

Former Christian Right Homophobe Sees the Error of His Ways

By [Pam Spaulding](#), [AlterNet](#). Posted [March 30, 2007](#).

Religious right-wing activist Joe Murray was drawn to the American Family Association because of its "prolife" positions -- and soon he started bashing gays without giving it "much thought."

Editor's note: This interview originally appeared on Pam Spaulding's blog, [Pam's House Blend](#)

Gen. Peter Pace's recent remarks about homosexuality and military service have resulted in a good deal of commentary in print and in the mainstream media. The major issue, of course, was that the chairman of the joint chiefs of staff cited his personal views as a justification for retaining the policy known as "Don't Ask, Don't Tell," which denies openly gay and lesbian citizens from serving in the military.

"I believe homosexual acts between two individuals are immoral and that we should not condone immoral acts. I do not believe that the United States is well served by a policy that says its is okay to be immoral in any way."

One column that weighed in on the general's views, [Running at the Wrong Pace](#), at the *Evening Bulletin*, was a blazing indictment of the American Family Association's nearly single-minded fixation on anything gay, calling out the fear and smear tactics used by the stewards of the AFA, Don and Tim Wildmon, in support of Pace's bigotry.

The author of the editorial was none other than **Joe Murray**, a columnist and a former staff attorney for the AFA, which is based in Tupelo, Miss. The [Southern Poverty Law Center](#) lists it among "A Mighty Army" of religious right organizations that promotes homophobia through its direct mail appeals, email action alerts and columns. In an October 2004 article, the *AFA Journal* suggests that the Homosexual Agenda is leading to a "grotesque culture" that will include "quick encounters in the middle school boys' restroom," and SPLC notes that one of its fundraising letters included this gem -- "*Since homosexuals cannot reproduce, the only way for them to 'breed' is to RECRUIT! And who are their targets for recruitment? Children!*" I've [posted quite a bit](#) on the organization as well.

Murray, in sync with the AFA's view that homosexuality will destroy civilization, wrote anti-gay (albeit entertaining) columns that added the terms [Sodomy Squadron](#) and [Buggery Blitzkrieg](#) to the gay lexicon. It was hard to believe that this was the same person writing this about the AFA regarding Pace's comments:

The American Family Association, a pro-family organization and former employer of this writer, sprung into action sending out this "action alert": "Homosexuals working to get Marine general punished for comments calling homosexual act immoral."

AFA then warned that the homosexual lobby "already forced [Pace] to back down a step," and urged supporters to defend Pace and "take a stand for our troops who cannot get involved in this political situation." AFA, like others, had pulled out its red herring.

This is not a political situation, but instead it is a situation where a high ranking official made comments that judged individuals, not ideas. Pace singled out gay soldiers during a time of war and told these men and women that they were immoral. His comments, as a military official, were over the line and not defensible. AFA, like other "Christian" groups, chose to run to Pace's aid and such an act suggests borderline bigoted behavior from an organization claiming the mantle of Christianity. This is disturbing.

After [writing my own reaction](#) to Murray's piece, I decided to contact him in an effort to learn more about his evolution in thinking on LGBT rights. I was pleasantly surprised when he enthusiastically agreed to do an interview.

Murray, who has also served as national director of correspondence for Patrick J. Buchanan's 2000 bid for the GOP nomination, joined the AFA because it aligned with his prolife outlook, is today uncomfortable with the label "conservative" because he feels that its definition has been hijacked by the fringe, though he's clearly not on the progressive side of the fence politically.

While in the environment of the AFA, however, he noticed troubling signs that the efforts of the organization often didn't resemble compassion, concern or principles of Christianity that he believes in. The hypocrisy that he saw there opened his eyes.

It's clear in this interview that Joe Murray has done a lot of soul searching about his record of homophobic commentary, and has concluded that he got it wrong. It's a rare opportunity to engage with someone who's been on the inside of the anti-gay movement, and he answered all the frank questions sent his way.

Pam Spaulding: As a Christian (and a conservative), describe your own evolution in thinking about homosexuality, the LGBT community, and how it has informed your politics and beliefs.



