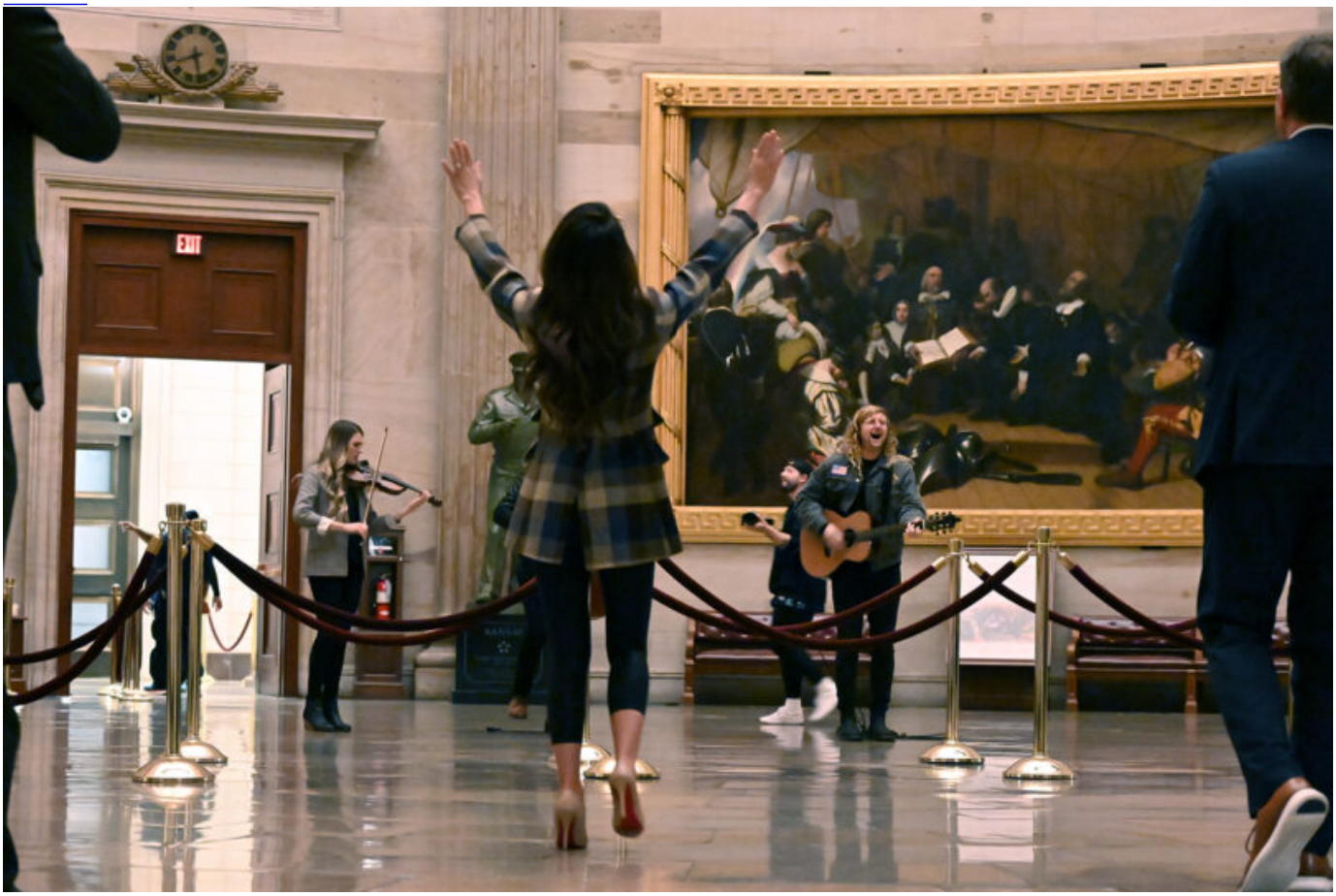
News



Rep. Lauren Boebert (R-Co.), center, raises her arms during a performance by musician Sean Feucht, with guitar, in the Rotunda of the U.S. Capitol, March 9, 2023, in Washington. (RNS/Jack Jenkins)

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Soon after the sun set in the nation's capital on an early March day in 2023, Sean Feucht, an evangelical Christian worship leader turned anti-COVID-19 vaccine activist, led a brief worship service in the Rotunda of the U.S. Capitol building. Feucht, who had spent the previous three years performing in front of sprawling crowds, drew only a smattering of members of Congress and their aides to an event that had been promoted as a mobilization of "an army of prayer warriors." One member, Colorado's Lauren Boebert, who calls Feucht a "great friend," knelt and spread her arms wide as he sang.

