

Religion news gets boost from Lilly, writers group

by [John Dart](#) in the [June 14, 2011](#) issue

In a complex transaction designed to strengthen nonpartisan religion reporting, the newly nonprofit Religion News Service received a grant of almost \$3.5 million from the Lilly Endowment and was acquired by the Religion Newswriters Association, effective June 1.

As newspaper circulation numbers fell and online journalism struggled for profits, "religion reporting became a lower priority," said RNA president Steve Maynard. When the for-profit Advance Publications sought a buyer for RNS in the fall of 2009, the Washington-based news service looked for help from the professional journalists' organization beyond the RNA's existing role of providing contracted assistance to RNS's business operations.

RNA officials approved a proposal to buy RNS provided that it could become a nonprofit entity. In a May 19 letter to RNA members, Maynard said that the news service would not seek to gain a competitive edge over other members and that RNS's newly envisioned regional news websites would not be created in areas where media outlets already have religion reporters.

Debra L. Mason, executive director of RNA and the Religion Newswriters Foundation, said in an e-mail interview, "Some journalists were not comfortable being part of the management structure of another media outlet or using our foundation reserves or exposing them to possible risk." As a result, Religion News LLC, a nonprofit body, was formed in 2010.

The purchase price for RNS was not disclosed, but Mason said that "almost 100 percent" of the three-year Lilly grant goes to three things: "to help convert RNS into a multimedia-rich site, to help create up to 20 local/regional religion hubs and to fund additional RNS staff."

The collaboration also forges ties between RNS and the University of Missouri School of Journalism, where Mason is a professor. The news service's editorial offices will remain in the nation's capital, sharing space with Missouri's programs at the National Press Building.

Kevin Eckstrom, RNS editor-in-chief, praised Lilly "for sharing our vision that we need more, not less, coverage of a subject that is at the heart of so much of our national and global life." Eckstrom said an expanded RNS will include a revamped, interactive website and more coverage of topics such as religion and politics.

"This is an important development, and very much a sign of the times," said Stewart M. Hoover, director of the Center for Media, Religion and Culture at the University of Colorado at Boulder. "RNS has a strong history and an important legacy, but will need increasingly to adapt to the new situation."