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The Religion Beat Gets Beat: The Rise and Fall of Stand-alone Religion Sections in Southern Newspapers, 1983-2015

Tara Yvette Wren

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THE RELIGION BEAT GETS BEAT: THE RISE AND FALL OF STAND-ALONE
RELIGION SECTIONS IN SOUTHERN NEWSPAPERS, 1983-2015

by

Tara Yvette Wren

A Dissertation
Submitted to the Graduate School,
the College of Arts and Sciences
and the School of Communication
at The University of Southern Mississippi
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

Approved by:

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the religious news coverage of five southern newspapers in Georgia, Tennessee, Mississippi, North Carolina, and Texas. The newspapers researched in this study are among those that published a stand-alone religion section. Newspapers surveyed include – *The Clarion-Ledger* (Mississippi), *The Charlotte Observer* (North Carolina), *The Dallas Morning News* (Texas), *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution* (Georgia), and *The Tennessean* (Tennessee). The period researched focused on stand-alone religion sections published from the papers mentioned above between 1983 and 2015. This timeframe was when newspapers across the country turned a keener focus toward religion coverage. This study investigates religious perspectives, practices, beliefs, and values of that era. It is also essential because it provides a broad view of how southern newspapers' focus on religion impacted communities. Each paper was analyzed using different methodologies based on the data availability and accesses and persons available for interviews. This study examines the evolution of each paper's religion reporting methods, themes, and graphic layouts of the stand-alone sections. This study highlights the historical impact of researched publications and what events influenced their development. It also takes a unique perspective in assessing how each paper used its religion section to harmonize with the public's sentiments at the time.

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Thanks be to God for strength, favor, and the ability to conquer this most prestigious task. He alone has been my ultimate guide and power source.

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Thanks to Mr. Thomas Lambert who provided a keen eye to each word. Also, this dissertation would not have the depth it does had it not been for the meaningful conversations with news industry professionals. To each of them, who were willing to provide information and context, I am incredibly thankful.

DEDICATION

I dedicate this dissertation to the two women in my life who have always supported me in all my endeavors – my mother, Dr. Mangle L. Shanks, and grandmother, Ms. Dora Lee Shanks Wren. They transferred their intelligence, smarts, wit, ability to persevere, and resilience on to me, and I am most appreciative.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT.....	ii
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	iii
DEDICATION	iv
LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS	xii
LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS.....	xiii
CHAPTER I – INTRODUCTION.....	1
Overview of Newspapers.....	3
Background	5
The Bible Belt	8
THESIS STATEMENT	8
RESEARCH QUESTIONS	9
METHODOLOGY	9
RESEARCH METHODS PER NEWSPAPER	10
The Clarion-Ledger Newspaper.....	10
The Dallas Morning News	11
The Atlanta Journal-Constitution.....	11
The Charlotte Observer.....	12

The Tennessean.....	12
CHAPTER II – LITERATURE REVIEW	14
Advocacy for Religion News Coverage	18
The Dallas Morning News	19
Religion Beat Obstacles	20
More Focused Religion Coverage	22
No Revenue, No Religion	23
CHAPTER III – THE DALLAS MORNING NEWS	25
Introduction.....	25
History of the Paper	25
Origins of the Religious Column	26
Changes over Time	31
Community Reflection.....	35
Publication Imagery	36
May 7, 2005, The Dallas Morning News.....	38
MAJOR THEMES	39
Non-Denominational Values	39
Art, Music & Literature	41
Religious Tolerance	42

Restoration of Faith.....	44
Religion & Politics.....	46
Stories of Triumph	48
Money & Finance	49
Conclusion	50
CHAPTER IV – THE ATLANTA JOURNAL-CONSTITUTION	53
Introduction.....	53
Goodbye Olympics, Hello Religion.....	56
First publication of Faith & Values stand-alone section, January 27, 1997, The Atlanta Journal-Constitution.	59
“Faith & Values” Editors and Writers	59
What Did “Faith & Values” Look Like?	63
Section Features	64
The Core of the Existence of “Faith & Values”	65
The Black Church Beat and Mega Churches	65
Volunteerism is Key	72
A Matter of Ethics.....	75
Churches Fight and Flight with Homosexuality	78
All Things Religious.....	80

Religion Wrapped Up	82
CHAPTER V – THE CHARLOTTE OBSERVER	85
Introduction.....	85
Religion News Can Stand Alone	86
The Pictures in the Print.....	93
More than Just Religion: An Evolving Section	95
Balance Among Beliefs	98
Education as a Source of Faith & Values	99
Power of Prayer.....	101
Public Acceptance Influences Public Opinion.....	104
Traditions and Local Landmarks	109
Repentance and Redemption.....	111
Religious Leadership	113
The Practice of Giving	114
A Sum of All Views.....	115
CHAPTER VI – THE TENNESSEAN.....	119
Introduction.....	119
The Tennessean’s Revelation	119
Section Presentation: Layout and Evolution.....	124

