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# See You at the Pole: Evangelicals, Public Schools, and “Student-Initiated” School Prayer in 1990s America

Benjamin J. Young 

Department of History, University of Notre Dame, South Bend, IN, USA

*Histories of school prayer have typically concluded in the late 1980s, when court rulings and stalled legislation conclusively barred the door on the return of state-sponsored prayer to public schools. Through an analysis of See You at the Pole, a nationwide initiative formed in 1990 that mobilized millions of American students to gather annually to pray at their school flagpoles, this article argues that the 1990s witnessed not the waning of religion in public schools, but rather its revival in “student-initiated” forms. By tracing the pivot from debates over state sponsorship of religion to debates over students’ rights of free expression, this article establishes the 1990s as a major turning point in legal, political, and religious histories of school prayer. Further, this study of See You at the Pole illuminates how bipartisan, pluralist legitimating logics that crystallized in the 1990s underlie the phenomenon that scholars have recently termed “Christian nationalism.”*

The sun had already set on Fort Worth’s suburban fringe on an April evening in 1990 when a small group of teens motored up to Burleson High School. They were on a youth group retreat run by nearby Crestmont Baptist Church and minutes earlier had sensed a spiritual stirring that beckoned them to their high school. Standing near the school entrance, the teens lifted their eyes to the inky black Texas sky, raising prayers for their classmates’ salvation and for spiritual renewal to awaken their school. As the night wore on, they repeated their prayers at nearby Crowley High School and Hughes Middle School, and, as a gesture to a homeschooled student in their ranks, drove to his house and prayed there as well.<sup>1</sup>

Three days later, Crestmont Baptist’s youth pastor Rick Eubanks sat in on a youth ministry working group convened in Dallas by the Baptist General Convention of Texas (BGCT), the church’s state-level denomination. Recounting his youth group’s impromptu school prayer gathering the week prior, he suggested the BGCT could organize a more structured version for high schoolers statewide. But where could students meet? “You can say anything you want under the American flag,” Eubanks mused aloud. “Every school has a flagpole,” added Chuck Flowers, a BGCT official. “Yeah,” a youth pastor named Neil McLendon interjected, “See You at the Pole!”<sup>2</sup>

Six months later, at 7:00 a.m. on Wednesday, September 12, 1990, 45,000 middle school and high school students in Texas and three other states gathered at their school flagpoles for the first annual See You at the Pole (SYATP). Attendance so exceeded the BGCT’s expectations that the initiative went nationwide the next year, drawing more than 800,000. The annual prayer campaign only grew, averaging 1 to 3 million participants annually in the 1990s, peaking at

<sup>1</sup>Rick Eubanks interview by Benjamin Young, Mar. 1, 2022 (transcript in author’s possession); Paul Fleischmann, *Better Together: Discovering the Dynamic Results of Cooperation* (Oviedo, FL, 2014), 87.

<sup>2</sup>Eubanks interview; Fleischmann, *Better Together*, 87.

more than 3 million in 2001. As the nation's largest mass expression of religiosity in the 1990s, SYATP was a barometer of late-twentieth-century evangelical youth culture and a flashpoint in the era's political and legal battles over religion's place in American public schools.<sup>3</sup>

This article aims to contextualize SYATP's meteoric rise in the 1990s as it morphed from an impromptu gathering of Baptist high schoolers in Texas into an annual religious ritual that mobilized millions across all fifty states. To be sure, religious expression in American public schools was not new in the early 1990s. Public schools have played host to religion for as long as religious students, teachers, and administrators have attended, taught in, and managed them. What made SYATP exceptional—and makes it worthy of historicizing—was its nationwide scale, coordination, and cultural impact. This article also looks to decipher the varied meanings that SYATP accumulated for the students who participated in it; for the youth pastors who organized it; for the teachers, school administrators, and parents who encouraged or opposed it; as well as for the lawyers, legislators, and merchandisers who attempted to leverage it to their own ends. A third task complements these two objectives: tracking the fervid evolution of discourse surrounding SYATP, in which planners and participants deployed a toolkit of motifs that at varying times included proselytization, pluralism, martyrdom, and, as the War on Terror got underway, spiritual warfare.

When viewed together, these three inquiries lay bare the disquiet that American evangelicals felt at the end of the twentieth century, as well as the strategies they pursued to assuage their anxieties as they claimed a contested space—public schools—for Christ. The school flagpole became a site where their concerns for the souls in their schools and the soul of the nation melded, linking evangelical youth culture and political conservatism and connecting the schoolyard to the Senate. These links made SYATP the linchpin in a major pivot in the legal and cultural standing of religion in American public schools in the 1980s and 1990s, a turn from the blanket ban on school-sponsored religiosity established in *Engel v. Vitale* (1962) and *Abington School District v. Schempp* (1963) toward a more nebulous standard condoning, even celebrating, “student-led, student-initiated” religious expression. As American teens gathered annually in the early-morning hours at school flagpoles in the 1990s, their prayers drew into the light the legal, political, and cultural trends shaping the nation in which they were coming of age.

Drawing from a range of journalistic accounts, oral histories, archival materials, judicial proceedings, legal statutes, congressional and presidential records, and religious literature, this article is the first historical study of SYATP from its beginnings in 1990 through 9/11.<sup>4</sup> It intervenes primarily in two scholarly conversations.

First, this article intervenes in the timeline that legal and educational historians have built around school prayer, first by picking up the story where a number of them have ended it, in the 1990s, and then by focusing on a phenomenon that, although it was the largest form of prayer in schools in that era, has been almost wholly omitted from histories that do treat that decade. These histories rightly acknowledge that legislative and legal attempts to reinstate

<sup>3</sup>Eubanks interview; Orville Scott, “‘See You at the Pole’ to Attract 100,000,” *Baptist Standard*, Aug. 17, 1994, 15; Paul Fleischmann, *Better Together*, 87. Other accounts of SYATP's origins obscure or embellish details, and some incorrectly claim that the initial meeting in Burleson took place at a flagpole. See David Van Biema and Emily Mitchell, “O, Say, Can You Pray?,” *Time Magazine*, Sept. 28, 1998, 68; Sherry Jacobson, “Teen Spirit—Student Prayers Ring Out Through Rain at Annual Meeting,” *Dallas Morning News*, Sept. 18, 1998, 33A; Christina Kincaid, “‘See You at the Pole’: Miracle of Faith,” *Baptist Standard*, Nov. 11, 1998, 25; “Students Across Country Gather to Pray,” *Christianity Today*, Oct. 28, 1991, 54; and *Annual of the Southern Baptist Convention* (Nashville, TN, 1994), 244.

<sup>4</sup>For glosses of SYATP by historians, see Eileen Luhr, *Witnessing Suburbia: Conservatives and Christian Youth Culture* (Berkeley, CA, 2009), 105; and Bruce J. Dierenfield, *The Battle over School Prayer: How Engel v. Vitale Changed America* (Lawrence, KS, 2007), 201.

the pre-*Engel* era of school-sponsored prayer waned in feasibility in the 1980s.<sup>5</sup> Yet this article contends that school prayer did not dissipate as a live legal issue in the 1990s, but instead was reborn as advocates shifted tact from lobbying for *school-sponsored* prayer to lobbying for *student-initiated* prayer.<sup>6</sup> Accordingly, prayer in public schools evolved in First Amendment jurisprudence from an establishment clause concern to a free exercise and free speech concern focused on students' rights to express their religiosity in public spaces. The Equal Access Act of 1984 inaugurated this shift from school-sponsored to student-initiated prayer, while the Supreme Court's decision in *Westside Community Board of Education v. Mergens* (1990) affirmed it. Ultimately, the Supreme Court would extend this logic to public school teachers and coaches in *Kennedy v. Bremerton School District* (2022). SYATP, by drawing the participation of millions of teens, solidified the normative status of student-initiated religious activity in American public schools, even as the involvement of pastors, parents, and teachers in the event blurred the very definition of student initiative that had given it legal standing.

Second, a study of SYATP complicates recent arguments that have traced to 9/11 the resurgence of evangelical militarism in the 2000s, as well as a broader historiography that has arisen in recent years to historicize what some scholars have called "Christian nationalism."<sup>7</sup> This article contends that 9/11 elevated a militaristic turn in American evangelical culture that had already surfaced through SYATP after the events at Columbine High School in Colorado and Wedgwood Baptist Church in Texas in 1999. As for Christian nationalism, its commonly understood elements were, to be sure, embedded in SYATP's ritualistic form (the event was, after all, a prayer gathering that met at an American flag). Yet this article will show that among SYATP organizers and participants, these elements were often uneven, and hardly univocal. For some, the flag and its civic ambience were central to the event; for others, they were peripheral. Moreover, by the mid-1990s SYATP secured acceptance from groups as wide-ranging as the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) and the Clinton administration because it came to operate under pluralistic concepts and constraints of equal access, student initiation, and free speech. Indeed, SYATP's success undermined attempts by congressional Republicans to pass a school prayer amendment to the Constitution in 1995. To the extent that scholars have narrated a history of Christian nationalism that renders it as majoritarian in rhetoric, coercive in application, martial in ethos, and a product solely of the Right, they have missed the ways that these very traits could germinate from roots that were grounded in evangelicals' embrace of a larger bipartisan, pluralist consensus on religious freedom in

<sup>5</sup>Histories of school prayer include Robert S. Alley, *School Prayer: The Court, the Congress, and the First Amendment* (Buffalo, NY, 1994); and Jonathan Zimmerman, *Whose America? Culture Wars in the Public Schools* (Cambridge, MA, 2022). SYATP evades mention in three leading works that cover school prayer in the 1990s; see Frank S. Ravitch, *School Prayer and Discrimination: The Civil Rights of Religious Minorities and Dissenters* (Boston, 1999); David M. Ackerman, *Prayer and Religion in the Public Schools* (Hauppauge, NY, 2001); and Joan Delfattore, *The Fourth R: Conflicts Over Religion in America's Public Schools* (New Haven, CT, 2004).

<sup>6</sup>As historians of childhood and education have shown, the 1960s and 1970s witnessed debates over antiwar protests and dress codes in American public schools that resulted in an overall expansion of K–12 students' rights to free speech and free expression in those spaces. SYATP flourished in this less restrictive legal milieu, channeling it toward religious ends. See, for instance, Gael Graham, "Flaunting the Freak Flag: *Karr v. Schmidt* and the Great Hair Debate in American High Schools, 1965–1975," *Journal of American History* 91, no. 2 (Sept. 2004): 522–43.

<sup>7</sup>Kristin Kobes Du Mez, *Jesus and John Wayne: How White Evangelicals Fractured a Faith and Corrupted a Nation* (New York, 2020), 179–88, 214–32. On Christian nationalism, see Andrew L. Whitehead and Samuel L. Perry, *Taking America Back for God: Christian Nationalism in the United States* (Oxford, UK, 2020); Philip S. Gorski and Samuel L. Perry, *The Flag and the Cross: White Christian Nationalism and the Threat to American Democracy* (Oxford, UK, 2022); and Bradley Onishi, *Preparing for War: The Extremist History of White Christian Nationalism—and What Comes Next* (Minneapolis, 2023). In their sociological formulation of the term, Whitehead and Perry list the belief that "[t]he federal government should allow prayer in public schools" as one of six indices of White Christian nationalist adherence. See Whitehead and Perry, *Taking America Back for God*, 7–8.

the 1990s. The history of SYATP illuminates these ambiguities and suggests the limits of using Christian nationalism as a heuristic for the recent American past.

