

## Perry's upcoming prayer event draws sharp criticism

By **PATRICIA KILDAY HART**  
 AUSTIN BUREAU  
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AUSTIN — Gov. Rick Perry's Aug. 6 day of prayer and fasting at Reliant Stadium is generating significant heat nationwide, with critics protesting the exclusively Christian focus of the event and Perry's partnership with the controversial American Family Association, which advocates against gay rights.

Expressing objections on a variety of religious and cultural grounds, some opponents have organized a protest on Facebook, while others are urging the nation's 49 other governors invited by Perry to boycott the event.

To host the Reliant Park event, Perry chose the Mississippi-based American Family Association, a nonprofit that operates a network of 192 radio stations with 2 million followers that has been labeled a "hate group" by the Southern Poverty Law Center for what the SPLC

calls the dissemination of "known falsehoods" about homosexuality. The AFA also has called for numerous boycotts against companies and entities it says "promote the homosexual agenda."

Critics also accused Perry of using a religious event to boost a possible presidential bid.

"I want to be clear that my criticism of the governor doesn't stem from my lack of appreciation for religion, rather it comes from my deep respect for religion and from not wanting religion to be prostituted for political purposes," said C. Welton Gaddy, a Baptist minister and president of the Washington, D.C.-based Interfaith Alliance. "I think the people of Texas elected him to be the governor of the state, not the pastor of the state."

Gaddy also expressed concern that Perry is organizing an event that "is not just distinctively Christian, but would be exclusionary of non-Christians. What got my attention is the close proximity between him talking about the run for the presidency and the critical condition of our nation all defined in pretty much policy issues."

The website for the event, dubbed "The Response," includes a statement from Perry: "Right now, America is in crisis: we have been besieged by financial debt, terrorism, and a multitude of natural disasters. As a nation, we must come together and call upon Jesus to guide us through unprecedented struggles, and thank Him for the blessings of freedom we so richly enjoy."

Mustafaa Carroll, of the Council on American-Islamic Relations in Houston, said he regretted that the service would be strictly Christian.

"We're down with the prayer part," Carroll said. "I just wish they would join other people in the prayer. It would be more productive to ask the whole community."

Several gay rights organizations also decried Perry's partnership with the AFA.

"Governor Perry's decision to work with such blatantly anti-LGBT groups on an event billed as a day of prayer is disturbing," said Joe Solmonese, president of the Human Rights Campaign, the nation's largest gay rights organization. "Governor Perry has called on governors from all other states to join him in recognizing the day of prayer. HRC is calling on governors across the nation to not support the August 6th event, and take a stand against the hijacking of religious values by those who actively work to suppress LGBT Americans."

### 'Hate group' label denied

Noel Freeman, head of the Houston GLBT Political Caucus, said his organization did not take offense with "the event itself. If Governor Perry wants to have a prayer event, that's his prerogative. The thing we take exception to is that his primary partner in this is an anti-gay hate group. They are primarily known for that fact. This was not a secret to either Governor Perry or his staff."

Tim Wildmon, president of the American Family Association, rejected the label of "hate group" and characterized his organization's position on homosexuality as representative "of a lot of people who have traditional values."

"They want somebody to speak for them," he said. "We try to do that. We are reaching the Christian community with the truth about what is going on in our country."

He acknowledged that a stated purpose of the August prayer event initiated by Perry - to pray for an end to the "debasement of our culture" - refers to the increasing acceptance of homosexuality by American society.

### Accused of defamation

Mark Potok, director of the Southern Poverty Law Center's Intelligence Report, said the AFA - through blogs and radio programs - willfully disseminates falsehoods about gays and lesbians.

"This is a group that has repeatedly defamed gay men with the falsehood claiming that gay men molest children at rates far higher than heterosexuals. And this is probably scientifically false," he said, citing research by the

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rates far higher than heterosexuals. And this is provably, scientifically false, he said, citing research by the American Pediatric Association and the American Psychiatric Association. "This has been well-known for many, many years. So our feeling, the American Family Association is either consciously lying or has absolutely failed to do any kind of due diligence as it engages in the personal defamation of gay men in this country."



Catherine Frazier, a spokeswoman for Perry, defended the governor's association with AFA.

"The American Family Association is an organization devoted to faith and strong families," she said. "We are pleased to have them as a sponsor for the event." She also denied that the event was politically motivated, saying Perry simply felt it was important to bring people together in prayer.

Potok said the AFA earned the "hate group" label based largely on the writings and radio program of Bryan Fischer, the AFA's director of issue analysis for government and public policy.

"He claims that gay people are responsible for the Nazi Party's murder of 6 million Jews. This is utterly false," Potok said.

Fischer could not be reached for comment, but in a YouTube video of a radio program discussion of Hitler, he states "virtually all of the brown shirts were male homosexuals" because Hitler found them to be especially vicious warriors.

Fischer also has asserted that gays should not be allowed to hold public office. Eric Bearse, spokesman for the prayer event, said organizers did not take into consideration the fact that Houston Mayor Annise Parker is a lesbian.

### Mayor's response

Parker on Wednesday said she was aware of the AFA's anti-gay history, but she declined to criticize the event.

"No, I'm glad to have anybody's dollars coming to the city of Houston. They can come back on a monthly basis if they'd like as long as they spend money," she said. "I'm not responsible for their message. My job is to make sure that anyone who comes and chooses to use Houston as a convention venue has a safe time (and) is able to navigate the city, and we thank them for choosing Houston."

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**bbrown3186** 10:23 PM on June 8, 2011

Sorry, Gov. I don't need an invitation to pray. I do it on my own time and place. Just like I



Sorry, Gov, I don't need an invitation to pray. I do it on my own time and place, just like I was taught by my Methodist pastor.

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**BlueJayWay** 10:17 PM on June 8, 2011

Pretty Hair Praying Perry - posturing, nationwide, with the American Family Association, from Mississippi, to gain political exposure before the "Real Americans" voter base, to take back America.

The Race To The Bottom Tour continues!  
LOL . . .

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**gerwood** 10:06 PM on June 8, 2011

What a dope!

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