

Global Journalism Initiative Builds Partnership to Strengthen Religion Reporting



■ A priest blesses the faithful at Holyrood Episcopal Church, a multi-lingual congregation in New York City that serves both the hearing and deaf in English and Spanish services (above). ■ Police guard a shrine in Shringar, India, while Kashmiri Muslims pray on the anniversary of the Prophet Muhammad's birth (left).



For Diane Winston, a nationally recognized scholar on the role of religion in media, it's impossible to ignore the many ways religion influences national and global affairs.

"Religion looms large in almost every aspect of society, particularly in the United States," says Winston, who holds the Knight Chair in Media and Religion at the Annenberg School for Communication and Journalism at the University of Southern California. "The intersection of religion and politics, for example, has been very clear. But that's not the only place where religion is front and center."



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Winston cites a series of national and global news events with religious implications, including the treatment of non-Orthodox Jews in Israel, refugee crises in Europe and in Latin America, and the struggles among Muslims in the Middle East. Even views about climate change policy can be influenced by a person’s religious convictions about how people care for the Earth, she says.

That lens—a clear view of how religion plays a role in daily news events—is shared by many journalists trained to cover religion as a beat, according to Bob Smietana, editor-in-chief of Religion News Service (RNS), an independent nonprofit news organization that has been dedicated to religion news coverage for more than 80 years.

“Being a religion reporter is like being an interpreter. If someone translates a document for you word for word from English to Spanish, for example, you would get the gist of the document. But you may not understand what it means fully,” Smietana says. “Religion reporters know the context, the history and the meaning of the language that people of faith speak. We work to help the public understand how religion matters when we cover the events unfolding each day.”

Yet, during the last two decades, economic forces have severely disrupted U.S. news organizations. News operations once significantly funded by paid advertising now must reckon with digital communications and new ways of measuring what kinds of content interests audiences. According to a Pew Research Center report issued in 2019, newsroom employment in the U.S. dropped by 25 percent between 2008 and 2019—a loss of about 28,000 jobs.

“News organizations have had to adapt to digital forms of storytelling, where use of social media and webpage clicks have pushed for up-to-the-minute coverage of a story,” Smietana says. “Often, religion reporting, which requires explanation and context and the expertise of a journalist who understands religion, doesn’t lend itself to shorter, clickable content. It works for a political horse race or for breaking news but not for religion reporting.”

As a result, news media companies have cut back on religion content. Fewer reporters are dedicated to covering religion in 2019 than even a decade earlier, says Winston, who calls the decline in coverage alarming. “In a time when religion looms large we have seen the ranks of religion journalists shrink,” she says. “But to be well-informed in 2020, you need to know more than just the surface of these issues. We don’t dare ignore it.”

reporter in religion; two visual journalists; and a reporter based in Cairo who is covering Islam around the world. At RNS, which has benefited from Endowment grants for religion reporting since 2000, the Global Religion Journalism Initiative grant is supporting the work of the managing editor, a national reporter and a reporter based in Rome who covers the Vatican. At The Conversation US, the grant is helping to fund two religion editors who are strengthening the organization’s coverage of religion and ethics, which began with support from a \$1.3 million 2016 Endowment grant.

Even though the initiative is a pilot, early outcomes have been positive. In the first six months, the three organizations published more than 150 religion stories in addition to their regular output. The stories ranged from breaking news at the Vatican and in the Middle East to a feature about mental health after the suicide of prominent pastor Jarrod Wilson to an explanation of how Sikhs practice faith in the United States. Many of the stories are reaching new readers through the combined efforts of the publications.

“This is the right time for this initiative,” says Sally Stapleton, one of the new AP editors, who recalls a time when most newspapers were staffed with religion reporters. “Even as digital communication has created a more interconnected society, we’re less educated about what’s going on with beliefs and ethics worldwide at a time that it matters the most. In many ways we feel more fractured.”

Stapleton suggests one cause of that division is increasingly aggressive commentary that can dominate social media. The Global Religion Journalism Initiative is dedicated to balanced, fair and accurate reporting—about religion in the news and about people of faith—focused on increasing the public’s understanding of religion.