## Origins

SYATP's speedy expansion from a dozen Texas high schoolers to more than a million participants in the early 1990s reflected a sense of urgency among evangelicals to spread the faith to the next generation. When Rick Eubanks and his fellow Baptist pastors in Texas conceived of SYATP at their April 1990 meeting, they did so against the worrying backdrop of a decade of decline in teen baptisms in the Southern Baptist Convention, their national denomination. SYATP gave an opportunity for the teenaged faithful to evangelize their classmates and reverse these downward trendlines.<sup>8</sup>

Eubanks and his fellow organizers also, inadvertently, had impeccable legal timing. Between the Burleson teens' prayer meeting in April 1990 and the BGCT's rollout of a summer promotion campaign for SYATP in late June, the Supreme Court handed down a blockbuster ruling in *Board of Education of the Westside Community Schools v. Mergens*, which upheld the constitutionality of the Equal Access Act. Passed by Congress in 1984 and dubbed the "son of school prayer" by legislators, the Act had countered the Supreme Court's gradual rollback of school-sponsored prayer since *Engel v. Vitale* (1962) by clarifying the obligation of public schools to afford the same access to "voluntary and student-initiated" religious gatherings on school grounds as any other student events.<sup>9</sup> Organizers of the inaugural SYATP quickly realized the affirmation of the Equal Access Act in *Mergens* provided a constitutional safe harbor for their planned statewide flagpole prayer event. As one organizer in Texas told youth pastors, "Equal access is an open door, and we must run through it."<sup>10</sup>

This sense of urgency, commingled with the language of spatial thresholds, spoke to a deeper impulse stirring American evangelicals at the beginning of the 1990s: spiritual mapping. A term that emerged around 1989 among a transnational network of American and Argentinian evangelicals, spiritual mapping grouped a set of discourses and practices that they developed which accentuated the sacred significance of space. Proponents envisioned demonic forces that occupied rooms, buildings, neighborhoods, cities, and even nation-states. Effective evangelization, in their view, necessitated "spiritual warfare"—a soldierly term for fervent, targeted prayer—aimed at liberating not just souls but spaces into Christ's dominion. Although most popular with Pentecostals and charismatics, spiritual mapping influenced other streams of American evangelicalism in the 1990s by renewing interest in cities, popularizing the language of spiritual warfare, and introducing practices like neighborhood "prayer walks."<sup>11</sup>

The Dallas-Fort Worth Metroplex was among the first areas where ideas of spiritual mapping took root in the late 1980s, and its key pioneers there had a pronounced interest in public schools. A Dallas-based charismatic leader, Cindy Jacobs, whose 1991 book *Possessing the Gates*

<sup>8</sup>"Southern Baptists Target Public Schools for Evangelism," *Church & State* (Mar. 1991), 17.

<sup>9</sup>Equal Access Act, 20 U.S.C. sec. 4071(c) (1984); *Board of Education of Westside Community Schools v. Mergens*, 525 U.S. 366 (1990); Martin, "Student-Initiated Religious Expression after *Mergens* and *Weisman*," 1565–9; and Luhr, *Witnessing Suburbia*, 103–4.

<sup>10</sup>"Baptist Youth Worker Says Equal Access Law Provides 'Open Door' to Public Schools," *Church & State* (Oct. 1990): 15; Rosemary C. Salomone, "From Widmar to *Mergens*: The Winding Road of First Amendment Analysis," *Hastings Constitutional Law Quarterly*, 18 (Winter 1991): 307–15; and Frank R. Jimenez, "Beyond *Mergens*: Ensuring Equality of Student Religious Speech Under the Equal Access Act," *Yale Law Journal* 100 (May 1991): 2150–1.

<sup>11</sup>Rene Holvast, *Spiritual Mapping in the United States and Argentina, 1989–2005: A Geography of Fear* (Leiden, Netherlands, 2009), 1–4, 23–31, 79–82. Early spiritual mapping texts include John Dawson, *Taking Our Cities for God: How to Break Spiritual Strongholds* (Lake Mary, FL, 1989); C. Peter Wagner, ed., *Territorial Spirits: Insights on Strategic-Level Spiritual Warfare from Nineteen Christian Leaders* (Chichester, UK, 1991); and Cindy Jacobs, *Possessing the Gates of the Enemy* (Grand Rapids, MI, 1991).

of the Enemy was an early spiritual mapping text, was close friends with David Barton, a school superintendent and amateur historian then living in Aledo, a Fort Worth exurb. Barton had written his own breakout book, *America: To Pray or Not to Pray*, in 1988, in which he pinned declining SAT scores, rising rates of sexually transmitted disease, and heightened drug use in American society on the Supreme Court's 1962 *Engel v. Vitale* decision thwarting state-sponsored school prayer. "The total number of prayers being offered for our students, our families, our schools, and our nation," he advised in the book's closing pages, "must be increased."<sup>12</sup> In the late 1980s, Barton presented his stump speech for school prayer on the same charismatic conference circuits from which spiritual mapping was taking shape.<sup>13</sup> Jacobs, for her part, recalled the Holy Spirit compelling her to pray as the *Mergens* case was litigated at the Supreme Court in 1990. The Court's affirmation of the Equal Access Act, she believed, "was won in the heavenlies" through spiritual warfare. Schools were a central concern for spiritual mapping proponents in the Dallas-Fort Worth area as the concept took shape.<sup>14</sup>

As spiritual mapping circulated through American evangelicalism in the early 1990s, similar resonances characterized SYATP. Indeed, when members of the Crestmont Baptist Church youth group had resolved that night in April 1990 to drive over to their schools on the southern edge of the Fort Worth suburbs to pray, they had spent months ruminating on the "theme verse" that their youth pastor had selected for that school year: Joshua 6:16 ("Shout, for the Lord hath given you the city"). As SYATP expanded into a statewide initiative, the BGCT's youth office made this verse, from the biblical account of the battle of Jericho, its tagline for the flagpole prayer campaign. A 1991 SYATP advertisement in Texas's *Baptist Standard* newspaper explained, "Students will be meeting to pray for God to intervene in student problems, such as drug and alcohol abuse, sexual immorality, depression, suicidal tendencies and satanic cult influences, claiming the promise in Joshua 6:16—'Shout! For the Lord has given you the Campus!'"<sup>15</sup> This daring scriptural paraphrase evinced how the notion of spiritually reclaiming space, evocative of spiritual mapping, characterized SYATP at its origins.

If the spiritual mapping movement tilled fertile soil for SYATP, the National Network of Youth Ministries served as the infrastructural trellis on which it grew. Organized in the late 1970s, the National Network was a consortium of denominational and independent youth ministries. After enjoying remarkable turnout at their inaugural SYATP in September 1990, Eubanks, evangelist Billy Beacham, and BGCT official Chuck Flowers set their sights on expanding it nationwide. When they presented the concept at the National Network's annual strategy retreat at Glen Eyrie Castle in Colorado in January 1991, their audience responded enthusiastically. Prominent ministries such as Fellowship of Christian Athletes (FCA) and Campus Crusade for Christ quickly signed on to promote the first nationwide SYATP, scheduled for the following September. In the months after the retreat, the 120 ministry executives in attendance publicized SYATP through their professional networks. The BGCT handed over coordination of the event to the National Network's home office in San Diego, under the direction of Doug Clark and Paul Fleischmann, while Beacham retained rights to the See You at the Pole trademark through his independent nonprofit Student Discipleship Ministries. Their efforts bore fruit. At 7:00 a.m. on Wednesday, September 11, 1991, over 800,000 students showed up at school flagpoles in forty-nine states. In subsequent years, participation would range between 1 and 2 million.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>12</sup>David Barton, *America: To Pray or Not to Pray* (Aledo, TX, 1988), 179; and Randall J. Stephens and Karl Giberson, *The Anointed: Evangelical Truth in a Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA, 2011), 62–6, 83–90.

<sup>13</sup>Jacobs, *Possessing the Gates*, 56–8.

<sup>14</sup>*Ibid.*, 97–8.

<sup>15</sup>"National Student Day of Prayer," *Baptist Standard*, Sept. 4, 1991, 22, italics in original; Eubanks, interview.

<sup>16</sup>Fleischmann, *Better Together*, 20–7; Eubanks, interview; Carol Brzozowski, "Event Lets Students Give Voice to Prayer," *Fort Lauderdale Sun-Sentinel*, September 7, 1991, 8D; Damon Adams, "Promoting Prayer," *Fort Lauderdale Sun-Sentinel*, Sept. 10, 1991, 1B; "Students Across Country Gather to Pray," 54; Ken Swart and

## From Pole to Periphery

These participation figures indicate that SYATP struck a chord with evangelical teenagers in the 1990s. High schoolers (and to a lesser extent middle schoolers) were certainly the most conspicuous participants in the annual prayer gatherings. Yet SYATP was not entirely the “student-led, student-initiated” event that organizers claimed it to be. Each annual iteration was the product of months of coordination by nonstudent actors. SYATP’s melding of evangelical religiosity, civic symbolism, and public space touched students and schoolyards, but the meanings and ramifications of the yearly event extended far beyond.

Before millions of students showed up at school flagpoles on a Wednesday morning each September, someone had to tell them when and where to show up. In this, the National Network of Youth Ministries played a leading role. By 1993, the National Network was operating a “toll-free information hotline” on SYATP for interested students, parents, and pastors. By 1994, it was partnering with the Southern Baptist Convention to produce a nationwide database of schools where SYATP took place. The bulk of organization, however, occurred at the regional and municipal levels. In June 1992, the Southern Baptist Convention sent each of its 38,000 churches instructions on how to organize a local SYATP gathering. Pastors often plugged SYATP in their church youth groups in the weeks leading up to the event. “It’s supposed to be student-initiated and student-led,” explained one Florida youth pastor in 1991. “I just urged them and encouraged them to participate.”<sup>17</sup> His modest self-appraisal aside, youth pastors were key pieces in the yearly organization of SYATP. Some became area coordinators, making sure each local school had a group of students ready to lead flagpole prayers. Students did not simply show up spontaneously at SYATP. Youth workers and coordinators, laboring at scales ranging from the local to the national, mobilized them.

For the millions of students who appeared at their school flagpoles on those dewy September mornings in the 1990s, the stars and stripes that stood aloft above them shaped the prayers they spoke below. A student at Maize High School in Wichita, Kansas, for instance, prayed that God would “do wonders through the pole and let your wonders show through the pole.”<sup>18</sup> Counterintuitively, organizers had not initially intended for SYATP to have a civic or political valence. At the BGCT’s initial planning meetings in 1990, youth pastors zeroed in on the flagpole because they viewed it as a conspicuous gathering place, slightly separated from school buildings, that all (or most) schools had. But the flagpole’s role as the event’s spatial fixture often channeled students’ prayers toward the civic. “This country needs prayer,” explained Rick Forges, a student at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Florida, who joined

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Damon Adams, “Prayers at the Flagpole: Students Across the County Take Part in 2nd Annual Before-School Services,” *Fort Lauderdale Sun-Sentinel*, Sept. 17, 1992, 3B; Van Biema and Mitchell, “O, Say, Can You Pray?,” 68; Rosalie Beck and David W. Hendon, “Notes on Church-State Affairs,” *Journal of Church and State* 35, no. 1 (Winter 1993): 210–1. Turnout estimates listed here reflect the ranges expressed in American news outlets during the 1990s. The National Network of Youth Ministries contracted with polling firms in 1993 and 2000 to provide statistics for internal use. The 1993 study pegged nationwide participation at 1.03 million, the 2000 study at 2.17 million. Barna Research Group, “Turnout Projections 1993 See You at the Pole” (1993), copy in author’s possession; and Integrity Marketing Group, “See You at the Pole” (2000), copy in author’s possession.

