

Unhealthy breakfast



How the National Prayer Breakfast, a relic from the 1950s era of civil religion, evolved into a florid display of Christian Nationalism

By Liz Hayes

Organizers described the reformatted National Prayer Breakfast as a “reset” when it returned to Washington, D.C., as an in-person gathering in 2023 after years of controversy and the pandemic forced a proverbial come-to-Jesus moment over the event’s future.

But now, after two years of the annual event being organized by the newly formed National Prayer Breakfast Foundation, critics are pointing to growing church-state separation problems while questioning the degree to which “The Family” – the secretive, controversial Christian Nationalist organization that ran the breakfast for decades – remains involved.

To those watching on television, this year’s National Prayer Breakfast on Feb. 1 probably didn’t look much different from events. As usual, an intentionally bipartisan group of members of Congress offered Christian prayers and read from the Bible. There was Christian music sung by Italian tenor Andrea Bocelli. Senate Chaplain Barry Black’s keynote speech was saturated with Bible references; House Chaplain Margaret Grun Kibben offered a closing prayer “in the name of Jesus.” President Joe Biden offered some remarks, continuing the unbroken, 71-year tradition of every sitting pres-

ident since Dwight D. Eisenhower attending the event.

Americans United’s primary concerns about the National Prayer Breakfast – that government is organizing a worship service, one that favors a single religion – were encapsulated in the opening remarks from U.S. Rep. Tracey Mann (R-Kan.), who co-chaired this year’s event with U.S. Rep. Frank Mrvan (D-Ind.). “We gather in historic Statuary Hall this morning in the spirit of Jesus to pray for the president, for one another and for the country,” Mann said.

For years the National Prayer Breakfast was held in a Washington, D.C., hotel. Last year it was moved to the U.S. Capitol Visitor Center. This year it occurred in the U.S. Capitol itself – Statuary Hall, a symbolic space that once was the location of presidential inaugurations and more recently has been used as a site to pay tribute to eminent citizens upon their death; recent honorees lying in state there included Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg and U.S. Reps. Don Young (R-Alaska) and Elijah Cummings (D-Md.).

“It is still deeply problematic that members of Congress are directly involved in hosting a religious event at the seat of our federal government,” Americans United President and CEO Rachel Laser remarked. “Our

public officials should not be organizing and promoting religious worship services in government buildings because it divides the country on religious lines, favoring a select few and making everyone else feel unwelcome.”

Journalist Jonathan Larsen, who has reported extensively on the National Prayer Breakfast and The Family for the progressive news site The Young Turks and now for his own Substack newsletters, noted the House controls the use of Statuary Hall, which means House Speaker Mike Johnson (R-La.) had to approve moving the breakfast into the U.S. Capitol. Some organizers had requested an even more prominent location: Last November, Mann and Mrvan co-sponsored a bill that would have authorized the use of the Capitol Rotunda for the breakfast. The bill never moved out of committee and did not pass.

All of the speakers at this year’s National Prayer Breakfast were Christian. Occasionally the program has included non-Christians – U.S. Sen. Chuck Schumer (D-N.Y.) and U.S. Rep. David Kustoff (R-Tenn.), who are Jewish, each had a brief speaking role once in the past five years. But the event is always overwhelmingly Christian.

“All faiths’ were supposedly welcome, but who were they kidding?” asked U.S. Rep. Jared Huffman (D-Calif.) and AU Vice President of Strategic Communications Andrew L. Seidel in a joint column published by the *Daily Beast*. “Jews, Muslims, Hindus, and other non-Christians were implicitly disinvited by ‘gathering in the spirit of Jesus and calling on the Lord in prayer,’ at a program indistinguishable from a Christian church service.

“‘Nones’ like us – people who identify as atheists, Humanists, agnostics, or nothing in particular – were categorically excluded,” Huffman and Seidel wrote. “The Prayer Breakfast’s exalting of Christian privilege divides America along religious lines and flouts the equality

our Constitution enshrines.”

While the program of the “official” National Prayer Breakfast looks largely unchanged on television, there is at least one significant difference for those attending in person: the crowd is substantially smaller. Attendance is now supposed to be limited to members of Congress and other government officials and their “plus-ones” – one guest each who must be either a spouse, family member or constituent. Organizers have estimated 200-300 people attended the last two breakfasts.

