



THE NATIONAL DAY OF PRAYER TASK FORCE:

Turning a Day of Faith into a Rally for the Christian Right

The Texas Freedom Network Education Fund supports research and education efforts in support of religious freedom and individual liberties.

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Executive Summary

Although originally established by Congress in 1952 as a day of prayer for people of all faiths, in recent years the National Day of Prayer has been co-opted by the religious right to advance a politicized, sectarian agenda. This is due in large part to a deceptive and deliberate strategy executed by the National Day of Prayer Task Force, a private organization that explicitly excludes participation by any non-Christian group in its programs.

Although the NDP Task force has no recognized standing with any governmental body, its Web site (www.nationaldayofprayer.org) bills itself as the “official” Web site of the National Day of Prayer. Further, the group’s extensive organizing efforts at the federal, state and local level have established it as the de facto national sponsor. This is evidenced by widespread endorsement in the media and, more alarmingly, by state and local governments.

In 2005, twenty-six state proclamations – more than half of all issued – adopted the NDP Task Force’s theme (“God Shed His Grace on Thee”), many of them using language taken directly from the NDP Task Force Web site. (See Appendix A.) Texas’ proclamation, for instance, anoints the NDP Task Force’s official theme and cites the New Testament text (Hebrews 4:16) selected by the Task Force as the official scripture for the 2005 National Day of Prayer.

In contrast to the original spirit of the event, the NDP Task force has cloaked the National Day of Prayer in a political mantle. Adopting the culture war language of the Christian right, the group explicitly instructs participants to pray about such social issues as “condom distribution, the promotion of homosexuality and a refusal to acknowledge God [in public schools].”¹

In addition to high-profile events in Washington, D.C., and many state capitals, the NDP Task Force also organizes local events in city halls and other venues around the country, more than 50,000 such “prayer events” in 2005.² These events apply a strict religious test for participants, excluding not only non-Christian groups, but also disallowing participation by any non-evangelical Christians.

History of the National Day of Prayer

The National Day of Prayer has been around in some form since 1775, when the Continental Congress called for the colonies to pray for guidance in forming a nation. President Lincoln issued a similar call in 1863, asking the nation to join in a day of “fasting and prayer.” It was not until 1952, however, that Congress officially established a National Day of Prayer:

"Resolved by the Senate and House of Representatives of the United States of America in Congress assembled, that the President shall set aside and proclaim a suitable day each year, other than a Sunday, as a National Day of Prayer, on which the people of the United States may turn to God in prayer and meditation at churches, in groups, and as individuals."

-Public Law 324, approved April 17, 1952 by President Harry S. Truman

In 1988, President Ronald Reagan amended this law to establish the first Thursday of May as the official date for the National Day of Prayer.

By tradition, the president’s annual proclamation has generally been a non-sectarian, interfaith call to prayer, as with President George W. Bush’s 2005 Proclamation:

"I ask the citizens of our Nation to give thanks, each according to his or her own faith, for the liberty and blessings we have received and for God's continued guidance and protection."

Or President Bill Clinton’s 1998 Proclamation:

"In every city, town, and rural community across our country, people of every religious denomination gather to worship according to their faith. In churches, synagogues, temples, and mosques, Americans come together to pray."

National Day of Prayer Task Force

For most of the day's history, local community groups and religious leaders coordinated events celebrating the National Day of Prayer. That began to change in 1988, however, with the creation of the National Day of Prayer Task Force.

The NDP Task Force is a private, 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization that exists to “encourage and promote events related to the National Day of Prayer.” This is accomplished through a multilevel strategy, including organizing at the regional level (recruiting regional and city coordinators and other volunteers to plan and facilitate local events) and the national level (planning and leading events in Washington, D.C.). The NDP Task Force also coordinates an extensive national media campaign to call attention to these events.³

Since the organization's founding, the NDP Task Force has maintained close ties to Focus on the Family, which provided grant assistance to the Task Force in its early years. The Task Force is currently headquartered at the Focus on the Family (FOF) offices in Colorado Springs. The chair is Shirley Dobson, wife of FOF founder James Dobson; and the vice chair, James Weidmann, is also on the FOF payroll, according to the most current records available.⁴

The Task Force also appoints an honorary chair each year. In 2005, Rev. Max Lucado served in this position. In 2004, controversial conservative commentator Oliver North served as honorary chair.

