

How a Democrat's Staunch Faith Makes a Difference in Washington

President Trump doesn't have a lot of nice things to say about Democrats these days. Well, except Sen. Chris Coons.

The same day the president made headlines for angrily walking out on Democratic leadership during shutdown negotiations (Jan. 9), he was also heaping praise on the Delaware Democrat.

"Senator Chris Coons: On occasion, we disagree, but I actually like him," Trump said that morning during a bill-signing in the Oval Office. Coons wasn't the only Democrat who worked on the bills splayed across the president's desk, but he was the only one in the room, a fact the senator later said wasn't lost on Trump or his daughter, Ivanka, who was also present.

The president then looked over his shoulder at the smiling senator: "We pray together, right? That's a good step."

The brief exchange highlighted the peculiar niche that Coons has carved out in a Washington riven by partisanship. A bridge builder with Republicans, Coons is known for helping create rare flickers of bipartisan agreement.

Part of his secret, it seems, is religion. Over the course of multiple interviews with Religion News Service, Coons, who grew up attending Red Clay Creek Presbyterian Church in Hockessin, Del., explained that his faith has not only provided grounding for his own life but has also emerged as a point of connection with Republicans, with whom he has forged lasting relationships – and legislation.

The fusion of service and faith has long fascinated Coons, who in the 1980s worked with the South African Council of Churches

and Archbishop Desmond Tutu to support the anti-apartheid movement. Coons went on to earn a master's in ethics from Yale Divinity School in the early 1990s, while getting a law degree from Yale Law School.

"This is what interests me more than almost anything that I've done in public life," Coons said, referring to the intersection of religion and politics.

One of his divinity school professors, Serene Jones, now president of the liberal-leaning Union Theological Seminary in New York, described him as "an exceptional student."

"I would have loved to have him as my church's pastor, and I am thrilled to have him in my country's Senate," she said.

The interest persisted after Coons entered politics in 2000 and rose to the national stage in 2010, when he won a special election to fill the Senate seat vacated when Joe Biden was elected vice president. As senator, Coons – who campaigned for Ronald Reagan in 1980 before becoming a Democrat – has repeatedly argued that being liberal and a Christian are not incongruous. He has spoken in churches and to Muslim groups, headlined a faith-themed 2017 event hosted by Union Seminary denouncing an uptick in anti-LGBTQ sentiment and penned an opinion piece in *The Atlantic* titled "Progressive Values Can't Be Just Secular Values."

For Coons, 55, being both a committed believer and ardent liberal also involves a lot self-deprecation regarding his own spiritual practices.

"I'm only on my third time through reading the Bible, start to finish, in a year," he said, almost sheepishly, before spending several minutes outlining what he described as inadequate attempts to focus on Scripture, such as relying on devotionals and using a Bible app on his phone.

Coons is a vocal supporter of the separation of church and

state, saying during the 2017 confirmation hearings for Supreme Court Justice Neil Gorsuch that he is “in awe” of Founding Fathers who called for it. But he appears to draw a distinction when it comes to the role of personal faith in politics.

“I wasn’t elected as part of an empire of Christendom. I was elected as part of a democratic republic where my state has lots of people who have different faith traditions and backgrounds or none at all,” Coons said. “But to pretend that my religious views shouldn’t influence my attitude and action – I think that’s fiction.”

He called on potential 2020 Democratic White House hopefuls to be honest about their own spiritual influences, noting, “My most basic advice is ‘Don’t hide your faith.’” Even so, Coons warned, “the gospel is not a blueprint for a political agenda (or) a party platform,” and he rebuked a form of Christian nationalism that permeates some corners of American politics.

“Christian nationalism, understood as a view that God created and inspired the United States to be the nation on earth that is meant to be a Christian democracy and to carry forth Christ’s vision for the world ... that is in profound tension with our founding as a pluralistic, multifaith, multiethnic, multilingual democracy, which in its founding documents recognizes a creator and recognizes natural rights but expressively declines to create a state religion, and to align ... powers of the state with any particular faith,” he said.

Such rhetoric seems at odds with Coons’ friendly relations with Trump and other Republicans who have pushed an idea of America as a preserve of Christianity. Although he has taken flack from progressive groups such as Indivisible for his relatively centrist approaches to financial deregulation and some immigration issues, Coons maintains a 100 percent rating from the Planned Parenthood Action Fund, repeatedly backed comprehensive LGBT nondiscrimination legislation and

consistently opposed Trump's travel ban on refugees and immigrants from a group of primarily Muslim-majority countries.

Yet Coons has won over so many Republican lawmakers that last year Politico dubbed him "the GOP's favorite Democrat." During one of Coons' interviews with RNS, Sen. Tim Scott, R-S.C., walked into Coons' office unannounced. Within seconds, Coons began reminiscing about how the two worshipped together during the annual Congressional Civil Rights Pilgrimage.

"Tim and I actually ended up in South Carolina together through faith and politics," Coons said, referring to the trip.