That’s a far cry from the crowd of several thousand that typically attended the multi-day series of National Prayer Breakfast events hosted by The Family, also known as the International Foundation and the Fellowship Foundation. The guest list had exploded beyond members of Congress to include a sizable contingent of representatives from foreign governments and the Family’s international affiliates, plus faith leaders, lobbyists and various hangers-on. It was as much a networking event as a prayer service, one that gave attendees access to U.S. politicians and powerbrokers.

The less savory side of the breakfast’s networking came to a head in 2018 when it was revealed that a Russian spy indicted by the U.S. Department of Justice had attended the prayer breakfast twice, allegedly seeking to set up a back channel for communications between Russian and U.S. officials. Maria Butina, a Russian gun rights activist and businesswoman, ultimately pleaded guilty to a charge of conspiracy and was sentenced to 18 months in a U.S. federal prison. She admitted to being a secret agent for the Kremlin while covertly gathering intelligence on the National Rifle Association and other groups at the direction of a former Russian lawmaker.

U.S. Sen. Chris Coons (D-Del.), a longtime co-host of the prayer breakfast, acknowledged to the Associated Press (AP) in 2023 that the Family-run event was becoming

challenging for members of Congress to support.

“Some questions had been raised about our ability as members of Congress to say that we knew exactly how it was being organized, who was being invited, how it was being funded. Many of us who’d been in leadership roles really couldn’t answer those questions,” Coons said.

A spokeswoman for U.S. Sen. Tim Kaine (D-Va.) told the AP Kaine had stopped attending the event in 2016 because it “had become an entertainment and lobbying extravaganza rather than an opportunity for spiritual reflection.”

The embarrassment over a Russian spy rubbing elbows with U.S. officials and faith leaders at the National Prayer Breakfast was compounded in 2019 when Netflix released the documentary series “The Family” – a multi-part exposé of The Family’s inner workings, Christian Nationalist agenda and ties to foreign governments. The series, which was based on two books written by award-winning literary journalist and former AU Trustee Jeff Sharlet, included substantial coverage of the prayer breakfast.

And while organizers have long attempted to bill the event as a bipartisan testament to the supposed ability of prayer to unite people, that framing fell flat during the four years that President Donald Trump addressed the crowd. At his first prayer breakfast appearance in 2017, Trump encouraged attendees to pray for Arnold Schwarzenegger, the former Republican governor of California, because his ratings on reality TV show “The Apprentice” weren’t as good as when Trump starred on the show. Trump also issued the false promise to “get rid of and totally destroy the Johnson Amendment” to enable evangelical pastors to endorse him.

During his final year in office, Trump arrived on the prayer breakfast stage holding a copy of *USA Today* over his head to display the



Capitol worship: President Biden addresses the 2024 National Prayer Breakfast

bold, front-page headline “ACQUITTED” – celebrating the Senate’s refusal the day before to impeach him. After keynote speaker Arthur Brooks, a Harvard University professor, urged the crowd to love their enemies and leave contempt out of disagreements, Trump stood at the podium and praised the Republicans who had acquitted him and sneered at then-House Speaker Nancy Pelosi (D-Calif.) – sitting just a few seats from him on the dais – by casting doubt on her previous comments that she prayed for him.

Several faith leaders took offense at Trump’s remarks and his use of the prayer breakfast stage to attack political opponents.

“I find it deeply problematic that the president uses the National Prayer Breakfast to lambaste the faith of his opponents,” Noah Farkas, a Conservative Jewish rabbi from California, told AP. “He forgets the history of faith in this country, and disrespects others who speak from their sense of faithful conscience.”

“A bipartisan prayer breakfast is the last place one would expect to find political attacks on opponents,” said the Rev. Tom Lambrecht, general manager of the conservative United Methodist magazine *Good News*.

When the COVID-19 pandemic forced the event to go virtual in 2021, prayer breakfast supporters decided

it was due for an overhaul. The National Prayer Breakfast Foundation was formed with the sole purpose of hosting the annual event; former U.S. Sen. Mark Pryor (D-Ark.) was named as the first board chair (he's since been replaced by former U.S. Sen. Heidi Heitkamp, a Democrat from North Dakota).

