



Pastor Jay Dennis
(863) 682-0163 x 334
Jay.dennis@fbclakeland.org

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

FIRST BAPTIST CHURCH @ THE MALL, LAKE LAND, FLORIDA ENCOUNTERS SURPRISES DURING DELIVERY OF BIBLES TO STAFF OF THE U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

With 5000 One-Year leather Bibles in hand, forty-three members of First Baptist Church @ The Mall in Lakeland, Florida were on mission, this time to the staff members of the United States House of Representatives. In 2002 we handed out study Bibles to the members of the U.S. House, Supreme Court Justices, Cabinet, Vice-President, and President. In 2005 we delivered One-Year Bibles to the members of the United States House of Representatives and the U.S. Senate. This time, however, a growing burden for the staff members of the representatives compelled us to return on February 28, 2007. There are 435 offices in three separate buildings. Our mission, named *Project Light* was to visit each one of them in one day.

Tyndale House Publishers helped us design a new One-Year Bible called "*The Decision Maker's Bible*." Our goal was to encourage the staff members to read the Bible through. As we began our morning at 7:00 a.m., we congregated in a conference room in the Longworth Building. Our team was filled with a lot of excitement and a little bit of fear. We truly did not know what to expect. The fear quickly dissipated and a sense of mission took over as we walked miles up and down the long halls of three buildings going from office to office and making our presentation. Once we shared who we were and where we were from, it was important that we immediately communicate the message that we wanted nothing from them. We did not have a complaint. We were not lobbyists and did not wish to speak to the representative. We were simply there to give each of their staff members this never before presented Bible to say "Thank you for all you do." In most instances, once we shared that, the walls came down and a sense of openness emerged. However, many surprises would be scattered throughout our day, both positive and negative.

In 2002 there was only one office that refused the Bible. In 2005 there were three offices that refused the Bible. But this time 19 offices said, "No" to the Bible. You can draw your own conclusion, but one certainly has to ask, "Is this indicative of what's going on spiritually in our country?" Has there been a marked move away from God in the last two years? It is important to know that the cost of the Bibles was far below the amount a staff member could receive without violating ethical or legal boundaries. However, several used the "We can't accept gifts" reason to refuse.

Those who were open to the Bible became readily obvious, and those who were not, equally obvious. Some that I assumed would give us difficulty, did not, and some I assumed wouldn't give us difficulty surprised us. One thing I can say for certain, we could not judge the response by observing a (D) or (R) beside the representative's name to judge how his or her staff would respond. It would be disingenuous of me to suggest however that one group didn't dominate the refusal list concerning the Bible. That may be the reason they find themselves wondering why the majority of evangelicals vote for the other party. One newly elected Republican Congressman from Florida refused the Bible. It is a fact that many evangelicals supported him in a very close election. Our Florida group was sorely disappointed.

Arguably the greatest response we experienced was from Representative Charles Rangel's office. His Chief of Staff made a tremendous effort to let us know we were welcome and that the Bible was welcome in that office. Although I don't agree with many of Congressman Rangel's stands, I greatly appreciate the warmth of his Chief of Staff to us and Mr. Rangel's personal gracious response to me.

Reactions ranged from the kind of warm welcome I described, to fear of taking a Bible. One staffer said, "Leave them for the staff, but I won't take one because I don't believe it." One staffer initially took the Bibles, but then after the team left she ran down the hall and gave the Bibles back. Someone higher up had said, "No." In the office of Democratic Majority Leader Steny Hoyer, his receptionist looked at us and said after having been on the phone, "Everyone is angry today." I assured her that our group was not and that we were there to love, encourage, and serve. We were allowed to leave 35 Bibles for his Capitol staff.

Congressman Adam Putnam, our representative from District 12 in central Florida, made this mission possible. I cannot say enough about how his Chief of Staff, John Hambel and Staff Assistant, Ashley Fishburn worked tirelessly to accommodate us.

There are so many stories to tell. We gathered as a group at the end of the day to share our experiences. Many of the maintenance staff wanted Bibles and we gladly gave them. The kitchen staff in one of the cafeterias wanted a Bible and we gave all 22 of them one. One of the past winners of Donald Trump's television show, *The Apprentice*, was there with a group of teenagers in a leadership forum. He mistook one of our young ladies for a tour guide. She used the opportunity to give him a Bible and each of the teenagers one as well. Later he was seen walking down a hall with the Bible under his arm. We walked into some offices where I thought we would be quickly turned away. One said, "I will allow you to leave one Bible," another said, "It's about time someone did something for the staff," and still another staff member, whose representative had literally thrown down the Bible we gave him in 2005, said, "We'll take five Bibles." Another surprise we encountered was the fact that the pornography industry is adept at targeting these same congressional offices with their products.

Prior to the trip there were some who said, "You are wasting your time going to Washington delivering Bibles. They will just throw them away." I wanted to ask those people, "Would it have been better to not take the Bibles to Washington? How much good would it have done and what opportunities would have been missed had we not given out the Bibles? We will take our chances on giving the Bible an opportunity to do what it does best—change lives. Those who received the Bibles may not immediately pick it up and read it, but the bumps of life have a tendency to put us on the search for something bigger than ourselves. When that happens, the Bible will be there."

