

Obama reflects on beliefs at prayer breakfast

by [Kevin Eckstrom](#) in the [May 17, 2011](#) issue

In a pre-Easter prayer breakfast at the White House, President Obama said Jesus' death and resurrection "puts everything else in perspective." Using the kind of personal religious language he once shied away from in public, Obama spoke of "the pain and the scorn and the shame of the cross" at the April 19 gathering for about 150 guests and staff.

"And we're reminded that in that moment, [Jesus] took on the sins of the world—past, present and future—and he extended to us that unfathomable gift of grace and salvation through his death and resurrection," Obama said.

The Easter event displayed the president's willingness to engage religion on his own terms, even though he has decided not to be a regular churchgoer or fully embrace public events like the annual National Day of Prayer.

The Easter breakfast was Obama's second, and following a Passover seder at the White House on April 18, it also reflects an ongoing effort to combat lingering doubts about the president's faith.

Last year's breakfast came in the wake of polls that revealed as many as one in five Americans believe he is a Muslim. Since then, Obama has talked more openly about his personal faith, particularly around holidays like Easter and Christmas.

"He's had this problem with how to practice his faith; every president's had this problem," said Wesley

Granberg-Michaelson, general secretary of the Reformed Church in America, who attended the April 19 breakfast. "And I was thinking this morning that this sort of event is at least one way that he's found, very authentically, to have his faith nurtured," he said.

Presbyterian

Church (U.S.A.) Stated Clerk Gradye Parsons, another guest, called it a "meaningful" gathering. Parsons said it was helpful "to be reminded by a person of great power about the passion and sacrifice of Jesus Christ." Geoffrey A. Black, president of the United Church of Christ, termed it "inspiring and uplifting."

White House officials said

they held the event before Easter so the breakfast wouldn't conflict with participants' own worship services.

Attendees included

several members of the White House faith-based advisory panel, among them Presiding Bishop Mark Hanson of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, Orlando megachurch pastor Joel Hunter and African Methodist Episcopal Bishop Vashti McKenzie.

On April 24, Obama, the First

Lady and their two daughters attended Easter morning services at Shiloh Baptist Church in Washington, which was founded in 1863 by freed slaves originally from Fredericksburg, Virginia. Senior pastor Wallace Charles Smith welcomed the Obama family, who sat in the second row. —RNS