Meanwhile, one of Coons' closest spiritual confidants is Sen. James Lankford, R-Okla., with whom he co-chairs both the weekly Senate Prayer Breakfast and the annual National Prayer Breakfast. (Coons inherited the role in 2016 from Virginia Catholic Sen. Tim Kaine, the previous Democratic co-chair of both events, who asked the Presbyterian to take over after being tapped as Hillary Clinton's running mate.)

"I have several Republicans who are also friends with whom I have gotten closer because of our opportunity to talk and share about our faith journey," he said. "I'd put James Lankford very high on that list."

The Senate Prayer Breakfast is a small affair for 20 to 25 lawmakers from both parties who assemble each Wednesday to discuss religious matters. Its proceedings are kept private outside of vague descriptions of prayer and songs, but both Coons and Lankford said it forges a special camaraderie among elected officials.

"It's unusual, I think, for people to understand that in our country, legislators get together, take off their labels, and pray for each other and each other's families," Lankford, who earned a master's of divinity from Southwestern Baptist

Theological Seminary and still occasionally performs marriage counseling and weddings, told RNS.

Coons described leading the gathering with Lankford as “one of the greatest blessings of my life,” adding that it also brings him closer to lawmakers in his own party. He said that after freshman Sen. Jacky Rosen of Nevada, a Jewish Democrat, attended the prayer breakfast for the first time in January, he “beelined” for her later that day at lunch.

These relationships can produce real-world results. Coons and Lankford both served on the 2017-2018 Senate Financial Services and General Government Appropriations subcommittee, which controls \$23.8 billion across 14 federal agencies and the Washington, D.C., government. With Lankford as chair and Coons as the ranking member, an appropriations bill passed through the subcommittee and the Senate recently – the first such legislation to do so in two decades – with bipartisan support.

Asked if their faith connection played a role in such projects, Coons said: “It helps – it helps a lot.”

Religion also played a role in Coons’ political friendship with former Sen. Jeff Flake, an Arizona Republican who was often critical of Trump’s rhetoric before retiring from the Senate in 2018. Coons said he and Flake found common ground on many topics, including a shared appreciation for religion – albeit very different varieties.

“He’s a Mormon, and at exactly the same time I was going to Kenya (for relief work), he was going to Zimbabwe on a Mormon mission, which literally means going up to people (and saying) ‘Would you like to talk about Jesus?’” Coons said in a December speech. “As a Presbyterian, not only had I never done that, I had never met anyone who’d done that.”

The pair ended up embarking on trips to the African continent together, but their most famous collaboration was initiating

the weeklong FBI investigation into allegations of sexual assault by then-Supreme Court nominee Brett Kavanaugh, a compromise move that surprised (and frustrated) party leaders on both sides.

The National Prayer Breakfast is currently Coons' most significant faith-based collaboration. An often relatively muted annual gathering in Washington, D.C., that traditionally includes a speech from the president of the United States, the breakfast has come under increased scrutiny after a Russian national, Maria Butina, was arrested last year and pleaded guilty after being accused of, among other things, attempting to exploit the high-powered spiritual event as a way to influence Trump and American politics in general.

Asked if they intended to heighten security at this year's event (Feb. 7), Coons and Lankford explained their role is to plan the program, not logistics.

Even so, both demurred on the question of whether leaders should screen the event. The Oklahoman said someone from the National Prayer Breakfast contacted him to ask about the issue, but he responded by arguing that religious gatherings are supposed to bring people together.

"I'm always a little taken back when someone will ... pull someone out and say, 'I'm not sure their motives were pure' – well, welcome to church," he said, echoing a similar point also made by lead National Prayer Breakfast organizer Doug Burleigh. "Not everyone walks into every prayer meeting with the same motivation."

For his part, Coons argued these sorts of faith-fueled gatherings are about finding common ground amid controversy, something he says he experienced firsthand with Trump at the 2017 National Prayer Breakfast. Just four days earlier, the president had signed his controversial "travel ban" executive order. By contrast, Coons had worked with several faith groups

– among them his home church – to welcome a Syrian refugee family in his state, only to have their arrival paused by the ban.

Coons told an audience last month that he had been scheduled to pray at the event immediately after Trump's remarks but walked over to the president beforehand to voice his disagreement about the ban on moral and religious grounds, saying: "I believe it is wrong. I believe it is against everything in my faith and everything that this breakfast is about."

The exchange promptly turned biblical: "I said, 'Mr. President, I also want to pray for you today.' He looked at me, and then I said, 'We're called to pray for our enemies.'"

Nearly two years removed from the encounter, Coons explained the remark wasn't just bluster. Leaning back reflectively in his office chair, he said he still prays for Trump on a regular basis.

"Frankly, I have found the practice of regularly praying for our president a powerful and purposeful spiritual discipline," he said, acknowledging that it has been "at times a struggle" to get past political clashes and remind himself that Trump is "a child of God."

The moment of prayer appeared to win the president's respect. He said Trump, who also was raised Presbyterian, often cites their common faith when they see each other.

"He says, 'We Presbyterians have got to stick together!' like we're some small hunted minority or something," Coons recalled, laughing. {eo}

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