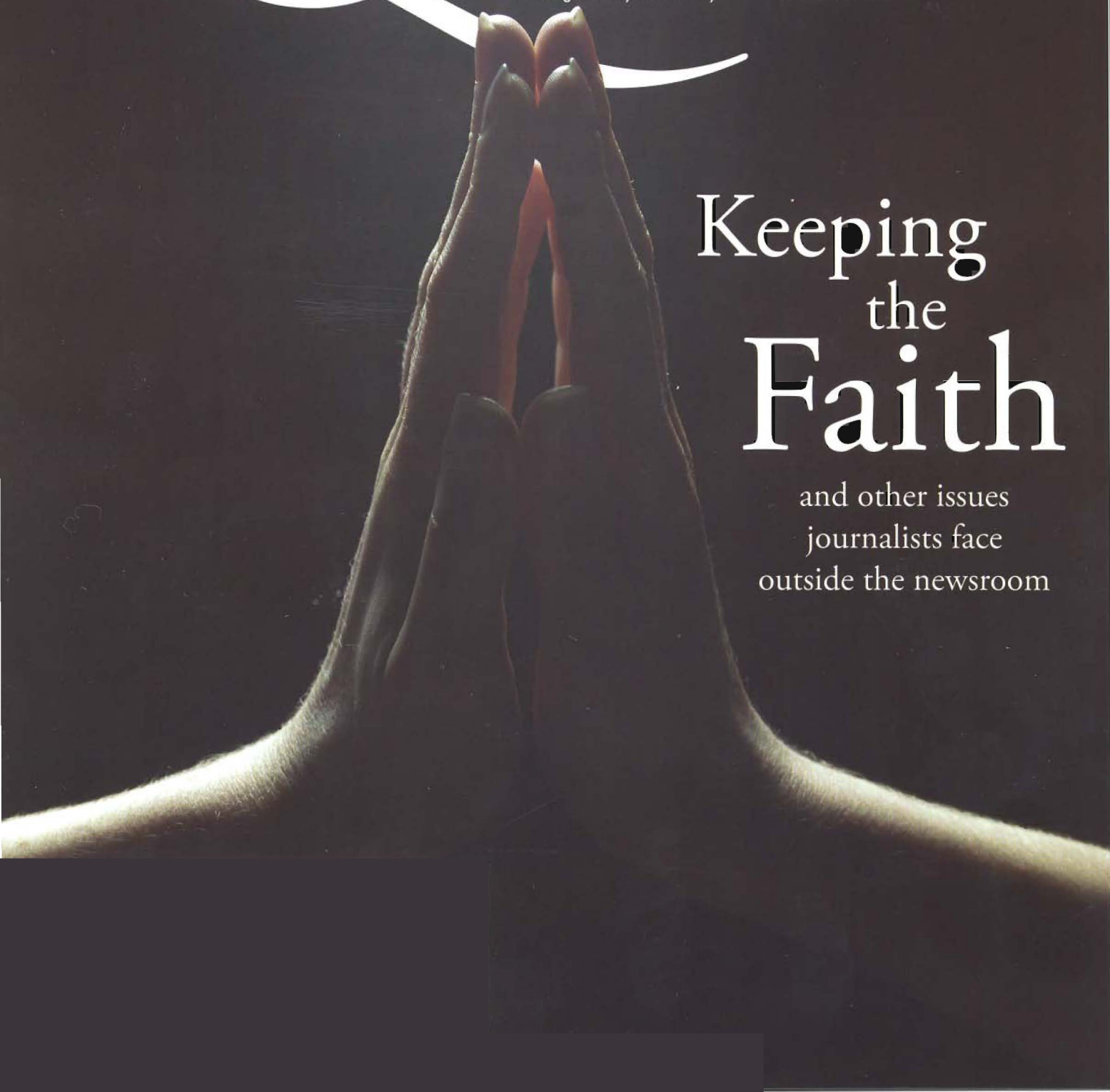


Quill

May 2008

A magazine by the Society of Professional Journalists



Keeping the Faith

and other issues
journalists face
outside the newsroom

Keeping The Faith

When Los Angeles Times reporter William Lobdell was given the religion beat, he believed God had, literally, answered his prayers.

