profanity, and sexual titillation. He turned off the TV and thought about it, then decided to ask his church to sponsor a "Turn the TV Off" week in which members would pledge not to watch TV for one week.

Wildmon knew something about media. He had worked part-time as a sports reporter since he was 16, had done local radio shows, and for some time had written a weekly syndicated newspaper column. To publicize the special week, he put out press releases, feeling sure he would gain some local coverage. He was surprised when his effort gained national attention. For weeks he took calls from journalists all over the country. More, he heard from a surprising number of people who shared his feelings.

"At 38 years old, that little spark [planted when he was nine] was just about burned out," Wildmon recalls. "I remember lying in bed, thinking, 'Is this what the Lord wants me to do?'" He asked that question for a month and became convinced that it was. In August, he moved back to Tupelo to get started. His mother took it hard: she thought he was giving up the ministry.

With $5,000 in savings (mainly from his publishing business), his wife substitute teaching, and his office in their dining room, Wildmon launched an organization called the National Federation for Decency. He had no affluent backers and hardly any mailing list. His brother Allen was startled when, at the launching press conference, he heard "national" in the name.

"When I started this in 1977, I thought I was dealing with sex and violence on TV. I've discovered we are dealing with a war between the Christian view of man, and a secular, or humanistic or materialistic, view of man."

Wildmon is speaking to perhaps 15 retirees who gather regularly at Priceville Baptist, a rural church set atop a hill in the pine trees outside Tupelo. He speaks quietly, not trying to convert anybody, only to mobilize those already convinced. Wildmon is just the opposite of his stereotype: he does not trade in emotion, but in information. It shows in the way he addresses this gathering, and it shows in the AFA Journal, which, boasts editor Randall Murphree, packs more words into 24 pages than most magazines get into 100.

"You may think that Billy Graham is the leading evangelist in America, but he's not," Wildmon tells the Priceville retirees. "The leading evangelists in America are those people who make the TV programs."

The theme has grown in Wildmon's mind over the years. A narrow struggle over TV programming has widened to become, for him, a battle between gods.

Wildmon wants to create an environment where people will not stand for the junk they are now being fed.

He makes no time for small talk and gets no thrill even from pressing the flesh with his allies. What he seems to enjoy is the challenge of the battle. AFA comptroller Forrest Ann Daniels, who has been with Wildmon virtually from the beginning, says she would meet him at a softball game, and even then all he would talk about was work. Editor Murphree says he looks forward to times when Wildmon's car has broken down, because by driving him home, Murphree gets his only chance at ten uninterrupted personal minutes.

Wildmon acknowledges that there is a cost to leading a confrontational movement. "I went through a period where I lost my emotional connection to my faith. I didn't lose my intellectual commitment. You know in your mind it all makes sense. But here is something that the church ought to care about, and the church just goes on its merry way. A few of your fellow preachers write you letters about love, and hate is just oozing off the page. Nobody is coming to your defense. I'm not entirely out of that period. I don't know if I will ever regain my emotions."

People tell Wildmon that the battle for an America undergirded by Christian ethics is already lost. He does not argue. "It's difficult to explain without sounding trite," he says. (Wildmon seems genuinely to dislike answering questions in a way that might sound conventionally pious.) "The Lord didn't call me to be successful. He only called me to be faithful."

That, when it comes down to it, is at the heart of Donald Wildmon. To use a cliche from movies that Wildmon would probably approve, he is like the Wild West sheriff who has to go out alone to face the desperadoes taking over the town. Wildmon sees something plainly evil in the living rooms of America, and he has to fight it. He knows he is outnumbered. He knows he will need every trick in the book to win. But, as they say in Hollywood, a man has gotta do what a man has gotta do.

Showdown with Sears

When Wildmon launched his movement, he began by visiting network executives, who welcomed him warmly and expressed their heartfelt concern for family values. It seems to have been in this period that he gained his deep mistrust for the creators of television. It was also during this period that he discovered how to get their attention. "I learned when I used a dollar bill, they used the same language I did."

