POLITICS & POLICY

They Want to "Steer Our Nation Back to God"—Starting With Prayer Night in the Texas Capitol

My God Votes says Christians have abdicated their civic duties. The Houston group has a plan to mobilize the church—starting in Texas.

By Robert Downen

April 21, 2025

Worshippers attending a prayer night led by a variety of religious groups from across Texas, including My God Votes, in the Capitol Extension Auditorium on January 14.

Eli Hartman/The Texas Tribune

By the time the acoustic worship band started strumming its third hymn, Kezli Cook was face down and crying into a faded chartreuse carpet. In the nearby rows, a kneeling mom tried futilely to wrangle a gang of grade-

schoolers as they darted from row to row, a fortysomething man in a short-sleeved button-down snored, and a weeping woman begged Jesus to cover the room in his blood. Once Cook, a 28-year-old event planner, composed herself enough to stand, she joined roughly twenty other congregants who'd traveled from College Station in blessing a man they now encircled, praying that the Lord would grant guidance, love, and grace. "Jesus!" the acoustic band chanted, joined now by the man who had been sleeping. "JESUS!"

At first glance, the scene was indistinguishable from many services at the tens of thousands of churches that worship each Sunday morning or Wednesday night in strip malls, rented movie theaters, and high school cafeterias across the country. But this was no house church or fledgling congregation. A seasoned Texas lobbyist could identify the dark green carpet on which Cook prostrated, and the man being blessed by elated congregants was not some soon-to-be-sent missionary or nerve-wracked catechumen. He was 64-year-old Steve Toth, a right-wing state representative from The Woodlands, who had spent part of that afternoon **posting on X** about a "spiritual battle" on "woke."

Such gatherings have been held at the Texas Capitol on most Tuesday evenings for the last two legislative sessions, and have now spread to a few other states. The so-called Pursuit Nights vary in size: Sometimes only a few dozen worshippers show, and they're relegated to a smaller community room in the Capitol's extension. Other nights draw flocks of more than 150 people, many of them bused in from across the state and herded into one of the Capitol's main auditoriums, their exaltations echoing across the building's hallways and legislative offices. Organized by My God Votes, a Houston-based initiative, the events aim to mobilize politically minded churches and provide lawmakers and Capitol staff with a place to worship during the session.

Each week, a lawmaker—all of them Republican so far—hosts a pastor, church, or worship band that often hails from their legislative district. My God Votes asks preachers to avoid political sermons, though a few have waded into conservative social issues. The first gathering of the 2025 legislative session was led by a politically active fundamentalist Fort Worth church and one of its former pastors, state Representative **Nate Schatzline**, who led one hundred or so worshippers as they **blessed the auditorium walls** in an attempt to ward off spirits they fear will influence lawmakers.

Other nights have included proclamations against the LGBTQ community or abortion.

Certainly, not every Pursuit Night attendee is drawn to the Capitol by politics. Some are adamantly opposed to the mixing of church and state; others, including Cook, said they were attracted by the stripped-down, small-church vibes of the gathering, a departure from the high production of megachurches that increasingly dominate American Protestantism. “There’s no lights, no graphics,” Jeremy Garcia, who takes breaks from his job running audio and visual at a Round Rock church to help at Pursuit Nights, told me. “It feels free. It feels like there’s so much more authenticity.”

But if there is one constant among the rotating array of churches, bands, and worshippers, it is a deep and urgent belief that America is in spiritual disrepair, and that Christ is the only remedy. Many worshippers believe they are called to spark a national revival of faith that starts at statehouses and with the lawmakers who work in them. “Jesus said, ‘Go into all the world,’” James Buntrock, a Houston pastor and the executive director of My God Votes, told me. “He didn’t neglect or exclude the world of politics or government. And God has a side on every issue. He’s not a Democrat; he’s not a Republican. But he has a side.”

Buntrock traces the idea for My God Votes to the COVID-19 pandemic. As the coronavirus spread in early 2020, his Houston congregation, Glorious Way Church, opted to hold in-person Easter services in defiance of local and state ordinances. Eventually the church—allied with two longtime fixtures of the Houston-area religious right, Steven Hotze and Jared Woodfill—filed suit against Governor Greg Abbott over an executive order that **limited church gatherings** and recommended they hold remote or socially distanced services. The congregation started distributing “My God Votes” yard signs to allow members to show solidarity amid what they said was religious persecution.

Inspired by that support, Buntrock and Glorious Way’s lead pastor, John Greiner, launched the organization My God Votes, with a mission to “WAKE UP THE CHURCH and steer our nation back to God,” according to the group’s website. The first Pursuit Night was held in 2023, and within a year, the group had the backing of a slate of Republicans in Harris County: Its

2024 gala included table sponsorships by state Senator Paul Bettencourt, state Representative Tom Oliverson, Harris County Commissioner Tom Ramsey, and Toth, whom Buntrock personally credited with the idea for My God Votes. Timothy Barton, whose group, WallBuilders, has been crucial to mainstreaming the idea that church-state separation **is a myth**, also gave a presentation at the dinner.

"Jesus has delegated his authority to us, the believers, and we're supposed to operate with his authority on this earth," he said that evening, before charging lawmakers to help carry out that aim. "Those who serve in office are called God's ministers for good. He is a minister to execute wrath on those who practice evil, and so we have a line of defense that we elect and put in office to execute wrath. They call him God's avenger."

