

AFA still cranky after all these years

by *Bill Berkowitz*

Rev. Donald Wildmon's three-decade old American Family Association develops sophisticated 'godcasting' network to activate its community of 'first responders'

It has an annual budget of close to \$17 million, net assets of more than \$32 million, owns and feeds programming to nearly 200 radio stations, employs about 100 at its home-base, operates the Center for Law & Policy, a high-powered conservative legal enterprise, and has developed one of the most sophisticated communications networks in all of right wing grassroots Christendom. And, after three decades of conducting boycotts, demonizing homosexuals, and railing against the entertainment industry, the Reverend Donald Wildmon's Tupelo, Mississippi-based American Family Association is as cranky as it ever was.

"Once your Christian religion is exorcised from society, society will not stand," Wildmon recently told The Clarion Ledger's Jean Gordon. "In a democracy you absolutely must have some values to hold you together. If you don't, you end up in chaos."

According to Gordon, over the years the AFA, founded in 1977 by Wildmon as the National Federation for Decency, has "grown into one of the most vocal conservative Christian groups in the nation, quick with its outrage about everything from homosexuality on TV to a Muslim lawmaker's plans to take the oath of office while holding a Quran." The organization declares war, rockets e-mail to its supporters, and claims victories: In the recent past it has claimed credit for a downturn in the Ford Motor Company's fortunes, for convincing Wal-Mart not to make donations to controversial (read that gay and lesbian) organizations, and to return to using the term "Merry Christmas" instead of "Happy Holidays" (another victory for War on Christmas battlers), and for the swift cancellation of the NBC television program "The Book of Daniel" -- actor Aidan Quinn starred as a Vicodin-popping Episcopal priest with a dysfunctional family.

"In the past," Wikipedia points out, "the AFA has promoted boycotts of all television shows, movies, and businesses that have promoted 'indecent,' ... launch[ing] specific boycotts against Crest, Volkswagen, Wal-Mart, Tide, Clorox, Pampers, Microsoft, Burger King, the Carl's Jr., Kraft Foods, Mary Kay Cosmetics, Old Navy, NutriSystem, and American Airlines. In 2004, the AFA went after the movie "Shark Tale," because the group believed the movie was designed to brainwash children into accepting gay rights. In 2005, it boycotted the company American Girl, seller of dolls and accessories, because of a charity that the company supported, and Target for its lack of the word 'Christmas' in its advertising."

But as Wildmon pointed out, "You win a few small battles. Primarily what we're trying to do is hold a thumb in the dam."

Some critics and commentators consider Wildmon's AFA as part of the old guard evangelical groups. "I would include them in what some have described as 'old guard evangelicalism,'" Jeffery L. Sheler, author of

the book "Believers: A Journey Into Evangelical America" (Viking, \$24.95) and former religion editor at U.S. News & World Report, told Gordon. "The old guard... focus[es] on a limited number of hot-button issues generally involving things like human sexuality including homosexuality."

The AFA's agenda may be considered "old guard evangelism," but its technological capabilities, media holdings, and its willingness to fully embrace the Internet, makes it a forward looking enterprise. Included in the AFA's operational orbit are several AFA-affiliated state-based groups, the AFA Foundation, the Center for Law & Policy, American Family Radio, American Family News Network's OneNewsNow.com (formerly Agape Press), and AFA Action -- the legislative action arm of the American Family Association.

Affiliated Websites include ValuesVoters.com -- a voter registration and education site; the Center for Law & Policy Case Note (blog); OneMillionDads.com; OneMillionMoms.com; AFA Internet Filtering; NoGayMarriage.com; and BoycottFord.com among others.

"He has perhaps one of the largest databases of supporters," said the Rev. Jimmy Porter, executive director-treasurer of the Mississippi Baptist Christian Action Commission, which sometimes works in concert with the American Family Association. "It is a substantial voice for the Christian conservative movement."

The organization's "e-mail blasts" "prompt supporters to shower TV and corporate executives with e-mail messages protesting objectionable TV shows or a company's apparent support of homosexuality," Gordon pointed out.

