

Focus on the Family laying groundwork for a ballot campaign in Massachusetts

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In 2004, involvement by Focus on the Family, the Colorado Springs, Colo.-based evangelical Christian ministry and education center, was central to passage of 11 of the 13 marriage amendments on state ballots that year. One of the keys to the group's strength is stealth. Much of the grassroots political organizing is run by state-based policy councils that are affiliated with Focus on the Family and much of their grassroots organizing, in turn, takes place in conservative evangelical churches — well outside the mainstream public eye.

A new book by *U.S. News and World Report* senior editor Dan Gilgoff, for which Gilgoff gained unprecedented mainstream media access to Focus on the Family founder Dr. James Dobson, senior Focus staffers and the 88-acre campus of the organization itself, shows just how Dobson and his \$140 million organization influenced the ballot campaigns. *The Jesus Machine: How James Dobson, Focus on the Family, and Evangelical America are Winning the Culture War* maps out the blueprint for how Focus works a grassroots campaign: A local affiliate organization collects signatures or lobbies for an amendment and uses evangelical church networks to rally its supporters; at the same time Dobson leverages the celebrity clout he has in evangelical circles to make personal appeals to supporters in the state to contribute funds or collect signatures for the amendment; and both Focus on the Family and the Family Research Council (FRC), an offshoot of Focus, provide financial and organizational support.

An examination of recent Focus on the Family-related activity in Massachusetts, which includes two visits to the state by political organizer H.B. London, a high-profile FRC pro-amendment rally in Boston called Liberty Sunday that was broadcast across the country, and a Focus-sponsored ex-gay conference called Love Won Out where speakers urged attendees to support the marriage amendment, points to one obvious conclusion: Dobson and Focus on the Family have their sights set on taking away the civil marriage rights of same-sex couples in Massachusetts and their grassroots campaign to win a statewide ballot campaign is well underway.

Culture warrior rallies pastors The name H.B. London may not mean much to the average LGBT person in Massachusetts, but it should. London, a first cousin of Dobson, serves as Focus on the Family's vice president for ministry outreach and pastoral ministries. His innocuous-sounding title gives little sense of how central London's work was in mobilizing support for the organization's successful effort to pass 11 constitutional amendments to ban same-sex marriage in the 2004 elections. Gilgoff, who interviewed London for his book, said that in the run-up to the 2004 elections, London traveled to 10 battleground states, meeting with thousands of pastors and urging them to preach to their congregations about conservative social positions prior to the elections.

With the Massachusetts legislature poised to take a final vote June 14 on its own marriage amendment, the lead organization promoting the amendment, VoteOnMarriage.org, invited London to hold pastors' meetings in April and May in Springfield, Worcester, North Reading, Brockton, Plymouth and Boston. The title of London's talks was just as vague and innocuous as his Focus staff title, "Making a Difference One Congregation and their Leaders at a Time."

VoteOnMarriage.org spokeswoman Lisa Barstow told *Bay Windows* that London was “not primarily a political guy” and that the purpose of his visit was to act “like a pastor to pastors, encouraging them, uplifting them, supporting them in their ministry. ... I have no doubt that the marriage issue will come up in the context of issues they’re facing as ministers today, but that’s not the key of what he does.”

But why would an organization like VoteOnMarriage.org, a group that exists solely to pass a constitutional amendment that would take away the civil marriage rights of same-sex couples, spend its time and resources bringing in someone to give apolitical pep talks to pastors? And why would Chanel Prunier, the campaign director for VoteOnMarriage.org, divert time away from campaigning for the marriage amendment to serve as the main point of contact for pastors interested in signing up for these pastor pep talks? *Bay Windows* tried to find out last April, but VoteOnMarriage.org closed the pastors meetings to the press.

Despite Barstow’s claim that the pastors meetings were largely apolitical, evidence suggests VoteOnMarriage.org brought in London because he is a seasoned culture warrior, part of Focus on the Family’s political team working to ban same-sex marriage across the country. In his interview with Gilgoff, London said it was his job to urge pastors not to shy away from preaching about controversial topics from the pulpit. “Every pastor has the responsibility to inform their congregation of the danger that lurks around the corner, whether it’s gay rights, same-sex marriage, or partial birth abortion,” London told Gilgoff.

