregnant women who are considering abortion, but do not offer abortion services. Focus assists these organizations in finding pro-life physicians to staff their facilities, providing written materials aimed at dissuading women from having abortions, and acquiring ultrasound equipment. Focus has pledged to purchase 650 ultrasound machines by 2010 in the hopes that women who receive ultrasounds will be less likely to have an abortion.

While these and other policy efforts surrounding abortion have been part of Dobson's ministry over the last 20 years, it is the prospect of legalized marriage for gays and lesbians that has inspired his most vocal and public opposition. Until his most recent offering, *Marriage Under Fire: Why We Must Win This Battle*, Dobson's books have focused on parenting and marriage from a biblical and psychological perspective. In *Marriage Under Fire*, he lays out 11 arguments against gay marriage that range from the conventional—children need both a father and mother—to the more esoteric—gay marriage will eventually bankrupt the country's Social Security and health-care systems.

The founding of FOFA appears to be an extension of this unprecedented reaction by Dobson to advances in gay rights. Throughout much of his career, Dobson has shied away from endorsing specific candidates for elected office. But in the last several months he has made two such political nods. One was for Rep. Pat Toomey, in his unsuccessful bid to unseat Pennsylvania Senator Arlen Specter in the Republican primary. The second is in his home state of Colorado, where former Congressman Bob Shaefer is in a tight race for the GOP nomination. Both moves were made by Dobson as an individual and were not sanctioned by Focus, but because of his influence, it is difficult to distinguish between the two.

In order to run this new advocacy organization, Dobson has taken a leave of absence from his paid role as president of Focus. This will free

him from the legal constraints that currently prohibit his ability to endorse political candidates by name. And there is little doubt which candidate he wishes to endorse. During a recent campaign swing through Colorado, President Bush met with Dobson, and White House Political Director Karl Rove has long courted evangelical Christians as a voting block. The formation of FOFA will make this connection much easier.

As an organization that is only a few months old, FOFA has done very little to date. Its most visible action so far is a recently launched newspaper ad campaign that attacks senators who do not support amending the Constitution to make gay marriage illegal. The ads are running in swing states and inform readers "Why Doesn't Senator X Believe Every Child Needs a Mother and a Father." FOFA will also be organizing a series of rallies across the country in the coming months to build support for the amendment, culminating in a national march on Washington on October 15. But the true power and nature of FOFA likely lies in its connection to Focus and its vast financial and membership resources.

Focus on the Family brought in more than \$116 million in foundation grants and individual donations in 2003. Through Dobson's tremendous name recognition and the unmatched direct-mail capacity of Focus, FOFA should be able to raise a tremendous amount of money in the coming months. This will be money that can be used without limit for lobbying and advocacy purposes. In 2003 IRS documents, Focus reported spending \$432,627 on lobbying activities. If even a fraction of Dobson's supporters donate to FOFA, his lobbying capacity would increase dramatically.

While Dobson's success as a political force and the potential of FOFA for increased impact are potentially troubling developments for the integrity of the nonprofit sector, his organization serves as another example of the power of general operating support. Through unrestricted grants and the flexibility of individual donations, Focus has been able to pursue a specific policy agenda. As mainstream and progressive funders see how smaller advocacy organizations struggle under the constraints of program-specific grants, Focus's success shows the value of flexible funding in cultivating a policy agenda. ○

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