

Focus on the Family

Focus on the Family is an Evangelical Christian 501(c)(3) non-profit organization headquartered in Colorado Springs, CO. Dr. James Dobson established the organization in 1977, and through the use of legally separated organizations it has become a strong and active force in American culture and politics. Focus on the Family's stated mission is "[t]o cooperate with the Holy Spirit in sharing the Gospel of Jesus Christ with as many people as possible by nurturing and defending the God-ordained institution of the family and promoting biblical truths worldwide." (http://www.focusonthefamily.com/about_us.aspx). The religious arm, the 501(c)(3) branch, of the organization focuses on outreach efforts that are built around six "pillars." Several of these pillars strongly foreshadow the lobbying activities of the 501(c)(4) branch. First among these pillars is "the preeminence of evangelism," which focuses on spreading the religion. "The permanence of marriage" refers to the organization's focus on how a Christian marriage should look, to include a hard stance against gay marriage. "The value of children" and "the sanctity of human life" are pillars that focus on proper child-raising and encompass a strong anti-abortion stance. For good measure the pillar, "the value of male and female" serves to directly address the issue of homosexuality and gay marriage, and reinforce what the organization feels are proper gender roles. (http://www.focusonthefamily.com/about_us/guiding-principles.aspx).

Focus on the Family manages to make a major impact on key facets of American life. The 501(c)(3) produces media such as magazines and DVD's, and even hosts a daily radio broadcast geared towards their wide Evangelical Christian following. The radio show is estimated to have 220 million regular listeners. (<http://www.rightwingwatch.org/content/focus-family>). Surprising to many is the impact the Focus on the Family seeks to have beyond the standard religious activities of proselytizing and providing spiritual guidance for their many

followers. Focus has managed to have a major impact on the political scene and actively seeks to influence legislation which affects the whole of American citizenry. This is done largely through an organization called CitizenLink, which, as a 501(c)(4), is much freer to engage in political lobbying. Focus on the Family has been an active and vocal opponent of the gay rights movement, supports the intelligent design movement, and takes a strong anti-abortion stance. They were part of the coalition that formed to sponsor California's Proposition 8, they produced an anti-abortion advertisement for 2010's Super Bowl featuring Tim Tebow, and founder Jim Dobson was known to meet regularly with President George W. Bush.

(http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Focus_on_the_Family_Action). Although both are headquartered in the same facility, CitizenLink is kept legally separate from the 501(c)(3), books are kept separate, and no funds are commingled. As required by law to keep the organizations separate, CitizenLink reimburses Focus for services provided.

(http://www.citizenlink.com/uploads/2010/07/FY2011-FOTF295213_7_2011AnnualReport_CitizenLink_INTERACTIVE1.pdf)

So long as these boundaries are adhered to, the two organizations can, and do, effectively operate as one coordinated unit, and even have common board members and management. *Id.* In 2005 the 501(c)(3) brought in \$142 million in revenue, while the affiliated 501(c)(4) brought in \$14.7 million. (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Focus_on_the_Family_Action)

Focus's main website maintains a section devoted to "social issues," where the user can read or watch media that gives the organization's perspective on current issues. Most links in the social issues section transport the user seamlessly to CitizenLink's website. This ability to operate efficiently as one unit is part of what has enabled Focus on the Family to become such a major player in domestic politics. Focus's large and loyal following can go to the 501(c)(3)'s

page to be informed on a range of issues dealing with Christianity and the family, and here they will also hear national political issues commented on just enough to get them fired up. Once they have been inspired to act, it's a simple matter of directing them to the CitizenLink site to get them involved on specific legislation or political campaigns.

This paper has addressed the relationship between Focus on the Family and its 501(c)(4) affiliate, but this is far from being the totality of Focus's empire. Focus on the Family is affiliated with many other state-centered groups, and also has 74 international ministries. (<http://www.rightwingwatch.org/content/focus-family>).

Recently, Focus has been working to adapt itself to changing social morays in American cultural life. Focus on the Family has gained a reputation over its life span for being a combative gladiator in the arena of America's culture wars. Jim Dobson might be best known for his infamous response to the attacks of September 11th, when he suggested that America's "immorality" might be responsible for the attacks. *Id.* However, the organization may be evolving as it enters a new era. Jim Daly became Focus's president in 2005, and when Dobson retired in 2009 Daly also took on the title of acting CEO and is now in the midst of a public relations overhaul for Focus on the Family, in an attempt to transform its divisive image. In a speech before an audience at the University of Colorado, Colorado Springs, Daly admitted "We've created an animosity... We've said hate the sin and love the sinner. But when you peel it back, sometimes we hated the sinner too. And that's not the Gospel." Recent comments seem to signal that Focus has accepted defeat on the issue of gay marriage, and will not continue making fervent legislative pushes on the issue any longer.

(http://www.nytimes.com/2013/03/09/us/focus-on-the-family-transforms-its-message.html?_r=0). Instead, Focus may shift towards a stance of simply advocating for the

freedom of Christian individuals (examples given were a photographer or a municipal clerk) to not participate in a same sex marriage, as it would conflict with their principles. *Id.* Perhaps the greatest indicator of Focus's shift in public relations strategy is an interview that Jim Daly did with U2's Bono in July, 2013. (<http://www.atu2.com/news/transcript-bono-husband-father-advocate-focus-on-the-family-interview.html>). In this candid interview, Daly and Bono spoke at length about family, love, and their faith. Daly's tone is decidedly more conciliatory and accepting than Dobson's had been, and Bono is perhaps known for his progressive political stances more than he is known for being a Christian.

While Focus is rebranding its image, it has not changed any of its core beliefs, and those core beliefs have always informed their lobbying activities. Americans, no matter their religious persuasion, would be wise wait and see if this attempt to act with a more civil and tolerant disposition will affect Focus's political activities. The outcome will affect us all.

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