Religion in a Variety of Topics.....	126
Reading Between the Lines: Content Overview	127
THEMES.....	129
Politics and Religion	129
Faith and Religious Practices.....	130
Faith-based Organizations	133
Religious Leadership	136
Religion in Arts and Entertainment	139
Homosexuality and Religion.....	142
Conclusion	145
CHAPTER VII – THE CLARION-LEDGER	147
Introduction.....	147
Why Add a Religion Section Anyway?	148
Analysis of Southern Style Religion.....	152
Southern Style Religion is Born	153
Section Presentation: How it Emerged	155
Editors and Writers Get No Clear Direction.....	157
Acceptance of the Writers.....	157
Content Overview	158

A Call for Diversity in Coverage	163
Religious Holidays.....	165
Easter Coverage was Education.....	168
Heavy Coverage of Baptist during Easter.....	169
Christmas: A Time for All	172
Religion in Societal, Racial, Gender and Sexuality Themes	176
Women in the Church	177
Social Issues.....	178
Race Relations	179
Religion Behind Bars.....	181
Politics and Religion.....	182
Faith and Religious Practices.....	183
Tithes & Offerings	185
Faith-based Community Organizations	185
Religion Leadership.....	186
Denominational Divides	188
Religion in Arts and Entertainment	189
Celebrations and Acknowledgements.....	190
All Things Considered	191

CHAPTER VIII – CONCLUSION.....	196
A Sign of the Times	197
Race is Not an Option	198
Politics Free Zone	200
Current and Future Days	201
Limitations	203
Implications.....	204
Future Research	207
BIBLIOGRAPHY	209

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

<i>Figure 1.</i> Dallas Morning News Religion Section.....	30
<i>Figure 2.</i> Revelations.....	34
<i>Figure 3.</i> Example of eclectic design	38
<i>Figure 4.</i> Modern Imagery.....	46
<i>Figure 5.</i> First day of <i>Faith & Values</i> section. This was the section’s front page.	59
<i>Figure 6.</i> Bishop Eddie Long Cover Story	69
<i>Figure 7.</i> Pulpit Temptations – example of cover story presentation.....	71
<i>Figure 8.</i> Back By Popular Demand – Randy Cohen’s ethic’s column returns	77
<i>Figure 9.</i> Keeping the Faith - design update.....	91
<i>Figure 10.</i> Shortened Masthead.....	97
<i>Figure 11.</i> Puppets Give a Helping Hand.....	112
<i>Figure 12.</i> Stand-alone Section Moved	117
<i>Figure 13.</i> Faith & Values First Cover Page	123
<i>Figure 14.</i> Front Page of New Section	154
<i>Figure 15.</i> Religion Southern Style	161
<i>Figure 16.</i> Mississippi Religious Leaders Share Essence of Easter	171
<i>Figure 17.</i> Christmas Isn’t for Everyone	173
<i>Figure 18.</i> Closing Cover Page.....	176
<i>Figure 19.</i> God Prepared You.....	193

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

AJC	The Atlanta Journal Constitution
RNA	Religion Newswriters Association
RNS	Religion News Service

CHAPTER I – INTRODUCTION

The written word has always been an indicator of cultural development across the ages in all of its various forms. To many, it encompasses the evolution of man's thoughts about himself and the world in which he lives. After the industrial revolution, the writing and reading of daily news became a staple of developed countries worldwide.¹ The printing, writing, and reading of the news took on an evolution of its own, serving as both a window and mirror to its regular partakers. Bringing the perspective to a micro-scale, the organization, design, and content of newspapers primarily reflected its audience and what "sold" on the stands and street corners. Fast-forwarding to the end of the 20th century, stories in newspapers still played a significant role in information and media consumption, particularly in the United States.² While it is true that newspapers covered a wide array of topics until the late 1980s and early 1990s, news reporters often ignored one subject. When reported on, reporting was done in a discourteous fashion. That is the topic of religion.

America, a country founded by, for lack of a better term, religious zealots, and established by shrewd businessmen with nothing to lose, always had a strained relationship with religious freedom and expression. Despite this, the country was built upon the idea of religious freedom.³ While religion was always a part of America's fabric, it was not always a topic so quickly reported on. As a result, only the sensational aspects

¹ David Paul Nord, "Newspapers and American nationhood." *The Hundred Years of the American Newspapers* (1991):391-405.