Grant seeks to significantly expand religion reporting

Support to increase the volume, quality and reach of religion reporting is at the heart of a \$4.9 million Endowment grant to develop the Global Religion Journalism Initiative, a collaboration among The Associated Press (AP), RNS, and a third news partner, The Conversation US, which provides explanatory journalism from academic authors. The grant was awarded to the Religion News Foundation (RNF) that supports RNS, to help fund the costs for the 18-month startup phase, including the hiring of religion reporters, editors and other staff members.

Through the initiative, The AP created a global religion editor position to lead a new team of eight journalists who report on faith and its influence throughout the world. The grant helped The AP also hire a religion news editor; a religion and politics reporter; a journalist focusing on youth and faith; an investigative

■ Hasidic Jewish leaders gather during the International Conference of Chabad-Lubavitch Emissaries in New York (opposite). ■ A Buddhist man lights an oil lamp and prays at a temple on the outskirts of Colombo, Sri Lanka (left). A young worshipper attends a prayer service in Santa Rosa, Brazil, a remote village in the Amazon Rainforest (below).



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Collaboration is central to strengthening that approach, so editors from the three publications gather regularly to discuss coverage plans and how each organization's journalism can contribute. Coverage produced in 2019 featured such overarching themes as religious organizations that face institutional change, the role of religion in conflicts around the world, and the religious and spiritual experiences of ordinary people.

Success is in the work

Reflecting on 2019, leadership at both The AP and RNS highlighted a multimedia story about worship among people who are deaf. It's an example of how cooperation can bring success. The story focused on Holyrood Episcopal Church-Iglesia Santa Cruz in New York City. RNS reporter Luis Andreas Henao told the story about parishioners who believe, as he wrote, "that what might be considered a limitation has strengthened their sense of community and expanded their understanding of God and the sacred gift of silence in a noisy world."



“We mentioned it to The AP, and the editors there were excited to capture video for the project,” Smietana recalls. Then, editors at The Conversation US connected with the story. One of their contributors, Jana Bennett, a professor of religious studies at the University of Dayton, authored a personal essay about her research into how people with hearing loss engage their faith through unique forms of worship and prayer. The project was distributed to several thousand of The AP’s members and customers worldwide.

As part of the initiative, the three partners are tracking religion stories produced through the collaboration and the reach of those stories across their national and international networks. And they continue to experiment with new approaches for their collaboration while still in this pilot phase. Stapleton says she is hopeful that the collaborative approach will increase the value of religion content to news organizations.

It’s already happening among journalists at AP bureaus around the world. They’re embracing the increased emphasis in religion coverage by adding their own stories to the mix and reaching out to new colleagues with expertise in religion to enhance those stories. Inspired by the initiative’s quality at The AP, journalists in Paris stepped up with a Christmas feature in 2019 about the venerable 855-year-old Cathedral de Notre Dame, which had been nearly destroyed by fire earlier in the year. “This is the first time since the French Revolution, that there will be no midnight Mass (at Notre Dame),” the cathedral’s rector told the AP reporter.

Leveraging relationships to expand reach

For The Conversation US, the new religion reporting collaboration is an opportunity to expand the reach of its work: promoting explanatory journalism produced by academic authors from colleges and universities across the United States.

The Conversation began in Australia in 2011. It launched in the U.S. in 2014, focusing on arts and culture, government and politics, environment and energy, education, science and technology, business and economics, and health, adding religion and ethics content two years later.

In 2019, religion content from The Conversation US was republished in media outlets as varied as Fox News, MSNBC, the *San Francisco Chronicle*, the *Chicago Tribune*, CNN, and *The Washington Post*, according to Bruce Wilson, chief innovation and development officer for The Conversation US.

Wilson says the impact of the Global Religion Journalism Initiative has the potential to be far-reaching, especially in addressing divisions across the United States. “People don’t typically get access to objective, evidence-based, well-sourced content about religion,” he says. “Often it is very opinionated. A lot of the media generated is playing to segmented audiences, giving people the information they think they want.”