<sup>17</sup>Ken Swart, “Youth to Gather at Flagpoles for ‘Student Day of Prayer,’” *Fort Lauderdale Sun-Sentinel*, Sept. 21, 1994, 2B; Jacobson, “Teen Spirit—Student Prayers Ring Out Through Rain at Annual Meeting,” 33A; *Annual of the Southern Baptist Convention*, 244; Ken Swart and Damon Adams, “Students’ National Day of Prayer Slated,” *Fort Lauderdale Sun-Sentinel*, Sept. 14, 1993, 2B; Adon Taft, “Teens to Gather at Flagpoles in Prayer Campaign,” *Miami Herald*, Sept. 6, 1991, 6E; Ken Swart and Damon Adams, “Christian Youth Groups Plan Prayer Rallies at Schools,” *Fort Lauderdale Sun-Sentinel*, Sept. 15, 1992, 7B; and “‘See You at the Pole’ Set for Sept. 16,” *Baptist Press*, June 2, 1992, 3.

<sup>18</sup>Van Biema and Mitchell, “O, Say, Can You Pray?,” 68.

forty others at its flagpole in 1992.<sup>19</sup> For many students, SYATP was at once a religious and a civic ritual; the distinction between the two was blurred.

Yet the flagpole's patriotic promptings did not always dominate. For other students—heads down, eyes closed—their intercession wandered freely from the nation they pictured to the people and places tangibly close to them. As a light drizzle fell on David Gossett and his classmates at Hollywood Hills High School in Florida in 1993, they “prayed for our school, teachers and other kids ... that we can witness to them.”<sup>20</sup> SYATP organizing guides advised students to begin by briefly linking arms in a large-group prayer around the flagpole before breaking off into circles of three or four students to pray for each other. For students following the guidelines, the bulk of their prayers centered not on the flag, but on one another.<sup>21</sup>

These small prayer circles often fostered newfound solidarities among Christian students who were previously strangers—an explicit aim of SYATP's organizers. In public schools, where practicing Christians were often unknown to one another because they attended different churches, SYATP coaxed faithful remnants out of the dispersed potential of student bodies. “I didn't know some of them were believers,” admitted a senior at Carns High School in Knoxville, Tennessee, in 1991. “I met three or four Christians I didn't know,” another SYATP participant remarked two years later, adding “I have a few new friends.”<sup>22</sup> Even where turnout was sparse, students could still feel an invigorating kinship with the millions they imagined participating nationwide. In Klamath Falls, Oregon, in 1991, a lone student kept vigil at her middle school but testified that she took heart in knowing her part in a simultaneous movement much larger than herself. Similarly, just a handful had shown up to SYATP at Three Rivers High School in Texas in 1990, “but to realize that thousands of other people are taking a stand,” their youth pastor commented, “is a real encouragement to our students.”<sup>23</sup>

Conversely, SYATP could alienate students who did not join in the prayers. Indeed, while supporters of SYATP saw flagpole prayer as a form of “good peer pressure,” others saw religious insensitivity, even intimidation. Nonparticipating students at Martin High School in Arlington, Texas, icily peered out their cafeteria windows at their 300 classmates assembled around the flagpole in 1996. “The religion part in school, I don't think is appropriate,” volunteered Erica Joseph, a sixteen-year-old student, as she looked on, since “[e]verybody has a different religion.”<sup>24</sup> At times, opposition from fellow students was more overt, as when Alan Sumler and ten other students at Richardson High School in Texas took on their praying classmates in 1994. Telling watching reporters, “There's no place for religion anywhere near the school,” Sumler mounted a boom box on his shoulder and led the others as they orbited the prayer circle blaring punk rock. “God,” a student in the circle prayed as a rejoinder, “we ask that you watch over these students walking around us right now because they're good people too.”<sup>25</sup>

<sup>19</sup>Damon Adams and Ken Swart, “Students Make Point with Prayer: Campus Event Denotes Christian Presence,” *Fort Lauderdale Sun-Sentinel*, Sept. 17, 1992, 1B; and Eubanks, interview.

<sup>20</sup>Ken Swart and Damon Adams, “Turnout for School Prayer Event Sets Record, Its Organizers Say,” *Fort Lauderdale Sun-Sentinel*, Sept. 16, 1993, 8B.

<sup>21</sup>“Attention Youth Leaders” mailer, 1993, box 1, folder 17, Home Mission Board Publications/Promotions Collection, Southern Baptist Historical Library and Archives, Nashville, Tennessee [hereafter SBHLA]; Eubanks, interview; and Amber Pierce, “‘See You at the Pole’ Gains Momentum as Campus Event,” *Los Angeles Times*, Dec. 23, 1994, E3.

<sup>22</sup>Swart and Adams, “Turnout for School Prayer Event Sets Record, Its Organizers Say,” 8B; “Students Across Country Gather to Pray,” 54.

<sup>23</sup>Orville Scott, “More Than 25,000 Students Attend ‘See You at the Pole,’” *Baptist Standard*, Sept. 19, 1990, 5; “Students Across Country Gather to Pray,” 54.

<sup>24</sup>Valerie Fields, “Uplifting Their Prayers—Spiritual Event at School Flagpoles Draws Some Praise, Some Criticism,” *Dallas Morning News*, Sept. 19, 1996, 1A; Judith Lynn Howard, “Area Students Gather in Prayer,” *Dallas Morning News*, Sept. 16, 1993, 31A.

<sup>25</sup>Kim North, “Teens Pray Amid Protest—Annual School Rally Debated in Richardson,” *Dallas Morning News*, Sept. 22, 1994, 25A; Scott, “More Than 25,000 Students Attend ‘See You at the Pole,’” 3.

Such clashes, though, were the exception rather than the rule. Indifference was more common. When a reporter at Las Alamitos High School in California in 1996 asked a hacky-sack playing student what he thought of his classmates praying nearby, he mused, "It doesn't hurt anybody ... and it doesn't make a difference."<sup>26</sup>

Crucial as adults were to SYATP's local execution every year, national organizers urged them to stay away from the event itself, both out of concerns that their presence would jeopardize its "student-led, student-initiated" legal status and out of a desire for students to feel able to express their faith independently. Their admonitions often went unheeded. A youth pastor in Yorba Linda, California, confessed to reporters that he attended SYATP at a local high school in 1996 because it was "so exciting for us to see what's happening on campuses."<sup>27</sup> Others observed parents standing at the fringes of SYATP prayer circles, watching or praying themselves. Indeed, these adults could fill the void when few students materialized at the pole. Administrators at a Burbank, California, high school, citing safety concerns, threatened to ban future flagpole prayers after ten adults from a nearby Pentecostal congregation joined six students for the 1993 iteration of SYATP. Such scenarios were nightmares for SYATP's national coordinators, who recognized that adult participants violated the Equal Access Act's stipulation that "nonschool persons" could not "direct, conduct, control, or regularly attend" such organized activities. They urged adults to instead plan their own flagpole gatherings at city halls or courthouses.<sup>28</sup>

Even more fraught was the question of whether teachers and administrators could join in SYATP, either as silent observers or active participants. The Equal Access Act allowed school employees to attend students' religious gatherings "for custodial purposes," but barred them from "promoting, leading, or participating."<sup>29</sup> Schools came to differing interpretations of this distinction. Teachers at a 1991 SYATP gathering in Columbus, Mississippi, joined students in prayer, and continued to pray at the flagpole after their students went inside for morning classes. Yet staff involvement proved controversial in some districts. For instance, the Arlington Heights School District in Illinois banned teachers from participating in SYATP in 1997.<sup>30</sup> Indeed, Alan Sumler's 1994 boombox protest at Richardson High School had been prompted by his indignation at chemistry teacher Lee Ferrell's participation. Ferrell defended himself, arguing "I'm not RISD [Richardson Independent School District] property before 8 a.m. I'm doing this on my own time."<sup>31</sup>

Journalists and lawyers also took interest in SYATP, the former hoping to capture conflict, the latter to litigate its legal fallout. In a few high-profile instances, both groups were rewarded. Journalists covered the dramatic moments at a SYATP gathering in Metropolis, Illinois, in 1991, when police, enforcing the school district's closed campus policy, temporarily detained students as they forced off the premises trespassing adults who had joined them. Witnesses on the scene called the National Network of Youth Ministries' hotline, and the National Network put them in touch with the American Center for Law and Justice (ACLJ), an evangelical legal organization. Founded by televangelist Pat Robertson earlier that year, the ACLJ had hired Jay Sekulow, the lawyer who had successfully argued the *Mergens* case before the Supreme Court in 1990. Sekulow quickly

<sup>26</sup>Enrique Lavin, "Prayers Raised: Students Worldwide Gather at Flagpoles to Worship," *Los Angeles Times*, Sept. 19, 1996, B1.

<sup>27</sup>Lavin, "Prayers Raised," B4; Eubanks, interview; Orville Scott, "60,000 Youth Expected to Pray at the 'Pole,'" *Baptist Standard*, Aug. 21, 1991, 7.

<sup>28</sup>Equal Access Act, 20 U.S.C. sec. 4071 (1984); James D. Davis, "Prayers Touch Schools—More than 3,500 Broward Kids Gather at Flagpoles," *Fort Lauderdale Sun-Sentinel*, Sept. 18, 1997, 3B; John Dart, "Few Attend Prayer Days at Schools," *Los Angeles Times*, Sept. 16, 1993, B4; Orville Scott, "Youth Will Pray at School Flagpoles Sept. 12," *Baptist Standard*, Aug. 22, 1990, 9; Scott, "60,000 Youth Expected," 7.

<sup>29</sup>Equal Access Act, 20 U.S.C. sec. 4072 (1984).

<sup>30</sup>Patricia Tennon, "Teachers Can't Pray with Students," *Chicago Tribune* (Metro Northwest Edition), Apr. 1, 1997, sec. 2, 1, 6.

