

# Focusing on the Family

## with James Dobson



Carol Greenhill is estranged from her grown homosexual son. James Dobson has eased her grief and gained her loyalty, she says, by reassuring the middle-aged Coloradan that “others have hurts in areas different than mine, but the pain is the same.”

Jill Cooper, a 34-year-old public-school teacher, housewife, mother, and committed Lutheran in Grafton, Wisconsin, experienced the tug of Dobson's ideas from a copy of his book, *Dare to Discipline*—a Christmas present last year that gave her the courage to strengthen her approach to child-rearing.

Three years ago, David Gatewood followed a similar attraction here to the headquarters of Focus on the Family, Dobson's organization, when he left his job training therapists to become clinical supervisor of Focus's telephone-counseling department. “I was overwhelmed by the trust people have in this friend of theirs, Dr. Dobson—as if they'd known him all their lives,” Gatewood says.

Such devotion has enabled the 59-year-old Christian child psychologist to shift some of the fault lines in U.S. social culture—and, increasingly, to create some shock waves in the nation's political arena as well. For while the ever-agitating Christian Coalition has become the public face of America's tens of millions of evangelical Christians, Dobson and Focus on the Family are the heart guiding many of these Christians as they act in their homes.

By stressing the importance of traditional family relationships and strong faith over more than two decades, Dobson has built Focus into one of the most revered service organizations in the country. Small contributions finance almost all of the organization's \$100 million annual budget. And by providing timely, substantive, biblically based advice to its constituents, Focus has become a worldwide multimedia juggernaut that now employs 1,300 people.

“If you have credibility on topics that are as sensitive and important as what happens within families, those are credentials that no purely religious leader can match,” says Republican strategist William Kristol. “Tens of thousands of Americans feel he's made their families better and their lives better, and that's a powerful thing.”

Two powerful statistics underscore Kristol's point. First, Focus is contacted by phone and mail about 3 million times each year. The only other comparable organization that approaches that volume of personal communication is

the White House. Second, in just the five-month period ending this August, more than 100,000 people from all over North America flocked to Focus's four-year-old, 47-acre campus in Colorado Springs to take the 45-minute public tour, even though Focus headquarters is basically just a nice office park.

James Dobson's career began in the late 1960s, when he was a child psychologist at the University of Southern California. The son of a traveling Nazarene evangelist, he became troubled by the crumbling of traditional methods of raising families. So in 1970 Dobson wrote *Dare to Discipline*, a beacon in what he saw as the child-rearing darkness created by the permissive ideas of Dr. Benjamin Spock and his disciples.

Dobson lectured PTAs and Sunday school classes while trying to maintain teaching and his clinical practice. But soon, inter-

views with Barbara Walters and others followed. And when Dobson became angry at the radical feminist agenda that dominated a 1976 global conference on women and family life, he left academia and established Focus on the Family in a two-room suite in Arcadia, California beginning with a syndicated radio show carried by 43 Christian stations.

Since then, Dobson—whose style is avuncular and folksy but morally authoritative—has prospered as a radio

host, lecturer, and author. His half-hour daily program is heard weekdays on more than 2,300 stations in North America, by up to 5 million people each week, ranking him an estimated third on the U.S. airwaves behind Rush Limbaugh and Paul Harvey. Hundreds more stations in nearly 60 foreign countries, ranging from Russia to South Africa, also air his shows. More than 70 million people have seen his filmed lectures.

And Dobson has sold more than 8 million copies of his 14 books, which include *When God Doesn't Make Sense*, *Parenting Is Not for Cowards* and, most recently, *Life on the Edge*, which he aimed at Generation Xers. Dobson gets royalties from his books and films but takes no salary from Focus.

The continuing personal appeal of the sandy-haired native Texan, trim and imposing at six-foot-three, has brought in the resources that have allowed Focus on the Family to grow from a handful of staffers into a sprawling, multi-purpose agency. In 1991, the organization moved its headquarters from Southern California to Colorado Springs. That booming



by Dale D. Buss

## FOCUS ON THE FAMILY

city of more than 300,000 people located at the foot of Pike's Peak has become a stronghold of conservative Christian organizations and their employees and families. More than 60 church and "para-church" organizations are now based here, with dozens arriving just since 1989. In addition to Focus (the largest Christian employer), the Navigators, the Christian & Missionary Alliance denomination, and Cook Communications (1,100 employees) are based in Colorado Springs. Other groups ranging from Compassion International (staff: 130) to the Fellowship of Christian Cowboys (staff: five) are also present.