Other conservative House members — U.S. Reps. Barry Moore of Alabama, Josh Brecheen of Oklahoma, Tim Burchett of Tennessee, Michael Cloud of Texas and Tracey Mann of Kansas — stood less conspicuously in a loose clump, swaying in time with the music or holding a hand aloft. Lingering at the back was Rep. Doug LaMalfa of California, who had endorsed Feucht when the singer unsuccessfully ran for Congress himself in 2020.

LaMalfa's presence may have been telling: Years after Feucht was denied by primary voters in California's eastern 3rd district, he is still vying to build influence on Capitol Hill, looking for allies to help him in pursuit of a nation where, as he puts it, "Christians are making the laws."

Since that appearance in the Rotunda, Feucht, who has tied himself to Christian nationalism and been connected to political extremists, has created a small coalition of Republican strategists, staffers and lawmakers, meeting with them in a Capitol Hill townhouse known as "Camp Elah," named for the valley where David slew Goliath.

And while Feucht often frames himself as a Washington outsider, arguably his most powerful ally is a figure who hovered along the edge of his Rotunda concert, hands raised in prayer: a Republican strategist named Timothy Teepell.

Teepell moved to Washington from Baton Rouge when he was 18 to work for Michael Farris, the leader of the Christian homeschool movement who later became CEO of the far-right legal group Alliance Defending Freedom. Soon he was back in Louisiana, attracting national attention for managing the congressional campaigns of Bobby Jindal, and then Jindal's run for Louisiana governor in 2008. When Jindal won, Teepell became chief of staff.

After Jindal's unsuccessful run for president in 2016, Teepell is credited with then-Missouri Attorney General Josh Hawley's ascension to the U.S. Senate in 2018. Teepell's name later came up in an investigation into Hawley's Senate campaign, ending in a 2022 ruling by a state judge that Hawley's staff "knowingly and purposefully" subverted the state's open records law by concealing emails between Hawley's attorney general staff and his campaign workers — in particular, Teepell.

The political operative eventually joined the conservative strategy firm OnMessage Inc., which subsequently launched a public affairs firm, OnMessage Public Strategies, featuring Kyle Plotkin, a fellow Jindal and Hawley alum.

Feucht waded into politics about the same time as Teepell's star began to rise, with the singer kicking off a nationwide "Let Us Worship" tour that featured large worship services to protest pandemic restrictions against churches. Though they were mostly held outdoors, the services tested and often violated local restrictions against COVID-19, making Feucht, with his long blond hair and his ever-present acoustic guitar, a culture war lightning rod with a counterculture vibe.

At a multi-day worship session in early 2021 in West Palm Beach, Florida, Feucht told the crowd, "I'd like to call up Timmy Teepell."

Teepell, boyish and baldheaded, strode onstage with his then 20-year-old son, Thomas, and other members of his family. Teepell smiled as Feucht launched into a more than 10-minute speech and prayer. "The Lord sent this man of God into my life in a season where I … had just finished running for Congress and just getting beat up," Feucht said. "God sent me a brother."

Feucht recounted calling Teepell for advice after he received criticism during the Let Us Worship tour, to which Teepell allegedly replied, "Man, you can't back down."



Sean Feucht, right, prays over Republican strategist Timothy Teepell, left, and his family in West Palm Beach, Florida, in February 2021. (Video screen grab)

As he laid hands on Teepell, Feucht declared: "We pray that Timmy would put more revivalists in public office."

Feucht suggested the strategist was at least informally advising him and hinted that his efforts in Florida received more attention after he told Teepell about his plans. "Immediately, we had state representatives and people retweeting the story of this place because of Timmy," Feucht said.

Teepell did not respond to interview requests for this story. A representative for Feucht declined an interview request.

In September of that year, Teepell was listed as a speaker at Feucht's "Hold the Line" conference at the Trump International Hotel in Washington. By that time, Teepell's political clients had been welcomed into Feucht's orbit: Hawley, who has increasingly embraced Christian nationalism, appeared onstage at a Feucht event on the National Mall in 2020. Feucht prayed over the senator, calling on God to elevate "men and women of faith" into positions of political power.

Hawley showed up to speak at subsequent Feucht events, in one instance waving a Bible as Feucht declared to God that he and others in attendance "promise to pledge our support" to "men and women just like Josh" in the 2022 midterms.