I will not say where, but in one office I have never encountered such spiritual warfare as we attempted to leave several Bibles for a large staff. At one point I walked back into the hall and cried out to God asking Him to intervene. It was back and forth with the staff member for several minutes. I can only imagine if the curtains in the unseen spiritual world could have been pulled back, the kind of battle one would have seen taking place at that moment. Finally, as if he had lost a fight, the staff member said, "Fine, go ahead and leave the Bibles." What happened with those forty Bibles we may never know, but we do know at least they were given an opportunity to enter into places where otherwise they would not have been.

After we had given out the Bibles, there were 1789 left. Had everyone taken one we would not have had that many left. As we gathered together to summarize our experiences and then leave, God was not finished. What would we do with those Bibles? Do we take them back to Lakeland? That is when the idea came. Over a year earlier I had met Bobbie Little with Christian Embassy at the Pentagon. I was privileged to speak at one of the prayer breakfasts there. I reached him and he told me he would have to call me back. Time was closing in on our group and they were about to disperse. When he called back I asked him if we could give these Bibles to the Pentagon Chaplain's Office. He was ecstatic and told me every one of them would be given out. They were sent to the Pentagon and now only God knows the impact these Bibles will have on the lives of military men and women all around the world. What looked to us like a dead-end street became a moment of God's opportunity. We planned one thing and God planned something far different. It is often that way. Emails from the Chaplains at the Pentagon have been very encouraging. They depend on the support of outside groups to help them do their ministry. The following is an e-mail from the Pentagon concerning the Bibles that were taken to Washington, DC. This demonstrates the reason we raised the money, made the effort, and took the trip:

Pastor (Dr.) Dennis:

I attend weekly religious services with other mobilized Soldiers here at the Pentagon. Recently, we received the Daily Bibles that were provided out of the generosity of your church. The value of these Bibles which your church sent is significant to the soldiers here. These brand-new, fine leather Bibles help us with the daily challenges we face. It is designed in a spiritual sense as daily ammunition and rations for the daily fight.

We appreciate your congregation's understanding that our military members (and families not here with us) needed your help with support we get from these bibles. We know that our receiving the Bibles did not just happen, someone had to provide the means and do the work, and for this we are grateful. We appreciate that regardless of what other Christians may think about the military war underway, there is a bigger spiritual war underway, and your team is supporting God's cause in this spiritual battle.

Another surprise came as our team tried to get the Bibles through security at the loading dock of one office building of the U.S. House of Representatives. When our team arrived with the truck loaded with Bibles it was 1:59 P.M. on February 27th. The security detail leaves at 2:00 P.M. They screen packages until then and what comes in after that must wait until the next day. The next day would be too late for our group. The guard looked at one of our men and said, "It doesn't look too good for you, we leave at 2:00 and it is 1:59!" He responded with, "We have 5000 Bibles to be delivered." The guard said, "Well praise the Lord." All twenty of the security detail stayed until all the Bibles were screened and unloaded. Was that a coincidence? No way, it was God's perfect timing and personal intervention. When we obey God He makes a way.

I came away from our trip with several observations:

1. The only things eternal are the Bible and people. We never waste our time when we invest in giving people the Bible. It may take months, even years, but when the Bible is given to someone in a spirit of love and genuineness it at least has the opportunity when that person is ready.
2. Our country's decision makers and their staffs are for the most part open to the things of God. Sure some turned it down, some took the Bibles because not taking them could have been bad PR, and some were confused about what they could do. But the vast majority said, "Yes, we want a copy of the Bible." We should look for opportunities to give Bibles to those who are in positions of influence. We must not assume they are simply not interested or will throw them away. Christians, of all people, should not possess a defeatist mindset.
3. If ever our country's Capitol needed to see Jesus in the lives of Christians, it is now. If I could be so candid, Christians must demonstrate the love of Jesus instead of an anger and belligerence. I can tell you that some of these staffers and representatives have been turned off to Christ because of the attitudes and behaviors of some Christians who have not been Christ-like. One does not have to compromise truth at the expense of kindness. Yes, there is a time for righteous anger, but we will never get through the door if the perception is that we are mean-spirited or pompous.

4. Most decision makers will respond to warmth, kindness, grace, and truth. To attempt to express the love of Jesus doesn't mean you are accepting their policies or embracing their beliefs, it does though create an atmosphere where a friendship can begin and your own convictions expressed. Of course there will be exceptions, but I believe this is the rule.
5. I have never been more certain of the power and presence of God as when we walked into those offices. Many people were praying and prayer does make a difference. Our group realized we had the privilege of representing Jesus! The Jesus they saw in our group would be the impression they would get of Jesus, Christianity, and Christians at least on that day.
6. Anytime you attempt something big for God, expect criticism. Unfortunately the criticism often comes from those who should be at the forefront of applauding and helping with this kind of effort. Our group would all agree they would not take anything for the experience they had in Washington, DC, especially the teenagers who made the trip.

Perhaps some will suggest this is all about politics, that those who took the Bible did so for political reasons. There may be an element of truth in that in some instances. Politics or not, anyone who opens his or her office to the Bible is welcoming the opportunity for life transformation. May we never underestimate the power of one Bible.

If you would like more information about this topic, please contact Pastor Jay Dennis at (863) 682-0163 x 334 or e-mail him at jay.dennis@fbclakeland.org