<sup>31</sup>North, "Teens Pray Amid Protest," 25A; "Students Across Country Gather to Pray," 54.



pounced on the Metropolis incident, firing off a blunt fax to the school district threatening legal action before flying to Illinois himself to address the school board. The superintendent quickly apologized. A follow-up SYATP gathering occurred unmolested at the school a week later.<sup>32</sup>

The next year, reporters were present at King High School in Corpus Christi, Texas, to document school administrators forcibly disbanding another SYATP meeting, which spawned the longest-running SYATP-related lawsuit. The Rutherford Institute, a rival evangelical organization to the ACLJ, swooped into Corpus Christi, and staff lawyer Kelly Shackelford convinced a group of parents and students to sue the district for abridgment of First Amendment rights. The case would languish in the courts for four years until the district reached an out-of-court settlement in 1996. These cases revealed how the ACLJ and Rutherford Institute both saw growth opportunities in SYATP. The firms not only served as yearly sponsors of the event. They were also ready to field calls, fire off faxes to restrictive school districts, and dispatch what Sekulow called “legal SWAT teams” to execute litigation against administrators who tried to curtail flagpole prayers.<sup>33</sup>

Taken together, the wide array of external actors that shaped SYATP’s yearly execution in the 1990s—clergy, parents, teachers, and lawyers—belies any straightforward acceptance of organizers’ claims that it was “student-led, student-initiated.” That is not to say that the millions of teenagers that gathered at school flagpoles every September were pawns of outside interests. Their loyal participation year after year spoke to the spiritual significance they found at those annual mornings at the flagpole, heads down, eyes closed, hand-in-hand with classmates they may have just met. But before students could see each other at the pole, national coordinators had to set the date on the calendar, youth pastors had to promote it to their youth groups, parents had to drive their children to school an hour early, and the ACLJ and Rutherford Institute had to do their best to ensure it all remained legal. As shall be shown later, the SYATP’s elastic adherence to the “student-led, student-initiated” standard set forth in the Equal Access Act and *Mergens* spawned a significant legal debate. More immediately, the broad range of people with interests in SYATP helps to explain why supporters’ discursive justifications for the event were frequently in flux.

### Witnessing Pluralism

For instance, in its earliest years, SYATP was straightforwardly, in intent, promotion, and execution, about proselytization. The annual flagpole ritual aimed to stir evangelical students to go where pastors generally could not—inside public schools—to share the born-again gospel. SYATP achieved its greatest success in this regard through its close relationship with the Christian student group movement, another initiative under the auspices of the National Network of Youth Ministries. The Supreme Court’s *Mergens* decision in 1990 had not just laid down the “student-led, student-initiated” criterion for events like SYATP. It also permitted Christian student groups in public schools so long as they operated by the same standard. Christian student groups in public high schools skyrocketed in number in the years after the *Mergens* decision, paralleling SYATP’s meteoric trajectory. FCA, one such organization that co-sponsored SYATP, saw its number of school “huddles” (bible studies) increase by 50 percent nationwide to 5,278 between 1992 and 1994. Four years

<sup>32</sup>“What Really Happened in Metropolis,” *Christianity Today*, Jan. 13, 1992, 54–6; Fleischmann, *Better Together*, 87; Rob Boston, “American Public Schools: Mission Field USA?,” *Church & State* (Jan. 1992): 8–12; Beck and Hendon, “Notes on Church-State Affairs,” 211.

<sup>33</sup>Jay Sekulow and Keith Fournier, *And Nothing But the Truth: Real-Life Stories of Americans Defending Their Faith and Protecting Their Families* (Nashville, TN, 1996), 224; “Schools Rule Change Sought to Allow Prayer Vigils,” *Dallas Morning News*, Sept. 23, 1992, 15B; “Students Angered by Schools’ Breakup of Prayer,” *Dallas Morning News*, Sept. 24, 1992, 26A; Orville Scott, “Corpus ‘Pole’ Dispute Leads to Professions,” *Baptist Standard*, Sept. 30, 1992, 8; “Corpus District to Pay 17 in Prayer Lawsuit,” *Dallas Morning News*, Apr. 25, 1996, 17; Tony Mauro, “Students ‘Taking Stand’ for Prayer in Schools,” *USA Today*, Sept. 15, 1993, 4A; Henry J. Reske, “Student-Led Prayers a Tough Subject,” *ABA Journal*, 79 (Nov. 1993): 20.

after *Mergens*, over 50 percent of Los Angeles high schools had an organized Christian campus group; 75 percent of middle schools and high schools in the Dallas-Fort Worth Metroplex hosted an FCA huddle; and in Florida, an independent ministry called First Priority was mobilizing students to form school bible studies.<sup>34</sup>

The National Network of Youth Ministries promoted SYATP to youth pastors as the perfect catalyst for organizing Christian student groups that would span the entire school year. A denominational mailer sent to Southern Baptist pastors in preparation for SYATP in 1993 solidified this connection. Providing directions for organizing a SYATP gathering and chartering a Christian club on opposite pages, the mailer gave explicit instructions to conclude the flagpole prayer event with an invitation to join a student group. (The Equal Access Act's full text was printed on another page.)<sup>35</sup> The strategy caught on among local organizers. "I hope we can get some school-based Bible clubs started out of this," a youth minister and First Priority staffer said shortly after that year's SYATP. "That's what a lot of the youth pastors would like to see."<sup>36</sup>

The shared ascent of SYATP and evangelical student groups in the early 1990s did not go unchallenged by students and parents of other faiths. SYATP came under fire in its earliest years from Jewish organizations after a series of missteps by organizers. In the summer lead-up to the 1992 SYATP, Southern Baptist officials encouraged the denomination's churches to prepare by erecting "Wailing Walls" where teenaged congregants could tape up photos of classmates they hoped to evangelize. Although these exercises did not specifically target Jewish students, the American Jewish Committee issued a public complaint over Southern Baptists' appropriation of the name of a Jewish holy site. The denomination denied any intent to offend but did not scrap the practice. Tensions further festered the following year when the National Network of Youth Ministries scheduled SYATP for September 15, the first day of Rosh Hashanah. "That's absolutely, totally coincidental," one national coordinator claimed. "It's not intended as a slight at all."<sup>37</sup> Wariness that SYATP was an impetus for proselytization of Jewish students was common at the local level too. As one synagogue leader in Florida put it in 1992, "Just a group of kids getting together before class, I have no problem with that. But if it goes beyond that, then ... I'm uncomfortable with that."<sup>38</sup> Similar reports had surfaced the year before in Phoenix, where local Jewish organizations published a pamphlet entitled "Where Missionaries Don't Belong" in response to the increasing prominence of evangelical student groups in area public schools.<sup>39</sup>

First Amendment watchdogs also watched with alarm as evangelicals leveraged SYATP to evangelize public schools during the early 1990s. *Church & State*, the magazine of Americans United for Separation of Church and State, sounded off with a January 1992 article that accused evangelicals of using *Mergens* as "a crowbar to force other types of religious activities into the public schools."<sup>40</sup> Like their evangelical counterparts, watchdogs grounded the debate in spatial language: evangelicals, *Church & State* alleged, were seeking to violate the sacrosanct neutrality of civic space by infiltrating public schools with their proselytization.

<sup>34</sup>Luhr, *Witnessing Suburbia*, 104–5; Damon Adams, "Bible Clubs Planned Network Focusing on Public Schools," *Fort Lauderdale Sun-Sentinel*, Aug. 23, 1992, 8B; Steve Blow, "Arguing About School Prayer Is the Easy Part," *Dallas Morning News*, Sept. 30, 1994, 31A; Dennis Romero, "Faith on Their Time," *Los Angeles Times*, Dec. 7, 1994, E1.

<sup>35</sup>"Attention Youth Leaders" mailer, 1993, box 1, folder 17, Home Mission Board Publications/Promotions Collection, SBHLA.

<sup>36</sup>Swart and Adams, "Turnout for School Prayer Event Sets Record," 8B.

<sup>37</sup>Swart and Adams, "Students' National Day of Prayer Slated," 2B; "Wailing Wall Plans Stir Complaints from Jews," *Baptist Press*, Jul. 16, 1992, 2–3; "Wailing Wall' Plan Denounced by Jews," *Baptist Standard*, Jul. 29, 1992, 4; "Southern Baptists' Use of 'Wailing Wall' Offends Jewish Group," *Church & State* (Sept. 1992): 16–8.

<sup>38</sup>Swart and Adams, "Prayers at the Flagpole," 3B.

<sup>39</sup>Boston, "American Public Schools," 12.

<sup>40</sup>*Ibid.*, 8.

Neither the ACLU nor other watchdogs challenged students' rights to gather of their own volition to pray at flagpoles, but they decried how the backstage coordination of SYATP by non-student actors flew in the face of the "student-led, student-initiated" criterion that *Mergens* clarified. Christina Engstrom Martin weighed in on the issue in the *University of Chicago Law Review* in 1994. She acknowledged that SYATP was "organized on a national level by powerful religious groups comprised overwhelmingly of adults." Nevertheless, she concluded that "one must presume student autonomy and voluntariness with a religious event like flagpole prayer. The Court's concept of voluntary attendance does not leave room for second guessing each student's individual decision to participate in a religious exercise."<sup>41</sup> Martin voiced what would become the interpretive position of the federal courts, which in a succession of cases in 1992 and 1993 confirmed the expansive nature of the Equal Access Act and the "student-led, student-initiated" standard, securing a wide berth for SYATP organizers to operate.<sup>42</sup>

The increasingly favorable legal environment that developed between 1992 and 1994, coupled with complaints from representatives of other faith traditions, encouraged organizers and participants in SYATP to frame the event in new ways. Increasingly, they spoke the language of pluralism, rather than proselytization. "They're not trying to convert anybody," a Florida pastor said of his participating students in 1992. "It's just a prayer around the pole."<sup>43</sup> A year later, another pastor and SYATP organizer expressed a similar outlook: "It's not to solicit or proselytize ... [but] to be a witness by their actions."<sup>44</sup> Indeed, the word "witness"—both as a verb and a noun—began to crop up with remarkable ubiquity in 1993 and 1994 in SYATP circles. A 1994 promotional article, for instance, characterized SYATP as "a way for students to present a visible, bold witness of their faith on their school campuses within the boundaries of the nation's legal system."<sup>45</sup> The spatial connotations of "witness" were subtle but significant, evoking an ambient presence within public schools instead of the totalizing occupation of space that spiritual mapping's lexicon had initially supplied the SYATP movement. Even students' prayers at the flagpole hewed to this new language. "Help us to be courageous so other people will know we're here," Joe Herrera, a Florida high schooler, prayed in 1992.<sup>46</sup> Lesli Claunch, a student at Duncanville High School in Texas, explained to a reporter at a 1995 SYATP event the importance "that people should see us out here praying."<sup>47</sup> Such language suggested a desire to be a presence within, rather than an authority over, public school spaces.

Appeals to pluralism by SYATP promoters and participants were much like their invocations of the "student-led, student-initiated" standard: grounded in realities but obfuscating other underlying dynamics. To be sure, SYATP organizers disavowed the thought of school authorities coercing students to participate, and although SYATP was never an interfaith event, reports of Catholic participants suggested it could take ecumenical forms.<sup>48</sup> Yet organizers' and participants' ultimate aim for SYATP to be a springboard for converting "unsaved" students never dissipated, regardless of how the event's public image evolved. In these regards, SYATP's pluralist framing shadowed elements of the Christian Right in the early 1990s as

<sup>41</sup>Christina Engstrom Martin, "Student-Initiated Religious Expression after *Mergens* and *Weisman*," *University of Chicago Law Review* 61 (Autumn 1994): 1591; Howard, "Area Students Gather in Prayer," 31A; Van Biema and Mitchell, "O, Say, Can You Pray?," 68; Boston, "American Public Schools," 11.

<sup>42</sup>Reske, "Student-Led Prayers a Tough Subject," 20; *Jones v. Clear Creek Independent School District*, 977 F. 2d 963 (1992); *Lamb's Chapel v. Center Moriches Union Free School District*, 508 U.S. 384 (1993).

<sup>43</sup>Adams and Swart, "Students Make Point with Prayer," 1B.

