

Storming the Capital With Prayer

Many Washington, D.C., insiders say prayer played a key role in the 2000 presidential election. They believe Christians are effectively shaping public policy behind the scenes.

A young, dark-haired woman smiles at the guard on duty as she checks her tote bag and keys at the security counter. After passing through the metal-detector checkpoint, she quietly takes a seat in the visitor's gallery of the United States Senate. Dressed in a blue blazer and black slacks, she could easily be mistaken for just another tourist.

In hushed tones, her guide stealthily points out a few of the senators on the floor below, and then hands her a list of some of the key issues being debated today.

With eyes wide open, the young prayer warrior goes to work. Silently, but passionately, she prays for God's blessing to overtake these leaders, for Him to give them wisdom in their decisions, and for righteousness to prevail in our nation's capital. This morning, she is part of an organization of on-site intercessors who have been praying undercover in the U.S. Senate, House and various committee rooms since 1994.

Later that night at one of the many prayer houses in Washington, D.C., several people make their way down the narrow stairs into the small room that is filled almost to capacity. Some are dressed in business suits, others in jeans and sweatshirts. Diverse in race and age, the group has assembled for one purpose.

“Lord, we’ve come to seek Your face for this city and this nation,” cries a young man seated on the floor. Others join in with similar petitions as heartfelt intercession fills the room and flows heavenward. This meeting and others like it are evidence that in a city where spirituality has often been cloaked in religious formality or disregarded with cynical skepticism, the Holy Spirit is moving, bringing a promise of renewed spiritual passion to our nation’s capital.

Signs of Change

To those who have been praying undercover in Washington, D.C., for the last several years, it seems as if the windows of heaven have recently been opened and that a spirit of refreshment has descended on Capitol Hill. Not since Jimmy Carter has a president been more outspoken about his spiritual beliefs than the 43rd president, George W. Bush. As one who says he has “learned the power of prayer,” Bush now joins the front line of those who believe prayer can make a difference in the capital.

“While there hasn’t been much encouragement for a strong culture of faith on Capitol Hill in the last few years, that is changing,” says Frank Wright, director of the D. James Kennedy Center for Christian Statesmanship. “If you ask any long-term staffers who have been on the Hill for the last 10 to 15 years, they will tell you that there is indeed a kind of spiritual revival taking place. I would say there has been at least a tenfold increase in spiritual interest in the last 15 years.”

That increased interest can be seen in the proliferation of Bible study and prayer groups on Capitol Hill led by various ministries, staffers and members of Congress themselves. Lloyd

Ogilvie, chaplain of the U.S. Senate, says he has seen an authentic renewal of personal prayer as well as Bible study and prayer groups among the senators and throughout the Senate staff.

"I'm encouraged by the fact that leaders in government are recognizing their need for supernatural wisdom, discernment, vision and strength," Ogilvie told Charisma.

No one seems to know exactly how many Bible studies and prayer groups are actually taking place on Capitol Hill, but a conservative estimate puts it at about 30 per week. Some studies, such as the Congressional Bible Study, have between 50 and 60 members. Other prayer and accountability groups have just five or six participants.

Rep. Jim Ryun, R-Kan., meets every Wednesday morning with a group of six other congressmen for fellowship and prayer in one of their offices. His wife, Anne, believes prayer is essential for their survival in Washington.

"Our prayer as a couple is the most important," Anne says. "Then we both have prayer and Bible study groups on the Hill." Anne attends a weekly Bible study for congressional wives sponsored by the Christian Embassy, a group founded by Bill Bright in 1975 to minister to leaders in government and their families.

Anne says that serving in Washington is a 24-hour-a-day job. "No one understands the life [of a public servant] except those who are living it with you."

Kimberly Genau, who serves as Capitol Hill liaison for the D.

James Kennedy Center, comes closest to knowing what Anne means. She spends her day ministering and praying with staffers, interns and wives of congressmen and senators.

“The level of warfare is very different here than anywhere else,” Genau says. “There are many strongholds that come against our leaders in the form of power, pride and immorality. They need our prayers daily.”

Many leaders are now boldly asking for prayer support from other Christians. At a recent pro-life breakfast in Kansas, Rep. Ryun told supporters, “We’re willing to fight, if you’re willing to pray.”

Sen. Sam Brownback, R-Kan., has echoed Ryun’s call: “I don’t mind being on the front lines, but I need your prayers,” he says.