"Increasingly, the desire was to return the annual event to its origins as a more intimate gathering between the Congress, the President, and those in his administration," Pryor announced in early 2023. "As with many other things in our country, the COVID years allowed the Members to hit the reset button and organize a working group to fulfil this longtime vision."

But skeptics like journalist Larsen have questioned just how involved The Family still may be with the National Prayer Breakfast.

Take U.S. Rep. Tim Walberg (R-Mich.), for example. He was a co-chair of the 2023 National Prayer Breakfast. Months later, in October, The Family paid for his trip to Uganda's National Prayer Breakfast, according to Larsen. While there, Walberg delivered a keynote address in which he urged Ugandans to "stand firm" in support of the anti-LGBTQ+ bill that imposes the death penalty on "serial offenders" of "aggravated homosexuality."

Even before the first revamped prayer breakfast was held in 2023, Larsen had noted that many members of the new National Prayer Breakfast Foundation board had deep ties to The Family or past prayer breakfasts. They included Caroline Aderholt, a trustee for the Christian Nationalist organization Concerned Women for America and wife of longtime Family insider U.S. Rep. Robert Aderholt (R-Ala.); U.S. Rep. Zach Wamp (R-Tenn.); Max Finberg, a former aide to longtime Family insider former U.S. Rep. Tony Hall (D-Ohio); Grace Nelson, wife of NASA Administrator and former U.S. Sen. Bill Nelson (D-Fla.); and Stan Holmes, president and CEO of

the nonprofit Core Fellowship Foundation.

U.S. Rep. Mark Pocan (D-Wisc.), a member of the Congressional Free-thought Caucus, earlier this year sent a letter to The Family, demanding to know the degree to which it's involved in the official National Prayer Breakfast, as well as the nature and extent of its operations around the world. He voiced particular concern about the organization's connections to anti-LGBTQ+ legislation abroad.

While the new prayer breakfast was happening on Capitol Hill last year, The Family reportedly invited about 1,400 people for a two-day "National Prayer Breakfast Gathering" at the Washington Hilton hotel; a spokesman said about a third of invitees were international guests. The program for the "official" breakfast was live-streamed at The Family's event, which Biden acknowledged in his remarks: "I understand we got a bunch of folks at a hotel not far from here. ... They apparently are watching this. Welcome. ... I'm grateful you're able to join us in prayer this morning and lift up one another and our nation."

It was unclear whether The Family hosted a prayer breakfast event this year; the organization never has released much information about its events, and there were no media reports on a Family-sponsored breakfast in 2024.

What has received a fair amount of news coverage is the similarly named National Gathering for Prayer and Repentance that occurred the day before the National Prayer Breakfast this year and last. Hosted by the Museum of the Bible just off the National Mall in Washington, D.C., the event reportedly was co-founded by House Speaker Mike Johnson.

"The gathering is staged as a far-right counterweight to the National Prayer Breakfast," *Rolling Stone* magazine reported. It described the National Gathering for Prayer and

Repentance as a stark contrast to the official breakfast by featuring "extremist calls for Christians to stand in opposition to sinful American culture – in particular the rise of LGBTQ freedoms, the environmental movement, and the practice of abortion. The kind of repentance sought by the speakers was often less for personal failings than for the failure of Christians to exert power and control over those who don't obey their theology."

Rolling Stone reported the event "was chock-a-block with Christian nationalist pastors and featured a clarion call for spiritual warfare, with members of Congress beseeching fellow Christians to 'tie the hands of Satan' and to 'bind the demonic forces' that are supposedly possessing America."

In addition to Johnson, speakers included event co-founders Tony Perkins, head of the Christian Nationalist group Family Research Council, and Jim Garlow, described as an "apostle" in the Christian Nationalist New Apostolic Reformation movement, which calls on Christians to take "dominion" over government and society to bring about the biblical end times.

There may have been less talk of Christians taking over government at the official National Prayer Breakfast, but Americans United still thinks it's an anachronism that has no place in a country with church-state separation.

"America's promise of church-state separation and religious freedom means that our government cannot favor one faith over others or religion over nonreligion," AU's Laser said. "The National Prayer Breakfast, which was created during a wave of Christian Nationalism in the 1950s, has flouted that promise."

On AU's "Wall of Separation" blog, AU Senior Advisor and *Church & State* editor Rob Boston summed it up: "It's time to consign the National Prayer Breakfast to the dustbin of history." ■