<sup>44</sup>Ken Swart, "Students to Meet by the Flagpoles for Prayer Event," *Fort Lauderdale Sun-Sentinel*, Sept. 14, 1993, 1B.

<sup>45</sup>Scott, "'See You at the Pole' to Attract 100,000," 15. Here I am indebted to Eileen Luhr, who has noted the pluralistic valences of "witness" as it rose in the 1990s evangelical lexicon. See Luhr, *Witnessing Suburbia*, 22–3.

<sup>46</sup>Swart and Adams, "Prayers at the Flagpole," 3B.

<sup>47</sup>Alexei Barrioneuvo, "Area Students Gather Outside Schools to Pray," *Dallas Morning News*, Sept. 21, 1995, 24A.

<sup>48</sup>See, for instance, Claudia Van Nes, "Area Students to Pray at School Flagpole," *Hartford Courant* (Hartford, CT), Sept. 20, 1996, B5.

Ralph Reed and his Christian Coalition organization pioneered a softer-elbowed persona and evangelical academic Marvin Olasky formulated his “compassionate conservatism” agenda. Evangelicals also joined the spectrum-spanning Coalition for the Free Exercise of Religion, which formed after the Supreme Court’s ruling in *Employment Division v. Smith* (1990) gutted free exercise protections. Spearheaded primarily by mainline Protestant, Jewish, and civil libertarian groups, the Coalition brought eager evangelicals under its big tent in the early 1990s as it worked to pass the Religious Freedom Restoration Act, which would erect free exercise safeguards that the court’s decision in *Employment Division v. Smith* had curtailed. For SYATP and the broader evangelical context of the 1990s, postures and methods assumed newly irenic forms, even if the ends remained the same.<sup>49</sup>

The rhetoric of pluralism, presence, and witness emerging around SYATP undermined critics’ arguments against flagpole prayer and more closely aligned the event with the legal reasoning that had first birthed it. The framers of the Equal Access Act had avoided a direct clash with the First Amendment’s establishment clause by rooting the law’s provisions in individuals’ rights to free speech and free assembly. The Supreme Court’s *Mergens* decision in 1990 had recognized this logic, giving expansive protections to student-led, student-initiated religious expressions like SYATP along those same lines. By shifting the debate from establishment clause concerns about the imposition of religion by school authorities, which had dogged school prayer advocates of the 1970s and 1980s, to students’ rights to express their faith without suppression by school authorities, the Equal Access Act and *Mergens* put unsympathetic school administrators and watchdogs like the ACLU on the back foot. Now *they* seemed to be heavy-handed imposers of orthodoxy—the orthodoxy of the public school as a religious vacuum. Florida high schooler Colleen Flannery expressed this reasoning in a 1994 newspaper editorial. “If anyone was offended by our presence,” she wrote after participating in SYATP that year, “they didn’t have to be around to witness it.”<sup>50</sup> Tarred with defending the “religion” of “political correctness,” watchdogs like the ACLU had by 1994 conceded the point on flagpole prayer, except in flagrant cases of teacher or parent involvement. By reframing SYATP through the pluralist language of “witnessing,” organizers and participants helped to secure the movement’s legitimacy as it became increasingly present in American public education in the mid-1990s.<sup>51</sup>

### The Amen Amendment

These pluralistic currents, counterintuitively, undermined efforts by congressional Republicans to pass a school prayer amendment to the Constitution. In the wake of a sweeping GOP victory in the midterms, incoming Speaker of the House Newt Gingrich publicly promised in December 1994 to hold a floor vote by July on a school prayer amendment. Soon rechristened the “Amen Amendment” by members of the press, many observers saw the bill as Gingrich’s olive branch to Christian Right lobbyists, whose social-issue concerns had not found their way into his *Contract with America*.<sup>52</sup>

<sup>49</sup>William Martin, *With God on Our Side: The Rise of the Religious Right in America* (New York, 1996), 364–8; Daniel K. Williams, *God’s Own Party: The Making of the Christian Right* (Oxford, UK, 2010), 234–5; James E. Wood Jr., “The Restoration of the Free Exercise Clause,” *Journal of Church and State* 35, no. 4 (Autumn 1993): 715–22.

<sup>50</sup>Colleen Flannery, “Should Religion and Schools Mix? Surely, Prayer Can’t Be Harmful,” *Fort Lauderdale Sun-Sentinel*, Sept. 7, 1994 [“City Plus” section], 14; Luhr, *Witnessing Suburbia*, 102–3; Martin, “Student-Initiated Religious Expression after *Mergens* and *Weisman*,” 1569; Steve McGonigle, “School Religious Debate Intensifies—Conservative Groups Push Student-Led Efforts,” *Dallas Morning News*, Dec. 18, 1994, 1A.

<sup>51</sup>Mauro, “Students ‘Taking Stand’ for Prayer in Schools,” 4A.

<sup>52</sup>Newt Gingrich and Richard K. Arme, *Contract with America: The Bold Plan by Rep. Newt Gingrich, Rep. Dick Arme and the House Republicans to Change the Nation*, ed. Ed Gillespie and Bob Schellhas (New York, 1994); Rochelle L. Stanfield, “The Amen Amendment,” *National Journal*, Jan. 7, 1995, 22; McGonigle, “School Religious Debate Intensifies,” 1A.

Yet leaders in the Christian Right and evangelical students at the grassroots greeted Gingrich's Amen Amendment with perplexity, indicating the extent to which they had imbibed a pluralist understanding of religion in the public schools. Ralph Reed flatly rebuffed Gingrich's announcement, stating that a school prayer amendment was "not our top priority."<sup>53</sup> Gingrich's gesture felt to many in the Christian Right like an archaic throwback to the school prayer battles of the 1980s, out of step with the contemporary moment in which both conservative and progressive observers agreed that religious expression in public schools, although not school-sponsored, was nevertheless as vibrant as it had been before *Engel v. Vitale*. At McGavock High School in Nashville, Tennessee, members of the bible club were noticeably skeptical of the amendment as it worked its way through Congress. "It ain't going to help us none," opined Ryan Rucker, a junior who participated in McGavock High's "Positive Youth" bible study. "Some people," he added, "they take that stuff too far." Dawn Bradford, a sophomore cheerleader who participated in McGavock High's FCA chapter, thought it would undermine what had become the pluralist status quo: "As much as I really want this school to be more Christian ... you've got to really think hard about people of other religions."<sup>54</sup> At schools in Los Angeles, students and teachers both connected their pluralist posture to perceived spiritual authenticity, fearing that a return to rote, school-mandated prayers would be a regression rather than an advancement. "I think a constitutional amendment is overkill," claimed a faculty sponsor of one campus student group, while another elaborated, "To make that a school rule, that everyone's going to have a time of silence, will water prayer down and make it less real." Gingrich's Amen Amendment simply felt ill-advised to students and teachers who otherwise aligned with the GOP's agenda. "We still pray," Hamilton Yutan, a junior at Los Angeles's Eagle Rock High School, insisted. "It's just that it's on our time."<sup>55</sup>

Indeed, as Gingrich tapped Congressman Ernest Istook of Oklahoma to steer the Amen Amendment through Congress during the spring and early summer of 1995, the coalition of groups that had first united around the passage of the Religious Freedom Restoration Act in 1993 came together again, painting the Amen Amendment as unnecessary, even detrimental, to protecting students' religious expression. The American Jewish Committee took the lead in drafting *Religion in the Public Schools: A Joint Statement of Current Law*, a pamphlet released that April, which articulated the coalition's consensus. It was endorsed by groups as wide-ranging as the National Association of Evangelicals, the Christian Legal Society, the National Council of Churches, the American Muslim Council, the American Humanist Association, and the ACLU. Besides addressing other common flashpoints around religion in public education, the pamphlet devoted an entire section to SYATP. "Student participation in before or after-school events, such as 'see you at the pole,' is permissible," it read. Moreover, "School officials, acting in an official capacity," could neither "discourage nor encourage participation in such an event."<sup>56</sup> Above all, the signatory organizations joined together in rejecting the notion that public schools were "religion-free zones."<sup>57</sup>

The publication of *Religion in the Public Schools* did not stop advocates of the Amen Amendment from painting a picture of persecution at hearings held by the House Subcommittee on the Constitution that summer. Believing that his amendment reflected the view of the American people, Istook convinced the subcommittee to hold hearings outside

<sup>53</sup>Stanfield, "The Amen Amendment," 22.

<sup>54</sup>Laurie Goodstein, "At This School, Prayer Is a Popular Elective," *Washington Post*, Dec. 4, 1994, A3.

<sup>55</sup>Romero, "Faith on Their Time," E6.

<sup>56</sup>American Jewish Committee et al., *Religion in the Public Schools: A Joint Statement of Current Law* (New York, 1995), 7–8; Charles C. Haynes and Oliver Thomas, "From Battleground to Common Ground: Taking Religious Liberty Seriously in Public Schools," *Religion & Education* 22, no. 2 (Autumn 1995): 12–3; Bruce J. Dierenfield, "The Amen Amendment: Doomed to Failure?," *Religion & Education* 22, no. 2 (Autumn 1995): 40–8; Delfattore, *Fourth R*, 284–5.

<sup>57</sup>*Religion in the Public Schools*, 1.

Washington, soliciting public comment in cities across the country. At first, his strategy was fruitful. In Harrisonburg, Virginia, Kelly Shackelford of the Rutherford Institute warned subcommittee members of flagpole prayer participants being “run off the property by Government officials.”<sup>58</sup> In Tampa, Florida, April Fiore testified that school administrators had allegedly threatened her daughter with suspension after she began meeting with her middle school classmates for flagpole prayer. Fiore urged Congress to pass the amendment in order to “put an end to these misunderstandings so that others will not have to go through the trials that my daughter and so many others have endured.”<sup>59</sup> But as the hearings progressed over the summer, the tenor of testimonies shifted. In Oklahoma City, Lavonn Brown, a Southern Baptist pastor, reasoned with the subcommittee:

Instead of opening Pandora’s box with a Constitution amendment [sic], why not affirm and announce the rights that our public schools already have.... Students can pray without ceasing at school now. They can pray with friends around the flagpole in the morning, when the teacher hands out an algebra test in the afternoon, and as they are running onto the football field at night.<sup>60</sup>

A majority of subcommittee members agreed with Brown and other witnesses who echoed him, and Istook’s Amen Amendment lost momentum as the summer progressed. The final hearing in Los Angeles was canceled. By August, Istook’s efforts had stalled in committee.<sup>61</sup>

As congressional Republicans faltered on school prayer, President Clinton, sensing a chance to shore up support from conservative southern Democrats before his reelection campaign, publicly embraced the pluralist consensus. In July 1995, Clinton released a “Memorandum on Religious Expression in Public Schools” that closely followed the verbiage of the *Religion in the Public Schools* pamphlet from earlier that year. In the memo, Clinton set forth his belief that schools were not meant to be “religion-free zones” and also affirmed the rights of students to “participate in before or after school events with religious content, such as ‘see you at the flag pole’ gatherings.”<sup>62</sup> In August, with SYATP just weeks away, he directed the Department of Education to send a four-page version of his memo to every school district across the country.<sup>63</sup>

For those involved in that year’s SYATP, Clinton’s directive earned their appreciation. A Florida youth pastor believed the memo would encourage students to “be a little more bold than they have been.”<sup>64</sup> A SYATP organizer in Texas told journalists that he encouraged students to carry a printed copy of Clinton’s directive to the flagpole “and then offer Clinton’s number at the White House if they were hassled.”<sup>65</sup> Clinton’s memo, by upholding the pluralist consensus that had emerged over the previous half-decade, gained far more support from

<sup>58</sup>U.S. Congress, House of Representatives, Committee on the Judiciary, Subcommittee on the Constitution, *Religious Liberty and the Bill of Rights: Hearings before the Subcommittee on the Constitution of the Committee on the Judiciary*, 104 Cong., 1st sess., June 10, 1995, 265.