The recognition of the need to uphold leaders in prayer and to support them through various ministries has birthed more than a dozen spiritual organizations that target Capitol Hill and the city of Washington.

One example is a town house behind the Supreme Court that has been the site of weekly prayer for those serving in government since 1991, when Harry Valentine invited friends to pray during the Senate battle to confirm Clarence Thomas. Rob Schenck, co-founder of Faith and Action ministry, purchased the town house in 1999. Those who pass by can’t miss the prominent sign in the front yard displaying the Ten Commandments.

Arriving in Washington in 1994 with a call from God to

minister to both elected and appointed officials in the government, Schenck quickly learned that those who work on Capitol Hill are well-insulated from the public.

“I began riding the elevators in the various government buildings early in the mornings and late at night,” Schenck remembers. “I’d be standing there, and the doors would open, and inside would be a senator or another official with whom I had sought unsuccessfully to get an appointment. Those elevators became a virtual ‘vertical chapel’ where God provided opportunities for me to share and pray with many leaders.”

In addition to the group’s ministry to people one-on-one, Faith in Action has presented more than 300 beautiful stone artwork tablets of the Ten Commandments to elected and appointed officials, asking them to display and obey them.

“I’ll never forget the day I ran into Sen. Joseph Lieberman while riding the underground subway between the Senate offices and the Capitol,” Schenck recalls. “I had the opportunity to speak to him about several issues. He later became the first senator to accept and display the Ten Commandments plaque in his office. He even asked for one in Hebrew for his home office.”

Operation Higher Court, a third outreach of Faith and Action, offers prayer and ministry to the Supreme Court justices. “The Supreme Court is the most insulated and isolated branch of the U.S. government,” Schenck says. “They do not interface with the public, so we’ve literally had to pray our way in there each step of the way.”

Just 24 hours after the historic Supreme Court ruling in the Bush vs. Gore election decision, Schenck attended a private reception hosted by Justice Antonio Scalia. Schenck reports that during a one-on-one conversation, Scalia asked for his prayers and the prayers of the people.

“I was taken aback by his humility and sincerity,” Schenck says. “I could tell he meant it. It was not just a platitude, but a genuine appeal for intercession on his behalf.”

Reclaiming the Capital

Sandy Grady, international prayer coordinator for Wall Builders and a regional director for the Strategic Prayer Network, moved to the area in 1974 with a similar call to pray for the government and its leaders. In addition to teaching groups how to pray for our government, Grady often conducts prayer walks throughout the city, leads prayer tours in the Capitol and spearheads on-site “swat teams” of intercessors for strategic prayer battles in the city.

“When I first started praying in the city, I hardly saw anyone else here praying,” Grady remembers. “But now people come to our nation’s capital all the time just to pray on-site. Recently, I was in front of the Supreme Court building and overheard two people sitting on the steps quietly praying. I introduced myself

and found out they were both airline employees from Fort Worth, Texas, who felt led to come to D.C. for the day and to pray in front of the Supreme Court.”

Ken Wilde, pastor of Capital Christian Center in Boise, Idaho,

has been bringing groups of intercessors to the capital city to pray on-site for the last five years. Boosted by the fact that his church is home to former Congresswoman Helen Chenoweth-Hage, Wilde speaks to pastors and churches across the nation, encouraging them to pray for our leaders.

Just last year Wilde's church founded the National Prayer Center in Washington, D.C., for the purpose of on-site prayer. Forty groups of intercessors from various churches are scheduled to come to the center in 2001.

Other prayer houses remain hidden throughout the city, hosting local and out-of-town guests who come to the city to pray. Many, like Hanna Ness, 20, say that coming to Washington to pray has given them a new passion and love for the country. "I believe God loves this nation and that He isn't going to let it go," Ness says.

Many local church groups and ministries also regularly pray at various sites in the District. Intercessory groups from churches in Maryland and Virginia have networked together and often prayer walked Capitol Hill and other areas of the city.

Pastors Dennis and Donna Pisani of Glory Tabernacle Church in Washington have made prayer a priority since they established their church in 1992. "From the very beginning we felt God say that He was going to move from the streets of D.C. to the corridors of the Capitol," Donna says.

Every Thursday night for the last five years, at least two dozen intercessors from Glory Tabernacle have met to pray at various sites throughout the city. "We pray wherever God leads us week to week," says Sandy Grady, who heads up intercession

at the church. "We have prayed in the Capitol, the White House, the Supreme Court, at various prayer houses, on university campuses and in the inner city."

