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Gay groups pressure Obama over prayer breakfast

Daniel Burke Religion News Service | Feb. 2, 2010

WASHINGTON -- Progressive religious leaders today, Feb. 2, unveiled plans to hold a multi-city event to protest Thursday's National Prayer Breakfast because of its sponsor's alleged ties to an anti-gay bill in Uganda.

The alternative American Prayer Hour will take place in 17 cities, including Washington, Dallas and Chicago, as an "affirmation of inclusive values and a celebration of diversity," according to organizers.

Meanwhile, gay rights leaders close to the White House -- including a member of President Obama's faith advisory council, and the gay bishop who prayed at his star-studded inaugural concert -- are lobbying the White House to use Obama's platform at the breakfast to denounce the Uganda law.

"You may rest assured that we are using every opportunity to talk to members of the [White House] staff and urge them to use strong language to speak out on this issue," said Harry Knox, who directs the religion program at the pro-gay Human Rights Campaign and also is a member of the President's Advisory Council on Faith-based and Neighborhood Partnerships.

"We're not surprised that the president wanted to continue the trend of every president speaking at the prayer breakfast," Knox said in an interview. "But we thought it was important that he recognize that his attendance has great power -- that the event can be redeemed, frankly."

Since Dwight Eisenhower in 1953, presidents have attended and usually addressed the National Prayer Breakfast. Last year, Obama unveiled his revamped faith-based office at the event. But the annual breakfast, which is usually closed to the public and filled with Washington powerbrokers, has been mired in controversy in recent years.

The event is sponsored and run by a secretive international organization of conservative Christians called the Family -- also known as the Fellowship -- which counts a number of world leaders, including U.S. senators and congressmen, as members.

In recent months, members of the Family have been accused of exporting the American culture wars to Uganda and inspiring its proposed Anti-Homosexuality Bill, which would severely criminalize homosexual acts and punish gay rights advocates. Ugandan President Yoweri Museveni and David Bahati, the member of parliament who introduced the bill, are both members of the Family, according to Jeff Sharlet, whose book "The Family" investigated the international group.

Bob Hunter, a member of the Family who has worked closely with Ugandans, has called the bill "terrible" in an interview on National Public Radio, and said "no one that I know, in America particularly, and my close friends in Uganda, I know of no one who supports it in the Fellowship."

Still, the Family has not officially denounced the bill, and did not return repeated requests for clarification of their role in its development.

The White House said Obama plans to attend the prayer breakfast, but declined to comment on the controversy surrounding the event.

At a press conference announcing the American Prayer Hour on Tuesday, a number of progressive faith leaders castigated the Ugandan bill and sharply rebuked the Family for its purported role in promoting it.

"It is time that they take responsibility for lighting fires that now they cannot control," said the Rt. Rev. V. Gene Robinson, the openly gay Episcopal bishop of New Hampshire who prayed at Obama's inaugural ceremonies and advised Obama on gay rights during the 2008 campaign.

Also at the press conference, a gay man from Uganda spoke of the rejection, harassment, and violence gays and lesbians face in his country. Identified as "Moses," the man wore a paper bag over his head for fear of retribution. He said he had been beaten at school, fired from his job, and raped by a policeman because he is gay.

"One would rather die than come out of the closet," the man said.

Robinson said it is too late to ask the president to boycott the prayer breakfast, but he has lobbied Obama's faith-based office to include a forceful support for gay rights in the president's address.

"I am encouraged and hopeful that we will see the fruits on Thursday," Robinson said. "I rather he go to the prayer breakfast and use it as a platform to denounce this attack on LGBT people."

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