Joe R. Murray: Well, first I am not sure if I am a "conservative" in the traditional sense. To me, the meaning of "conservative" has changed over the past few decades and, in light of such a change, I doubt that label applies to me.

I am prolife, but I am also in favor of gay marriage. I believe in a strong military, but I do not believe homosexuality is immoral. I believe that trade policy should protect the Main Street worker and not the Wall Street fat cat. I believe that America has a duty to protect her borders and preserve her cultural integrity. And I believe in a higher minimum wage. So, I am not sure exactly where I fit in political spectrum.

That being said, the issue of gay rights has been weighing heavy on my mind for quite some time. The gay issue is a human issue, and thus I strongly believe that it must be

approached with concern and compassion. Furthermore, the individuals engaging in the debate must recognize that behind the theories there are real life human beings that are made in the image of the Creator.

While it is true that I have written some inflammatory pieces (which I will explain in the next question), I must say I never really gave them much thought, for I was attracted to the American Family Association (AFA) because of the prolife issue. To me, that is the number one issue facing our civilization today, for if one is not guaranteed the right to life, rights such as a gay marriage are meaningless because you will not be around to enjoy them. Hence, the gay issue was just a secondary issue in my view.

This, however, changed when I got to Tupelo.

After adopting the AFA party line for some time, something in the back of my head kept tearing away at my conscience. How could AFA, an earthly organization, declare the divine intention of God and condemn the souls of homosexuals? How was it that men could make the declaration of who was getting into Heaven, and who was getting the one-way ticket to Hades?

I thought who are these people to say who is getting into Heaven and who is not? I thought of the story of Joan of Arc, who, when she was being burnt at the stake, was asked the question of whether she would go to Heaven.

Her response? "If I am not, may it please God to put me in it; if I am, may it please God to keep me there." In other words, it is God, not man, who decides who gets to pass through the gates of Heaven. So, how could groups like AFA even hint that gays were doomed to hell? This smacked of the politics of man, not the divine mercy of God.

Then there was the fact that the gay issue had become over simplified -- a sure sign that some facts were missing. Where was the Biblical authority for the condemnation that all homosexuals were to be buried in the fires of Hell? In order to answer that question, I decided to take an in depth study of the Bible to determine if what these conservative theologians were preaching was sound.

As I studied the Bible, I found that the word "sodomite" that was used in Corinthians and Romans referred not to all homosexuals, but largely to the promiscuous behavior of the Roman/Greek bathhouses and the use of boy prostitutes.

Take for instance, 1 Cor. 6:9-10, a verse commonly referred to support the argument that *all* forms of homosexuality are immoral. As I understand it, the Greek word translated as "boy prostitutes" may refer to catamites, i.e., the boys or young men kept for purposes of prostitution and the term translated for "sodomites" refers to all homosexual males who *engaged in such practices with such boys*. In other words, the condemnation of homosexuality in that passage, thus, refers only to homosexual males who engage the services of boy prostitutes -- it is a very narrow definition.

To argue that this verse condemns all homosexuality ignores the true meaning of the words used. Rather than embrace the true meaning of the words and explore the

possibility that some homosexual conduct may be permissible, such as that between two consenting adults, fundamentalists have opted to hijack this verse and fill in the gaps with the wisdom of the world. In other words, the definition was not as broad as many fundamentalists would argue, thus it left a huge opening as to whether gays in a committed relationship would be damned to hell.

How could preachers preach such vehement messages towards gays when it was clear that the Bible was unclear at best, and silent at worse, on the issue? Why recklessly condemn a group of individuals? Why fixate on them when your congregation is knee-deep in divorce (Jesus had some pretty clear words on that issue)? And as for gluttony, how can preachers lecture gays on restraint, when churches host pot luck dinner after pot luck dinner, and not be deemed hypocritical?

It was this hypocrisy that caused me to open my eyes. Those on the Christian right, for whatever reasons, have become fixated on homosexuality. They are obsessed by it and perverse form of vengeance appears to be fueling their inquisition. I may be wrong, but I think actions are speaking much louder than words here.

The whole gay issue is no longer about the quest for the Truth; it is about fear and loathing. It is about shame and sorrow. It is anything but Christian.