For decades, Christians have been expressing concerns about the morality of TV, and before that, of movies, and before that, of novels. But Wildmon was probably the first to express those concerns by playing economic hardball.

He recruited volunteers to monitor prime-time shows for their sex and profanity and to keep track of who sponsored the worst shows. Sears turned up on the list, in the number-three spot. Sears was vulnerable, because of their high visibility and all-American image.

He wrote to them. He wrote again and met with Sears executives. When they did not respond adequately, he called a boycott and a day of picketing. He had a mailing list of fewer than 2,000 names, but Sears did not know that. On the day he began picketing, Sears announced they were dropping out of some of the most dubious shows. Wildmon declared victory.

He had found a strategy that he would employ, with variations, time and again. First, gather facts about what is really being done and who is behind it. Second, locate the economic weak spot. Third, mobilize your volunteers to protest. It is a strategy particularly suited to firms selling products to the masses, since they fear controversy.

Wildmon is not troubled by the element of coercion involved in a boycott. He compares it to talking to a man who is trying to burn down your house. "If you keep on appealing to his moral conscience, and just to his moral conscience, you know what he's going to do? He's going to succeed in burning your house down and killing your children." Regarding advertisers, he says, "They may be converted to my way of thinking, they may not. The bottom line is, 'Are you going to keep putting things on TV?'"

How effective boycotts have been is debatable. Advertisers do not like to admit that Wildmon has swayed them, and some have made a point of saying they had their best year ever while Wildmon was boycotting their products. Even if a boycott does not make any impact on sales, however, letters and calls by the thousand can make a point. Companies that spend millions on their image do not like having people mad at them.

In several highly publicized cases, companies were not very convincing when they shrugged off Wildmon's significance. For example, last year Pepsi dropped its corporate link to rock-video star Madonna, citing "confusion" between its television ads and the MTV video Wildmon had protested. Pepsi said Wildmon had little to do with the decision. Wildmon said he did not care what they said, so long as they pulled the ads. Few in the press thought Pepsi dropped its $5 million sponsorship over mere "confusion."

Wildmon also claims to have ousted Playboy from 7-Eleven stores, to have prevented The Last Temptation of Christ from playing in first-run theaters, to have convinced Burger King, among others, to change their sponsorship of TV shows. The networks have dropped at least a few shows because of Wildmon's protests, and the threat of a protest probably keeps some material from ever reaching the scripting stage.

On the other hand, Wildmon has not succeeded in getting pornographic movies out of Holiday Inns, nor has he succeeded to date in convincing K-mart to stop its Waldenbooks subsidiary from selling pornographic books and magazines. CLeaR-TV (Christian Leaders for Responsible Television), the Wildmon-led coalition of Christian leaders, recently began a boycott of S. C. Johnson and Pfizer for their sponsorship of TV sex, violence, and profanity. It remains to be seen whether a boycott can work when the target is so diffused. (CLeaR-TV suggests activists carry a card listing the 50 products these companies sell.)

When asked about his success rate, Wildmon makes no extravagant claims. He admits that TV has not improved; he suspects, however, that without his efforts it would be a lot worse. Wildmon **has** made clear progress in gaining recruits. His mailing list has consistently grown, up to 400,000. So has his budget, more than tripling in the last three years to reach $6 million dollars. When he started, Christian leaders would not give him the time of day. Now he finds many coming around to his way of thinking. CLeaR-TV comprises, he says, more than 1,600 leaders and the heads of more than 70 denominations.

Live-and-let-live pluralism

Wildmon is not prone to philosophical statements—he is more fascinated by strategy than by goals—but he is quite clear that he is not trying to build a theocracy. When asked what his work had to do with the kingdom of God, he answers, "Not much."

But he sees two connections. First, he believes Christians are naturally activists who should express their faith by opposing evil. While disgusted with the liberal bent of his Methodist denomination, he does not criticize their social-action agenda, except to say that other issues like TV and pornography should not be ignored.

Second, he believes a more moral society makes it easier for the gospel to spread. "I'm rubbing a little bit of salt in the right places. I see it helping make conditions in society conducive to the message that a Charles Colson or Billy Graham or somebody else brings."

