

Inside Philanthropy

Big Money, Quiet Power: A Look at the National Christian Foundation

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October 3, 2016

The National Christian Foundation is one of the biggest donor-advised funds in the United States, yet it has a remarkably low profile—at least in the secular nonprofit world. NCF's grants totaled a whopping \$960 million last year, a figure that has grown in leaps and bounds over the past decade. Its rise is more evidence of the growing popularity of donor-advised funds among many donors, as well as the attractiveness of DAFs that are mission-driven.

NCF's grantmaking also offers a window into the powerful world of conservative Christian philanthropy. While many of the funds that flow through NCF benefit thousands of churches, ministries and charitable groups, this is also a major conduit of cash that benefits a range of causes on the right. What's more, as with other DAFs, the donors behind this giving are almost entirely anonymous.

NCF got its start as the brainchild of faithful financiers Terry Parker, Ron Blue and Larry Burkett. Back in the early 1980s, Parker and his colleagues saw the need for a community fund with a Christian mission. NCF was the result, a place where well-heeled churchgoers could focus their almsgiving and be sure it went to the right causes.

But Parker and team didn't stop there. NCF's genius lies in its lawyerly drive to open up all avenues of giving, tapping every asset type, and make each one pay tax-day dividends. NCF's mission reflects that ambition: “mobilizing resources by inspiring biblical generosity.” The late Terry Parker and current president David Wills elaborate further [in this interview with Philanthropy Roundtable](#).

NCF clearly has the “mobilizing resources” part down to a science. But let's not forget that key word: biblical. NCF is, to be plain, a fundamentalist Christian organization. [In its statement of faith](#), it affirms that “the entire Bible is the inspired and inerrant Word of God; the only infallible rule of faith and practice.” So it isn't surprising to find a lot of resources going to the “family values” movement.

To hear it from left-wing sources, working to sway policy and culture is about all NCF does. In fact, this is an unfair charge, since such giving comprises a minority of NCF's grantmaking. But the ideological activities of this grantmaking giant are still substantial and they warrant discussion.

At *Inside Philanthropy*, we've written in the past about NCF's support for crisis pregnancy centers, which seek to steer women away from abortions, and which have been criticized for their misleading advertising. But such funding is just the top of a moral values grantmaking iceberg at NCF. Beneath lies a who's who of conservative groups that have received money through NCF. Among other things, this funder is probably the single biggest source of money fueling the pro-life and anti-LGBT movements over the past 15 years.

Leading grantees have included the Alliance Defending Freedom, an umbrella organization for right-wing legal groups that's gotten over \$51 million from NCF since 2001, and Campus Crusade for Christ (over \$45 million since 2001), which also used to employ NCF founders Terry Parker and Ron Blue. Then there's Focus on the Family (over \$49 million) and the Family Research Council (over \$19 million).

Other beneficiaries include the American Family Association (over \$13 million), the Louis Palau Association (over \$11 million), Oral Roberts University (an astounding \$90 million plus), and Promise Keepers (over \$2 million). Another grantee is the Discovery Institute (over \$2 million), a major proponent of intelligent design. The list goes on—in fact, NCF's 2014 990 is a staggering 17,775 pages.

Add to that the many millions NCF channels toward right-wing and libertarian organizations unaffiliated with Christianity. Some highlights: the Heritage Foundation, the Cato Institute, the Federalist Society, Judicial Watch, Accuracy in Media, and many others.

As is the case with most donor-advised funds, it's not easy to determine where the money came from, or who donated what to whom. NCF touts privacy as one of its virtues to prospective donors, which it shares with DonorsTrust, the major secular right-wing DAF. A lack of transparency can shield donors from scrutiny as they support causes that many might call into question. On the left, places like Tides also move money with few fingerprints.

In NCF's case, we do know a bit about a few major donors. One is Steve Green, billionaire founder of Hobby Lobby and ardent supporter of family values causes. Another is the McClellan Foundation, which has given well over \$100 million to NCF over the past fifteen years. The Bolthouse Foundation and the Friess Family Foundation, two more Christian givers, have donated on a princely level as well.

But as for the bulk of NCF's revenues, which have totalled over a billion dollars in recent years, your guess is as good as ours.