

Prayer vs. the prayer breakfast

By [Steve Thorngate](#)

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When faith-based advocacy groups hold a protest, they often dress it up in prayer. It's not enough to say to the gathered people and (hopefully) cameras that your faith compels you to speak out against torture or war or inequality; you have to say it *to God* (but still in front of the cameras). This always strikes me as odd and mildly offensive.

So I was pleasantly surprised when I attended yesterday's [American Prayer Hour](#) and spent much of that hour in actual prayer. The event was [organized](#) by a coalition of pro-LGBT groups as an alternative to the National Prayer Breakfast: while President Obama attended a breakfast [organized](#) by secretive Washington, DC group The Family, people around the country gathered in solidarity with the gays and lesbians of Uganda, where political leaders with [ties to The Family](#) have proposed shockingly harsh antigay [legislation](#).

I went to the Chicago gathering, one of four events anchoring efforts around the country. While it was clear that the purpose for meeting was to oppose The Family and the proposed Ugandan law, the event wasn't really a protest. There were no banners or slogans and very little finger-pointing. Instead, the theme was prayer: for the safety of Uganda's LGBT community, for hope in place of despair, for the grace to respond to hatred with love. While the 30 or so of us were a far humbler gathering than the parade of foreign dignitaries and religious movers and shakers in Washington, ours had the advantage of actually being focused on prayer.

As for the president, both [he](#) and Secretary of State [Hillary Clinton](#) spoke against the Ugandan bill, though Obama did so [only as a brief aside](#). While Dan Neffelt is right to [claim this](#) as an organizing victory, I share Mark Silk's wish that Obama [had gone](#)

[farther](#) and criticized The Family itself for its connection to what he called an "odious" bill.

An even stronger statement would have been to [skip the breakfast](#), but this was never a serious possibility, not even when it [looked as if](#) the author of the offensive Ugandan bill would be there. Presidents are expected to attend the National Prayer Breakfast, and it's hard to imagine the administration determining that President Obama's conspicuous absence would be worth the political fallout. Imagine the headlines: "Obama boycotts prayer."

It's a shame, because the National Prayer Breakfast isn't about prayer, and everybody knows it. It's the keynote event of a week of networking opportunities for powerful people, run by an opaque and troubling organization and presented under a mantle of piety. True, [some of the speeches are good](#). But we'd be better off without it.