Art and Sharon Snow, pastors of Brentwood Foursquare Church in Bladensburg, Maryland, are helping churches encircle the city in prayer with their Prayer Around the Beltway guide. Art says the impetus behind this prayer guide came from a historic battle in the War of 1812 that was fought in his own backyard. During this battle, American troops retreated and opened up the corridor into Washington, allowing the British to enter and burn the city.

Believing that God wanted to change this corridor from "a place of retreat to a place of advance," Snow drove the entire 64-mile beltway around the city, recording specific prayer focuses for each of the 38 exits.

Sharon Snow recently had a vision that the prayers encircling the city of Washington were putting a rope around the feet of a giant enemy. "As more and more churches come together in prayer," Snow believes, "the rope will get tighter and tighter around the feet of the enemy, and the powers over the city will fall."

Perhaps those traditional strongholds binding our nation's capital have already started to fall. Intercession leaders say it was an answer to concerted prayer when bad weather prompted the use of a Bush family Bible at the recent presidential inauguration rather than a 1767 King James edition used by George Washington and several other presidents.

Several ministries had issued prayer alerts about the Masonic

Bible—the one traditionally used when a new president is sworn into office—warning that it could have spiritual consequences because of the movement’s secret rituals linked to the occult. But just before the ceremony began, representatives of the New York Masonic Lodge that owns the Bible decided it was too fragile to be exposed to the inclement weather. Intercessory prayer teams view the incident as evidence that prayer is bringing change in the spiritual climate of the capital.

A Call to Prayer

Many prayer leaders believe that prayer is not only changing Capitol Hill, but the city of Washington as well. Susan Michael, coordinator for U.S./D.C. Prayer Watch says her organization has targeted the city and the local government in prayer for the last several years.

“We’re seeing a real turnaround in the local government, in businesses and in the real estate market,” Michael says. “The immigration to the suburbs has begun to turn around, and people are moving back into the city.”

According to recent statistics, crime in the District of Columbia fell 32 percent from 1993 to 1998 and dropped another 14 percent in 1999. These figures far exceed the national average of a 12 percent decline.

The spiritual landscape in Washington has not always been as fertile as it is today. Ruth Cox Mizell remembers it being more of a desert 20 years ago. When former President George H.W. Bush ran for the Senate in 1964 in Texas, Mizell served as his campaign manager. Later, when Bush won his vice-presidential election, he asked Mizell what she would like to

do in Washington. "I'd just like to pray for you," she told Bush.

"Those were very lonely years back then," Mizell says, "with not a lot of prayer going on in the capital."

But no matter how dry the spiritual climate has been at times, there have always been a few faithful pockets of prayer in the capital. Johnny Johnson, former assistant secretary of the Navy during the Nixon administration, paved the way for the first prayer groups on Capitol Hill with a monthly prayer breakfast in the Rayburn Senate Building.

In 1973, Gary Bergel and his wife moved to Washington after Intercessors for America was chartered at a conference in Plymouth, Massachusetts. "We agreed to help put out a monthly newsletter to unite people in prayer for our government and to establish a day of prayer and fasting on the first Friday of each month," Bergel says.

Corinthia Boone, one of the early pioneers of prayer for the city and the nation, has been praying for revival since she was a young girl. In 1985 she founded Together in Ministry, an organization that calls pastors from the metropolitan area together in prayer. She also helped to establish the 24-hour Revival Prayer Watch, in which 365 churches each take a 24-hour period of prayer.

The National Day of Prayer has been celebrated in our nation's capital since it was signed into law in 1952 by President Truman. This year's celebration on May 3 marks the 50th anniversary of the event. National director Shirley Dobson estimates that more than 2 million people will be praying for

the nation that day.

Turning this nation back to its godly heritage was the purpose behind two of the largest Christian prayer gatherings ever to assemble on the Mall in Washington. Promise Keeper's Stand in the Gap rally on Oct. 4, 1997, and the recent The CallDC event on Sept. 2, 2000, called together fathers, mothers, teens and children to repentance, prayer and fasting for the nation.

The CallDC, with its follow-up 40-day fast, was one of the most significant prayer initiatives to take place in our nation's capital, Bergel says, "because God has waited for such a long time for the emerging church to be about its prayer business." Bergel believes prayer is having a powerful effect and that these gatherings were crucial to what God wants to do in the United States.

