

## The National Prayer Breakfast of the United States of America

On Wednesday, February 4<sup>th</sup>, I arrived at the Washington Dulles Airport, took a taxi and went straight to register for the three-day National Prayer Breakfast (NPB) Program for 2009. The main agenda was faith strengthening but an important attraction was the opportunity to be in the same room with the 44th President of the United States of America, Barack Obama and listen to his own testimony about his faith and what the NPB meant for inter-political party relationships.

The NPB traces its roots to a local vision of 19 business executives from Seattle, Washington who in April 1935 during the Great Depression met together over a meal to pray and think of ways to deal with the difficult economic situation facing them. This became a regular event which spread to other parts of the USA, then in 1942 to Washington, DC where they were joined by the President at an event that became an annual one. There breakfast groups were founded in the US Senate and House of Representatives that met every week and still do. Their goal was to find a “better way” for America through belief and actions in their faith in God. **This “better way” they felt would come from a common purpose fueled by faith and the ability for politicians to work together.**

At a pre-breakfast dinner, I began to understand why the NPB had become an international event involving business, social causes, politics and religion. I sat with a Minister from Kosovo, a former minister from Albania and a Member of Parliament from New Zealand among others. Some had attended the NPB meetings for more than 20 years. We all understood the common bond of faith and the desire to do something positive for our people through participation in politics. The testimonies of former rebel leaders from parts of Africa who through faith have now come to bond together with others they took arms against to seek peace and development in their countries were powerful reasons for the international character of the NPB. Many in Congress have come to understand Africa better through this event. It is clear though that more contact on the African continent itself beyond faith-based encounters would benefit policy makers in Washington. I was intrigued by the presence of the Advisor to the President of Sudan at a post-breakfast dinner held within the premises of the U.S. Senate.

I was impressed by the American attention to detail, discipline to ensure that only those invited attend and that everything goes according to time. Without going through song and dance routines, dinner which was advertised to start the first evening at 6.30pm and end by 9.30pm did start on time and ended at 8.30pm to allow guests opportunity to meet, greet and make new friends. The official hosts, for this year’s NPB the Honourable Vernon J. Ehlers and the Honourable Heath Shuler members of the House of Representatives welcomed us before the dinner.

What is the point in all of this? The American Congress is still exhibiting very partisan behavior even in considering an economic stimulus package that most Americans consider very necessary for the survival of the American way of life. Republicans are still reluctant to see their key members join a Democrat’s Administration to bring greater inclusiveness into governance in the United States. The senior Republican Congressman nominated to become the Commerce Secretary refused it citing differences with President Obama over the stimulus package. But in giving testimony during dinner, former U.S. Attorney-General John Ashcroft gave testimony of his faith and then said what again makes the prayer

breakfast necessary. In the end, he said, that what we should seek is unity, not uniformity. I imagine what we could become in Ghana if we agreed that despite our political and ethnic differences, we can unite as a people around the common purpose of enabling each individual to reach his or her potential and work toward the prosperity of our nation. Speaker upon speaker at the various dinner and lunch events reinforced the view that politicians from different political parties around the world should practice living by, "Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us".

So on a very cold day in Washington, DC, the 57<sup>th</sup> National Prayer Breakfast was held at the Ballroom of the Washington Hilton Hotel. Political, religious and business leaders from 180 countries attended this event made even more special by the fact that the first African-American President of the United States would be in there. The Breakfast was attended by members of the American Congress, the Vice President and President Barack Obama and his wife Michele. The Guest Speaker was the former Prime Minister of the United Kingdom, Tony Blair. I was in attendance with my wife Yvonne and sat at Table 46 with a Member of Parliament from Uganda and Member of Congress from Kansas and others. I counted over 300 tables in the main hall with an overflow group of participants in another hall. Prayers were said. Passages from the Bible were read. Speeches were given.

The main speakers – Tony Blair and Barack Obama agreed that the Golden Rule was a reason good enough to bring all of us together to give hope that the World can work as one to improve the welfare of every human being. I could not have agreed more with the point of view that each one of us, business owners, politicians, workers, religious leaders etc. should not be cheerleaders or mere spectators but become active players in the effort to improve Our World. I am making the motion that business leaders, political leaders and others should get together to plan an Annual National Prayer Breakfast in Ghana (it would not be the first attempt but we should make it one work). But it would not work as a one-time media and publicity event. That would only be for show. We need real grassroots Prayer Breakfast Meetings held all over the country that would naturally migrate once a year to Accra. It would be good if we could by then host constituency and regional ones.

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February 13, 2009