AFA President Tim Wildmon (son of Donald), in his commentary for the March issue of the AFA Journal wrote that the organization is an "activist" group: "We see social and moral problems in the culture, and we take on as many of them as we can and do so from a Christian perspective. And when we get into a battle, we try to win."

A recent AFA's battle involves the FX network: On April 10, OneNewsNow.com reported that OneMillionDads.com had launched its "Fed Up with FX Network" campaign. Claiming that FX has "the most gratuitous sex, violence and profanity" on any network today, OneMillionDads.com is calling "for all commercial sponsors to pull their support for FX," OneNewsNow.com reported.

In an e-mail dated April 16, Wildmon urged supporters to "send an e-mail to the Democratic National Committee telling them you expect a public apology" because DNC Chairman Howard Dean failed to mention Jesus or the Resurrection, "the very heart of Easter," in a DNC-issued statement about the holiday.

'First wave of AFA responders'

Like many other evangelical groups that started out several decades ago, the AFA conducted the vast majority of its earliest communications through direct mail; envelopes packed with petitions, sample letters that could be sent to the targeted party, and occasionally picture postcards of an art piece/artist being protested filled mailboxes across the country.

These days the organization uses the Internet to communicate with and motivate its activists. Tim Wildmon pointed out that "the Internet and e-mail allow us to get the ball rolling very quickly. We can contact millions of people in a matter of hours. In the last three years, AFA has been very effective in winning battles with our Internet activism. In fact, AFA has become the largest pro-family group on the Internet with some 3.4 million people having joined our e-mail action alert team. They are the first wave of AFA responders to each issue."

Wildmon added that "we Christians" need to "be prepared to engage in the culture war for the long haul. The war is about the future of our country and what kind of America we will hand over to our children and our grandchildren. The people who subscribe to a secular humanist worldview â€“ including many who are anti-Christian in their beliefs and actions â€“ are tireless in their efforts to remake our country in their own godless image. I am talking about groups like the ACLU, Planned Parenthood (the largest abortion provider in the country) and many in the entertainment and news media."

With the enemy cleared named, Wildmon declared that the AFA is aiming to grow its network of first responders from the current 3.4 million to 5 million during the coming year.

American Family Radio

American Family Radio first appeared on radar screens when it began taking over stations that were formerly held by National Public Radio. In 2002, the New York Times reported that In Lake Charles, Louisiana, American Family Radio had replaced two NPR stations on the radio dial. "Religious broadcasters have done this to public radio stations in Oregon and Indiana, too," writer Blaine Harden said, "and many large-market public radio stations, like WBEZ in Chicago, complain that new noncommercial stations, most of them religious, are stepping on the signal at the edge of their transmission areas."

Launched in 1987, AFR has approximately 200 radio stations in 27 states across the country. According to American Family Radio, "AFR has built more stations in a shorter time than any other broadcaster in the history of broadcasting." The AFA built their small radio empire by applying for noncommercial educational licenses. According to a People for the American Way Right Wing Watch, "When the FCC refused to certain licenses, the AFA sued the FCC in federal court arguing that to deny religious groups noncommercial broadcasting licenses violates their First Amendment and Equal Protection rights."

According to the AFA's 2005 990 tax form, the "Building and maintenance of a national Christian network" is one of the organization's most important projects. American Family Radio -- "Today's Radio for Life" -- is a 24/7 operation that "offers the finest in inspirational and traditional Christian music [about 70% of the programming] and 30% preaching/teaching/talking." American Family Radio also provides a "five-minute, around the clock, newscast" put together by its news staff. It is "a non-commercial network," with "no advertising," that "operate[s] off contributions from listeners and supporters."

The "About AFR" page on its website says: "Back in 1987, the vision God gave the American Family Association Founder, Don Wildmon, was to use satellite and the latest technology to build hundreds of American Family Radio stations across America. Dr. Wildmon wanted to use these radio stations to inform Christians about what is happening in America. God had an additional reason for the stations -- encouragement and inspiration to and for the body of Christ."

