

CAPITOL CHAPLAIN TENDS TO UNUSUAL FLOCK

By Mary Massingale Illinois Statehouse News

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SPRINGFIELD — Room 122A in the state Capitol is probably the least used room in the building — except for 7:30 on Thursday mornings.

Every week during the legislative session, a handful of lawmakers and lobbyists gather in the statehouse chapel for a Bible study led by Pastor Shaun Lewis, the Capitol's unofficial chaplain.

"I'm just like any other missionary," Lewis said. "Just don't call me a lobbyist for God."

The physical description would fit, however, as the 30-year-old Lewis easily blends into the Capitol environment of cell phones and suits. But instead of tracking down lawmakers to push talking points for a piece of legislation, Lewis prepares a weekly, comprehensive Bible study guide and then hand delivers copies to the offices of all 177 legislators, offering to pray with any lawmaker or staff member.

"These are the souls of men and women," he said.

As director — and sole employee — of the Illinois branch of the nonprofit, donation-funded Capitol Commission, Lewis carries out the command written in 1 Timothy 2:1-4: Pray for and evangelize among political leaders. However, Illinois' political culture offers more of a challenge than the commission's 18 other state offices.

"Illinois has got to be one of the more partisan states," he said. "This is such a volatile atmosphere."

A regular participant in the early-morning meetings, Rep. Linda Chapa LaVia, D-Aurora, puts it more simply.

"Politics is not a God-friendly profession," she said.

However, Lewis hopes his weekly Bible studies create some sort of bipartisanship, and the participants at a late-April meeting numbered both Republicans and Democrats. They all cited one issue they agree on: The weekly Bible study is key to keeping the circus of Illinois politics in check.

"You get so busy here — you walk out of the building at 9 o'clock," said state Sen. Tim Bivins, R-Dixon. "You kind of lose your focus. It's great to get this perspective in the middle of the week."

Chapa LaVia agreed.

"It reconnects me to my integrity as a wife and a legislator," she said. "It creates a calmness."

The Rev. Robert D. Vanden Bosch credits that calmness to Lewis' "gentle spirit."

"It creates an atmosphere of genuineness," said Vanden Bosch, the head of Concerned Christian Americans and a longtime statehouse lobbyist.

Authenticity might not seem to fit well in the rough-and-tumble Illinois political arena built on voting strategies and deals made in closed-door, backroom meetings — especially for someone with no political knowledge whatsoever.

"I didn't even know that Illinois doesn't have a Congress — it's a General Assembly," Lewis said.

But what Lewis did know was that ministry was his calling, first realized during his teen years spent teaching at Peoria's Bethany Baptist Church and serving on mission trips to Russia, India and the Philippines.

However, he heeded friends' advice to get "real-life" experience, graduating from Bradley University with a degree in mechanical engineering and working at Caterpillar for three years before making the decision to move his family to Los Angeles so he could attend seminary. Nearing his summer 2007 graduation, he heard of the unique Capitol ministry.

"It clicked when my wife and I realized politicians are people," Lewis said.

Lewis drives home that point when he visits churches across the state, urging congregations to pray for and minister to their elected officials. As a reminder, he leaves copies of his daily prayer list.

The monthly schedule begins with prayers for President Barack Obama, Vice President Joe Biden and Gov. Pat Quinn, and continues each day, listing the names of Illinois' Congressional delegation, Illinois Senate and House members, and U.S. and Illinois Supreme Court justices.

With Illinois' culture and history of political corruption, it may seem a bit much to ask people to pray for politicians, but Lewis stands firm in his mission.

"They are often maligned and misrepresented, and when they hear from their constituents, it's usually in the form of complaints," he said. "They've been elected to have the courage to make decisions, but then again, their job is on the line."

And he also recognizes that people — no matter what their profession — have failings. But those failings are more apt to run rampant in a power-driven environment far from home and family.

"Politics is the art of compromising," Lewis said. "When you're constantly compromising, that starts to penetrate into your morals."

However, the pastor passes no judgment, and he refuses to talk politics with any of his Capitol flock. As the campaign season for the November election heats up, he declined to offer voters any advice, saying any change in politics is only temporal.

"The only way we're going to change things is one heart at a time," Lewis said. "And hearts change minds."

The words sound a bit like a campaign slogan. Is politics in his future?

He laughed. "It's the Gospel that changes lives, not politics," he said.

But some of the Capitol has apparently worn off on him, especially when asked if he wanted to add any final thoughts.

"I'm Shaun Lewis and I approve this message," he said, smiling.