News

Biden stands behind a podium and in front of four American flags

President Joe Biden delivers remarks at the National Prayer Breakfast on Capitol Hill in Washington Feb. 3, 2022. (CNS photo/Sarah Silbiger, Reuters)

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The National Prayer Breakfast is under new management, distancing the decades-old event from the secretive organization that founded it after years of controversy and a scandal that showed the yearly gathering in the nation's capital is vulnerable to espionage.

According to a statement sent to reporters by former Arkansas Sen. Mark Pryor, the prayer breakfast, whose highlight is typically a speech from the sitting U.S. president, is no longer run by The International Foundation, a Christian group more

familiarly referred to as "The Family." Instead, the 2023 breakfast, to be held this year on Feb. 2, has been coordinated by the newly created National Prayer Breakfast Foundation, which emerged "following numerous meetings in 2022," according to Pryor’s statement.

"As with many other things in our country, the COVID years allowed the Members to hit the reset button and organize a working group to fulfill this longtime vision," the statement read.

Unlike past versions of the breakfast, which were hosted in a sprawling hotel ballroom with hundreds of attendees from all over the world, the new version of the gathering will only include members of Congress "plus one’s spouse, family member, or constituent guest," wrote Pryor.

In a Jan. 25 interview with Religion News Service, Pryor, board president of the National Prayer Breakfast Foundation, said the breakfast is the new organization’s sole event. He anticipates the expected 200 to 300 participants will bring a spouse, significant other or "their pastor or priest from home." He added that the breakfast will not be a sit-down affair as it has been in the past. Attendees will be offered bagels, coffee and tea before they take their seats in an auditorium at the Capitol Visitor Center in the U.S. Capitol.

"That’s what Congress wants, they want to take it back to its origins and in the early days it really was just the Congress and the president," said Pryor, who expects President Joe Biden to attend and called the plans "a little bit of a back-to-basics movement."

The International Foundation plans to hold a separate assembly at the same time as the prayer breakfast called "The Gathering." The event appears to resemble older versions of the prayer breakfast, with attendees observing the National Prayer Breakfast via video as part of a two-day convention with what organizers expect will feature "significant international participation."

A. Larry Ross, media representative for The International Foundation, confirmed that its event "will be interrupted to carry the President’s message into the ballroom via livestream in real time," he told RNS via email.

"The planned NPB Gathering at The Washington Hilton currently has well over 1400 attendees registered for the two-day event, including 2/3 domestic and 1/3

international Fellowship friends from around the world."

The Young Turks were the first to reveal the changes to the event on Tuesday.

Representatives for Delaware Democrat Sen. Chris Coons, who helped coordinate previous iterations of the prayer breakfast, confirmed the leadership change to RNS on Jan. 24. Last year, Coons similarly cast the 2022 prayer breakfast, which was also scaled down and took place at the Capitol, as a kind of "reset" for the event.

The changes follow years of controversy surrounding the prayer breakfast, whose origins date back to President Dwight D. Eisenhower’s administration.

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The breakfast first came under widespread scrutiny in 2009 after journalist Jeff Sharlet published the book "The Family," detailing his experience with the organization that runs the event. The event was hit with scandal in 2018, when the Department of Justice charged Russian national Maria Butina with attempting to exploit the National Prayer Breakfast as part of a larger "conspiracy to act as an agent of the Russian Federation."

Since then, many groups have criticized the event, particularly secular organizations such as the Freedom From Religion Foundation, whose leader challenged President Biden’s participation in 2021. The group organized a sign-on letter opposing the Prayer Breakfast this year as well, featuring support from secular as well as religious organizations.

Some Democrats have signaled misgivings about the event as well. Sen. Tim Kaine, a Democrat who previously co-chaired the National Prayer Breakfast, told The Young Turks in December 2021 he had "no intention" of returning to the event.

FFRF President Annie Laurie Gaylor told RNS in an email that her organization welcomes the changes, but said, "it does look as though the creation of a new entity to sponsor the prayer breakfast is essentially a subterfuge, because the folks running the NPB Foundation are all connected with the Fellowship."

Other critics also are raising questions as to whether the newly announced changes constitute a genuine leadership overhaul or are "largely cosmetic."

In a statement to RNS, Sharlet pointed to reporting showing how, among other things, the board of the new foundation includes many people with ties to the International Foundation.

"Any step toward reducing this mostly off-the-books weeklong lobbying festival is good news," Sharlet said. "On the other hand, the change appears largely cosmetic."

Pryor said that his organization is "completely different and totally separate" from The Family.

He hopes the skeptics will understand that as the event takes place.

"Let us show that it is going to be different and just give us a little time here," he said. "We haven’t even had the breakfast yet."