In Texas, the growth of Pursuit Nights has coincided with a slate of bills and reforms that would **infuse more Christianity** into public life. In 2023, Texas lawmakers, emboldened by a series of recent U.S. Supreme Court decisions, allowed school districts to **replace counselors** with unlicensed religious chaplains. On the first day of the 2025 legislative session, Christian activists and some lawmakers said they had to engage in "**spiritual warfare**" with their political opponents, opposing the separation of church and state. Those calls continued that evening, at the first Pursuit Night of the session. "Pray for the fear of the Lord to come into this place," Landon Schott, who pastors Mercy Culture Church, in Fort Worth, said from the auditorium stage **that evening**. "Let the fear of the Lord return to Austin. In Jesus's name."

Since then, Texas senators have advanced bills that would require the Ten Commandments to be posted in public classrooms and allow school districts to set aside optional prayer time. (Hearings for the bills have not yet been scheduled in the House.) Both chambers have also passed their own school-voucher bills, legislation that would overhaul the state's school-funding system and allow religious and other lightly regulated private schools to receive taxpayer dollars.

"Christians are waking up to the culture of the day," Buntrock said. "They're beginning to speak up."

On a recent Tuesday afternoon at a cafe near the Texas Capitol, Jonathan Schober sipped a cup of coffee, breaking from his typical weekly fast ahead of

Pursuit Night as he told me about his hope for a new, American Reformation. The gregarious son of a Pentecostal preacher, Schober ran as a Republican for a Texas House seat in the North Austin suburbs in 2022, and he was involved with Citizens Defending Freedom, a group that pushed **for book bans** in schools across the state. But rather than politics, he tells me, his true calling has always been bringing people together—be it through the interdenominational Bible studies he led during a twenty-year IT career at Dell or, now, through coordinating Pursuit Nights for My God Votes.

Schober, a 54-year-old father of seven with a salt-and-pepper goatee, views Pursuit Night as a direct response to what he feels is a decades-long failure of American Christianity. Too often, he told me, churches and pastors have treated faith as "this thing that happens on Sunday and is only spiritual." The consequences, he said, have been catastrophic: Clergy abuse scandals in numerous denominations, including his Assemblies of God; a shying away from talking faith and politics in "polite company"; and millions of Christians who are content to brace for Jesus's return while remaining disengaged from the civic realm.

"If you're just preaching a Sunday sermon, is that really living out the gospel?" he said. "If Christ is actually transformative, we should see a real transformation of society—Martin Luther stuff. Not isolated to one church."

A few hours later, Schober stood in the center of the Capitol rotunda—one of his favorite parts on the tour he gives to worshippers in town each week—basking in the perfect reverb of a Beaumont pastor's hymn. That day's gathering was small: an all-Black group of twenty or so friends from southeast Texas who knew one another through church and civic life. They spent the next two hours traversing the massive statehouse, praying over the House and, in a moment of luck one called "providential," watching the passage of Senate Bill 965, which reaffirmed the right of public school employees to pray while on duty.

After meeting with their lawmakers and stopping in Republican Lewisville Representative Mitch Little's office to sing "How Great Is Our God," the group convened in the smaller Capitol gathering room where less crowded Pursuit Nights are held. As the others lined up to grab plates of Papa Johns pizza provided by another Republican state representative, Donita Banks hung back to talk to me.

A retired public school teacher of thirty years, Banks vociferously disagreed with many of the Christian-focused bills being pursued by Texas lawmakers, including those that would require the Ten Commandments in classrooms. To her, the slate of bills seemed a cheap form of revival—like "having a car without a key to drive it"—that felt more like a reassertion of dominance by the same powers that for centuries had locked out people like her. "It used to be very, very clear: Church and state were separate," she said. "Now we have these megachurches, mostly in the Caucasian community, that have really pushed [against] that separation—they have [campaign] signs at their church!"

A few weeks after my conversation with Banks, I sat in the same room with a far different crowd of believers. By then, lawmakers were working later and later into the evenings, and the faint murmur of that night's worship band could be heard from nearby hearings on bills to legalize the use of honey in craft home brewing or strengthen the criminal punishment for the attempted murder of a police officer.

Among that evening's twenty or so worshippers was Stephen Alexander, a long-haired forty-year-old who spent years helping build marijuana facilities before having what he described as a suicidal breakdown, as if "the spirit of death came upon me." After leaving a mental institution, he said, he tried to join a Masonic lodge but left because he said its members worshipped Lucifer. He soon found Christianity, and he has since been involved with Luke 4:18 Ministries, an Austin-based group that treats people with an assortment of ailments—from homelessness to mental health issues—through prayer.

"People are asking for biblical values to be put back in the state of Texas," he said. "The world would tell you there is separation of church and state, but you don't find that biblically. And I think the church is called to be the authoritative word over the land and carry authority so that when we speak, the world listens and the world obeys."

Soon after, the band started, and Alexander joined the small group of worshippers as I sat at a folding table with Joanne Pontius, an eighty-year-old in an "**Appeal to Heaven**" T-shirt who works with Alexander at the Austin deliverance ministry. Over the course of her life, she said, there'd been a worrying backing away of the church from politics and the world.

"The church has gotten out of politics, and our whole country has gone down the toilet," she said, citing suicide rates and drug use that she blames on Christians' civic abdication. "When Jesus said, 'On this rock I will build my church,' he actually used the word '*ekklesia*,' which means government. And if everything were done by Jesus, we'd be living in heaven on earth."

After a few minutes of talking, Pontius made her way to the rows of chairs, where her fellow believers sang hymns and Steve Toth, the Woodlands representative, sat deep in prayer.