The NDP Task Force now claims more than 50,000 “prayer events” nationwide and has an annual budget in excess of \$2 million.⁵

A Religious Test

“Our expression of that involvement [in the National Day of Prayer] is specifically limited to the Judeo-Christian heritage and those who share that conviction as expressed in the Lausanne Covenant.”

- from National Day of Prayer Task Force Web site

While the NDP Task Force acknowledges that the National Day of Prayer is intended to include people of all faiths, involvement with an NDP Task Force event is explicitly restricted to evangelical Christians. Volunteers who wish to serve as an NDP Task Force coordinator are required to indicate their acceptance of the Lausanne Covenant.⁶

The Lausanne Covenant is a declaration issued in 1974 to articulate a specifically evangelical view of Christianity, an expression that excludes not only other faith traditions, but also Catholics and many mainline Protestant denominations. Among other tenets, the Lausanne Covenant requires a belief in:

- *Biblical inerrancy* – “We affirm [that the Bible is] without error in all that it affirms, and the only infallible rule of faith and practice.”
- *Christian Exclusivity* – “Those who reject Christ repudiate the joy of salvation and condemn themselves to eternal separation from God.”⁷

Although the Task Force claims to be inclusive of the Jewish tradition, this is a disingenuous claim, given its strict adherence to the Lausanne Covenant. Further, NDP Task Force materials are replete with references to “Christ,” and the group’s sample event program calls only for the participation of Christian pastors and leaders.

In recent years, the Christians-only guideline has been forced on local community events, as NDP Task Force volunteers hijack traditional interfaith services. In 2005, for instance, local NDP Task Force volunteers preemptively booked the City Hall in Plano, Texas, and refused to allow representatives from non-Christian faith communities to participate in the National Day of Prayer event there. In previous years, this event had been an inclusive, multi-faith ceremony.⁸

A Political Agenda

“We can and must win this cultural war.”

- from National Day of Prayer Task Force Web site

The National Day of Prayer Task Force not only promotes a specific religious agenda, but a political one as well. The NDP Task Force repeatedly employs the culture war language of the Christian right, using its Web site and resources for local volunteers to disseminate information about conservative positions on hot-button issues.

For example, in 2005 the Task Force detailed “five great things to pray for,” including:

- **Media** – because it is an “environment hostile to those who voice their belief in Christ.”
- **Education** – because schools are “promoting a radical social agenda,” including “condom distribution, the promotion of homosexuality.”⁹

Elsewhere in its promotional materials, the Task Force targets perennial causes of religious conservatives – abortion, gay marriage, and the courts.¹⁰ The NDP Task Force pushes its information to local volunteer organizers, which can have the effect of turning prayer events into conservative political rallies.

In addition to advancing a polarizing political agenda, the NDP Task Force chooses politically divisive figures to serve as spokespersons, such as Shirley Dobson and Oliver North.

An Appearance of Government Sanction

Although it has no recognized standing by any federal, state or local governmental body, through its Web site and media campaign the Task Force deliberately cultivates the appearance of an official sanction. Its Web site header proclaims “The Annual National Day of Prayer Official Website.” The Task Force also annually establishes an official theme and names an honorary national chairperson. The theme and honorary chair are aggressively marketed to the media, as well as state governments and local municipalities. This campaign to brand the NDP Task Force as the de facto national sponsor has been extremely successful, both in the media and with state and local governments.