Along with thousands of intercessors across the country, he believes that the power of God to set our nation on a new course will be released as believers and governmental leaders answer the Holy Spirit's call to prayer.

Did Prayer Put Bush in Office?

Some Christians believe the controversial 2000 election was determined by an army of intercessors.

While the tumultuous 2000 presidential election popularized terms such as "dimpled chads" and gave rise to slogans such as "Every Vote Counts" and "Sore Loserman," Christian leaders across the United States brought some less popular words into public awareness: repentance, fasting and prayer.

One of those leaders was Dutch Sheets, pastor of Springs Harvest Fellowship in Colorado Springs, Colorado. In an interview with Charisma, Sheets detailed the call to intercession that swept across his congregation on Oct. 4, 2000, during a Wednesday evening service. "God spoke to us about the battle over the coming election," Sheets remembers, "saying that if the election had been held then, His man would not win."

The next Friday, Sheets shared this call through an e-mail that reached thousands of Christians across the country. "It was incredible to me how the body of Christ picked this up and ran with it," Sheets says. "If God had not done what He had in the previous 10 years of networking prayer in this nation, I don't think it would have happened."

Sheets says the call to prayer was nonpartisan. "I don't put my faith in a party or a person," he says. "My prayer was, 'God, give us a president who will have Your heart and help turn this nation back to You.'"

Meanwhile, in Florida, a statewide network of intercessors quietly prepared for an anticipated but as yet undefined battle. Jonathan Benz, pastor of prayer and outreach at Covenant Centre International Church in West Palm Beach, says the Holy Spirit spoke to him in July 1998 that Palm Beach County would be pivotal in determining who would sit in the White House during the next presidential term.

In August 1998 the church began praying for the 2000 election and even began sending intercessors from Florida to Washington, D.C., to pray at the Capitol. Benz also began networking with prayer ministries across his state. By the

time the election took place, there were prayer ministries in 55 out of 67 counties in Florida.

In September 1999, Chuck Pierce, president of Glory of Zion Ministries in Denton, Texas, shared with Benz's congregation a prophetic word that the eyes of the world would be on West Palm Beach in the near future. Pierce also told them that if the intercessors would pray with authority they could turn the nation in the right direction.

"We heeded the prophetic words we'd been receiving for two years, so we weren't surprised when these events came about," says Benz, speaking of the election crisis that put Palm Beach County in the news. "But we were overwhelmed by being so quickly put in the spotlight. Press from all over the world reported on the prayer effort in Florida, and amazingly, the reports were all favorable."

What difference did all these prayer efforts make? "If the church had not prayed, I don't believe we would have had an inauguration in January," Benz says. "We were heading down a road toward a constitutional crisis."

Sheets believes that our nation is going to begin to see the fulfillment of 2 Chronicles 7:14 because of the prayer, fasting and repentance that has taken place. But he also strongly feels that if the prayer effort slows after the election, then we've failed as a church. "There must come a more sustained prayer movement in America that is part of our normal, everyday lives," Sheets says. "If this takes place, then I believe we're going to see incredible breakthroughs in the next year or two."

Prayer: A Capital Offense

It's OK to pray in the Capitol, but don't bow your head on the steps of the Supreme Court—you might get arrested.

It is the evening of Dec. 3, in Washington, D.C. Television crews and news media vans line the street in front of the U.S. Supreme Court building, awaiting tomorrow's historic ruling. A line of people hoping for one of the 50 available public seats in the courtroom forms on the right and snakes around the corner for another block. Directly in front of the building, a prayer vigil draws the attention of the Supreme Court police.

From across the street, Pat Mahoney, executive director of the Christian Defense Coalition, watches the vigil he has helped organize. Mahoney, who has been banned from coming within 50 feet of the steps of the Supreme Court building, has been arrested at least 25 times in the last nine years for exercising free speech, holding prayer gatherings, carrying signs and praying on the steps of the Supreme Court building.

"There is an erosion of religious rights and freedoms in our nation, and particularly our nation's capital, that we must stand against," Mahoney told Charisma.

Indeed there is a paradox in our nation's capital over the issue of religious freedom. Both houses of Congress open their sessions in prayer. Both have full-time chaplains. When the Supreme Court sits, a declaration is made: "God save the United States and this honorable court." Yet a law-abiding citizen of the United States can be arrested for praying in or near a government building.

Pierre Bynum was threatened with arrest in November 1996 for bowing his head, closing his eyes and clasping hands with those in an out-of-town prayer group that he was leading through the Capitol. The police said it was a demonstration.

