

Address to The American Prayer Hour

February 4, 2010 | Calvary Baptist Church | Washington, DC

I am Dean Snyder, senior pastor of Foundry United Methodist Church, and I am pleased to join other faith leader friends and you in this time of prayer in a variety of voices from a variety of traditions and faiths.

We have gathered as people of different faiths who share a commitment to caring, community, conversation, justice and inclusion for all people. We are here to support and encourage one another.

A leader of my congregation sent a pointed email to a Methodist leader in Uganda several weeks ago. It said:

“I have been distressed to read continuing reports in the U.S. press regarding legislation proposed in the Ugandan legislature to imprison and execute individuals who are homosexual. Since the basis of this legislation seems to be an understanding of the Christian faith, I would be interested in knowing what you or the United Methodist Church in Uganda may be doing to oppose such legislation.”

He signed it with his name and a notation that he is a member of Foundry United Methodist Church in Washington, DC.

He received a pointed reply:

“Thank you for your concern and prayers for our neighbors, indeed brothers and sisters, in the homosexual community. The United Methodist Church... continues to advocate for life. The death penalty is not an option and the leadership is more than [a]ware of that. While we seek to do the best we can on the ground [here], we ask you to be in partnership with us, especially because some of these positions are coming from conservative brothers and sisters in the United States with allies who espouse convictions from the prayer breakfast organization in DC. Did you know that part? If so, what role are you playing?”

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“The Family,” the group that organizes the National Prayer Breakfast being held at the Hilton today, is a Washington, DC–based secretive religious right organization. It is a secretive organization that uses its religious affinity with Christian politicians, locally, nationally, and

globally, to promote a free-enterprise, anti-union, anti-gay, anti-choice agenda.

“The Family” was begun 75 years ago by a Methodist minister who said that God came to him one night and told him Christianity had been focusing on the wrong people, the poor, the suffering, the “down and out.” God called him, he said, to be a missionary to the affluent and powerful, those he called not the “down and out” but the “up and out.” So “The Family” moved to Washington, DC and began to invite elected officials and politicians into small prayer groups and then to reach out to “key men” throughout the nation and the world.

The closeness of the relationship between “The Family” and those who have sponsored and promoted the Ugandan anti-gay legislation is uncanny. The Ugandans in political power who have sponsored and promoted the legislation are members of the “The Family,” and associated with organizations who have received large amounts of funding from “The Family’s” foundations.

“The Family,” and the politicians and elected officials who belong to it, adopted Uganda as the nation it believed would become the Africa showplace for its political and religious rightwing values and views.

No one, surely not me, is suggesting that leaders of “The Family” or the senators and representatives affiliated with “The Family” would support the death penalty for gay people. But I am willing to suggest that the kind of homophobia taught by the American religious right feeds hate and violence against lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people. It feeds hate and violence against women. It feeds hate and violence against children. It feeds hate and violence against the poor. It feeds hate and violence against religious minorities.

It is amazing to realize that a group like “The Family” has been able to persuade or pressure every president since Dwight Eisenhower to attend a sectarian event like The National Prayer Breakfast. I was invited one year and attended. No one at my table represented the broad range of Christian faith present in our nation and the world. No one. Everyone was affiliated with nondenominational sectarian Christian groups. The audience just did not represent the broad range of American Christianity, not to mention the broad range of American people of various faiths. It was an event that catered to a sectarian minority of American Christianity. It was a flexing of the religious right’s political muscle.

The leaders of “The Family,” however, use this access to the president of the United States and other elected officials to advance their agenda and their parochial views here and around the world.

United States presidents and mainstream senators and representatives must stop lending credence to the National Prayer Breakfast by blessing it with their presence. In my experience,

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If there is to be a gathering of national leaders for prayer, let it represent the full scope of America’s people of faith, not just sectarian parochial Christian groups and a few token representatives of other religions. If there is to be a national gathering for prayer, maybe it should not be a ticketed “by invitation only” event. Which one of our various religions’ founders would hold a “by invitation only” prayer gathering?

If the association between “The Family” and the Ugandan death-penalty legislation were to accomplish this, if this were to be the last National Prayer Breakfast sponsored by “The Family” attended by an American president, it would be a gift to American democracy and the world.

But we, of course, cannot permit ourselves to drift into attitudes of hate toward those who hate us. To love our enemies is a teaching of many religions. The only solution to hate is to do what we are doing here today: gathering across societal divides, racial divides, cultural divides, religious divides, sexual identity divides, gender divides, economic divides, political divides... to be together, to respect one another, to learn from one another, and to encourage one another.

By being here together, we offer America an alternative today. We offer Washington, DC an alternative. The alternative is also a family—the human family—the family of humanity to which we all belong. There are no secrets in this family; there are no hidden agendas; there are no surreptitious plots; there are no ins and outs, no superior and inferior, no normal and abnormal. In this family there are only sister and brother.

This is the family we are. This is the family we can become.