

## **National Day of Prayer Under Attack**

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(May 1, 2008) On this 57<sup>th</sup> National Day of Prayer in the United States, while millions of Americans are attending prayer gatherings around the country, representatives of other faiths are protesting the “Christian slant” of the day and calling for more “inclusive” services.

According to Liberty Counsel, a non-profit legal organization dedicated to advancing religious freedom, protests are erupting throughout the nation.

“Whenever God is mentioned in this society, controversy cannot be far behind,” the Counsel said in a recent statement. “Some groups like the pro-Muslim group, CAIR (Counsel on American Islamic Relations), complain that prayer events organized by Christians on that day are slanted toward Christianity, rather than being ‘inclusive’ of other faiths. They want to hijack the traditional Christian prayer events and turn the national focus from a time of intercession into a watered-down version with moments of silence and reflection.”

The National Day of Prayer is an annual observance held on the first Thursday of May and invites people of all faiths to pray for the nation. It was created in 1952 by a joint resolution of the United States Conference and signed into law by Harry S. Truman. However, the resolution is just another on a long list of national days of prayer and fasting that date back to the time of George Washington. Because the nation was founded on Christian principles and the majority of Americans are Christian, these days of observance have traditionally been observed in a Christian manner.

This is not acceptable to many groups, who believe the nation should observe the day in a more “inclusive” fashion. Most of their protests are being aimed at the National Day of Prayer Task Force, a private Christian group headed by Shirley Dobson, wife of Focus on the Family founder James Dobson.

The Task Force was founded to coordinate events for the National Day of Prayer. It specifically requires all prayer coordinators to sign a pledge of faith in Jesus Christ and requests that events be “conducted solely by Christians while those with differing beliefs are welcome to attend.”

Although the Task Force is a private group, many believe it receives at least tacit approval by the government with an annual proclamation by President Bush and prayer ceremonies held at the White House and on Capitol Hill.

However, as Becky Armstrong, a spokeswoman for the National Day of Prayer Task Force told the *Post*, people of other faiths are perfectly free to organize their own events.

“The task force has chosen to conduct events that reflect its Christian perspective on prayer,” she said. “All Americans are free to exercise their First Amendment rights to organize events that observe the National Day of Prayer in a manner that reflects their religious perspective.”

The fact that the Task Force and most of the Day's observances are Christian remains unacceptable to groups such as CAIR and Jews on First, a group formed in October, 2005 to "oppose the growing strength of the Christian right." The two groups issued a joint proclamation calling upon American Muslims and members of other faith communities to contact governors and other elected officials to make any government-sponsored observances more representative of the nation's diversity.

"Mainstream religious leaders have criticized the organizers of National Day of Prayer events for restricting participation to a narrow group of evangelicals," the statement reads. "Even though prayer day events are sponsored by a private organization, observances receive unofficial government approval through a proclamation by President Bush and ceremonies held at the White House and in Congress."

Jews on First, is conducting an "Inclusive National Day of Prayer" campaign to lobby governors for "alternative inclusive observances."

"The National Day of Prayer has been hijacked!" the group declares on its Web site. "What began as President Truman's declaration of a National Prayer Day for all Americans is now excluding and dividing us on religious lines."

The Orange County California chapter of Americans United for Separation of Church and State sent more than 2,000 letters to Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger urging him to not to support events where hosts are limited to evangelical Christians.

Some say the pressure is beginning to pay off. Dr. Ravi Zacharias, the 2008 Honorary Chairman of the National Day of Prayer, has excluded the name of Jesus Christ from his official prayer, choosing to end it with "In God's holy name."

A receptionist with the National Day of Prayer in Colorado Springs told the *Christian NewsWire* that he excluded the name of Jesus so as not to offend the Jewish participants in the event, and that others are free to pray in Jesus name if they desire.

"This nation was birthed by Christianity and national prayers have traditionally recognized that fact," states the Liberty Counsel. "Days of prayer and fasting are a traditional and important part of American history. Prayer and spiritual renewal are necessary to sustain liberty. We need leaders in all sectors, both public and private, who are not afraid to acknowledge Jesus Christ. Christians should never forget Who gave us our freedom. Without Him, this Nation will not and cannot long endure."

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