

June 3, 2009

Ottawa *Watch* 225: Prayer Breakfast – 2009

By Lloyd Mackey

Christian apologists do not particularly apologize for their faith. They rather explain or defend it, at various levels, for people who are interested enough to listen to what they have to say.

That morning, in June, 2009, Ravi Zacharias did a good job of explaining the Christian faith and its potential for helping to shape the body politic.

A decade later, after he died of cancer, the “other side” of Zacharias became public. He was revealed to be someone who greatly exaggerated his academic credentials and behaved toward some women in a sexually-inappropriate – some would say abusive – way. His ministry, posthumously fell apart and he undoubtedly would not be asked today to speak at a parliamentary prayer breakfast.

It used to be that the National Prayer Breakfast was virtually unpublicized outside the parliamentary precinct. Still, it managed to attract an attendance of 300 or 400, each year, drawn from national political, diplomatic, academic, business, labour, religious and ethnic leadership.

The last two years, the event was moved out of a size-limiting banquet room in the aging West Block to nearby off-the-Hill meeting space. And, it was featured in advance stories in the *Hill Times*, the widely-read tabloid reporting everything you wanted to know about the body politic.

Largely as a result of those factors, plus a strong volunteer organizing effort, the attendance has more than doubled. Last Thursday, May 28, some 850 people well-filled the biggest hall in the nearby Crowne Plaza Hotel, to hear the musical styling of Paul Brandt and a clear and sensitive enunciation of the Christian faith from renowned apologist Ravi Zacharias. Both men, incidentally, are Canadians.

The event is organized by the MPs and senators who participate each week in a quiet, off-the-record, across-party-lines Parliamentary Prayer Breakfast. The chair of that group is David Anderson, parliamentary secretary for the Canadian Wheat Board. Anderson, as it happens, is a Cypress Hills area grain farmer who also has a theological degree and has occasionally served the Lutheran church of which he is a member, as its interim pastor.

In other words, he takes his faith seriously, but approaches it in both an intelligent and practical fashion.

The weekly breakfast is “coached” by Jack Murta, who was a member of the cabinet during the Mulroney era. He had often said, during that time, that the prayer breakfast did more to reshape his life than the political career that got him to his first Ottawa stint.

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I always enjoy taking note of the scripture readings provided by the organizers for the party leaders or representatives to read at the national breakfast.

I say “leaders or representatives”. It is seldom that a sitting prime minister attends the breakfast and this year was no exception. The last prime minister to attend, as I recall, was Jean Chretien, who was on hand in the mid-90s to hear hockey great Paul Henderson speak.

This year, International Trade Minister Stockwell Day sat in for the prime minister. He sat beside Opposition Leader Michael Ignatieff. And, next to them were Robert Bouchard, representing the Bloc Quebecois, and NDP leader Jack Layton.

The various readings, this year, all seemed to pose the same question: “Who is my neighbour?” And they all tied nicely to the theme that knowing and loving your neighbour is a part of knowing God and staking out your life in his interests. (I should note that, from 75 feet away, it appeared that all four party representatives behaved in quite a neighbourly fashion.)

The breakfast objectives, which are stated early on in each event, call for Christ-centredness – an emphasis on studying and praying together to understand the person, life and work of Christ. Very carefully, it is emphasized that the objective is not to “convert”, but rather to help people in the public world to relate to and be shaped by Christ, no matter their own particular perspective.

I wondered how Zacharias would fare as the speaker. He is, after all, one of the foremost defenders of the Christian gospel and, in that capacity, regularly debates intellectual leaders in other spheres of faith and non-faith.

I repeat the above assertion: he was both clear in his warm defence of the gospel and sensitive to the people of other various faiths that would have been in the audience.

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That brings me to the last point in assessing the emerging changes in the National Prayer Breakfast.

For the first time, the event was videoed for public access. The Cable Public Access Channel (CPAC) cameras were there and it was announced that people could go to the CPAC website to view the breakfast in its entirety. So, it is over to you, readers. To get the full story, go to www.cpac.ca.

But don't rush to the site right now. CPAC's people tell me that the breakfast will be aired this Saturday, June 6, at 6 a.m. and will be available starting next week, at the site's video-on-demand page.

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