All of us are “attempting to bring really good content to the public that brings hope and objectivity,” Wilson says. “It allows people to see things from different perspectives. We will distribute the same news to the left, right, red, blue, urban and rural. They all will have access to the same objective journalism.”

That’s what makes the Global Religion Journalism Initiative groundbreaking, Wilson adds. “At the end of the day, the public is now getting access to really well-written and fact-based information,” he says. “By funding really good journalism, Lilly Endowment is helping to democratize knowledge. The initiative is showing what’s possible.”

■ A Buddhist family (opposite) approaches a temple on the outskirts of Kandy, Sri Lanka, where religious tensions have emerged amid political change. ■ Students gather early to attend former U.S. President Jimmy Carter’s Sunday school class at Maranatha Baptist Church in Plains, Ga. (below).



Called to Lives of Meaning and Purpose

“This is an opportunity to discern what God will have you do next.”

As a participant in Samford University’s Life is Calling program, St. Simon Peter Episcopal Church welcomed the opportunity to discover how God was calling members to live out their faith individually as Christians and collectively as a Christian community in Pell City, Alabama. Encouraged by Kelly Rhodes Adams, project coordinator for Life is Calling, the church formed an “Imagination Committee” that asked parish members to consider such questions as: How might we discern and experience God’s call on our lives? Where is God calling us to serve? To assist St. Simon Peter Church and other participating congregations in the Samford program, Adams and her team of consultants spent the last half of 2019 creating and piloting a curriculum focused on individual calling.

“The goal was to foster and facilitate conversation that would lead individuals to a deeper understanding of calling as multi-faceted and seasonal in a way that encompasses our whole life and whole self,” she explains. “Participants were encouraged not only to think about where their ‘deep gladness meets the world’s deep need’ by considering their passions and gifts but also the season of life they’re in and how God could be calling them through the various roles of that season.” These roles might include those of employee, retiree, parent, grandparent, caregiver, mentor, friend, empty-nester, newlywed or volunteer.

To better understand God’s call on their collective faith community, the Imagination Committee at St. Simon Peter Church invited a Samford program consultant to lead a four-week series of classes. Applying the lessons that emerged from the series, members identified several new ministry possibilities. In the end, they embraced the idea of a respite program for caregivers of persons with dementia. “Their community is aging, and they’ve seen the toll that memory loss can have on families,” says Adams.

Leading a team at Samford, Adams is helping parishioners at St. Simon Peter and 15 other congregations in Alabama hear God’s call to minister outwardly—as with caregivers. But just as meaningful is the work of helping individuals discover where God is calling them. “God is calling us in many ways. We need to nurture disciplines that will help us listen and discern, and to consider our faith lives within our families and at work and school,” Adams says. “To create a culture of calling within the church, we must recognize and affirm individual calling, in its myriad forms, in ourselves and others.”



Cascading communities of learning

Samford University is one of 13 faith-based organizations that have received grants to create “innovation hubs” as part of Lilly Endowment’s \$20 million Called to Lives of Meaning and Purpose Initiative. Begun in 2017 and continuing for five years, each hub is working under the guidance of an experienced leader, such as Adams, to accomplish the initiative’s central goals:

- to nurture the religious lives of Christians by helping them discover and fully experience God’s call; and
- to enhance the vitality of congregations by developing or expanding ministries that enable Christians to live out their callings in community.

Unique to the initiative is its multi-tiered organizational structure. The Collegeville Institute for Ecumenical and Cultural Research at Collegeville, Minn., serves as coordinator of the program’s many moving parts and provides learning opportunities—including an annual conference—for hub leaders. These leaders, in turn, create learning opportunities for up to 24 congregational teams that make up the individual hubs. Retreats, webinars, Zoom sessions and dedicated Facebook pages are among the educational activities and resources available to the churches through the hubs. The coordination program also gathers hub teams for learning opportunities focused on innovation and evaluation. Each participating congregation is

creating a project and can apply for a grant of up to \$30,000 to launch or expand a ministry that supports the initiative's intent.