And if a person's sexual disposition is determined by birth, how can it be that these folks were created merely to be cast into Hell? The fundamentalist explanation makes no sense, but the view that only some homosexual behavior (see the verbiage used in Corinthians, etc.), and not all gays, is immoral does make sense.

Thus was my evolution. I may not be right, but I think the Christian community must explore these issues openly and honestly if they are truly to remain Christian. We have an obligation to explore these issues and be open to the fact that the modern view on homosexuality may be wrong.

While many on the right will argue I am soft on the issue and playing with souls, I believe that failure to seek the Truth and understand the Gospel is a worse sin. God gave us minds to exercise them, not be spoon fed information. I truly believe that if people actively seek the Truth, they will end up in the right place, but those who fail to embark on the journey will remain forever lost in the wilderness.

Spaulding: You wrote some pretty inflammatory (if entertaining) anti-gay pieces for the AFA when you were a columnist there ([Have We Lost the Culture War?](#) and [Santorum's Surrender?](#)). What do you think of them when you reread them today?

Murray: To me, those pieces, while entertaining, were not my best intellectual

work. I regret my penning of those articles for one reason -- I was fueling the flames of fear and hatred.

Just as an explanation, at this time I really was not spending time thinking about the substance of the gay issue, as I was focused on the right to life issue. My use of language and words were meant to entertain and get some laughs? I did not fully understand (or chose not to) the fact that some folks would take me literally.

Furthermore, I have always been concerned about the values coming out of the Castro District. I see the hatred some of these people have towards my Church, the Roman Catholic Church, and I just took their anger as proof that some folks on the Christian right were accurate in their depiction of the "homosexual agenda." I failed to investigate the matter and just adopted the party line -- this was a monumental error on my part.

It was not until I began to look closer at the issue that I came to realize that: (a) not all of the gay community is represented by those marching in the streets of San Francisco and (b) those in the streets had a right to be angry, for they have been told for years that they were immoral, sinful and shameful. How horrible must it be to be condemned due to a trait you had no control over. I thought, hell, I would be angry, too. Even further, when I looked at society, I found that most of our societal institutions worked against the gay community.

I believe that the gay community is a strong community and is as equally diverse as the Christian community. And just as some of the radicals on allegedly representing Christianity, i.e., Fred Phelps, should not be used to describe the Christian church, those radicals on the gay issue should not define the gay community.

Oh, I will say this. I do think that "Santorum's Surrender" had some saving grace, for it made those politicians on the right shake in their boots. I received calls from high ranking D.C. insiders asking me to remove the column from AFA's website because it could hurt Rick in his 2006 reelection. I was told he was sorry, and the pledge was something that just slipped through the cracks. I did not buy it for a minute.

AFA, though, did, and the column, while remaining on the net, was stripped from the front page and buried. Again, politics trumped principle and my doubts increased.

Spaulding: In your recent column in the *Evening Bulletin*, [Running At The Wrong Pace](#), you address Gen. Peter Pace's remarks about homosexuality, noting that the AFA came to his defense in a way that was unacceptable, saying "*If troop safety is AFA's primary concern, and not fear-mongering, why hasn't AFA demanded Bush bring these soldiers home?*" It was a strong statement that Wildmon's organization has lost its sense of purpose as a purportedly Christian organization. That was tough criticism. What kind of feedback have you received from the AFA or its readership about your column?

Murray: Institutionally, it has been a deafening silence. I still have a small number of friends that I still communicate with and they have told me the response has been mixed-

some agreeing with me and some not. All in all, I am sure that I will not be headlining the AFA Christmas Party this year.



Don and Tim Wildmon.

But I would like to add this thought -- my intent was not to bash AFA, but rather move them in the right direction (if that is possible). I hoped that if some folks in the organization read the piece from a former employee with strong "conservative" credentials, they would take a second look on how to handle this issue. It is a long shot, but it was worth the chance.

Spaulding: As someone who has been "behind the curtain" at the AFA, tell us what it's like working for Don and Tim Wildmon. How pervasive is their personal worldview within the organization about gays, and how does it shape its mission? It's clear they fixate on gays, gay sex and the existence of this phantom Homosexual Agenda that is taking over the country, if you are to believe their Action Alerts. Do they really feel it's their mission as Christians to work for institutionalized discrimination against a population?