<sup>59</sup>U.S. Congress, House of Representatives, Committee on the Judiciary, Subcommittee on the Constitution, *Religious Liberty and the Bill of Rights: Hearings before the Subcommittee on the Constitution of the Committee on the Judiciary*, 104 Cong., 1st sess., June 23, 1995, 352–3.

<sup>60</sup>U.S. Congress, House of Representatives, Committee on the Judiciary, Subcommittee on the Constitution, *Religious Liberty and the Bill of Rights: Hearings before the Subcommittee on the Constitution of the Committee on the Judiciary*, 104 Cong., 1st sess., July 14, 1995, 510.

<sup>61</sup>Delfattore, *Fourth R*, 289–98; Dierenfield, “The Amen Amendment,” 40.

<sup>62</sup>“Memorandum on Religious Expression in Public Schools,” in *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States, 1995* (Washington, DC, 1996), II, 1083–4.

<sup>63</sup>Dierenfield, “The Amen Amendment,” 46–7.

<sup>64</sup>Damon Adams, “School Groups Wait for Details on Prayer Rights,” *Fort Lauderdale Sun-Sentinel*, Aug. 6, 1995, 1A.

<sup>65</sup>Barrioneuvo, “Area Students Gather Outside Schools to Pray,” 24A.

SYATP organizers and participants than Gingrich's failed Amen Amendment. Gingrich and his fellow Republicans had campaigned in the 1994 midterms on restoring a bygone golden age of school-sponsored religiosity, but for students, parents, and pastors, SYATP's success indicated a new "student-led" era was already underway.

### Columbine and the Consumption of Martyrdom

With its legal battles quelled, SYATP entered the second half of the 1990s on a high note. Its 1995 edition, held weeks after Clinton's directive, was its largest yet, drawing an estimated 2.5 million students. The expanding ecosystem of Christian student groups in public schools ensured SYATP's continual status as the nationwide spiritual kick-off event for the school year. "Never in my 27 years of youth ministry have I seen teenagers more concerned for their lost friends," exclaimed Richard Ross, a youth ministry consultant, in 1997. "There is an unusual spiritual interest and hunger among teens."<sup>66</sup> As time arced toward the millennium, an aura of anticipation gripped evangelical youth culture.

At the same time, SYATP's consumer subculture grew with the World Wide Web's emergence. Through [syatp.org](http://syatp.org), Billy Beacham's Student Discipleship Ministries sold posters, instructional videotapes, and an annual compact disc album of contemporary Christian music. An evangelical publisher launched a young adult fiction series in 1998 about a group of Christian high schoolers who meet at SYATP and become friends.<sup>67</sup> But it was SYATP-themed apparel—baseball caps, bucket hats, shirts, wristbands—that lay at the heart of its consumer subculture. "I AM A CHRISTIAN," proclaimed the boldfaced font on the t-shirt of a high school student at SYATP in Florida in 1997, while a classmate next to him wore a t-shirt that depicted a crown of thorns around a cross.<sup>68</sup> This "Jesus wear," as means of religious display, encouraged indirect "witness" to classmates over direct proselytization, the signaling of one's presence in public space rather than the quest to occupy it. Consumer goods evinced how evangelical youth culture had made a partial peace with a pluralistic public sphere, even if for evangelistic ends.<sup>69</sup>

The events at Columbine High School in Colorado on April 20, 1999, however, shattered this optimism, radically reorienting the discourses surrounding SYATP. Among the dead were Cassie Bernall and Rachel Scott, both evangelical students. Rumors about their deaths spread quickly over the Internet in the days after the shooting, alleging that the two shooters had questioned Bernall and Scott about their belief in God before they shot and killed them when they answered affirmatively. Subsequent investigations by local law enforcement, journalists, and scholars all found formidable evidence to conclude that these accounts were false.<sup>70</sup> But as American evangelicals wrestled with Columbine's horrors, the answer seemed clear. Bernall and Scott were not just the tragic victims of a despicable act; they were martyrs.

<sup>66</sup>Ken Walker, "Public School Challenges Remain, but Youth Ministers Are Excited," *Baptist Press*, Jan. 17, 1997, <https://www.baptistpress.com/resource-library/news/public-school-challenges-remain-but-youth-ministers-are-excited/> (accessed Apr. 18, 2023); Fleischmann, *Better Together*, 69; Andres Tapia, "Is a Global Great Awakening Just Around the Corner?," *Christianity Today*, Nov. 14, 1994, 85–6; Martin Miller, "Hundreds of O.C. Students Gather in Prayer," *Los Angeles Times*, Sept. 18, 1996, B6.

<sup>67</sup>Among other books in the series, see Nancy Rue, *Friends Don't Let Friends Date Jason* (Colorado Springs, CO, 1999).

<sup>68</sup>Davis, "Prayers Touch Schools," 3B.

<sup>69</sup>"Attention Youth Leaders" mailer, 1994, box 1, folder 17, Home Mission Board Publications/Promotions Collection, SBHLA; Luhr, *Witnessing Suburbia*, 23; Heather Hendershot, *Shaking the World for Jesus: Media and Conservative Evangelical Culture* (Chicago, 2004), 17–25.

<sup>70</sup>See, for instance, Hannah Rosin, "Columbine Miracle: A Matter of Belief," *Washington Post*, Oct. 14, 1999, C01. For more exhaustive scholarly analysis, see Justin Watson, *The Martyrs of Columbine: Faith and the Politics of Tragedy* (New York, 2002), 10–11, 29–33, 53–5, esp. 117–45; and Ralph W. Larkin, *Comprehending Columbine* (Philadelphia, 2007), 39–62.

As SYATP organizers labored in Columbine's harrowing shadow over the summer of 1999, the language of martyrdom seeped through evangelical youth culture. Popular evangelical youth revivals like Teen Mania latched onto Bernall and Scott's apparent martyrdoms. Youth pastors warned students that God might call them to follow in the two's footsteps. Bernall and Scott, after all, had been just like them—bringing their bibles to school, wearing Christian-themed clothes. Their murders seemed to dispel an illusion that the public school was a safe, pluralistic space for Christian students.<sup>71</sup> The languages and practices of spiritual mapping and spiritual warfare also returned after Columbine. "We believe there's a spiritual war going on," a SYATP organizer in Dallas explained after Columbine. "Without sounding too crazy," he elaborated, "Satan has escalated the battle from the physical to the spiritual. These [Christian] kids represent a threat to him."<sup>72</sup> The battle called for students to be willing to give up their lives for Christ, as Bernall and Scott had, if the moment came. The battle also called for prayer. Parents in Arkansas and Texas organized "Campus Prayer Journeys" in which they marched prayerfully around local public schools seven times (evoking the biblical battle of Jericho), thereby anointing the buildings before SYATP took place the next morning.<sup>73</sup> The language of spiritually occupying territory, so palpable at SYATP's origins, now resurfaced, superseding the language of pluralism.

Reinforcing this rhetorical turn was the way merchandisers peddled martyrdom to evangelical youth in Columbine's wake. A "Yes, I Believe" website (capitalizing off Bernall's alleged last words to her killers) appeared with the blessing of her parents, selling t-shirts, hats, and bracelets with the credo. Family Christian Bookstores, a nationwide chain, debuted its own copycat line of "Yes, I Believe in God" books, necklaces, and key chains. From a third vendor, the Center for Reclaiming America, students could order a "Yes, I Believe in God" back-to-school kit that contained a New Testament, a t-shirt enumerating students' religious freedoms, and nylon textbook covers listing the Ten Commandments. Much of this merchandising was timed to align with SYATP. Weeks prior to SYATP's scheduled date in September 1999, an evangelical publisher released *Jesus Freaks*, a devotional book ghostwritten for hit Christian rock group dc Talk. Aimed at teenagers, this modern-day book of martyrs ran from the first-century apostles to Cassie Bernall, linking them in a millennia-long trail of blood. Then, on Monday, September 13, the eagerly anticipated book by Cassie Bernall's mother, *She Said Yes*, hit bookstore shelves two days before SYATP.<sup>74</sup> There was a vibrant market for this martyrdom merchandise; before the year's end, *Jesus Freaks* would undergo eight printings and sell half a million copies. These products accentuated martyrdom's meaning to young evangelicals, while also cloaking it in a measure of commodified unreality.

All these factors suggested that SYATP's 1999 edition would be unlike any prior one. A few weeks beforehand at a Sunday morning service at Wedgwood Baptist Church, which was tucked away in a labyrinth of suburban cul-de-sacs ten miles southwest of downtown Fort Worth, the pastor pleaded for students to attend SYATP, showing images of Columbine on the church's projectors to drive home the stakes. The day before SYATP, Mark Whittaker, an organizer

<sup>71</sup>Rosin, "Columbine Miracle," C01; Sarah M. Pike, "Dark Teens and Born-Again Martyrs: Captivity Narratives after Columbine," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 77, no. 3 (Sept. 2009): 660–3.

<sup>72</sup>Deborah Kovach Caldwell, "Lessons in Faith—Evangelical Youths Reaching Out to Peers in Wake of Violence," *Dallas Morning News*, Sept. 13, 1999, 1A; Eubanks interview.

<sup>73</sup>Caldwell, "Lessons in Faith," 1A; James Dotson, "Parents to Bathe Schools in Prayer During 'Campus Prayer Journeys,'" *Baptist Press*, Sept. 2, 1999. Campus Prayer Journeys began after the Jonesboro, Arkansas, school shooting in 1998 and expanded rapidly after Columbine. See James Dotson, "Adults to Intercede for Students Through 'Campus Prayer Journeys,'" *Baptist Press*, Sept. 6, 2001, <https://www.baptistpress.com/resource-library/news/adults-to-intercede-for-students-through-campus-prayer-journeys/> (accessed Apr. 18, 2023).

<sup>74</sup>Jody Veenker, "Marketing Martyrdom to Teens," *Christianity Today*, Dec. 6, 1999, 22; dc Talk and Voice of the Martyrs, *Jesus Freaks: Stories of Those Who Stood for Jesus* (Tulsa, OK, 1999), 2; Misty Bernall, *She Said Yes: The Unlikely Martyrdom of Cassie Bernall* (Nashville, TN, 1999); David Van Biema, "Terror in the Sanctuary," *Time Magazine*, Sept. 27, 1999, 43.



for the Dallas-Fort Worth Metroplex, shared his impressions of the moment's tenor. "We've always known the blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church," Whittaker explained. "Kids are saying, 'Golly, here are kids who've given their lives for Christ. I need to stand up.'" So deeply were such sentiments felt that area youth pastors were organizing follow-up evening rallies at local churches to complement the morning gatherings.<sup>75</sup>

### The Wedgwood Shooting and the Declaration of Spiritual War

Wedgwood Baptist Church hosted one of these "After-the-Pole" gatherings on the evening of September 15, 1999, which would have a profound effect on SYATP and to larger American evangelical subculture. In its unfolding, Wedgwood's rally revealed the extent to which the theme of martyrdom had come to permeate SYATP. In its aftermath, the rally became a symbol of spiritual warfare to its evangelical interpreters, with SYATP as a means of fighting back.