In recent years, Focus has created several additional radio programs. It now sends Dobson's monthly letter and a magazine to everyone on its 2.1 million-person active mailing list. It has created 10 different magazines aimed at niches such as teachers, physicians, and Christian activists. The latest is *Single Parent Family*. One devoted to elder care may be forthcoming.

Focus produces high-quality children's programming, such as its hugely popular *Adventures in Odyssey* radio serial and a new video series called *Last Chance Detectives*. Other video productions have straightforward, real-life messages, such as *Sex, Lies...and the Truth*, which proclaims the virtues of teenage sexual abstinence. These offerings aim right at the hearts of Focus's core supporters, who—its research shows—are predominantly evangelical, Catholic, and mainline Protestant women ages 30 to 49, married with two or more children, half with college or postgraduate degrees.

Most recently, under the direction of Dobson's cousin, former pastor H. B. London, Focus has been building entire new outreaches to pastors and to black families, and a large program of free basketball camps for low-income kids.

Dobson's radio show, however, remains the core of the ministry. There he addresses questions Scriptural and secular, relational concerns and social issues, in a personal melange that communicates high traditionalist ideals. This September, for instance, the show had broadcasts on fatherlessness, surviving breast cancer, living with messy people, "money matters for families," and "reaching emotional wholeness [through] God's healing power."

The radio show, in turn, generates most of the 10,000 pieces of mail and phone calls that Focus receives each day from the hurting, confused, and just plain curious. More than 250 trained correspondents and phone operators field each written or called-in query. Most are easily fulfilled with the more than 6,000 books, tapes and other items stocked in Focus's huge, computerized warehouse; about 10 percent require a more personal response. Focus's tally sheet of topics they're asked to address ranges from gambling addiction, toilet training, and eating disorders, to elder abuse, rape, and suicide.

One recent afternoon, the four-foot-long file of inquiries in need of immediate responses bulged with yellow-covered "urgent" requests, and long "emotional" letters color-coded in blue. "We've

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WHITE HOUSE.



got lots of volume today," observes Frank Keller, the former public school administrator who directs Focus's correspondence department. "But our response time for all of them is still 3 to 10 days."

About 1 percent of all those who contact Focus discuss their problems with 1 of its 18 state-licensed counselors. After trying to defuse any immediate crisis, they refer callers to a network of more than 1,500 Focus-affiliated Christian counselors across the country. It is discouraging to Focus's battalions of call handlers that their Christian constituency seems to

be plagued with the same problems as everyone else. "Statistically, there are as many divorces among 'Christians' as in secular society," says Willie Wooten, Focus's director of counseling.

Dobson says that the dizzying pace at which societal breakdown is eroding even the Christian family has pulled him reluctantly into politics in a much bigger way than ever before. Beginning in the mid-1980s, Dobson began to travel to Washington—to serve as a key member of Edwin Meese's anti-pornography commission, for example, and to informally advise presidents Bush and Reagan.

These days, James Dobson is quick to use his radio show to address urgent political issues. In mid-September, he used nearly an entire broadcast just to read one of the most strongly worded diatribes he had ever composed: a scathing criticism of the Beijing women's conference, which he saw as deeply hostile to traditional families, and U.S. participation in it. The next week, Dobson took three days of airtime to dissect a just-aired ABC News *Day One* profile that had painted Dobson as an ominous new presence on the American political scene.

Only \$4 million of Focus's budget is dedicated to "public policy"—much of that to "community impact seminars" that it holds around the country. But Dobson's strong connection with his large following, and his alliance with well-connected outfits in Washington like the Family Research Council (a former Focus affiliate), give Focus on the Family political clout that can't be measured in dollars.

"He has the best combination of politics and family issues going on the religious right," says Matthew Freeman, research director of People for the American Way, the Washington-based liberal interest group that continually clashes with Focus and other conservative Christian organizations.

On issues ranging from home schooling to abortion to last year's lobbying-reform bill, Dobson and Focus have demonstrated "an ability probably as good as anybody's to generate calls into Congress in a hurry, because of his radio show," says Freeman. "When they talk about an issue and urge people to call in, it'll happen. Even the Christian Coalition can't get that kind of quick response."

