

Religion news vies for space as newspapers downsize: Economic concerns

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The *Dallas Morning News* recently received the Religion Communicators Council award for the nation's best religion section. It was the 10th time in 11 years that the *News* had won, and it has reaped similar prizes in annual Religion Newswriters Association contests.

Unfortunately for the *News*, there's no chance for another title. In January the newspaper discontinued the section, citing economic concerns.

It isn't the only publication deciding to drop sections devoted to religion. The *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* recently combined religion with its "living" pages, while the *Wichita (Kansas) Eagle* dropped its religion editor and downsized the beat.

No one has sensed yet that great numbers of religion reporters and editors are losing their jobs, though specialty news beats such as religion, science and education often suffer during times of economic cutbacks.

The broader problem is an industrywide trend of declining newspaper circulations and increased layoffs. According to the Annual Report on American Journalism, there was a net loss of 600 full-time professional employees at daily newspapers in 2005. And early indications are that 2006 may have been twice as bad.

Religion analyst Martin Marty, a longtime columnist for the *Christian Century*, has written about the "dire" economic situation of newspapers, magazines and other print media in a March essay, "The Decline of Print News," for the "Sightings" Web newsletter.

"Religion and faith-and-values sections are dying not because there is not enough to report on in 'religion,'" Marty said. "Religion has seldom been so newsworthy or comment-inducing as it has become in recent decades."

Some experts believe that the decline in newspaper circulation is directly related to the growth of online editions and blogs. Convenience and the ability to sift news in a topic-specific medium have caused previously devoted print subscribers to substitute the Internet for their daily paper. And fewer print readers means less ad revenue to fund special sections.

But Brad Owens, a journalism professor at Baylor University, described the print media as in transition rather than in decline.

Now more than ever, religion tends to be a topic especially covered on the Internet, he said. "I think religion is a type [of news] where special Web sites and blogs kind of feed people's interest more than the traditional model of journalism would," Owens said.

A negative side of that trend is that users generally visit the Web looking for specific information. That means they may miss more of the subtler or peripheral news they would get in a religion section.

Richard Oppel, editor of the *Austin American-Statesman*, said termination of a religion section is not the tragedy it's made out to be. The *Statesman* covers faith-based news throughout its pages and includes a "faith page" inside the features section on Saturdays.

"I never believed in religion 'sections,'" Oppel said via e-mail. "They were a showy response to an obvious reader interest when newspapers were in their salad days. But they were dependent on advertising, and advertising can be thin in that sector. Also, if you are slave to a section, then you deprive the front page of some great stuff."

In fact, the absence of a strictly "religious" section means faith-related stories must appear throughout the newspaper—a distribution that more closely reflects reality. As preachers often say, faith isn't just for Sundays.

Debra Mason, Religion Newswriters Association executive director, echoed the sentiment. In an RNA newsletter, she wrote: "Hundreds of daily newspapers do not and never have had religion sections. Instead, religion news is integrated throughout the paper. We should not confuse religion sections with religion news as a whole."

The *Dallas Morning News* has taken the high interest in faith-based stories to heart. Religion news competes well for page-one space, and the newspaper's religion blog

and newsletter continue to grow in popularity. -*Hannah Elliott, Associated Baptist Press*