Bynum, a minister, decided to pursue legal action with the help of the American Center for Law and Justice. On April 3, 2000, U.S. District Judge Paul L. Friedman ruled that while the Capitol police regulation against demonstrations is justified to prevent disruptive conduct in the Capitol, Bynum's action was in no way disruptive.

Bynum told local news media that his victory at the Capitol "gives people a little benchmark and the confidence that the Constitution is still alive, and still respected."

"It's shameful to see some of the excuses that are used to restrict religious expression in the name of maintaining public order," says Frank Wright, director of the D. James Kennedy Center of Christian Statesmanship. "People's rights are taken away in subtle ways that are couched in terms that seem to be very reasonable. The reaction of the Capitol police is simply a reflection of what's going on in the culture."

Wright believes the whole concept of separation of church and state is grossly misunderstood in our day. "The current conception of separation of church [and state] is less than 50 years old and comes from recent Supreme Court decisions," Wright says. "It's going to take a return to a judicial philosophy that recognizes that the current interpretation is a novel and even unconstitutional one."

At the annual National Prayer Breakfast on Feb. 1, George W.

Bush told 4,000 guests that the federal government in its zeal to maintain a separation of church and state has been punishing religious institutions.

“The days of discriminating against religious institutions simply because they are religious must come to an end,” Bush said. “We do not prescribe any prayer; we welcome all prayer. This is the tradition of our nation, and it will be the standard of my administration.”

While the nation awaits what could be a monumental shift in the philosophy and practice of separation of church and state, it appears that the right to pray in or near buildings such as the Capitol and Supreme Court will have to be won building by building.

Blacks Say Bush Wasn't 'God's Man'

Many African American Christians are offended by the suggestion that prayer put

George W. Bush in office. They say the Republican Party represents oppression.

As Christians in South Florida prayed that “God’s man” would win the turbulent election, members of New Birth Baptist Church in Miami convened to protest voting irregularities in Florida, which they say disenfranchised black voters.

New Birth pastor Bishop Victor T. Curry, who is also head of the Miami/Dade County chapter of the NAACP, contends that

thousands of Florida voters were mistakenly identified as convicted felons or as having registered twice and were not allowed to vote. A disproportionate number of them were blacks. "God has a perfect will and a permissive will," Curry says. "God wouldn't have to cheat for His man to become president."

Recent polls show that more than 70 percent of blacks support both school vouchers and school prayer, but among African Americans, moral issues such as those and abortion often take a back seat to bread-and-butter concerns such as affirmative action, health care and education. While 57 percent of born-again voters chose Bush, according to a Barna Research Group study, polls show that more than 90 percent of black Protestants voted for Al Gore.

Though he admits that he cannot not speak for all African Americans, Curry expresses strong distrust for the Republican agenda, arguing that the party of Abraham Lincoln, who freed the slaves, now has little regard for the poor. "They want to make sure the rich get richer," he says. "I don't believe they promote the biblical Christ; they promote the Republican Christ."

African Americans have voted Democratic since Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal era in the 1940s. Yet during the 2000 election, black Christian leaders such as Carlton Pearson and Kirbyjon Caldwell began calling on blacks to rethink their stance. Caldwell, an Independent and pastor of Windsor Village United Methodist Church in Houston, spoke at the Republican National Convention last summer in support of Bush, claiming that his faith-based initiatives could bring urban revival.

Caldwell also gave the benediction at Bush's inauguration,

praying that God's favor would be on outgoing President Clinton as well as on Bush, and that America would have "the faith to believe that walls of inequity can be torn down, and the gaps between the rich and the poor, the haves and the have-nots, the uneducated and the educated can and will be closed."

His wife, Suzette Caldwell, who leads Windsor Village's Prayer Center, says that during the election the church simply prayed for God's will. "We did not have a specific prayer strategy for Mr. Bush," she told Charisma. "We prayed for the will of God to be done in the area of Bible says we are to pray for those who have rule over us so we can have peace."

She also noted that in Texas, Bush won less than 10 percent of the black vote during his first election for governor, then an unprecedented 27 percent in his re-election. "President Bush again will have to prove that he is the president of all people," she says.

And her prayers are still consistent. "While President Clinton had some personal do believe the Lord used [his] leadership," Caldwell says. "The Bible tells us the heart of the king is in the Lord's hands. The Lord can use anyone."

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