London was also a key grassroots organizer in rallying support for an earlier marriage amendment backed by MFI. The *Boston Globe* reported in Dec., 2003 that Focus on the Family sent London to hold five pastors meetings in the run-up to the 2004 legislative debates, which were held before same-sex couples began marrying in May, 2004. London told the *Globe* that pastors received strategy packets at those meetings, which explicitly urged pastors to convince their congregants to take action to prevent the civil marriages of lesbian and gay couples from ever happening in the first place.

“If we could get even 500 to 700 pastors throughout the whole state [at the January meetings], when you think about how many people they represent, we can disseminate and multiply it by one-hundredfold and five-hundredfold,” London told the *Globe*. (Nima Reza, a spokesperson for Focus on the Family, said that no one from the organization would comment for this story.)

Gilgoff told *Bay Windows* that if Focus on the Family is sending London to rally the pastors in Massachusetts, the organization is likely taking a hands-on approach to the local civil marriage rights battle. “It sounds like Focus on the Family, the national organization, the Colorado Springs-based organization, might be even more active there, if H.B. London is coming in,” Gilgoff said. “I think that they probably view Massachusetts as ground zero for the fight against same-sex marriage ... I think they think if they can pass it there then it would really kind of go to the jugular of the gay rights movement, and I think that’s what they’re trying to achieve.”

Family policy councils work under the radar

Focus on the Family has 35 Family Policy Councils (FPCs), state-based advocacy groups that push Focus on the Family’s socially conservative agenda via political lobbying. According to Focus on the Family’s 2005 annual report to the IRS, the FPCs are legally separate entities from Focus on the Family, but Focus on the Family helped found them by recruiting and organizing a board of directors for each organization and recruiting fulltime executive directors for the FPCs. The Massachusetts Family Institute (MFI), originally called the Pilgrim Family Institute and founded in 1990, is Massachusetts’s FPC. Barstow told *Bay Windows* that MFI’s board has selected each of its executive directors independent of input from Focus on the Family. She said MFI notifies Focus whenever there is a change in leadership, and Focus has never taken issue with any of the board’s decisions.

It's unclear how closely MFI works with Focus on the Family. MFI and VoteOnMarriage.org publicly downplay their connection to Focus on the Family. Kris Mineau, president of MFI, is the most visible spokesperson for the VoteOnMarriage.org coalition. In interviews and media appearances, Mineau regularly frames VoteOnMarriage.org as the leader of a populist movement of citizens angry that same-sex couples can now marry in Massachusetts and who want to see marriage restricted once again to heterosexual couples. Despite his background as an evangelical Christian pastor, he steers clear of overtly religious rhetoric, employing the much more secular argument of "let the people vote." He also rarely mentions MFI's ties to Focus on the Family.

Visitors to the website of Focus on the Family will find a much different picture of Mineau from the public persona he uses in dealing with the mainstream media. In a video interview conducted by his wife Lura Mineau and posted on Focus's CitizenLink news site, Mineau describes MFI as the local arm of Focus on the Family at the outset, saying, "Well, thank you, Lura, and what a pleasure it is, the two of us to be leading Massachusetts Family Institute, the family policy council for Focus on the Family in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts."

Mineau also uses far more overtly religious language in the video aimed at Focus on the Family supporters than he does in speaking with the mainstream media, telling his wife, "We've entered our 16th year and we are definitely the leading voice for traditional family values in Massachusetts. The Lord has greatly blessed us." He also explains that while MFI was for many years based in Newton, "the Lord has given us a larger, more efficient facility in the town of Woburn."

Barstow, who also serves as a spokesperson for MFI, said that while there may be "some coordination" between the two organizations, MFI "operates independently of Focus on the Family." She said Focus on the Family serves as one of the partner organizations in the VoteOnMarriage.org coalition.

Gilgoff said that in the states he studied there was strong coordination between FPCs and the other arms of Dobson's organizations, but the decentralized nature of Focus on the Family and its FPCs is what has allowed them to do much of their organizing work under the radar.

