

New support for RNS

By [John Dart](#)

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When newspaper circulation in the U.S. peaked in the 1970s and '80s, large news outlets could afford to have specialists covering such fields as science, medicine, legal affairs, environment and religion. At the *Los Angeles Times*, where I worked for three decades through 1998, there were always at least two or three of us on the religion beat.

In recent years the *Times* has had a slot for only one religion specialist. Many mid-sized papers have no full-time person covering religion news.

Filling the gap for many news outlets is Religion News Service, a nonsectarian service based in Washington, D.C. Once under the aegis of the nonprofit National Conference of Christians and Jews, RNS was bought by Advance Publications 17 years ago. But the company began seeking a buyer for RNS in 2009.

So it was encouraging when Lilly Endowment [announced](#) a three-year, nearly \$3.5 million grant to expand RNS's reporting and online presence. Returning to a nonprofit status was necessary if RNS wanted at least some initial help from Lilly, which has been the primary supporter of [Religion & Ethics Newsweekly](#) on PBS since 1997.

The lynchpin in this transition was the [Religion Newswriters Association](#). Begun in 1949, RNA's nationwide group of journalists set examples of honest and enterprising reporting of religion news through contests and annual meetings, but its informality left it unprepared for leaner times.

Debra L. Mason, a onetime religion reporter in Columbus, Ohio, saw the need for a manager to improve RNA's annual conferences and its newsletter--and to do some fundraising to put together an organization that would serve newcomers and veterans on the "God beat."

While working on her doctorate, Mason built an organizational structure--including the Religion Newswriters Foundation--and expanded the eligibility for RNA membership to educators, students and writers/editors from publications such as the *National Catholic Reporter* and the *Century*. No public relations people allowed, however.

Mason eventually got a faculty post at the University of Missouri School of Journalism. That venerable J-school and its Reynolds Journalism Institute now serve as hosts for both RNS and RNA.

I was the RNA president in 1990-92, but it was after my tenure that Debra came aboard and became the artisan that her last name suggested. Knowing that RNA had intermittent crises related to journalism's troubles, I expressed the hope to her that the Lilly grant would also allow the writers group to stay afloat.

She replied that RNA was never in jeopardy--that it has a annual budget of more than \$100,000 and had raised more than \$300,000 in 2010 for RNA's foundation. "I think, however, that it's fair to say it gives longer life to RNS," she added.