"This truly is an experiment," says Kathleen Cahalan, director of the coordination program. "Lilly Endowment has a long commitment to exploring vocation and calling in the Christian life, and much of the past work has focused on young adults through college campus programs. Now the Endowment is extending those efforts to larger audiences—people in congregations, their pastors and other leaders—and using these innovation hubs as a strategy for reaching them."

The experiment is not without its challenges, but hub leaders have embraced the concept and anticipate positive results. "We're helping Christians grasp two important themes," explains Nancy Going, program director of the C3 hub (Creating a Culture of Calling) and executive director of Vibrant Faith. "First, we Christians don't have just one calling; God calls us to do multiple things. Second, these callings likely change throughout our lifetimes."

A variety of approaches

An early decision that each hub had to make was determining its criteria for selecting participating congregations. The Endowment didn't prescribe a process, only urged hubs to be innovative in their designs. As a result, the Samford hub chose to limit applicants to Alabama churches but sought diversity in size, member demographics and faith tradition. Virginia Theological Seminary's hub opted to work



within the Episcopal denomination. The hub run by the American Baptist College reached out to African American congregations and aimed its first year of programming specifically to pastors rather than laity. Vibrant Faith recruited "congregations we thought could handle an initiative like this and weren't so involved in a crisis that they couldn't move forward," says Going.

Among the most ecumenical hubs is the Communities of Calling Initiative based at the Collegeville Institute. Its congregational teams represent churches from multiple denominations located in urban and

■ A mural (opposite) reflecting the work of vocational discernment projects with congregations across the country was a focal point for participants of a 2019 gathering of project leaders in Indianapolis (above, below).





rural settings in 10 states and Canada. The cohort gathered together for the first time in fall 2018 to begin reflecting on their experiences of calling, as individuals and as members of congregational teams.

“We brought the teams together in a retreat setting,” recalls project director Laura Kelly Fanucci. “We wanted to give them time and space to connect with each other and begin to wrestle with questions of calling. It was interesting to have a Free Methodist pastor and an Orthodox priest who rarely end up in the same room, finding common ground around practices related to calling. It’s been beautiful to see their openness to learn about this issue from each other.”

Because of the diverse needs and contexts of hub members leaders have been flexible in tailoring learning experiences appropriate to their congregations. As the initiative has unfolded, plans have been tweaked, pacing has been adjusted and new resources have been explored in response to the groups’ needs. Pastors, in particular, have expressed appreciation for the opportunity to take a break from the busyness of day-to-day ministry, dispense with tight deadlines and consider where their churches are going in the next several years. “This is not a prepackaged program,” says Adams. “Participants have the freedom to pause and ask, ‘In our unique context and in this moment of time, where is God calling us as individuals and as a congregation?’”

The power of cross-fertilization

Two years into the initiative, the chemistry within the hubs and among the congregations is palpable. Teams take it upon themselves to visit each other’s worship services, share resources and propose joint gatherings apart from formally scheduled events. When Vibrant Faith hub leaders offered to teach a workshop on coaching strategies, the Collegeville hub agreed to host the sessions, and representatives from 10 of the 13 hubs attended the training. When the hub located at the Samuel DeWitt Proctor Conference slated its annual conference for Birmingham, Ala., the leaders reached out to the nearby hubs at Samford University and American Baptist College and suggested they gather for a pre-conference workshop. “We talked about issues facing

our churches, especially from the standpoint of social and racial justice,” says Adams. “It was transformative for our participants.”

At December’s annual meeting in Indianapolis, hub leaders engaged in “cross-fertilization”—their term for swapping ideas about ways to respond to the challenges they face. Most leaders are at the point in the initiative where they are receiving grant proposals that detail each congregation’s plan to launch or expand a ministry. With the help of the annual meeting’s attendees, facilitator Steven Tomlinson compiled a list of likely obstacles that could impede the success of some proposals. These obstacles included a lack of creativity; fatigue among volunteers; fear of failure; conflict within a team; and the tug between innovation and tradition.

A common dilemma that many hub leaders reported was the tendency of congregations to request grant support for ministries that are worthy of implementation but are unrelated to the intent of the initiative.

“Discernment is about listening to the still, small voice that takes Christians to a deeper place,” Tomlinson reminded them. “This initiative gives congregations an opportunity to discern what God will have them do next.”