The most visible component of Focus on the Family is the main organization itself, based in Colorado Springs, Colo. The main organization works to promote a conservative Christian political agenda, but it originally built its name and its following as the vehicle for Dobson's work as a Christian family guru, dispensing advice from Dobson, who is a psychologist, on raising children, creating strong marriages and other family-related topics. The main organization divides its time between the political work and the family advice programming.

Focus has a legally separate advocacy-oriented offshoot called Focus on the Family Action. Dobson founded the organization in 2004 to concentrate exclusively on fighting culture war battles, and it has a \$14.7 million budget. The Family Research Council (FRC), based in Washington, D.C., was founded by Dobson in 1983 and existed as a branch of Focus on the Family until the early 90s when it formally separated. FRC, which has a \$10.8 million budget, advocates for conservative Christian policies both in Washington and at the state level. Despite the formal separation of the two groups, Gilgoff reports in *The Jesus Machine* that FRC continues to coordinate its activities closely with Focus on the Family.

Given the various strands through which Focus on the Family can make an impact on public debate, Gilgoff said, it can be difficult for the public to understand the full extent of Focus on the Family's involvement in an issue like a marriage ballot campaign. "The way James Dobson's national empire has been constructed it's more difficult, I think, for the media to connect all those dots," Gilgoff said. "In 2004, I think, Ohio, which I wrote about in the book, is a prime example of how that worked with the state amendment."

In Ohio, the local FPC led the effort to collect the signatures to get the question on the ballot. James Dobson wrote to hundreds of thousands of his followers in the state to get them to submit their names and collect more signatures. And the FRC in Washington spent \$2 million on the signature drive, which involved collecting more than 300,000 signatures in approximately three months. “[Ohio] was a great example of this national nexus of all of Dobson’s national empire being brought to bear to put that amendment on the ballot,” Gilgoff said. “And of course there it had dramatic consequences. I think it likely put George W. Bush, it certainly helped put him over the top and therefore deliver him the White House.”

It is unclear whether that level of coordination exists between Focus on the Family and MFI, but at a minimum both Focus on the Family and FRC have leveraged their resources in Massachusetts over the past few years to help MFI with its attempts to pass a marriage amendment. The interlocking work of MFI, Focus on the Family and FRC seems similar to Gilgoff’s description of Focus’s work in Ohio in 2004. State lobbying records show that in 2003 and 2004 Focus on the Family spent more than \$138,000 to send its staff to Massachusetts to lobby the legislature on an earlier marriage amendment supported by MFI, but which ultimately failed. In the run-up to legislative debates on that amendment, Focus purchased a full-page Boston Globe ad claiming that research shows that same-sex couples are inferior parents to their heterosexual counterparts (although many of the studies cited in the ad compared heterosexual married parents to single or divorced parents, not same-sex couples). Focus on the Family also organized the H.B. London pastors meetings mentioned above. And once those legislative debates began, FRC president Tony Perkins and other FRC staff traveled to Boston and worked side-by-side in the State House with then-MFI President Ron Crews in an unsuccessful bid to pass the amendment.

In 2005, when the newly formed VoteOnMarriage.org was working to collect signatures to put its amendment on the ballot, Dobson sent a personal fundraising appeal to his supporters in Massachusetts, urging them to try to raise \$100,000 to help VoteOnMarriage.org collect its signatures. In 2006, when VoteOnMarriage.org worked to bring that amendment up for a vote in the Legislature, Focus on the Family contributed about \$75,000 to the effort, according to the state Office of Campaign and Political Finance. And in October 2006, FRC rallied both local and national supporters to urge the passage of the marriage amendment through a Liberty Sunday rally filmed in Boston and broadcast across the country on Christian radio and television; VoteOnMarriage.org president Dr. Roberto Miranda spoke during the rally, Perkins served as the event’s emcee, and Dobson himself addressed attendees and viewers via a videotaped statement.