Adds John Green, political scientist at the University of Akron and a long-time student of American religion: "A lot of people who are concerned about abortion and family values don't think of themselves as part of a political movement." Overt political leaders like Beverly LaHaye, president of Concerned Women for Amer-

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ica, or Ralph Reed, executive director of the Christian Coalition, "may turn them off. But then they listen to Dobson, and what he says may make them political."

Last November's strong showing at the polls by evangelical Christians has suddenly made Dobson a significant potential power broker in presidential politics. In recent months, he's been visited in his Colorado Springs office by GOP presidential candidates Pat Buchanan, Phil Gramm, Lamar Alexander, and Alan Keyes, and has been meeting regularly in Washington with Bob Dole and Newt Gingrich.

The candidates know that Dobson will refuse to endorse any one of them. But, as Dobson says, they want to understand his constituency. "And they believe that even a few words from Dr. Dobson will open or close hearts to a political message," says Chuck Donovan, a longtime Dobson ally and senior policy analyst for the Family Research Council. Tim Cain illustrates that truth. A Christian Coalition member in Little Rock, Arkansas Cain earlier this year gained inspiration from Dobson's replaying on his radio show of a Keyes speech in New Hampshire, and subsequently volunteered for the candidate's morality-focused campaign.

Dobson also has been sending a message to the candidates: Don't count on the support of evangelicals for a Republican "big tent" on social issues. "I think you should warn the Republican presidential hopefuls that it will be impossible to skirt the moral issues in 1996," Dobson wrote in March to Haley Barbour, head of the Republican National Committee. The candidates "will not be able to doubletalk, sidestep, obfuscate, and ignore the concerns that burn within our hearts—you have my word on that." He added: "Losing only 5 percent of [evangelical Christians] could prove fatal in 1996." Presidential candidates unresponsive to social issues could spur formation of a third party, Dobson warns.

**D**obson isn't one to stay long in a comfort zone, and he is now expanding Focus's activities overseas, where he sees the same forces ripping families apart as in the United States. The organization already has substantial operations in Canada and Great Britain, and is setting up offices in South Africa and Australia. "Our biggest challenge isn't finding places where we'll be accepted but figuring out how we can possibly go every-

where," says Rich Simons, vice president of international operations for Focus. "The sinful nature of man is universal."

Circumstances also have convinced Dobson that it's time for Focus on the Family to move outside its cozy religious constituency. For one thing, secular culture in this country finally is coming around to many of the views about the traditional family that he has been pushing for 20 years. Now is an opportune time, Dobson says, for Focus to reach for a larger share of minds.

That's why Focus now has non-religious Dobson commentaries running on about 100 big secular radio stations like Detroit's WJR and New York City's WOR. About 500 small and medium-sized papers regularly run a Dobson column. And Focus is going into cyberspace via America Online.

Can Dobson and Focus really move into the secular arena when he has doubts even about alliances between evangelicals and Catholics? Could Focus's attention to the outside world dilute its service to—or alienate—Christians? Will Focus's Christian orientation play well in a broader culture that is often uncomfortable with the straight and narrow?

Freeman, of People for the American Way, doubts that Dobson's "sometimes-extreme rhetoric" will play well outside of the evangelical community. But the University of Akron's Green notes that "in the last couple of years, all kinds of people have come to realize that the family is under distress—people who wouldn't agree on the color of the sky. So there probably is a much bigger market out there for his message than there was before."

Dobson says he doesn't worry about such questions. "My goal isn't to preserve the institution known as Focus on the Family. All organizations have a shelf life, and when God is through with us, I assume He'll move on to some other organization. So I'm not trying to find the safest and most risk-free avenue for this ministry. Our job is to engage the culture on behalf of the family, and if that brings us criticism, then so be it."

"I never anticipated what's happened here," Dobson told a recent interviewer. "Never set out to do it, never planned it. Wish I could say I had. It has resulted from the blessing of the Lord, and has been as big a shock to me as to anyone else. I'm doing my best to stay with it."

## TYPICAL ANSWERS TO QUESTIONS POSED BY FOCUS ON THE FAMILY CONSTITUENTS TO DR. DOBSON

**Question:** My teen daughter recently told me that she is two months pregnant. What should my attitude be toward her now?

