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## Prayer Day 'Hijacked' by Evangelicals, Critics Say

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Groups Complain That Application Process for May 1 Observance Excludes Some Religions

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WASHINGTON -- Is the upcoming National Day of Prayer a day for all Americans -- or just conservative evangelicals?

That's what some critics are charging in advance of the observances Thursday as they call for a more inclusive approach to an event that they say has been "hijacked" by conservative Christians.

Jews on First, a 2 1/2 -year-old online organization, has questioned the application process for coordinators affiliated with the National Day of Prayer Task Force, which is headed by Shirley Dobson, wife of [Focus on the Family](#) founder [James Dobson](#).

Although the task force is a private group, it nonetheless gets an unofficial government seal of approval with an annual proclamation by [President Bush](#) and prayer ceremonies held at the [White House](#) and on [Capitol Hill](#).

Jews on First is spearheading an "Inclusive National Day of Prayer" campaign that includes a Web site featuring talking points, sample letters to governors and a list of "alternative inclusive observances."

"The National Day of Prayer has been hijacked!" the group declares on its Web site. "What began as President Truman's declaration of a National Prayer Day for all Americans is now excluding and dividing us on religious lines."

Jane Hunter, co-director of Jews on First, said her group has interfaith volunteers in several states who are urging their governors to issue inclusive proclamations about the annual observance.

"The volunteers who organize the events . . . are required to pledge that they will only invite Christian clergy to officiate," said Hunter, a longtime Jewish activist who lives in Bethesda. "The volunteers themselves have to . . . make a statement of faith that is very narrowly drawn so that only a conservative evangelical Christian would be comfortable doing it."

The National Day of Prayer is always observed on the first Thursday in May. Becky Armstrong, a spokeswoman for the National Day of Prayer Task Force, said the same application for coordinators has been "used for years."

"The task force has chosen to conduct events that reflect its Christian perspective on prayer," she said. "All Americans are free to exercise their First Amendment rights to organize events that observe the National Day of Prayer in a manner that reflects their religious perspective."

The task force's Web site ( <http://www.ndptf.org>) features a note from Lisa Crump, manager of local coordinators, that says, "A simple application with contact data and statement of faith, confirming your commitment to Christ is all that's needed to get you on the way to becoming a NDP Task Force volunteer coordinator."

Applicants must indicate whether their lives reflect a belief statement that begins: "I believe that the Holy Bible is the inerrant Word of The Living God. I believe that [Jesus Christ](#) is the Son of God and the only One by which I can obtain salvation and have an ongoing relationship with God."

The application form also asks coordinators to pledge that activities they help lead "will be conducted solely by Christians while those with differing beliefs are welcome to attend."

The Jews on First effort has been supported by other church-state watchdog groups, such as those affiliated with the Washington-based Americans United for Separation of Church and State.

Americans United's chapter in [Orange County](#), Calif., sent more than 2,000 letters to Gov. [Arnold Schwarzenegger](#) urging him not to support events whose hosts are limited to evangelical Christians.

"It seems to say that if you're not part of that group, then you're a second-class citizen," said Stephanie Campbell, president of the chapter.

Lisa Page, chief deputy press secretary for Schwarzenegger, said the governor's office receives numerous requests each year for a National Day of Prayer proclamation and "the governor has always been inclusive of all faiths on this special day."

Among several "alternative inclusive observances" listed online by Jews on First ( <http://www.InclusivePrayerDay.org>) is one May 6 in the Harrisburg suburb of Camp Hill, Pa., held "in response to an exclusionary Commonwealth Prayer Breakfast."

The Rev. Paul Fullmer, a [Presbyterian Church \(USA\)](#) minister from Annville, Pa., has protested that breakfast's emphasis on Christianity, and has organized an interfaith gathering that will feature prayers and readings from state founder [William Penn](#)'s writings on tolerance.

"What our legislators are doing is not representing us; it's representing their own particular exclusive interests," Fullmer said. "How contrary is that to William Penn, who founded Pennsylvania as a place of religious refuge?"

A spokesman for the organizer of this year's breakfast in Camp Hill could not be reached immediately for comment.

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