Three OnMessage clients — Sen. Rick Scott of Florida, Montana U.S. Rep. Matt Rosendale and Virginia Senate candidate Hung Cao, according to OpenSecrets — have appeared on Feucht's podcast since 2021. Cao's appearance took place just days after he announced his candidacy, with Feucht saying, "We're going to get behind you, we're going to support you."

Though Feucht joked that Teepell is "very expensive" during the Florida laying-on of hands, formally employing Teepell could be tricky, as nonprofits such as Feucht's are forbidden from explicit electoral political work such as endorsing candidates. It's unclear if Teepell officially works with Feucht: Neither Teepell nor OnMessage appears on tax disclosure forms of Sean Feucht Ministries, Feucht's primary nonprofit (he runs multiple). But since 2021, when tax records show Feucht asked the IRS to recategorize Sean Feucht Ministries as a subcategory of nonprofits known as "a church or a convention or association of churches" — which do not have to file public tax disclosures — the organization's finances have been shrouded.



Sean Feucht interviews Thomas Teepell at a house Feucht calls "Camp Elah" in Washington, D.C. (Video screen grab)

The organization, according to A News Cafe, raised more than $5 million during the Let Us Worship tour in 2020 — a massive increase over the previous year's earnings.

Teepell’s connections to Feucht now extend to Thomas Teepell, Timmy’s son, a Senate aide ("I get to do cool things," says his LinkedIn explanation of the job) who credits Feucht with his spiritual transformation from a self-described weed-addicted frat boy into a dedicated Christian. In a podcast episode recorded in April, Feucht interviewed Thomas, who recounted how the Holy Spirit "hit" him as he and his father were called onstage in Florida years earlier.

In the podcast, Feucht said Thomas helps out with services at his Capitol Hill base, Camp Elah. Feucht purchased the property sometime between February and August of 2022. One video asking supporters for donations to maintain the house features Hawley.

In another video, Feucht makes clear his intention in buying the house, which is close to Congress and steps from the Supreme Court: "It is time in America that we take back territory."

The building’s previous owner was Brandon Harder, chief of staff to Rep. Mann, the Kansas Republican who attended Feucht’s Rotunda service. Harder and his wife, Kristina, a Trump Health and Human Services staffer, were among multiple congressional staffers who were identifiable by their security badges at Feucht’s Capitol Rotunda worship last year. The next day, the couple appeared on Feucht’s Camp Elah podcast.

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Harder has also been featured in Camp Elah in videos for Feucht, recalling how he felt a call to ministry after going on a day-long, nearly 35-mile prayer walk through the Capitol grounds in 2015. He has also organized a "staff prayer breakfast" on the Hill, he said, a monthly gathering where staffers "come together and talk about Jesus, and talk about what we need to do in this place."

As for Camp Elah, aside from worship services held in a living room area, documented on social media, the site hardly buzzes with activity. Last April Feucht announced plans for daily prayer walks from the site to the Capitol, but, despite advance notice, reporters from RNS and other outlets had difficulty spotting prayer walk participants leaving or returning to the house until the last day, when roughly 10 people made the trek. Repeated visits to the house have found no one on the

premises, or none who answered the door. Recently the doorbell was removed, its wires left dangling.

But it’s clear Feucht is doing his best to build a cohort of legislators and aides around his Christian nationalist fusion of faith and politics, and to advertise his Capitol Hill ties to his followers outside the Beltway. He has repeatedly mentioned the Rotunda worship service on his 50-state "Kingdom in the Capital" tour conducted in partnership with Turning Point USA — a conservative activist group that, like Feucht, has pushed forms of Christian nationalism. Boebert and Mann have spoken at Feucht events in their respective state capitals; LaMalfa and Burchett have appeared on his "Hold the Line" podcast.



Christian musician Sean Feucht, right, prays with Sen. Josh Hawley, R-Mo., left, during a rally at the National Mall in Washington, Sunday, Oct. 25, 2020. (AP/Jose Luis Magana)

At least four of the eight members who attended the Rotunda service have hung the Appeal to Heaven flag outside their congressional offices. Feucht often waves the Revolutionary War-era ensign, increasingly associated with Christian nationalism and the Jan. 6 attack on the Capitol, on tour.

As he builds his network in Congress, Feucht appears to be fostering ties to the executive branch should Trump win in November. In late June, Feucht convened a prayer call days before President Joe Biden’s debate with Trump, telling some

participants he had convened the last-minute Zoom session in response to texts from his "friend Chris LaCivita," senior adviser to Trump’s reelection campaign.

LaCivita, Feucht said, asked him for "intervention from the divine" ahead of the first presidential debate. "I think it’s important, man," he said. "When people are crying out for God to move in their campaign, heaven’s going to respond."