As the night began, 300–400 middle and high schoolers from area youth groups packed Wedgwood's church sanctuary. A few dozen adults watched from the balcony. After initial announcements, which included an oblique reference to a skit that would occur later in the night, a local Christian band named Forty Days took the stage. About fifteen minutes into the time of worship, as youth swayed and sang, a man burst through the main doors at the back of the sanctuary, clad in a green jacket and white hat. The music was loud, the lights dim—only a few sitting in the rear pews took notice of him at first. He raised what looked to be a handgun. A concussive staccato echoed across the room.<sup>76</sup>

A moment of hesitation gripped the crowd of youth and youth pastors as they glanced back at the source of the noise. The band continued to play. Toward the front, the juxtaposition of the sudden intruder and the uninterrupted worship music confused the crowd. Some in the back haltingly stooped under the pews. Haley Herron, a 17-year-old high school senior, joined others near her who kept singing, one eye on the band on stage and the other on the man at the back. "We didn't know what was going on," she later recounted.<sup>77</sup> Was this the skit? Students paged through their programs, trying to find it on the set list. Others, more persuaded, assumed their roles in the impromptu drama, turning towards the back with applause. "Shoot me! Shoot me!" they shouted in jest over the music, acting out imagined martyrdoms. The man began making erratic forays down the aisles, sometimes firing at those still standing, at other times into the air.<sup>78</sup> Each round of loud bangs met with scattered nervous laughter from the pews, one witness recalled. "Even if it's a skit," she remembered thinking, "it's not funny."<sup>79</sup>

Seconds later, the man tossed an object towards the stage—a pipe bomb—which exploded. Band members leapt for cover behind stage equipment as shrapnel shot up into the balcony, where the few dozen adults present sat watching the scene unfold. Tim Hood, who was operating the A/V booth in the balcony, slowly brought the sanctuary lights up to full strength, now suspecting that what was going on below was not a skit, but something sinister.<sup>80</sup>

<sup>75</sup>Caldwell, "Lessons in Faith," 1A; Jason Sickles and Kendall Anderson, "Church Rampage," *Dallas Morning News*, Sept. 16, 1999, 1A.

<sup>76</sup>Michael E. Young, "Gunman Opens Fire at FW Church—Shooter Kills Self, at Least Seven Others at Teen Rally," *Dallas Morning News*, Sept. 16, 1999, 1A; Dan R. Crawford, Kevin Gale, and Chip Gillette, *Night of Tragedy, Dawning of the Light* (Colorado Springs, CO, 2000), 45–6, 61–2; Stephanie Simon, John Beckham, and Lianne Hart, "Gunman Opens Fire Inside Texas Church; 8 Dead," *Los Angeles Times*, Sept. 16, 1999, A1, A19; "Gunman Opens Fire in Church, Killing 7," *Chicago Tribune*, Sept. 16, 1999, 1.

<sup>77</sup>Simon et al., "Gunman Opens Fire Inside Texas Church," A1.

<sup>78</sup>Crawford et al., *Night of Tragedy*, 62–4; Mark Wingfield, "Lone Gunman Slays Seven in Texas Church," *Baptist Standard*, Sept. 22, 1999, 1, 9; Eric Slater, "Suddenly, the Stranger Fired," *Los Angeles Times*, Sept. 17, 1999, A1; Jim Yardley, "Gunman Kills 7 at a Church, Then Himself," *New York Times*, Sept. 16, 1999, A1.

<sup>79</sup>Crawford et al., *Night of Tragedy*, 320–2.

<sup>80</sup>*Ibid.*, 64–5, 320–2.

As light dawned over the sanctuary, it grew quiet. The man continued to pace the back of the room, occasionally locking on a target and firing. Jeremiah Neitz, a nineteen-year-old attending as the friend of a youth pastor, then rose from his cover a few pews from the back and faced the intruder. “Sir, you don’t have to be doing this,” Neitz called across the sanctuary to the man, who trained his gun on him. Neitz continued. “Sir, you can shoot me if you want. But I know where I’m going. I’m going to heaven. What about you?” After a pause, a shot rang out. The intruder, Larry Gene Ashbrook, had committed suicide.<sup>81</sup>

Seconds later, Fort Worth police officers entered the sanctuary with guns drawn, cautiously approaching Ashbrook’s body. Wedgwood’s youth minister Jay Fannin, who had run to the church office to call 911 when Ashbrook had first burst into the room, reentered seconds later, screaming at those still present to flee.<sup>82</sup> Still not registering the scope of the tragedy around her, high schooler Laura Watson followed others out to a hallway. “Wow,” she remembered thinking as she passed other police officers rushing into the sanctuary, “they even got cops to spend their off-duty time to make this look real.”<sup>83</sup> Conditioned by months of acting as if violent martyrdom was a possibility, shaped by months of visualizing and consuming Cassie Bernall and Rachel Scott’s purported last moments as their own, when the youth at Wedgwood actually, improbably, came under violent attack, most thought it was another act. But Ashbrook had, in fact, murdered four teenagers—Kristi Beckel, Joseph Ennis, Cassandra Griffin, and Justin Ray. Also among his victims were Sydney Browning, Wedgwood’s 36-year-old children’s choir director, and Shawn Brown and Kimberly Jones, both 23-year-old seminarians at nearby Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary. Seven others were injured. The Wedgwood shooting confirmed the extent to which the theme of martyrdom—conjured in imagination but unthinkable in reality—had come to permeate the evangelical youth culture around SYATP in the wake of Columbine. And for evangelicals, it troublingly suggested that no space—not even a SYATP rally at a church—was safe anymore.<sup>84</sup>

As survivors sought to make sense of the tragedy, they oriented themselves around what had come to feel familiar. The next morning, students showed up to pray at the flagpoles of three area high schools, including, coincidentally, one at which Crestmont Baptist Church’s youth group had prayed on that inaugural night nine years prior. At a chapel meeting at Southwestern Seminary, students mourned the deaths of their two fellow seminarians. “It started with ‘See You at the Pole,’” Rex Horne, the chapel speaker, eulogized, “and then became ‘See You in Church,’ and finally moved on to ‘See You in Heaven.’”<sup>85</sup> Texas governor George W. Bush, who had been campaigning for the Republican presidential nomination in Michigan at the time of the shooting, flew back to the state to meet with survivors that night. Journalists photographed him that Sunday in the third row at a memorial service for the victims at a local football stadium. Planners had asked him to speak, but he respectfully declined. Two Columbine survivors addressed the crowd in his place.<sup>86</sup>

As time passed, Wedgwood’s survivors struggled to grapple with what had unfolded. Police investigations revealed the shooter to have struggled with mental illness. Yet he had no

<sup>81</sup>Ibid., 68; Herb Hollinger, “Gunman Kills Seven at Church Prayer Rally, Including 3 Seminary Students,” *Baptist Press*, Sept. 16, 1999.

<sup>82</sup>Crawford et al., *Night of Tragedy*, 60, 70, 107–8; Sickles and Anderson, “Church Rampage,” 1A.

<sup>83</sup>Crawford et al., *Night of Tragedy*, 225.

<sup>84</sup>Wingfield, “Lone Gunman Slays Seven,” 9.

<sup>85</sup>Dan Martin, “Seminary Mourns & Praises,” *Baptist Standard*, Sept. 22, 1999, 8; Dirk Johnson and Gustav Niebuhr, “Back to the Flagpole, This Time to Mourn,” *New York Times*, Sept. 17, 1999, A18; Crawford et al., *Night of Tragedy*, 86–7.

<sup>86</sup>Dan Martin, “Mourners Urged to Let Their Light Shine,” *Baptist Standard*, Sept. 29, 1999, 1, 9; Jim Yardley, “An Angry Mystery Man Who Brought Death,” *New York Times*, Sept. 17, 1999, A1, A19; “Bush Promises to Battle Religious Bigotry in Wake of Texas Tragedy,” *Baptist Press*, Sept. 13, 2000, <https://www.baptistpress.com/resource-library/news/bush-promises-to-battle-religious-bigotry-in-wake-of-texas-tragedy/> (accessed Apr. 18, 2023); and Crawford, Galey, Gillette, *Night of Tragedy*, 9.

apparent connection with the congregation, and the question of why he targeted the teenagers gathered at Wedgwood remained disturbingly inexplicable.<sup>87</sup> Wedgwood's faithful felt compelled to reach, then, for spiritual interpretations. Interviewed the night of the shooting, Wedgwood children's minister Kim Herron expressed her belief that "Satan is at work in the world. That was Satan incarnate."<sup>88</sup> Jim Gatliff, the pastor at a church whose youth had attended the Wedgwood service, saw the attack as the climax of months of spiritual warfare that had begun after a youth revival the previous April. He also directly connected Wedgwood to Columbine, asserting, "The torch has been passed to us from Columbine, and we want to carry it well."<sup>89</sup> An email from Cassie Bernall's grandmother to Wedgwood's church office (one of 14,000 email messages of condolence that the congregation received in the days following the shooting), reinforced this link. "Please," she wrote, "hold closely and dwell upon the fact that your beloved ones are in Heaven's Hall of Martyrs with our beloved Cassie."<sup>90</sup> Indeed, the congregationally authorized account of the massacre, published in 2000, leaned heavily on the spatial language of spiritual mapping to explain the tragedy. The account narrated that "Satan journeyed through the suburbs of Fort Worth" on September 15, 1999 and, "Having observed the Wedgwood community and one of its churches," he "ventured to the east a few miles and found one whom he could use, a troubled man filled with anger and disappointment."<sup>91</sup> The demonic had obscured itself via Ashbrook as "an angel of light," entering the church's sacred space "as though he were a part of the program, a participant in the skit."<sup>92</sup> The spatial motifs of spiritual mapping that had fueled SYATP's initial rise now helped mourners make sense of SYATP's greatest tragedy.

If Columbine had prompted many pastors to tell their youth to prepare for the chance of martyrdom, Wedgwood prompted many to now tell them to prepare for the reality of war. The day after the Wedgwood shooting, a chain email began circulating that underscored these themes:

Hey Satan! You really shook me up last night! Having someone go into a youth rally and shoot people—that seemed cruel even for you.... My main question was, why were you attacking Christian youth? Then it hit me, fear. You realize that these are the people that will turn the tide of your "battle." You are so afraid because these youth aren't afraid of your conventional weapons. Peer pressure, drugs, sex, greed are all failing.... So take your shots and try, but we will not cave in, and we're finished being on the defensive. Jesus tells us that the gates of hell can't stop us, and we're claiming that promise. So get ready for the battle of your life.... Try to understand, this is no less than a declaration of war. You may want to give up now, because our Dad is on our side and Jesus told us that if He is for us nobody can stand against us. So if you desire, we will accept your unconditional surrender. Otherwise, let's get ready to rumble! Your sworn enemies forever, the children of the Most High God.<sup>93</sup>

Others echoed this militaristic turn in language. Bob Reccord, a Southern Baptist official, preached at a gathering of youth pastors in North Carolina a few days after the shooting,

<sup>87</sup>V. Dion Haynes, "Texas Killer Described as Abusive Loner," *Chicago Tribune*, Sept. 17, 1999, 3; Claudia Kolker and Eric Slater, "Texas Gunman Tied to Hate Groups; Writings Show Persecution Feelings," *Los Angeles Times*, Sept. 18, 1999, A13.