Fast forward five years

Evaluation is a key component of all Endowment programs, and hub leaders already are gathering information about the lessons learned from the Called to Lives of Meaning and Purpose Initiative. Hub leaders agree that at the end of the initiative’s five-year span, they want the legacy to be more than the establishment or growth of several congregational ministries. They hope conversations about discernment will be ongoing, and the concept of discipleship will have fresh meaning for individual Christians and for entire communities of faith.

“We typically think of churches as places that don’t want to try new things,” says Adams. “But I’ve been surprised at the number of congregations that said, ‘Sign us up!’ when they heard about this initiative. For me, success will be less about the projects that they propose and more about their willingness to experiment and to look for new ways to be a neighbor to their immediate communities. They’re learning a process of discernment that is tailored to their congregations and that will help them in the future to discern where God is calling them to serve.”

■ Phyllis D.K. Hildreth (above), who directs the Called to Lives of Meaning and Purpose Initiative at American Baptist College in Nashville, Tenn., took part in the 2019 gathering in Indianapolis.

Vocation matters

In March 2019, nearly 700 people representing close to 200 U.S. colleges and universities gathered in Louisville for the national conference of NetVUE, the Network for Vocation in Undergraduate Education. NetVUE's director David Cunningham welcomed a capacity crowd with the words of the late American poet Mary Oliver: "Tell me, what is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?"

Presidents, provosts, chaplains, professors and student life leaders came together to learn from one another about how to help students navigate the interplay of meaning-of-life questions, career preparation and religious exploration. They came eager to trade ideas and share resources as they continue to help their campuses be places where students cultivate lifelong practices of vocational discernment.

Now in its 10th year, NetVUE grew out of the Endowment's highly collaborative Programs for the Theological Exploration of Vocation (PTEV) initiative introduced in 1999. The purpose of PTEV was to encourage college students on 88 campuses to examine the relationship between their faith traditions and life choices. The objective: nurture a new generation of talented and committed leaders for religious communities and society.

"PTEV had a significant impact on the colleges and universities that participated," says Harold V. Hartley III, senior vice president at the Council of Independent Colleges (CIC), which had many member schools that received Endowment planning, implementation and sustaining grants to fund PTEV programs on their campuses. When this grant support for the PTEV initiative ended, several presidents at participating schools approached CIC to explore ways to continue the work. "They told us they were going to miss the opportunity to learn from each other," says Hartley. "They were willing to pay dues to help sustain the program."

In 2009, NetVUE's first year, 125 colleges and universities became founding members. Since then, membership has grown by about 10 percent annually. At the end of 2019 more than 260 schools were NetVUE members. Membership dues cover operational expenses, and an Endowment grant to CIC supports NetVUE's effort so that member schools can:

- tap into the resources of an online community
- participate in NetVUE's biennial conference
- take part in annual faculty development seminars
- interact with peers at regional gatherings
- apply for grants to strengthen their vocational exploration programs.

NetVUE schools vary in size and denominational roots. They are in every region across the United States and they run a wide variety of programs. Yet, they share

several challenges, including increased religious diversity on campuses and the need to help students develop marketable job skills while encouraging them to find a sense of direction motivated by faith and develop a commitment to serve the needs of others.

"A lot of folks are talking about developing a mentoring process that is attentive both to meaning-of-life questions and career-preparation questions," says Cunningham. "By their nature, liberal arts campuses attract students who are eager to have those conversations." He cites a "synergy" that exists among administrators, faculty, campus ministers, academic advisors and placement personnel at NetVUE schools. "All things are knitted together to help students think holistically about life's big questions before and beyond graduation."

Cunningham and his staff are leading a 10-year evaluation to learn about NetVUE's long-term impact. "We're looking at what a difference the network is making on campuses," he says. "We hope that vocational discernment will become a habit throughout students' lives. We expect one of the outcomes to be a kind of resilience so when graduates of these programs encounter obstacles or find that a vocational direction isn't working for them, they have the ability to retool and adjust."



■ David Cunningham (above) directs NetVUE.