

## Christian Coalition Shrinks as Debt Grows

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In an era when conservative Christians enjoy access and influence throughout the federal government, the organization that fueled their rise has fallen on hard times.

The once-mighty Christian Coalition, founded 17 years ago by the Rev. Pat Robertson as the political fundraising and lobbying engine of the Christian right, is more than \$2 million in debt, beset by creditors' lawsuits and struggling to hold on to some of its state chapters.

In March, one of its most effective chapters, the Christian Coalition of Iowa, cut ties with the national organization and reincorporated itself as the Iowa Christian Alliance, saying it "found it impossible to continue to carry a name that in any way associated us with this national organization."

"The credibility is just not there like it once was," said Stephen L. Scheffler, president of the Iowa affiliate since 2000. "The budget has shrunk from \$26 million to \$1 million. There's a trail of debt. . . . We believe, our board believes, any Christian organization has an obligation to pay its debts in a timely fashion."

At its peak a decade ago, the Christian Coalition deployed a dozen lobbyists on Capitol Hill. Today, it has a single Washington employee who works out of his home. Its phone number with a 202 area code is automatically forwarded to a small office in Charleston, S.C.

The Christian Coalition is still routinely included in meetings with White House officials and conservative leaders, and is still a household name. But financial problems and a long battle over its tax status have sapped its strength, allowing it to be eclipsed by other Christian groups, such as the Family Research Council and the public policy arm of the Southern Baptist Convention.

Although some of those groups have begun moving into the coalition's specialty -- grass-roots voter education and get-out-the-vote drives -- none is poised to distribute 70 million voter guides through churches, as the Christian Coalition did in 2000.

The coalition's decline is a story that can perhaps best be told along biblical lines: It is the narrative of a group that wandered after the departure of its early leaders, lost faith in some of its guiding principles and struggled to keep its identity after entering the promised land -- in this case, the land of political influence.

From its inception, the coalition was built around two individuals, Robertson and Ralph Reed. Both were big personalities with big followings.

"After the founders left, the Christian Coalition never fully recovered," said James L. Guth, an expert on politics and religion at Furman University in South Carolina. "The dependence on Robertson and Reed was really disastrous."

Reed left in 1997 to become a Republican political consultant and is now seeking the Republican nomination

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for lieutenant governor of Georgia. Once a golden boy of GOP politics, he has recently had his reputation tarnished by his ties to lobbyist Jack Abramoff.

Robertson resigned as the Christian Coalition's president in 2001 after defending China's one-child policy in a CNN interview that fellow conservatives viewed with horror. It was among the most damaging in a series of remarks that have hurt Robertson's standing among evangelical Christians -- and may have hurt the Christian Coalition as well.

"He kind of constantly makes people wonder whether the organizations he was involved with really are fringe organizations when he does things like explain Ariel Sharon's stroke as an act of God," Guth said, referring to a comment Robertson made about the Israeli prime minister earlier this year.

Roberta Combs, the South Carolina coordinator for Robertson's 1988 bid for the Republican presidential nomination, replaced him as head of the Christian Coalition five years ago. She says the organization was in worse financial shape then, with debts approaching \$4 million. She cleaned house and, she says, made enemies.

"I had to let a lot of staff go, and they all got upset with me because they were close to Ralph [Reed]. Of course they said bad things about me. But we got a lot of that [debt] paid down over time," Combs said.

IRS records show that the Christian Coalition's red ink has remounted. Its debts exceeded its assets by \$983,000 in 2001, \$1.3 million in 2002, \$2 million in 2003 and \$2.28 million at the end of 2004, the most recent year for which it has filed a nonprofit tax return.

Lawsuits for unpaid bills have multiplied. The Christian Coalition's longtime law firm -- Huff, Poole & Mahoney PC of Virginia Beach -- says it is owed \$69,729. Global Direct, a fundraising firm in Oklahoma, is suing for \$87,000 in expenses. Reese & Sons Inc., a moving company in District Heights, is trying to recover \$1,890 for packing up furniture when the Christian Coalition closed its Washington office in 2002. The list goes on.

Michele Combs, the Christian Coalition's spokeswoman and Roberta Combs's daughter, described the organization as "a victim of our own success."

Money flowed to the coalition in the mid-1990s, when Bill Clinton was president. But, Michele Combs said, with a conservative president and a conservative Congress, things are different. "It's harder to raise money when the agenda you've been working for all these years is moving forward and you have a place at the table," she said.

According to some former employees, however, the Christian Coalition stumbled because it lost touch with core conservative principles.

Despite Robertson's denials, fellow conservative Christians viewed his 2001 CNN interview as a defense of forced abortions. "The Christian Coalition was already on life support. Robertson's remarks probably mean its demise," former Christian Coalition lobbyist Marshall Wittmann predicted at the time.

In 2003, Roberta Combs defied conservative orthodoxy when she campaigned in Alabama in support of a state tax increase. Leaders of the Christian Coalition's Alabama chapter said the national organization had "dramatically departed from a 13-year traditional core values platform."

Combs also drew charges of nepotism by hiring her daughter and son-in-law, Tracy E. Ammons, a schoolteacher who became a \$6,000-a-month Senate lobbyist. When the couple divorced two years ago, he claimed that the Christian Coalition owed him \$130,000 in unpaid salary.

"On the financial end, I was privy to everything from counting money to going and talking to the landlord when we couldn't pay the rent," Ammons said in a recent interview. "Lots of times we wouldn't pay until someone sued. I did it to others. Then [the Christian Coalition] did it to me."

The group's identity is now tied to its voter guides, which are about to undergo a substantial change.

After years of battling the IRS, the Christian Coalition reached a settlement a year ago that secures its status as a tax-exempt 501(c)(4) lobbying and educational institution.

But the settlement requires the Christian Coalition to allow candidates to write up to 25 words of explanation on each issue in the voter guides. In the past, the guides listed topics such as "unrestricted abortion on demand" or "adoption of children by homosexuals" and described the candidates' positions simply as "supports" or "opposes."

In a letter to state chapters in February, Roberta Combs warned that they, too, must follow the 25-word rule when they publish voter guides for state elections, or else stop using the Christian Coalition's name and logo. The settlement has irritated some conservative activists, who think it will make the guides less effective.

Combs said that although some chapters are upset, it was vital to resolve the dispute with the IRS and that "it won't be hard to find new people" to form chapters in Iowa or any other state that balks. She also said the Christian Coalition needs a new face on television and is looking for an executive director who can play that role.

"People have been writing our obituary for years," she said. "But you go out in the hinterlands and talk to the grass roots, and it's a whole different story. People call us every day and want to be involved."

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