Wolf in sheep’s clothing

Beyond its overtly political activities Focus on the Family has also been active in Massachusetts organizing events that on the surface seem less focused on politics and more closely aligned with Dobson’s original calling as a Christian advice guru. In October 2005 Focus on the Family brought its traveling ex-gay conference, Love Won Out, to Boston. Most of the conference focused on both pseudo-scientific and religious arguments urging LGBT people to try to reject their homosexuality and become heterosexual, but Mineau was also on hand to make an appeal to attendees to get involved in the VoteOnMarriage.org signature collection effort. Bill Maier, one of the conference’s featured speakers and vice president of Focus on the Family, led a workshop during the conference urging attendees to get involved in the fight against civil marriage rights.

Sean Cahill, former director of the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force Policy Institute and a current staff member at Gay Men’s Health Crisis, attended the Boston Love Won Out conference and wrote a report about the event for the Task Force. He said at the start of the conference organizers warned the audience that the conference was a religious gathering and that any pro-gay activists trying to disrupt the event could be charged with hate crimes or civil rights violations based on religion. Yet with the onsite campaigning for the marriage amendment, Cahill said the conference seemed to be departing from its religious mission.

“They said that it was a religious conference... [but] in these breakout sessions they were organizing politically to repeal same-sex marriage. So I thought that was an interesting contradiction,” said Cahill.

The Task Force studied the Love Won Out conferences and found an interesting pattern: in 2004 five of the states that passed marriage amendments, Oregon, Utah, Texas, Oklahoma, and Michigan, hosted conferences the previous year. That trend was less evident in 2006, when only two of the states that passed marriage amendments, Alabama and Tennessee, had visits from Love Won Out. But beyond the ex-gay message, Cahill said he believes these conferences also serve as organizing opportunities to lay the groundwork for anti-gay marriage campaigns, and he points to the Boston conference as evidence.

Focus on the Family has held other events in the state not directly related to marriage. Earlier this year Focus on the Family sponsored a series of workshops in at least two churches, Wesley United Methodist Church in Salem and St. Mary’s Church in Rowley, in which attendees watched a 12-part video presentation called “The Truth Project” aimed at teaching participants to develop “a biblical worldview.” Focus also hosted a pastor’s lunch last August to promote the video presentation and a two-day training seminar last September to train facilitators of the program. Mineau posted an announcement about the pastor’s lunch on the Christian New England News website on behalf of Focus. Bay Windows attended one of the Salem seminars undercover in February and found that the presentation, led by Focus on the Family’s Del Tackett, was not explicitly focused on politics or same-sex marriage. Yet in the video, Tackett made veiled references to civil marriage rights for same-sex couples. He argued that the structure of the family as a husband, a wife and their children was divinely established by God. “And you and I know that this structure is under huge attack today,” he said. He also argued that those who attempt to promote alternate family structures go against God, saying, “This is not ours to manipulate.” While the lesson did not explicitly mention the marriages of lesbian and gay couples, it seemed primed to inspire viewers to believe that the family was under attack by such marriages and that it was their responsibility to defend it.

Gilgoff said events like Love Won Out and the Truth Project presentations are part of an effort by Focus on the Family president Jim Daly, who stepped in as president of the larger organization when Dobson began focusing on Focus on the Family Action, to brand Focus as more than a political organization. But he said those programs also help feed the Focus on the Family political machine.

“Their new president Jim Daly realizes that all of the political activism of Focus and Dobson is branding the organization as a political organization. That threatens to level off their membership and their constituent list, and so they’re trying to become more active in the community level to counter that political cast that the organization has taken on,” said Gilgoff. “So in a strange way, it’s weird, because a lot of it is about conservative politics or at least conservative theology and worldview. At the same time I think through the Del Tackett series on worldview they’re trying to establish themselves as a Christian organization independent of their politics. But I think they’re kind of mutually reinforcing.”

‘Guerrilla warfare’

Focus on the Family found itself on most LGBT activists’ radar screens as a result of its work on the marriage amendments, but its involvement in Massachusetts extends as far back as the early 90s with the founding of the Massachusetts Family Institute (MFI) under its original name, the Pilgrim Family Institute. Holly Gunner of Newton, a board member of both MassEquality and the ACLU of Massachusetts, worked with fellow activists during the early 90s to found a group called the Lighthouse Institute for Public Policy that monitored the role of the Christian right in local and state politics. Gunner, who made clear that she was speaking to *Bay Windows* as a private citizen

and not in her capacity as a board member of MassEquality or the ACLU, said she first began paying attention to the religious right in Massachusetts in 1992 after reading about a group of religious Newton residents who attended a school board meeting and denounced a comprehensive sex ed program. A self-described newspaper junkie, Gunner said their rhetoric sounded eerily similar to that used in a *New York Times* report detailing the activities of Christian Coalition supporters at a school board meeting in New York City.