<sup>88</sup>"That Was Satan"—Another Mass Shooting, and Nation Again Is Left to Ask What Has Go Wrong," *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, Sept. 16, 1999, A1.

<sup>89</sup>Mark Wingfield, "The Torch Has Been Passed from Columbine," *Baptist Standard*, Sept. 22, 1999, 6.

<sup>90</sup>Crawford et al., *Night of Tragedy*, 18–9.

<sup>91</sup>*Ibid.*, 23–4.

<sup>92</sup>*Ibid.*, 222–3.

<sup>93</sup>Reprinted in *Ibid.*, 314–6.

declaring, “We don’t have time anymore to baby-sit kids.... We’ve got to equip these kids for a warfare they’re being launched into.”<sup>94</sup> With a fresh fervor, currents of apocalypticism intensified the militaristic motifs gripping evangelical youth culture. “Now spiritual warfare begins in earnest,” wrote Richard Ross, the influential youth ministry consultant, in response to Wedgwood.<sup>95</sup> The traumatic effect of the shooting at Wedgwood’s SYATP rally decisively fanned the martyrrial rhetoric that Columbine had sparked into fiery calls for spiritual belligerence.

In the Wedgwood shooting’s aftermath, some evangelical leaders channeled this belligerence toward President Clinton’s muted response. *Baptist Press* scoured his public remarks in the year after Wedgwood and belabored to readers the fact that the president made just one public mention of the shooting, compared with over 100 mentions of gay hate crime victim Matthew Shepard.<sup>96</sup> Clinton, praised a few years earlier for confirming students’ rights to participate in flagpole prayer, now received chastisement for failing to address the epidemic of anti-Christian violence that Columbine and Wedgwood apparently augured. By signaling his awareness of evangelicals’ fears that they were under attack, George W. Bush used these tensions to his political advantage in the closing months of his presidential campaign against his Democratic rival (and Clinton’s vice president) Al Gore. In September 2000, a year after the Wedgwood massacre and two months prior to election day, Bush made his first mention of the church shooting on the campaign trail, seizing on comments made ten months prior by White House press secretary Joe Lockhart, which described Southern Baptists as “perpetrators of religious hatred” because of their evangelism of Jewish people. Bush disparaged the comments as tone-deaf coming so soon after the Wedgwood shooting and promised as president to fight against such “religious bigotry.”<sup>97</sup> By invoking Wedgwood to differentiate himself from the outgoing administration, Bush positioned a vote for him as an act of resistance against malevolent forces of spiritual warfare, a move that aided his broader efforts to secure a sufficient share of the evangelical electorate for victory.<sup>98</sup>

So it was that ten months after his election, when President Bush called Americans to prayer in the wake of 9/11, SYATP’s customary mid-September timing seemed providential to organizers and students. As recovery efforts began at Ground Zero in Manhattan, the nation’s youth knew where to go. On September 20, 2001, they went to their flagpoles—3 million students, the largest total in SYATP’s history. At middle and high schools nationwide, the flagpole beckoned on that Wednesday morning in September, as it had for over a decade by then. But the tragic turn of events infused the ritual with a somber significance.<sup>99</sup> At Floyd Central High School in southern Indiana, 250 students sheltered from the rain in their school gymnasium as a student played “Amazing Grace” on the bagpipes to honor the dead. Eric Scheibe, a senior at Harrison High School in Atlanta, was resolute. “As the innocent are buried,” he told the 200 classmates who joined him at the flagpole, “our innocence is buried as well.” The spiritual blended with the patriotic at James Middle School in Fort Worth, where, after a few initial prayers, students broke into singing “God Bless America,” “America the Beautiful,” and “The Star-Spangled

<sup>94</sup>Debbie Moore, “Record Underscores ‘Urgency’ in Wake of Wedgwood Shootings,” *Baptist Press*, Sept. 27, 1999, <https://www.baptistpress.com/resource-library/news/reccord-underscores-urgency-in-wake-of-wedgwood-shootings/> (accessed Apr. 18, 2023).

<sup>95</sup>Crawford et al., *Night of Tragedy*, 316–7.

<sup>96</sup>Van Biema, “Terror in the Sanctuary,” 43.

<sup>97</sup>“Bush Promises to Battle Religious Bigotry in Wake of Texas Tragedy.”

<sup>98</sup>Eighty-four percent of white evangelical voters who attended church at least once a week voted for Bush in the 2000 presidential election, and this demographic accounted for roughly one-third of his vote total. See Sheryl Henderson Blunt, “Election 2000: Partisanship in the Pews,” *Christianity Today*, Apr. 2, 2001, 29.

<sup>99</sup>Todd Starnes, “Thousands of Students Find Comfort Around Flagpoles,” *Baptist Press*, Sept. 20, 2001, <https://www.baptistpress.com/resource-library/news/thousands-of-students-find-comfort-around-flagpoles/> (accessed Apr. 18, 2023).

Banner.” Students prayed in particular for the war—no longer merely in the spiritual realm, but in the geopolitical realm—upon which they knew their country was about to embark. Junior Reserve Officers’ Training Corps (JROTC) students at Valley High School in Louisville, Kentucky, outfitted in dress uniforms, prayed that God would guide President Bush and the nation’s military leaders. “I just ask that you would give us the courage to fight back,” prayed Regina Branblett, a junior at Grand Prairie High School in Texas, as JROTC students stood a few feet from her, their eyes closed.<sup>100</sup> That night, President Bush addressed a joint session of Congress and millions of television viewers nationwide. “The course of this conflict is not known, yet its outcome is certain,” he said. “Freedom and fear, justice and cruelty, have always been at war, and we know that God is not neutral between them.”<sup>101</sup>

## Conclusion

If the prayers for war came naturally to the 3 million youth gathered at the nation’s flagpoles on that Wednesday morning, it was because the spatial language of spiritual warfare and spiritual mapping—of infiltration, invasion, occupation—had been a key element of SYATP at its origins. The language of pluralistic presence temporarily overshadowed these motifs in the mid-1990s as advocates for “student-initiated, student-led” expressions of religiosity notched increasing court victories, evangelical students and teachers exercised the rights secured by these cases, and a societal consensus emerged around their appropriateness. Yet the combined shocks of Columbine and Wedgwood shattered evangelicals’ hopes that a peaceful religious pluralism could reign in American public schools. The discourses of spiritual warfare and spiritual mapping, temporarily muted at mid-decade, reemerged as evangelical youth, their parents, and their pastors sought to make sense of their world. The seeds of a renewed evangelical militarism may have come into full bloom after 9/11, but an analysis of SYATP reveals they were planted at Columbine and crucially watered by the Wedgwood shooting.

With its 9/11 edition, SYATP solidified its place in the annual rhythms of American public education and propelled its vision of schoolyard religiosity into the new millennium. If the legislative and legal failures to overturn *Engel v. Vitale* in the 1970s and 1980s had foreclosed the return to an era of school-sponsored prayer, evangelicals in the 1990s had won the consolation of securing “student-initiated” space for their teenaged faithful to bear witness at the foot of the flag. It was an unintended consequence—and perhaps ultimate fulfillment—of evangelicals’ strategic shift to pluralism on the school prayer issue that they were not its only beneficiaries. By the late 1990s, lawyers were successfully leveraging the Equal Access Act to defend the rights of American high school students to form Gay-Straight Alliances.<sup>102</sup> At the same time, battles over religious expression in public schools, as Jonathan Zimmerman has observed, cooled in the 2000s as the legal standard around “student-initiated” activity hardened.<sup>103</sup> This general consensus around students’ religious expression in turn laid crucial legal and cultural groundwork for the formal expansion of these rights to public school employees, as the Supreme Court’s *Kennedy v. Bremerton School District* (2022) decision has shown. In the winding sixty-year path from *Engel* to *Bremerton*, the stunning rise of SYATP from impromptu youth group prayer meeting to annual nationwide ritual in the 1990s clarifies that the Equal Access Act and the *Mergens* decision were the key turning points along the way.

<sup>100</sup>Shelly Moon, “Students Meet for Prayer, Song—Many Ask for Comfort, Strength During Flagpole Service,” *Dallas Morning News*, Sept. 20, 2001, 1Y; Starnes, “Thousands of Students Find Comfort Around Flagpoles.” On American evangelicals’ narratives of Christian persecution, see Melani McAlister, *The Kingdom of God Has No Borders: A Global History of American Evangelicals* (Oxford, UK, 2018), 213–23.

<sup>101</sup>Reprinted in *European Security* 10, no. 4 (2001): 120.

<sup>102</sup>*East High Gay/Straight Alliance v. Board of Educ.*, 81 F. Supp. 2d 1166 (D. Utah 1999); Charles J. Russo, “*Board of Education of Westside Community Schools v. Mergens* at Twenty-Five: An Update on the Equal Access Act,” *Religion & Education* 43, no. 1 (2016): 3–18.

<sup>103</sup>Zimmerman, *Whose America?*, 195–7.

Further, for scholars committed to the project of tracing the militaristic motifs of Christian nationalism in the twenty-first century, SYATP stands out as a potential—largely unexplored—influence. Christian nationalism as an analytical category sheds light on SYATP and the ways in which its spatial orientation around the school flagpole made it both a Christian and a civic exercise—a private expression of belief united to a public symbol of the nation. Nevertheless, it would be an oversimplification to interpret SYATP singularly as a ritual of hard-edged Christian nationalism. SYATP was a far more complex phenomenon, as saturated with multiple meanings as the flag itself. The fears of martyrdom and calls to spiritual warfare that Columbine and Wedgwood inspired served to obscure the underlying pluralist logic of “student-initiated” activity, which in the mid-1990s had won over allies like the ACLU, had scuttled a Republican school prayer amendment, and had made SYATP more legally protected and publicly accepted than ever. The dual spirits of pluralism and patriotic militarism that characterized SYATP were not contradictory. Janus-like, the first spirit reflected efforts to carve out legal and physical space for evangelical spirituality in public schools within the framework of an open public sphere, while the second spirit represented the deeply felt anxieties of evangelical youth, parents, and pastors that could fill those spaces once they were legally secured. This continual feedback loop of minoritarian appeals for “equal access” to the public sphere and majoritarian invocations of Christian nationhood made SYATP at once legally legitimate in the eyes of the courts and the ACLU, spiritually authentic in the eyes of its student participants, and effective as a patriotic grassroots call to spiritual arms. As the example of SYATP reveals, to analyze Christian nationalism without recognizing its underlying pluralist, legitimating logics is to miss the source of much of evangelicalism’s staying power in the late-twentieth-century public sphere, and in our own time. As the United States entered the new millennium, American youth would continue assembling by the millions on a Wednesday morning every September, hoping to encounter God, and see each other, at the pole.

**Benjamin J. Young** is a PhD student in the Department of History at the University of Notre Dame, USA. He specializes in twentieth-century American history, with an interest in the intersections of religion, political economy, and metropolitan development. He is currently at work on a history of evangelicalism in the post-World War II metropolitan South.