Getting Government to Buy In

In 2005, twenty-six state proclamations – more than half of all issued – adopted the NDP Task Force’s theme, “God Shed His Grace on Thee.” Many of these proclamations also cited the scriptural text (Hebrews 4:16) from which the NDP Task Force derived its theme. (See Appendix A.)

None of these proclamations acknowledged that the theme was established by an unofficial, sectarian organization, creating the appearance that the theme was state sanctioned. For instance, New York governor George Pataki’s proclamation read: “Whereas, this year’s Day of Prayer celebrates the theme ‘God Shed His Grace on Thee.’”

A review of all 2005 state proclamations strongly suggested that most states adopting language and theme from the NDP Task Force did so with the perception that it was official. In fact, Democratic governor of Montana Brian Schweitzer wrote an open letter to the Task Force announcing Montana’s participation in the National Day of Prayer. He also stated, however, that the event should “serve to unite people of faith from every culture and tradition” – a concept at odds with the goals of the NDP Task Force.

Even on a local level, mayors and city council members have issued proclamations using language from the Task Force. In 2004, Phoenix mayor Phil Gordon issued a proclamation using the NDP Task Force theme for that year, “Let Freedom Ring.”¹¹

Getting the Press to Buy In

The NDP Task Force has garnered significant media attention for National Day of Prayer events around the country. It has become increasingly common for media outlets to refer to the NDP Task Force as the official organizer of the National Day of Prayer. The Task Force’s own press release encourages this perception, presenting its annual theme, chair and honorary chair without mention of their unofficial status. (See Appendix B.)

Numerous examples exist of the Task Force's theme and national chair being presented without reference to the group's status as a private, Christian organization. Below are just a few examples from press coverage of the 2005 National Day of Prayer:

- *The Associated Press* inaccurately named Shirley Dobson as the National Day of Prayer Chairwoman, rather than chair of a private group promoting the event.¹²
- The New Orleans *Times-Picayune* inaccurately identified Rev. Max Lucado as honorary chairman of the National Day of Prayer and listed "God Shed His Grace on Thee" as the theme.¹³
- The *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* inaccurately named Shirley Dobson as Chair of the National Day of Prayer and directed readers to the NDP Task Force Web site.¹⁴
- The *Tampa Tribune* incorrectly stated that the National Day of Prayer was organized by the NDP Task Force and chaired by Shirley Dobson.¹⁵
- The *San Antonio Express-News* printed a column by the local National Day of Prayer coordinator, which named, without any official sanction, the city's theme as "God Shed His Grace on Thee."¹⁶

Let Us Pray... Together

After September 11, President Bush brought a renewed emphasis to the National Day of Prayer, focusing on prayer as an opportunity to bring people of all faiths together in the spirit of national unity. This is in continuity with the original intent of the day as an acknowledgement of the powerful roles that religious faith and religious freedom have played in shaping our national culture.

This sentiment is in stark contrast to the mission of the National Day of Prayer Task Force, which uses prayer as a tool of religious exclusion and political division. While sectarian and political groups are certainly free to organize such events, they should not be allowed to do so with the sanction – explicit or implied – of government or the media.

The true danger lies in letting any sectarian or political group undermine the spirit and purpose of the National Day of Prayer – bringing Americans of all faiths together.

Appendix A

2005 National Day of Prayer Proclamations By State

States Adopting NDP Task Force Theme

Arkansas
Colorado
Delaware
Florida
Georgia
Hawaii
Idaho
Illinois
Indiana
Kentucky
Massachusetts
Missouri
Nebraska
Nevada
New Hampshire
New Jersey
New Mexico
North Carolina
North Dakota
Ohio
Oklahoma
South Dakota
Texas
Utah
New York
Virginia

States Not Adopting NDP Task Force Theme

Alabama
Alaska
California
Connecticut
Iowa
Kansas
Louisiana
Maine
Maryland
Michigan
Minnesota
Mississippi
Oregon
Pennsylvania
Rhode Island
South Carolina
Tennessee
Vermont
Washington
West Virginia
Wisconsin
Wyoming
Arizona

