

# At National Prayer Breakfast, Biden calls for unity

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WASHINGTON (RNS)—Appealing to a form of camaraderie increasingly rare on Capitol Hill, President Joe Biden lauded the power of faith in his speech at the National Prayer Breakfast on Feb. 3, calling for unity at an unusually intimate iteration of the annual religious gathering.

Speaking in an auditorium in the visitors center of the U.S. Capitol, Biden singled out those in the room who had recently lost loved ones, recalled with frustration the Jan. 6, 2021, Capitol attack and lamented the waves of death spurred by the ongoing pandemic.

## ‘Serve rather than be served’

Amid such difficulties and division, Biden told the audience comprising mostly members of Congress that his Christian faith reminded him of the importance of service.

“In a moment of a great division, our democracy is at grave risk. I pray that we follow what Jesus taught us—to serve rather than be served,” he said.

Biden added: “Rather than drive us apart, faith can move us together. Because all the great confessional faiths share the same fundamental basic beliefs: not just faith in a higher power, but faith to see each other as we should. Not as enemies but as neighbors. Not as adversaries but as fellow Americans, as leaders of this nation who work and pray together.”

Faith, the president said, comes in many forms, which include faith in American values. “I pray to keep the faith (in) the very promise of America:

believing that there's nothing we can't do, where every person is created equal in the image of God, no matter where we come from, who we are, what our color or how we choose to pray—or whether or not we choose to pray—(we) deserve to be treated equally throughout their lives.”

## **Smaller event, different focus**

This year's prayer breakfast was smaller than before the pandemic, a byproduct of COVID-19 restrictions and an effort by organizers to refocus the gathering. In recent years the now 70-year-old event had become a sprawling series of assemblies with an international roster of more than 3,000 attendees, typically held at the Washington Hilton hotel.

In 2018, a woman was accused of attempting to exploit the event as an agent of Russia. Two years later, President Donald Trump, celebrating his acquittal at the prayer breakfast after his first impeachment, suggested House Speaker Nancy Pelosi was a liar for saying she prayed for him.

Organizers suggested this year was meant to shift the focus of the National Prayer Breakfast. Its keynote speaker was Bryan Stevenson, a lawyer and longtime advocate for criminal justice reform and racial equality. Founder of the Equal Justice Initiative and author of the bestselling book *Just Mercy*, Stevenson was instrumental in creating the National Memorial for Peace and Justice, the Alabama memorial to the 4,400 victims of lynching in the United States.

Sen. Chris Coons, a Delaware Democrat and Presbyterian who spoke at the prayer breakfast, was one of its chief organizers for several years. Coons told Religion News Service this week the gathering's small size was partly due to an effort to “reset” the event by framing it as a “narrower engagement between Congress, the president, and some inspirational singers and speakers.”

The prayer breakfast was co-chaired by Sen. Kirsten Gillibrand, a New York Democrat, and Sen. Mike Rounds, a South Dakota Republican, who also spoke, along with other leaders from both parties.

## **‘Justice is what love looks like in public’**

Sen. Raphael Warnock, a Democrat and pastor of a historic Black church in Georgia, opened the event with a prayer, noting that “Justice is what love looks like in public.” He was accompanied by Rep. Cathy McMorris Rodgers, a Republican from Washington state, who read from Proverbs. Democratic Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer of New York read from Deuteronomy and Leviticus, occasionally slipping into Hebrew as he did so. Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell read next, reciting a passage from Matthew.

Biden took advantage of the more intimate gathering to reach out to his political adversaries. Referring to the Capitol as, “in government terms, a sacred place,” he bemoaned that Republicans and Democrats spend less time together than in the past, and he said he considers McConnell, a stalwart opponent of his agenda, a friend.

Biden, a Catholic, cited St. Augustine, who “wrote that a people was a multitude defined by a common object of their love,” the president said.

“I believe the common objects of our love that define us as Americans are opportunity, liberty, dignity, respect, honor, service, truth—things everybody recognizes both here and around the world. As I stand in this citadel of democracy that was attacked one year ago, the issue for us is unity. How do we unite us again?”

The president also framed the recent hostage situation at Congregation

Beth Israel in Colleyville as an example of unity that overcame sectarian division. While Rabbi Charlie Cytron-Walker and others were held at gunpoint, Biden said, a band of interfaith colleagues worked to help him.

“Whether you’re in a synagogue or a church or a mosque or temple, whether you’re religious or not, we’re all imperfect human beings trying the best we can because we can’t know the future, we can’t know what’s coming,” he said. “That’s America. From darkness we found joy, hope and light.”

## **‘Faith motivates action’**

Biden was followed by Vice President Kamala Harris, who reflected on her own religious upbringing attending Twenty-third Avenue Church of God in Oakland, California.

“Faith is not passive. Faith motivates action. It lifts us up and it gives us purpose,” she said.

Harris closed her brief remarks with a prayer.

“God, grant us faith, not only in you, but in one another,” she said. “Let us be kind, let us be generous, let us be full of grace. Let us see the light in all your people, and be guided by that light for all our days.”

Stevenson based his talk on the words of the biblical prophet Micah: “What does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?”

“Whether it’s gun violence or gang violence or domestic violence or sexual violence or police violence or aggression of any form, we have to understand that these things separate us from doing justice, from loving mercy,” he said.

As the event wound down, Rep. Lucy McBath, a Georgia Democrat, read from Philippians 4:4-9 shortly before Sen. Cindy Hyde-Smith, a Mississippi Republican, closed the proceedings in prayer.

“Father, I lift up those of us who have been put in positions to lead this country,” Hyde-Smith prayed. “Convict our hearts to right the wrongs and to be brave and steadfast against evil. May your will be done and the decisions made be pleasing unto you.”