Wildmon favors a live-and-let-live pluralism—in fact, that is what he thinks he grew up in—but he does not believe pluralism can work without a core commitment to Christian values. He parts company from conservatives who merely want a free market. "Capitalism without Christian ethics is destructive."

He says Christians should fight for their beliefs not because they are a majority—that he doubts—but because they know what is right. "No significant change has ever been brought about by a majority," he says. "It's always been started by a committed minority." He cites gays and radical feminists as modern minorities that have shaped the climate of opinion. Christian activists, too, can make a decisive difference. "You give me one million radicals, and I'll change America."

His enemies describe Donald Wildmon as a censor who would like to impose fundamentalist views on the entire nation. *Censor* apparently provokes the same spine-tingling reaction among certain liberals that *Communist* once provoked among Republicans. It is used, similarly, as an all-purpose condemnation. If parents protest when schools require their children to read *The Handmaid's Tale* the parents are censors. If Wildmon asks his supporters to write the sponsors of L.A. LAW regarding a lesbian episode, that makes him a censor. Never mind that crying "censorship" can work to repress speech, silencing parents who want a say in their children's education, stigmatizing TV viewers who want to press for another kind of TV. According to Bill Swindell, who oversees the AFA'S 600 nationwide chapters, "People say, 'You can't impose your values on everybody else.' They're really saying, 'We want to disenfranchise you.'"

Wildmon and his staff are culturally very conservative—they do not have much of a sense of humor about religious jokes on SATURDAY NIGHT LIVE—but the prospect of their becoming national censors from their office in Tupelo seems remote. For one thing, they do not seek governmental influence. The exception is their recent crusade against National Endowment for the Arts' subsidies to artists, but Wildmon says Andres Serrano (whose photo of a crucifix immersed in urine set off the controversy) can take any kind of pictures he likes, so long as he does not expect the government to support him. Wildmon would not, he says, support a constitutional amendment making it possible to outlaw *Playboy*.

When asked what would prevent a domino effect, where *Playboy* and SATURDAY NIGHT LIVE get eliminated first and then *People* magazine and L.A. LAW, so that pretty soon nothing is left but LEAVE IT TO BEAVER and the *Reader's Digest*, Wildmon says, "People. People are not going to let it happen. The people who support me, if I go too far, they're not going to support me. They'll back off." Wildmon knows that his power is limited by his ability to persuade a mass of people, and he does not believe America would ever tolerate a genuinely censorial regime.

Actually, Wildmon would like to change America in a way far beyond censorship. He wants to create—or recreate—an American climate of opinion like what he grew up in. He wants an America where *Playboy* goes broke because people will not support it—will not sell it in drugstores, will not advertise Chevrolets in it, because too many people consider it offensive. You can define that as censorship if you wish, but do not expect to make American spines tingle over it. Wildmon wants to create an environment where people will not stand for the junk they are now being fed.

That would be a remarkable goal to launch from New York or Washington, let alone Tupelo. But Wildmon is a scrapper, the type who is not "reasonable" about the fights he picks. He fights to win, and when he does not win he fights anyway. Win or lose, do not look for Donald Wildmon to go fishing.

CT editors say Wildmon is genuine

Editor's note: AFA re-prints this article as a means of sharing some of the history of AFA, and to help supporters better understand and appreciate the ministry. Along with the article, Christianity Today ran these comments:

CT senior writer Tim Stafford is used to telephoning prominent people. But Tim's experience interviewing big shots did not prepare him for his encounter with media gadfly Donald Wildmon: "Usually when I call the eminent," says Tim, "it takes two days to get through the layers of staff to talk to the person. But I was talking to Donald Wildmon less than 20 seconds after someone answered the phone. And within five minutes, he was spilling out his feelings about the personal losses he has sustained in his battles with the media."

CT's editors did not decide to profile Wildmon just because he has had a nationwide impact, but because we kept hearing how utterly genuine he is. Tim's three-days' observation of Wildmon in his Tupelo home and headquarters confirmed that impression. "No guile, no hypocrisy," Tim tells us. "He says exactly what he thinks."