In mid-April, the Associated Press reported that "Nonprofit community groups, schools and churches this year will get their first opportunity since 2000 to apply for licenses for full-power, noncommercial/educational FM radio stations. The Federal Communications Commission stopped taking those applications so it could catch up on its backlog and revise its system for reviewing them."

Noncommercial/educational stations are usually found at the low end of FM frequencies spectrum (87.9 to 91.9) and depend on public or institutional support. Because there's a lack of noncommercial space on the radio dial in cities, opportunities more often exist in remote or rural areas.

Although the licenses are free, costs for a station could limit the number of applicants. Legal, engineering and equipment startup costs typically could total up to \$250,000, Matthew Lasar, media history professor at University of California at Santa Cruz and editor of a blog on FCC issues, told AP.

"In this era of increasingly non-local, hyper-commercialized, homogenized radio, it becomes especially important that the FCC preserve and advance programs that give great weight to diversity of ownership and localism," Michael J. Copps, an FCC commissioner, said on the agency's Web site.

The FCC points out that there are 2,817 such full-power stations in the United States -- including more than 630 National Public Radio affiliates -- and about 11,000 commercial stations.

"The Cleveland-based United Church of Christ has been publicizing the radio opportunity in public meetings, e-mails and its newsletter," AP recently reported. "Our strong hope is to get some of these licenses into the hands of people in rural states who are committed to reclaiming the unifying and healing role of religion, which is so needed in our nation today," the 1.3 million-member UCC said in an e-mail in January to its churches and others interested in noncommercial radio.

While acknowledging that the UCC was "a big player in this," Patrick Vaughn, general counsel for American Family Radio, claimed that the UCC "oppose[s] most religious broadcasting that has a conservative, evangelical perspective."

Funding the Wildmon family

According to the 2005 990 tax form, founder Donald E. Wildmon received about \$110,000 with benefits, plus over \$30,000 in expense account and other allowances -- including a housing allowance of over \$31,000 -- in 2005. AFA president Tim Wildmon got about \$100,000, and the organization's secretary, Forrest Daniels, received slightly more than \$80,000.

The organization gives 'scholarships' to any full time employee at 'any accredited college or university,' which added up to about \$54,000 in scholarships. As the blog Kevin's Space pointed out on March 30, "the kids of these people get their university education paid for, with funds that are donated, supposed to fight for the family. But it is clear the people who benefit are the Wildmon family."

The 2005 990 tax form revealed that the AFA paid over \$26,000 to Neal Clement (son-in-law of Donald). Clement represents the FSC Securities Corporation, which owns stock in this company. While the 2005 return "does not say how much, but it does show that they lost over a million on all of their corporate stock holdings," Kevin's Space reported. "Their 2003 return states that they hold just over \$1.6 million worth of stock in FSC Securities Corporation. They also paid \$33,000 to the LTD Computer Services, which is owned and operated by Larry Durham (brother-in-law of Donald).

Kevin's Space also pointed out that "The non-profit also acts as a bank to not only its founder, but also its employees" and other entities involving more than \$7 million:

Donald E. Wildmon even owed almost \$21,000 at the beginning of 2005, and it appears from their tax statements that nothing was paid back at the end of the year. In 2003 he owed over \$33,000 and paid back \$13,000 over the course of the year. The AFA was also owed money it borrowed to three other individuals -- [longtime AFA staffer] Edward Vitagliano (over \$5,000). He made no payments over the course of the year. Stephen Ensley (over \$72,000) paid back about \$11,000. In the 2005 tax return, he owed about \$61,000 at the beginning of the year, and owed \$61,000 at the end of the year, meaning he paid nothing on the loan during 2005. Ensley is the American Family Online president. And Ron Cottom (over \$10,000) paid back almost \$4,000. He works for the American Family Radio.

In addition, the Educational Media Foundation was granted loans amounting to more than \$6 million, and the

Family Worship Center Church, Inc. -- a church run by the disgraced televangelist Jimmy Swaggart -- received close to \$1 million.

According to Wikipedia, the Rocklin, California-based Educational Media Foundation (also known as EMF Broadcasting, or just simply EMF) is a "not-for-profit organization which operates the K-LOVE and Air 1 radio networks and publishes the Christian Music Planet magazine."

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