But, as Lobdell confessed last summer in a first-person, front-page Times story, eight years of religion reporting that included the worst of the priest sex abuse scandals took a personal, painful toll.

by Debra L. Mason

A one-time born-again Christian, Lobdell said reporting on the darker side of religion led him to lose his faith. He also told his editors he wanted off the beat. Although journalists are stereotyped as a secular and nonreligious lot, surveys show that about 70 percent of journalists profess a faith tradition.

With religion as a component in today's front page news — from the war in Iraq to the U.S. presidential campaign — it's harder for journalists to separate their private faith from their public profession.

People's religious beliefs affect how they vote, raise their children, and spend their time and money. As Lobdell's story shows, it can affect their work as a journalist, too, regardless of their beat, medium or position.

Common sense and experience help guide journalists wondering whether it's possible to follow a faith tradition, while being trained to question everything.

Lobdell's example shows — and he's not alone — that sometimes a journalist's job challenges a person's faith. But thousands of others find no such contradiction. And a very small, but growing, number of journalists see working in the mainstream media as a religious mission.

Tips for handling faith on the job

Although politicians rarely ask journalists their political preferences, reporters on all beats may be asked their religion when querying sources about matters of faith.

Veteran religion reporters, who are used to the question, say there is no single right way to respond. In an era in which journalistic transparency is prized, some journalists are upfront. Others answer in general terms — “I'm Christian” or “I'm Jewish” — and move on with the interview. Some deflect the question and explain it's the source's beliefs that are pertinent.

No matter what approach, journalists should assure sources they are able to report about a source's faith with accuracy and fairness.

Reporting on people you disagree with

Most journalists have practice reporting about people they disagree with. Religion introduces a new intensity to that challenge.

It's one thing to be a political reporter who votes Democratic and interviews Republicans. It's another thing when a reporter's sacred beliefs are ridiculed by a source who's a lead story.

Reporters must remember that their job is to report, not

comment or judge. The inclusion of context is important, as is representing diverse views. Journalists also should live by the principle that being true to one's faith does not require being false to another's.

Of course, as with any story, if you really can't report fairly on someone whose religion you disagree with, ask to be taken off the story.

Conflict of interest

Every journalist encounters a conflict of interest at some point, but religion brings special considerations. In general, reporters don't join organizations they cover, but prohibiting a journalist from belonging to a religious group violates that person's First Amendment right to practice religion.

The boundaries between what is and isn't ethical for a journalist when faith is involved are murky, but again, common sense should rule.

For example, if you feed homeless people at a shelter each month with your synagogue or mosque, should you avoid writing about homeless people? If you're a Sunday school teacher, should you avoid writing about religious education? Generally, when religion is involved, it is acceptable to report on activities similar to those you participate in.

There are, however, some activities you should avoid, including:

- Reporting on your own place of worship.
- Reporting on issues from which you cannot separate your religious beliefs. (For example, if your tradition teaches that homosexuality is a sin and you do not feel you can impartially cover a gay rights march, you should recuse yourself from coverage.)
- Any leadership position (in a religious body) that would compromise your ability to report impartially about a religious tradition.
- Promoting your faith tradition above others in your reporting.
- Profiling people you know through your religious life.
- Reporting on issues for which you've advocated on behalf of your faith group.

Finding support

Some journalists keep a Bible on their desk as a signal of their faith. In other cases, dress or religious practice may make it clear.

Society of Professional Journalists

Freelancer Directory

Such signals help others in the newsroom to identify same-faith co-workers who can serve as an informal support network.

National conferences have elements of support as well. For example, at the National Association of Black Journalists' annual meeting, some members gather to sing in a gospel choir.