**Dobson:** You cannot reverse the circumstances by being harsh and unloving at this point. Your daughter needs more understanding now than ever before, and you should give it to her if possible. Help her grope through this difficulty and avoid "I told you so" comments. She will face many important decisions in the next few

months, and she will need cool, rational parents to assist in determining the best path to take. Remember, lasting love and affection often develop between people who have survived a crisis together.

**Question:** Most colleges and universities permit men and women to live in co-educational dormitories, often rooming side by side. Others allow unrestricted visiting hours by members of the opposite sex. Do you think this promotes more healthy attitudes toward sex?

**Dobson:** It certainly promotes more sex, and some people think that's healthy. The advocates of cohabitation try to tell us that young men and women can live together without doing what



comes naturally. The sex drive is one of the strongest forces in human nature, and Joe College is notoriously weak in suppressing it. I would prefer that supporters of co-educational dormitories admit that morality is not very important to them. If abstinence is something we value, then we should at least give it a wobbly-legged chance to survive. The sharing of collegiate halls and bathrooms hardly takes us in that direction.

**Question:** Do you think parents are now beginning to value discipline more? Is the day of permissiveness over?

**Dobson:** Parents who tried extreme permissiveness have seen its failure, for the most part. Unfortunately, those parents will soon be grandparents, and the world will profit little from their experience. What worries me most is the kind of discipline that will be exercised by the generation now reaching young adulthood. Many of these new parents have never seen good discipline exercised. They have had no model. It will be interesting to see what develops from this blind date between mom and baby.

**Question:** What advice would you give parents who are worried their spankings may be crossing the line into child abuse?

**Dobson:** My advice is, don't lay a hand on the child. Anyone who has ever abused a child, or has ever felt themselves losing control during a spanking, should not expose the child or themselves to that tragedy. Anyone who has had a violent temper that at times becomes unmanageable should not use that approach. But that's the minority of parents, and I think we should not eliminate a biblically sanctioned approach to raising children because it is abused in some cases.

**Question:** Do you think religion should be taught in schools?

**Dobson:** Not as a particular doctrine or dogma. The right of parents to select their child's religious orientation must be protected, and no teacher or administrator should be allowed to contradict what the child has been taught at home. On the other hand, the vast majority of Americans do profess a belief in God, and I would like to see this unnamed God acknowledged in the classroom. The Supreme Court decision banning non-specific school prayer (or even silent prayer) is an extreme measure, and I regret it. The tiny minority of children from atheistic homes could easily be protected by the school during prayerful moments.

**Question:** What is your position on civil disobedience in the prevention of abortions?

**Dobson:** After World War II, German citizens living around Nazi extermination camps were required to visit the facilities to witness the atrocities they had permitted to occur. Though it was technically "legal" to kill Jews and other political prisoners, the citizens were blamed for not breaking the law in deference to a higher moral code. This is the way we feel about the slaughter of 25 million unborn children. We are a law-abiding people and do not advocate violence or obscene or disrespectful behavior, but, to be sure, we will follow that higher moral code nonviolently to rescue innocent, defenseless babies. And some day the moral issues involved here will be as clear to the world as the Nazi holocaust.



## AT INTERVIEW WITH JAMES DOBSON

—Colorado Springs

**TAE:** How do you balance the hope and encouragement you try to provide through your organization with the role of cultural and public policy critic that you sometimes have to adopt in the public arena?

**Dobson:** Honestly, I don't see those as contradictory. I see our primary responsibility as defending families—individually and as an institution—against whatever threats impinge on them. That may mean putting an arm around hurting people, or having a counselor call on someone's family that's falling apart. And it may mean taking on the Senate if they're about to do something that will hurt families corporately. It's all part of the same picture. That's why I don't see what we do in the area of public policy as being political in nature. It's not a segmented portion of our work that has as its objective the gaining of power or the influencing of government. Instead, it's all part of a whole, which is to care for the family and individuals who are in families.

**TAE:** Seven years ago, when I met with you, you were concerned about having too high a profile. You didn't want to be available for people to take shots at because that would hurt the ministry. How has your thinking evolved on that?

**Dobson:** It's totally changed. Our strategy at that time was to do as much good for families as we could without allowing the searchlight of the media to catch us in its sweep. We followed that strategy until 1992, and then made a conscious decision to just do what we felt was needed.

