

**Exclusive to Anna Dembowski, intern for RealClearReligion.org**

\*Unedited version of "[The Capitol's Room Without Politics](#)" (Published July 17, 2015)

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The Congressional Prayer Caucus – now a bipartisan, bicameral group of nearly 100 members – began a decade ago with one man. Rep. Randy Forbes of Virginia chose a room in the U.S. Capitol Building to put prayer before politics.

“When I first started praying in Room 219 each week, it was often just me – but I knew the power of the prayer personally from my own life, and felt the deep need for our country’s leaders to unite in prayer for the future of our nation,” Forbes, chairman of the Prayer Caucus, wrote to RealClearReligion.

Political and denominational affiliations are no match for the Prayer Caucus. Democrats, Republicans, Methodists, Lutherans, Catholics, Mormons – the list goes on – are Caucus members.

“Today, it is typically standing room only as [m]embers from both sides of the aisle join together to pray before the first votes of the week,” Forbes wrote.

Forbes co-chairs the Caucus with Sen. James Lankford of Oklahoma whose election to the Senate in 2014 made the Prayer Caucus bicameral. Lankford, a man of perhaps unshakeable faith, first joined the Prayer Caucus in 2011 upon taking office in the House of Representatives.

“There are people I will vote against probably 95 percent of the time, and we’ll interpret some passages that we both read very differently, but I also understand that doesn’t bother me in my faith,” Lankford, co-chair since January 2015, told RealClearReligion from his Washington, D.C., office. “That doesn’t shake me in who I am, nor does it deter me from trying to cooperate with people.”

For Lankford, faith is not an accessory. It is an identity.

“I don’t think [faith and politics are] together or separate. My faith is who I am,” he said. “That’d be like saying, ‘You can’t be a redhead while you’re in Congress. I am a redhead, that’s kind of who I am, and until God changes it to white, which he’s actively working out, I’m going to be a redhead.’”

As easily as the Senator is recognized by his hair color, so too is he recognized by his faith.

In June, Lankford was presented with the 2015 Distinguished Christian Statesmanship Award by The D. James Kennedy Center for Christian Statesmanship. (Rep. Forbes received the award in 2009.)

The Center's mission is three-fold: to share the gospel with individuals on Capitol Hill, to help Christ-followers on the Hill mature in their faith, and to restore a vision of Christian statesmanship among politicians. George Roller, executive director of the nonpartisan Center, said Lankford exemplifies each of the three prongs.

“There are many fine Christians in the House and the Senate, but James Lankford has just risen above them,” Roller told RealClearReligion, noting the Senator's ability to articulate his faith. “[Faith is] very much a part of who he is. That's one of the reasons we gave him the award. He's so sincere in his faith, and his faith is his life.”

Roller said he met Lankford at a prayer breakfast on Capitol Hill for Oklahoma representatives shortly after Lankford was sworn in as a Representative. Since their first meeting, the two have gotten to know each other well, their relationship built upon a common faith.

“The times I've run into James ... always the content of our conversation is about spiritual things,” Roller said. “I don't know that we've ever discussed a bill that's being considered or whatever, because we just have so much fun talking about faith and what God is doing in our lives.”

As to the one political conversation the two have had – how the Senator became involved with politics – faith was still the focus.

“He shared with me how God made it very clear to him – and [James] never ran for politics, not even for high school elections – that God let him know he was supposed to run for Congress, and God let his wife, Cindy, know kind of at the same time,” Roller said, noting the Senator's previous work as director of the Baptist-affiliated Falls Creek Youth Camp in Oklahoma.

Article VI of the U.S. Constitution [states](#) that “no religious test shall ever be required as a qualification to any office or public trust under the United States.”

“The founders wanted to make sure that no one serving had to either have a faith or to set their faith aside,” Lankford said.

And so, perhaps surprisingly, religion on Capitol Hill is vibrant – and has been for decades. Lankford listed Bible studies and a Wednesday morning prayer breakfast in addition to the Prayer Caucus – the prayer breakfast being the most popular.

“I'm new into that group, but that group is not new. It's been around for a couple decades,” he said. “That's the place where I see members get together, bipartisan, and pray together the most, as far as the highest number of members.”

For many, Congress' prayers hit home.

“We spend more time praying for needs of our families, needs back in our state, our staff, more than we do political or policy issues,” Lankford said.

Yet members of Congress are not without prayer requests themselves – discernment getting the top spot on that list.

“There are a million issues right now in our nation. I can’t do a million issues. I can’t do all those. I have to have discernment of what I need to work on,” Lankford said.

His personal prayers, he said, are like those of the typical American. He prays for members of government – specifically the president and the Supreme Court – the nation’s safety and for upcoming legislation.

“They’re real difficulties, and there’s time when there are bills that are difficult here and become divisive,” Lankford said. “I don’t want us to, as a Congress, ignore hard things. I do believe God can bring resolution on things that are difficult. I’m going to pray them through.”

And like Lankford, before the cameras roll, the votes are cast, and the bills are pitched, members of Congress pause for prayer in Room 219 – a safe haven devoid of politics and partisanship.

“Room 219, though, will always be special to me because it’s not about politics,” Forbes wrote. “It’s not about policies. It[’s] simply about uniting in prayer for our nation.”