** Proclamation from Montana could not be located.*

Appendix B

2005 National Day of Prayer Task Force Press Release

March 1, 2005

MILLIONS TO UNITE IN PRAYER REQUESTING “GOD TO SHED HIS GRACE ON AMERICA”

President George W. Bush and all 50 governors will proclaim 54th annual National Day of Prayer

COLORADO SPRINGS, COLORADO (March 1, 2005) – As American troops fight for democracy and freedom around the globe, citizens of the United States are preparing to celebrate their freedom to gather, worship and pray. Millions will answer the call to prayer on May 5, the 54th annual National Day of Prayer, by flocking to observances held in public venues to pray for the nation, governmental leaders, media, and schools.

This year’s theme is “God Shed His Grace On Thee” and is based on Hebrews 4:16 NIV - “Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.” National Day of Prayer Chairman Shirley Dobson, wife of Focus on the Family founder and chairman Dr. James Dobson, said “the concept of grace is preeminent in both the National Day of Prayer theme and the supporting verse for this year.”

“The National Day of Prayer provides each of us with a powerful opportunity to humble ourselves before the Almighty and to seek the ‘redeeming and preserving grace’ Abraham Lincoln so eloquently spoke! In asking God to forgive our collective rebellion against Him. We can also pray for our schools, the media and especially our governmental leaders, asking the Lord to grant them wisdom and yes, grace, for the challenges they face on a daily basis. How encouraging to know that our loving heavenly Father listens and responds to our personal and corporate petitions, enabling us to ‘receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.’”

Noted author and pastor Max Lucado is the 2005 Honorary Chairman and will address the national event in Washington, D.C. In addition to his appearance at the national observance, Lucado has released, *Turn: Remembering Our Foundations*, which is this year’s theme book.

About The National Day of Prayer

The National Day of Prayer tradition predates the founding of the United States of America when the Continental Congress issued a proclamation setting aside a day of prayer in 1775. In 1952, Congress established an annual day of prayer and, in 1988, that law was amended, designating the National Day of Prayer as the first Thursday in May.

Available at <http://www.nationaldayofprayer.org>.

Notes

¹ <http://www.nationaldayofprayer.org>.

² Allen, Mike. "DeLay Calls for Greater Humility." *Washington Post*. May 6, 2005.

³ <http://www.nationaldayofprayer.org>.

⁴ National Prayer Committee, Inc., IRS Form 990, 2003; and Focus on the Family, IRS Form 990, 2003.

⁵ National Prayer Committee, Inc., IRS Form 990, 2003.

⁶ <http://www.nationaldayofprayer.org/agreement.html>.

⁷ <http://www.lausanne.org>.

⁸ Appleton, Roy. "Prayer event exclusionary, some say." *Dallas Morning News*. May 5, 2005.

⁹ <http://www.nationaldayofprayer.org>.

¹⁰ http://www.nationaldayofprayer.org/downloads/bulletin_inserts.pdf; "Prayer Lines." Volume 12, Issue 1. 2004.

¹¹ <http://phoenix.gov/mayor/proprayer.html>.

¹² The Associated Press. "Bush bows head on National Day of Prayer." *USA Today*. May 5, 2005

¹³ Staff. "Day of Prayer." *Times-Picayune*. April 24, 2005.

¹⁴ Hannigan, Candice. "Community of Faith: Churches to Mark Day of Prayer; '05 theme is 'God Shed His Grace on Thee'." *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, April 28, 2005.

¹⁵ Nicholson, Dave. "Group Gears Up for Day of Prayer." *Tampa Tribune*, April 23, 2005.

¹⁶ Dollar, Soapy. "It's Time To Go Further In and Higher UP IN Your Prayer Life." *San Antonio Express-News*. April 30, 2005.