**TAE:** Why did you make that decision?

**Dobson:** I cause I were becoming no visible body and



## "WHEN THE PRESIDENTIAL

it was more difficult to be a quiet organization. So we just decided, let's go ahead and enter that arena and take the positions we have to take and let the chips fall where they will.

**TAE:** And how have you felt about where the chips have fallen?

**Dobson:** The amazing thing is that we're treated very fairly by the press. I rarely ever feel that I've just really been mauled by the secular media. We have in the last few months had articles done on us by *MacNeill/Lehrer NewsHour*, the *New York Times*, the *Washington Times*, the *Kansas City Star*, the *Dallas Morning News*, NBC, and CBS, and I have no complaints. Now, they don't always get it right, and sometimes they are antagonistic, but I really feel that we've been treated pretty fairly.

**TAE:** You've got the Republican presidential candidates coming to you. What is it that they want, and can you give it to any one of them?

**Dobson:** The reason they come here is because exit polling from November showed that 43 percent of the Republican vote came from people who identified themselves as evangelicals, and the majority call themselves pro-life. So it's obvious that we represent a huge number of people who are very concerned at this time about what they see happening. They're primarily worried about their own families. They see what pressures are on their kids. They worry about what Hollywood is going to tell their teenagers, and about what schools are going to say about safe-sex and condom distribution. They're worried about Beavis and Butt-head and rock music, and they're also worried about what they see as anti-family influences in Washington. Now these are not people who typically write letters or make phone calls to their representatives. But they are out there by the millions, and they came to the polls in November in record numbers. So when the Republican presidential candidates come here to focus on the Family, for the most part they are asking not for my endorsement, because they know I won't grant that. They're asking for advice about that constituency, and what those people are expecting and desiring from their politicians.

**TAE:** And what do you tell them?

**Dobson:** I talk about the moral issues that are paramount in the minds of the people we serve. I try to emphasize to them that it is not enough for a conservative politician, whether he's Republican or Democrat, to talk about economic issues and taxation and the streamlining of government, because that's not primarily where people's hearts are. I wish that were understood better by the people who are running for president at this time. Haley Barbour, the chairman of the Republican National Committee, has openly expressed a desire to avoid taking positions on moral issues he deems controversial. He wants to narrow the conversa-

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tion down to issues concerning money. He distributed half a million of copies of a 32-page color magazine last month which described the heart of the Republican party; there was not one single word in that magazine about values, or about families, or about abortion or homosexual rights, or anything that this large constituency cares about. Newt Gingrich just sent a letter to who knows how many millions of people, a general Republican letter, where none of those issues were discussed. What I attempt to say to those politicians when they come here is: "You're being watched much more closely than you think you are, and you will not be permitted to waffle on those issues. If you do, I believe there'll be a third party in 1996—which won't win, but neither will you."

**TAE:** Did Senator Dole show he'd gotten the message via his comments about Hollywood decay?

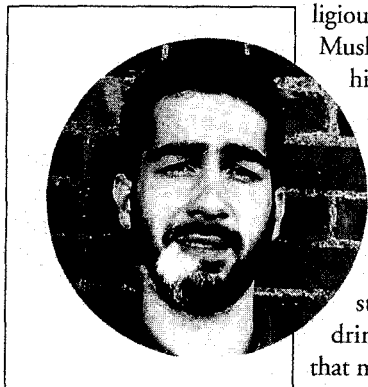
**Dobson:** I spent three hours with him recently. I thought I was going to spend 15 minutes, but I spent three hours talking about these issues, and I have an appointment to meet with him again soon. I don't believe he understands that passion; I don't believe he comprehends the vast number of people who would identify with this description that I've given. I think he felt that it was enough to make some comments about Hollywood, which have no action plan associated with them, and then he's met his obligations to conservative Christians. That isn't going to get it done. You never hear him talk strongly about abortion, or funding for Planned Parenthood, or a religious liberties amendment, or any of the other issues that those folks call about and talk about. He hopes to avoid those issues. In fact, I could not get him to say that he would not select a pro-abortion running mate, and I've attempted in the strongest possible terms to tell him that I believe it'll be political suicide for him if he does. It's very frustrating. President Bush got a 17-point positive bump in opinion polls from the 1992 Republican convention. Yet immediately after that convention the media began reinterpreting what happened there, and blamed it all on Pat Buchanan and Bill Bennett and the pro-family movement that was represented there. It was all manufactured out of thin air. Then when George Bush lost, they said it was because of this emphasis at the convention. In truth, George Bush lost because he broke the only promise anybody could remember he had ever made. If the Republicans are stupid enough to walk away from those basic moral values they have stood for consistently, such as the issue of abortion in the platform, which has been there since 1976, they will deal away the political power that has been loaned to them by the American people.