Murray: From the offset, even though I was employed by AFA, I worked for the law center, which was located in a building that was separate from the main office. Thus, I was somewhat isolated from the internal workings of the ministry. I also did not interact with Don or Tim on a daily basis. Very rarely, if at all, did I speak to them on this issue. For the most part, the law center focused on lawsuits and the main ministry did its thing. We lived very separate work lives.

As for the fixation with the "homosexual agenda," you are right -- it is a significant part of the ministry's drive. I am not able to judge the hearts of other men, so I cannot speak to whether they truly believe that homosexuals are out to "convert" the children of America or they are merely using this issue as a method of fundraising. Either scenario, though, is disturbing.

And I while say, it is my own personal view that at least some inside AFA find the obsession with this issue uncanny. AFA needs to open its eyes to the idea that gays are not the enemy. I did.

Spaulding: As far as all of the threatened and actual call for boycotts are concerned, the Wildmons haven't had luck going up against corporate America. The effort against Disney failed, for instance, and the AFA has tried to take credit for Ford Motor Co.'s bad run of economic luck, which is ludicrous. Do they really believe that they have any chance of a long-term success with this approach?

Murray: Look, it is the free trade policies of this nation that are hammering the final nail into Ford's company, not any boycott. Again, I don't feel comfortable judging what is in the hearts of the AFA head honchos, but I am perplexed as to how a reasonable person could conclude that such boycotts have made a difference.

In my own personal view, these boycotts remind me of Don Quixote, for they chase the windmills. Let's look at the Disney boycott.

This boycott, in my view, was a disaster and a boycott of everything Eisner was a grave mistake. Christians still went to Disney, still watched their movies and still bought their kids Mickey Mouse stuffed animals. In my view, the boycott was too expansive. It should have boycotted Disney the week before, of and after the event. That might have made a difference. Why such a boycott did not happen, I do not know.

As I disclaimer, I have to state that I think it is wholly inappropriate to use Disney World as a political platform, and take issue with Gay Days at Disney. It is not that I have issue with gays, I just don't think a children's theme park is the right venue to make a political statement.

Hence, I feel that such boycotts are nothing more than saber rattling when the press machine is in a lull.

Spaulding: Does the AFA see attacking LGBT taxpaying citizens as merely the best fundraising tool they have left in the tool box, or do they think they can wind the clock back and force people into the closet again through shame, intimidation and legislation?

Murray: Again, this is a good question, and I am equally confused with AFA's actions. AFA preaches the Gospels, but uses broad stereotypes to pigeonhole an entire community of individuals. I will not tell you what is in the hearts of these people, but I will look at the evidence.

If AFA believes they are trying to help people, they are sorely misguided. As stated by Edward Bulwer-Lytton, "an ounce of help is better than a pound of preaching." The tactics employed by AFA, such as writing down the license plates of gay individuals, is anything but Christian. Such acts blemish the bride of Christ. Thus, what are we left to conclude? I will let your readers decide. [Joe is referring to Tim Wildmon's interview featured in the documentary [small town gay bar](#). Interviewees said that Tim Wildmon and the AFA had people scoping out a local bridge in a small town in Mississippi, writing down the license plate numbers of gay and lesbian residents who drove across the bridge to a rural location on a Saturday night to go to the only gay bar in the area, since in rural America the closet is a necessity for your own safety. His father Don would read the plate numbers on the air the next day to "keep people accountable."]

Spaulding: How closely do the religious right organizations work together on political initiatives? They are all competing for the same social conservative dollars; is there a sense of hierarchy or competition between say, the AFA and Focus on the Family? Is there any infighting going on that you can share?

Murray: Unfortunately, it is difficult for me to answer this, for as a staff attorney for the law center, I was not always in the loop about the inner workings of various religious right organizations. Though I cannot get into details, I will say that while diplomacy

usually exists between the different groups, there have been a number of times egos have gotten in the way of the "cause."

