

Rev. Dr. Donald Ellis Wildmon, one of the legendary leaders of American conservatism, died December 28, 2023, at Tupelo, Mississippi, after a courageous battle with Lewy Body Dementia.

Don was born in Dumas, Mississippi, on January 18, 1938, to Bernice and Ellis Wildmon. Don graduated from Ripley High School in 1956 and from Millsaps College in 1960. He served in the U.S. Army's Special Services from 1961 to 1963. Don was ordained as a minister of the United Methodist Church in 1964. He received his Master of Divinity from Emory University's Candler School of Theology in 1965. Don also held honorary doctorates from Asbury College and Wesley Biblical Seminary. He served the United Methodist Church as pastor until 1977 and was appointed to churches in Mathiston, Iuka, Tupelo, and Southaven, Mississippi and in Cartersville, Georgia. He left the pastoral ministry when he founded the National Federation for Decency, which later became American Family Association.

This grassroots organization began in 1977 when, as a pastor and a father of four young children, Don became alarmed with the unbiblical content that was increasingly taking over television. He turned it off and encouraged his church in Southaven, Mississippi, to turn television off for a week. Don's challenge to his family and his church hit the local media, and that effort soon drew national attention. The soft-spoken minister from a small-town church in Mississippi launched a far-reaching ministry that inspired millions to join their voices together on issues of ultimate consequence to our nation's future—life, marriage and family, religious freedom, public policy, justice, and more.

With Don's national influence and his ability to generate grassroots activism, he led numerous successful campaigns to help guide major corporate sponsors away from indecent and obscene programming, leading them to change their advertising policies. Under his visionary leadership, AFA developed a broad range of resources, strategies, and media outlets aimed at promoting Christian values in all areas of public life. Don began the American Family Radio network in 1991, and soon grew to nearly 200 radio stations. AFR was built in a shorter period of time than any other radio network. Known nationally as one of the country's most influential Christian watchdog organizations, American Family Association is now led by his son, Tim Wildmon.

Don appeared on numerous national television shows, such as *The Phil Donohue Show* and NBC's *Meet the Press*, and was featured in the New York Times, Wall Street Journal, USA Today, *Time*, *Newsweek*, *People* and *TV Guide*. Together with Paul Weyrich, chairman of the Free Congress Foundation, Don started the Arlington Group in 2002. The group was a coalition of leaders of prominent Christian conservative organizations in the United States established for the purpose of developing and executing national and grassroots strategies to protect the traditional institution of marriage, increasing respect for innocent human life, limiting judicial activism, and acting on other moral issues of concern. It became one of Washington's most powerful conservative groups, and the first effective combination of the major religious right organizations to stem the tide of the cultural decline of our nation. In 2004, *Advertising Age* magazine recognized Don and fellow conservative Karl Rove among "10 Who Made a Mark on Marketing."

Throughout his 33 years as head of the American Family Association, Don received national awards for his commitment to traditional values. He was selected as one of the Conservative Hall of Fame Lifetime Contribution Finalists at the Weyrich Awards Dinner 2009. At the Values Voter Summit in 2010, he received the James C. Dobson Values and Leadership Award, which recognized his work to promote family values and awareness of our country's Judeo-Christian heritage. Don was a recipient of the Daniel Webster award from Florida Family Council in 2010 for his life of service and ministry to Christian families. He was honored by Vision America in 2013 with the Daniel Award for his decades-long battle for morality that inspired millions. From that time on, the Daniel Award was called the Don Wildmon Award, honoring pastors for bravery in the public square.

Don was honored by Friend Ships in 2014, a ministry which uses ships to transport donated supplies and medicine to needy countries, with the Friend Ships Humanitarian Award for his lifetime of achievements and in honor of the "dreams, visions and accomplishments of this man of God who has stayed the course" in building an impactful ministry.

In October 2016, Don was informed by Jerry Johnson, president and CEO of National Religious Broadcasters, that he had been named the recipient of the 2017 NRB Hall of Fame Award, presented on March 2, 2017, at the NRB International Christian Media Convention.

Locally, Don was an active member and avid supporter of the church he helped found in 1977, Lee Acres United Methodist Church, now Cornerstone UMC. In 2003, he received the Dickson Award, which honored pastors who greatly influenced the life or lives of their sponsor. In 2004, Don received the "In God We Trust" award at Sandtown UMC "in recognition of his service to God and Country—an example of faith and commitment to family values as embodies our national motto in public service." He was the recipient of the John Wesley Christian Statesman Award in 2008 from Riverside Independent Methodist Church in Flowood, Mississippi, and was recognized as a "Pro-lifer of the Year" by Right to Life of Jackson, Mississippi.

Don authored 22 books and his great passion for travel abroad led him to guide over 30 tours to the Holy Land and Western Europe.

Survivors include his wife of 62 years, Lynda Bennett Wildmon; four children, Tim Wildmon (Alison); Angela Wildmon; Donna Wildmon Clement (Neal), and Mark Wildmon (Virginia), all of Tupelo; one sister, Louise Yancey (Mike) of Memphis, Tennessee; six grandchildren, Wriley Wildmon Freeman (Wil); Wesley Wildmon (Chelsea); Neal Clement (Samantha); Walker Wildmon (Lexie); Drew Clement; Blake Clement; eleven great-grandchildren: Abbi Freeman, Hardin Davis, Emerson Anne Davis, Bennett Wildmon, Landry Wildmon, Anna Wesley Wildmon, Luke Wildmon, Samuel Wildmon, Andrew Wildmon, Isaac Wildmon, all of Tupelo, and Alden Clement of Franklin, TN.

He was preceded in death by both his parents; his brothers, Johnny Wildmon (June) of Tupelo, Allen Wildmon (Mickey) of Hernando, and sister Helen Tenenbaum (Harold) of South Burlington, Vermont. Pallbearers will be his grandsons. Honorary pallbearers will be board members and employees of American Family Association. Visitation details will be forthcoming. The family wanted to issue a heartfelt thank you to the healthcare and home hospice care workers who lovingly cared for Bro. Don during his difficult final years.