

## Several events to mark National Day of Prayer

Editor likes separation of church and state but appreciates event

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PROVO — Government should stay out of religion, but its support for the National Day of Prayer does more good than harm.

That's the opinion of Lincoln Steed, editor of Liberty magazine, a publication founded more than 100 years ago by the Seventh Day Adventist Church to promote the separation of church and state. "There is security in keeping the state out of the religion business," Steed said. "They should make an environment that allows religion to flourish, but they should not fund, promote or be the big brother for any form of religiosity."

"The Freedom of Prayer" will be the theme for Steed's keynote speech at the annual Utah Valley National Day of Prayer service at 7 p.m. Thursday at the Provo Tabernacle, 100 S. University Ave. It's one of several prayer events planned throughout the state.

In addition to Steed's remarks, the Provo event will feature prayers from four religious traditions — evangelical Christian, Navajo, Hari Krishna and The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

Linda Walton, who owns a public relations firm in addition to her activities as a Seventh Day Adventist minister, has organized the Utah County event for more than a decade. Walton says the eclectic

mix of religions invited to pray at the event is to demonstrate there are many ways people talk to their deity.

"I really like to pray," she said. "And I like to find ways we can agree once in a while with other people instead of fighting with each other. A lot of people have not been exposed to unusual, to them, kinds of prayer. We want to try to make it as comfortable as possible for everyone. It's educational, and it's inclusive."

Prayers at the event, sponsored by the Utah Valley Ministerial Association and Utah Valley University Interfaith Student Association, will be offered by Jim Powell of the CenterPoint Church; Gladys Begay of the Navajo tribe; Caru Das of the Hari Krishna Temple in Spanish Fork; and Tami Harris, an LDS chaplain. Provo Mayor John Curtis will lead the Pledge of Allegiance.

This year's National Day of Prayer is generating an unusual amount of interest because of two events. One is a viral e-mail campaign based on a false report that President Barak Obama was canceling the National Day of Prayer. At about the same time, the Obama administration was named as the defendant in a Wisconsin suit in which an April 15 ruling by U.S. District Judge Barbara Crabb declared that government support of the National Day of Prayer is unconstitutional.

Disregarding the ruling, Obama issued a proclamation Friday setting aside May 6 as a day to "give thanks for the many blessings God has bestowed upon our nation."

"Prayer has been a sustaining way for many Americans of diverse faiths to express their most cherished beliefs, and thus we have long deemed it fitting and proper to publicly recognize the importance of prayer on this day across the nation," the proclamation reads.

Officials in the Obama administration say they will appeal Crabb's decision, and until the appeal process is completed, the president will designate the day by proclamation.

Steed said he doubts the ruling will be upheld at the highest levels. "I fully expect if it ever gets up to the Supreme Court, they are not going to declare a Day of Prayer unconstitutional. Not this court," he said.

And that's fine with Steed.

"I would just caution that we do not want the state directing religious activity," he said. "The less government the better."

The Provo Day of Prayer service is one of dozens that will be held throughout the state Thursday by a variety of religious organizations. The National Day of Prayer Task Force, which is promoted by evangelical Christians, will hold 12 services in communities from Logan to Payson.

Gov. Gary Herbert, who signed a Day of Prayer proclamation in March, will speak in a morning service for business leaders sponsored by the group in South Jordan. Thursday evening, the same group will hold a service at the Utah Capitol from 7 to 8:30 p.m. for anyone who wants to come.

Unlike the Provo meeting, which stresses inclusion, the National Day of Prayer Task Force has come under some criticism by interfaith groups because task force-sponsored services exclude prayers from anyone other than evangelical Christians — excluding Muslims, Jews and Mormons, as well as unbelievers.

The Rev. Gregory Johnson, founder and president of Standing Together and Utah coordinator of the task force, stressed that everyone is invited to attend their various prayer day events.

"We respect other's beliefs," Johnson said, "but our services are an evangelical expression of the National Day of Prayer, and we are holding exclusively evangelical events."

In another event, the Calvary Chapel of Salt Lake City is expecting 200-300 people at a free prayer breakfast from 8 to 10 a.m. at its chapel, 460 W. Century Drive, Salt Lake City. The Rev. Dr. France Davis will be the featured speaker.

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