Gunner said she got in contact with school committee members and community members in other cities and towns and found that conservative Christian parents were waging similar campaigns against school committees in Lexington, Braintree and Sudbury. She said the *Boston Globe* would cover these disputes in their regional inserts, but most people who read those inserts would have no idea that the same battles were happening across the state. To build her case Gunner said she would spend her Sundays driving around the state to pick up copies of the *Globe* with each of the regional supplements.

Gunner said she and her allies found evidence that local chapters of national religious right groups like Christian Coalition and Focus on the Family were training local activists to run for school board positions while hiding their religious conservative politics. At a Christian Coalition training session in 1993 Gunner said she listened to a speech by Christian Coalition regional director Clay Mankameyer explaining how they used a stealth strategy by having a candidate in Virginia Beach hide his pro-life and anti-gay views and instead position himself as the “clean water candidate.” At the national level Ralph Reed, executive director of the Christian Coalition, told the Los Angeles Times in 1992 that having conservative Christian candidates downplay their religious views was “just good strategy” and compared it to “guerrilla warfare.” Gunner said she formed the Lighthouse Institute to try to document the work of the Christian right and alert both activists and the media.

“What we decided was we needed to make the public aware that this was not just local people, that this was some organized national thing and they were trying to create hornets nests and controversies around the public schools in these various towns, and the objective was to run candidates for school committee so they could take control of the public schools,” said Gunner.

In October 1993 the *Boston Globe* reported that the Christian Coalition had sent a representative to the state earlier that year to start a local chapter, and that chapter began running classes across the state to train activists to work at the local level to advance their agenda in school committees and local government. The same story, which came about, in part, thanks to Gunner’s persistence in contacting *Globe* editors in the hopes of generating interest in a larger news story on the topic, reported that the Pilgrim Family Institute was becoming one of the top forces in local Christian right politics, drawing on its association with Focus on the Family to win supporters. According to the *Globe*, Pilgrim and Focus on the Family were holding activist training and networking sessions around the state.

Boston magazine reported the same story, though highlighting new Christian conservative activists, two years later. In a piece that also had its roots in Gunner’s advocacy, the magazine profiled a group of local religious right activists working to gain control of the school committee in Hampshire County to oppose safe schools programs for gay and lesbian students. One of the lead activists, Margaret Walden, was the local coordinator for MFI, and she told the magazine she first got connected with MFI after calling up Focus on the Family and asking how to fight condom distribution in the local schools. Walden learned how to wage an effective fight against pro-gay school programs by attending a training session in Wayland sponsored by MFI and Focus on the Family.

Gunner also collected as many materials as possible connected to local religious conservative groups, no mean feat in a pre-Internet age. Those materials show that at least in the 1990s MFI worked closely with Focus on the Family. A spring 1994 MFI quarterly report shows that in February 1994 MFI brought a Focus on the Family speaker to Worcester to hold a parents forum

on fighting negative media influences. Two months later MFI brought Focus on the Family public policy experts to Wayland for a community impact seminar and an activist training program. The report describes an MFI annual awards banquet scheduled for that May and mentions that one of the speakers will be Kevin Campbell, director of Family Policy Councils for Focus on the Family. On the back page of the report there is a form allowing supporters to subscribe to Focus on the Family's Citizen magazine and receive a monthly MFI insert in each issue.

Gunner said that since the marriage issue took center stage, MFI has gotten more direct support in terms of staff and resources from Focus and FRC, and "the consequence is that the Massachusetts Family Institute is politically much more astute and professionally much slicker than they were back in 94, 95. They do polling, they do media, they do messaging, they have these ads in the newspaper. They're like a Karl Rove operation ... The modus operandi is very similar now to what it was then, it's just today it's very professionalized, very slick, and uses all the tools of modern political warfare."