For others, particularly Christians, two growing, New York-based international organizations encourage the faith within the mainstream media.

Gegrapha is a fellowship for Christians who are journalists. It draws a line between the profession of journalism and evangelistic activity, however. It encourages ethical and moral behavior among Christians who are journalists.

"We believe in the integrity of the profession, and we reject the use of journalism for any political, philosophical or religious propagandistic purposes, even those pertaining to Christianity," their Web site states.

The World Journalism Institute is an evangelical Christian organization with a mission "to recruit, equip, place and encourage journalists who are Christians in the mainstream newsrooms of America."

WJI is selective as to which Christians are welcome at their events, asking for attendees to recount their "personal testimony of spiritual redemption and sanctification, including your theological understandings." WJI believes that having more Christians in newsrooms helps the media present a diversity of viewpoints.

WJI holds conferences independently, and in coordination with national groups such as UNITY and the Associated Collegiate Press.

Finally, journalists seeking to combine their spiritual and work lives might consider working for a religious publication.

Regardless of the faith, many of these publications belong to associations such as the Jewish Press Association or Catholic Press Association, at which journalists can more easily mingle their practice of a faith with the practice of their profession. ❖

Portions of this article originally appeared in Reporting on Religion: A Primer on Journalism's Best Beat. Copyright 2006 Religion Newswriters. Used by permission. The entire book is available for free online at: www.RNA.org.

Debra L. Mason is executive director of Religion Newswriters and director of the Center on Religion & the Professions at the University of Missouri's School of Journalism, where she teaches religion reporting and writing.

For more information about SPJ's freelance directory and membership, please contact National Headquarters at (317) 927-8000, ext. 203, or spj@spj.org.

**Congratulations to
Marshall University's
School of Journalism and
Mass Communications
Mark of Excellence award winners.**

W. Page Pitt

JMC
School of Journalism &
Mass Communications

Breaking News Reporting

Second place: **Casey Rowe**, a senior from Scott Depot, W.Va.; **Sarina Lopresti**, a senior from Poughquag, N.Y.; and **Leann Dickens**, a senior from Orgas, W.Va., "Emmons fire kills 9, including students"

Editorial Writing

First place: **Kristin Steele**, a junior from Wayne, W.Va., and **Brad Bader**, a graduate student from Winfield, W.Va.

Breaking News Photography

First place: **Jennifer Chapman**, a senior from Barboursville, W.Va., "Stirring up campus"

Radio News Reporting

First place: **Kimberly Burcham**, a senior from Huntington, "Storytime for West Virginia"

Second place: **Adam Cavalier**, a junior from Montgomery, W.Va., "Redefining education at Marshall"

Third place: **Kimberly Burcham**, "Abortion on campus: Views from the right and left"

Radio Feature

First place: **Adam Cavalier**, "A mellow fellowship: Mark Zanter feature"

Second place: **Adam Cavalier**, "Pumpkin house: trick or treat night"

Third place: **Kimberly Burcham**, "Harmonica musings"

Radio In-Depth Reporting

First place: **Blaire Morse**, a recent graduate from Shelbyville, Ky.,

"The quest for healthy breasts"

Second place: **Angela Bradley**, a recent graduate from Winfield, W.Va.,

"The growing minority on college campuses: the single parent"

Radio Sports Reporting

First place: **Adam Cavalier**, "The name's pronounced Due-biss-ee"

Third place: **Ryan Epling**, a graduate student from Wayne, W.Va.,

"Yulia Kachelkina" feature

Radio Newscast

First place: WMUL-FM Staff, Marshall University, "Newscenter 88"

THE PARTHENON

The Parthenon is one of the oldest university newspapers.



WMUL-FM 88.1 has won more than 750 awards for its programming since 1985.

M.U. Report

MU Report is the student-produced television newscast of Marshall University.

W. Page Pitt School of Journalism
and Mass Communications

One John Marshall Drive
Huntington, WV 25755
304-696-2360

www.marshall.edu/sojmc