# Religious Conservatives, Up Close III

## CANERI DAGLI

Caneri Dagli thinks it is very hard for a young man to be religious during college. Dagli, an observant Muslim, was tempted and tested during his first year at Cornell University, but he maintained his faith.



"Although many students are believers," Dagli says, "at most colleges there is an almost complete lack of acknowledgment of God in common conversation." Instead, there is heavy emphasis on drinking, drugs, and sex. Dagli thinks that many college students drink so much in order to escape reality. "Drinking completely makes you forget about who made you and where you're going. It is a complete escape into this world of fantasy which is utterly destructive."

When Dagli first arrived at Cornell, he was taken by the whole social scene. He almost joined a fraternity, and he says he had a very high opinion of himself. "I still loved my religion, still believed in God. But I was not humble by any stretch of the imagination. I was known to say 'a little arrogance keeps you going,' which is just completely foolish." A couple years of maturity and experience changed Dagli's perspective. "I am light years away from perfect, but I am a little better now." Currently in his senior year, he is more focused than ever on his religion. "I pray five times a day—sometimes I have to leave a class, or be late, or skip lunch to be able to do my prayer."

Dagli's religion has given him a different view of morality than many of his peers. Most men of his age view women as sex objects, he says. "I am really disgusted by how women are treated, seen as objects. Even these intelligent women who got into this great university are still viewed like two legs and other body parts." Dagli tries to respect women, and part of this respect is waiting until marriage to have sex. "My religion is dogmatic—no premarital sex. If you are not ready to commit your life to a person, but are ready to use this person for your own pleasure, deep down you are exploiting them and degrading yourself."

Dagli sees hypocrisy in many Americans who are upset by the high rate of unwed motherhood and abortion. "They want their orgasms without taking any responsibility. People say, 'it's okay for teenagers to have sex,' but once one of them gets pregnant it is like they did something wrong. There is nothing wrong with a girl getting pregnant, what's wrong is what she was doing in the first place." He continues, "I happen to think abortion is wrong because you shouldn't destroy something which is a miracle every time it is created."

As for the media's depiction of his religion, Dagli says, "I don't see how it could be worse." The only time Muslims are portrayed in reporting is when they are accused of terrorist acts. "That is the only thing people know about Muslims." He also thinks that the media are hostile to other religions. "When do priests make the news? When they abuse children. When do Protestant ministers make the news? When they are running some scam. And these two rabbis just made the news for sexually molesting a woman on an airplane. The press is just waiting for a chance to discredit organized religion."

Dagli doesn't want religion to be an official basis of government policy. "I think it is wrong for a politician to say that we should do this simply because the Bible says so." At the same time, "I have no problem with a hefty injection of morals into politics, which I imagine the Christian conservatives could bring. To me, someone who is thinking about God and making a decision is better than someone who is not thinking about God and making a decision."

Dagli continues to work on his faith, knowing his religion stresses forgiveness and fresh chances. "If you do something bad, stop and acknowledge your sin and say I am sorry, I did not mean to do this, you will always be forgiven. It is not like God is out to get you. He is rooting for you."

## JEFF KEMP

When Jeff Kemp graduated from Dartmouth, he seemed to be living the archetypal male fantasy. Not only had he been drafted by the National Football League to play pro football as a quarterback, he was surrounded by a loving family, numerous friends, and admiring women. Yet Kemp felt that he was missing



something. "At graduation I had reached a pinnacle in terms of social, athletic, and academic success. I had the chance to have all the fun that I wanted: attention, girlfriends, and fraternity friends, but I felt empty and adrift. Out of sync with God's purpose." After attending graduation parties, Kemp would lie in bed thinking. Suddenly a Bible verse he had memorized as a child came into his mind. "It spoke to the fact that we don't love God just by having His good will worked in our lives. We also need to be called to His purposes. I realized that I had labeled myself a Christian but was definitely living with a selfish purpose. I had overlooked the importance of my relationship with God, and it was not satisfying."