Spaulding: Do you know Peter LaBarbera -- meaning have you met him? He's one anti-gay activist I simply don't understand. The level of his fixation on gay sex is disturbing (and I've taken repeated fire from him for pointing it out); I imagine that some of his tactics (such as going undercover in bathhouses and at leather events) have to seem a little *odd* to some of the people in the anti-gay movement. Do you have any thoughts about it?

Murray: I have not met Mr. LaBarbera, but am familiar with his "work." Like you, I have no clue what this fella is about. I really don't wish to comment on his actions, for it would only give them a credibility they don't deserve.

Spaulding: Inside the AFA, what were the feelings about the fall of Ted Haggard? What did you think of it?

Murray: At the time of the Haggard incident, I was only a columnist with Agape Press living in Jersey, thus I was far removed from the internal response of AFA.

As for me, it always amazes me how quickly some Christians turn on one another. The Haggard story is one of sadness, for it tells the tale of a man who has been so indoctrinated with hate and fear, that he has been fighting something he cannot fight. He is denying his very identity. I only hope that Haggard's story humanizes the treatment of gays inside the church and causes people to reevaluate their position, but I am doubtful about this.

Spaulding: Corporate America has long led the way and has been supportive of LGBT employees and courted the gay dollar. As more people come out of the closet, average Americans see that there is little to fear when they know someone who is gay or lesbian. The last bastion of institutionalized discrimination to address has been the battle to change local, state and federal laws to recognize and protect LGBT citizens. This has been an area of success for the extreme Christian right because they can and do get out the vote, as we've seen with state marriage amendments. What tactics do you see organizations like the AFA using in 2007-2008 to maintain or gain ground politically?

Murray: My best guess is that AFA, and groups like them, will try to paint the gay rights movement as a radical fringe that is poisoning the cultural well and seeking to impose their will on a defenseless America. In other words, fear will be the main motivating force.

I am sure that pictures of half naked gay men will make their way into action alerts, as well as concerns over homosexual indoctrination in the school house. Hate crimes will be an issue and many will try to scare preachers into believing that the passage of the hate crime bill will penalize the Sunday morning sermons. This is shameful.

In other words, it will be an "us vs. them" mentality. Gays are the enemy and God-fearing Christians are the victim. The extremes of the gay community will be shown as the norm in an attempt to exploit the issue. In the end, such a dialogue, in my view, will further muddy the waters on this issue and prevent moderate voices from trying to find common ground, and this will do further damage to the standing of the church in the gay community -- and to me, that is almost an unforgivable sin.

Spaulding: I have to ask about the 2008 presidential election. There has been a lot of press about the angst of the religious right re: the marital issues of the top-tier presidential candidates. Giuliani and McCain are certainly no choirboys, with multiple marriages/divorces, and unannounced candidate Newt Gingrich, well, he breaks the moral hypocrisy meter. We keep seeing troubling poll numbers about Mitt Romney and evangelicals' willingness to vote for a Mormon. So now we're down to the second tier -- Huckabee, Hunter, Tancredo, etc.

Is there any candidate that will satisfy Dobson, Falwell and the Wildmons, or are they going to hold their nose and get behind whoever is nominated? If one of the above is acceptable, what do you think the driving force for supporting them will be?

Murray: Unlike Pat Robertson who baptized Bush in 2000 before Dubya made his prolife position public, Don has been pretty decent at studying the issues before endorsing a candidate. Don is not establishment, so he does not think like an insider. I am doubtful that a Giuliani or McCain can past muster, and Newt has so much baggage, I just don't see that happening.

As for Mitt, he has the religion issue. I remember during a weekly mandatory devotional at AFA, one top AFA executive made the statement that Catholics were not Christians (being a Catholic, this was news to me). So if Catholics are not Christians, I can only imagine what Mormons are considered.

Ideally, AFA would want a Hunter or a Brownback, but the chances of that happening are slim. As a former staffer for the Buchanan campaign, I can testify to how groups like AFA, when backed into a corner, will go with the political choice over the principled candidate.

Hence, to answer your question, while not initially supportive of any of the first tier candidates, I believe that once the nomination is made, AFA, and other Christian groups, will follow the party line. I can hear the mantra now -- we must stop Hillary. The desire to stop Hillary will trump any concern over where the GOP nominee stands on the issues.