² Matthew Gentzkow, Edward L. Glaeser, and Claudia Goldin. "The rise of the fourth estate. How newspapers became informative and why it mattered."

³ Edwin S. Gaustad, *Faith of the founders: Religion and the new nation, 1776-1826*.

of religion garnered space and type within U.S. newspapers. According to research by Ernest Hynds, before the 1980s, religion news was scarce in newspapers.⁴ Newspapers typically ran religion stories throughout the paper, including the front page, on any given day based on news value, and occasionally, papers would run a special section on religion.⁵

This paper explores the religion news coverage of five southern newspapers in Georgia, Tennessee, Mississippi, North Carolina, and Texas. A newspaper in each of these states witnessed the transition of religion news coverage – evolving from scattered stories throughout the newspaper to publishing dedicated stand-alone religion special sections to seeing those special sections go away. For this study, “stand-alone” is defined as an entire pullout section or at least one page within the newspaper devoted solely to religion news and information.

The newspapers researched in this study are among those that published a stand-alone religion section across the nation. Newspapers researched include – *The Clarion-Ledger* (Mississippi) published its section in 1983; *The Charlotte Observer* (North Carolina) published its section in 1985; *The Dallas Morning News* (Texas) published its section in 1994; *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution* (Georgia) published its section in 1997, and *The Tennessean* (Tennessee) published its section in 1999.

Although these southern states were not the only states to have newspapers that published stand-alone religion sections, their commitment to include a dedicated section

⁴ Earnest C. Hynds, “Editors at most US dailies see vital roles for editorial page.” *Journalism Quarterly* 71. No. 3 (1994): 573-582.

⁵ Earnest C. Hynds, “Large Dailies Have Improved Coverage of Religion in 1990s.” *Newspaper Research Journal* 20 (Winter 1999): 43-54.

to religion news may have been rooted in the fact that these states are situated in the Bible Belt region of the United States.⁶

According to Gallup, the most religious states continue to be in the South, plus Utah (because of its heavy Mormon population). In a 2016 Gallup poll, Mississippi held its place, for the ninth straight year, as the most religious state in the country, with 59 percent of Mississippi residents identifying as “very religious.”⁷ All other states associated with this study had high percentages of citizens classified as “very religious” – Tennessee 50 percent, Georgia and North Carolina at 47 percent, and Texas 45 percent.

The newspapers likely added religion sections to appeal to many religious readers and sell more advertising. Gallup recognized that strong religious culture played a crucial role in the poll numbers. So did Stanley Brunn, Gerald Webster, and J. Clark Archer, who studied the changes in the predefined Bible Belt geographic area from 1971 to 2000. They suggest that religion is a key identifier of southern culture and is a feature that remains important whether one resides in a Baptist-dominated city or a suburb.⁸ The researchers note that to understand the economic, political, and cultural South today, one needs to understand the role of religion.

Overview of Newspapers

The Clarion-Ledger, Mississippi’s largest daily newspaper, launched its stand-alone religion section on Easter Sunday, April 3, 1983. After that, it ran once a week on

⁶ Stanley D. Brunn, et al., “The Bible Belt in a Changing South: Shrinking, Relocating, and Multiple Buckles.” *Southern Geographer* 51 (2011):513-549.

⁷ Frank Newport, “Mississippi Retains Standing as Most Religious State.” Gallup News, <https://news.gallup.com.poll.203747/mississippi-retains-standing-religious-state.aspx>.

⁸ Brunn, et al., “The Bible Belt in a Changing South: Shrinking, Relocating, and Multiple Buckles.”

Saturdays. The section was a source of education on various religion topics, denominations, and rituals. It included stories on social, gender, racial, and political issues. Before April of 1983, the religion news had a church directory, a Sunday school lesson, weekly columns, and a religion round-up. They called the round-up “Pulpit and Pews” and included a listing of churches, church services, and special religious events. These features appeared within either the State-Metro/B section or a section called “Impact,” a societal/community news and information section.

The Clarion-Ledger’s Religion Southern Style eventually met the fate that so many other stand-alone religion sections witnessed. In December 2008, they put religion news back inside the paper.⁹ According to then-executive editor Ronnie Agnew, the main reason was revenue and news’ whole cutbacks. Agnew indicates that the only entities that wanted to advertise in the religion section were churches; that did not cover the newsprint's cost.¹⁰

In 1994, *The Dallas Morning News* launched its religion section, and because it is one of the more prominent newspapers in the industry, other papers noticed. This move by Dallas jumpstarted a new era for newspapers in the country. After nearly two decades of success, the newspaper discontinued publishing the popular section in January 2007 because of economic concerns.¹¹

The stand-alone religion sections in *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, *The Tennessean*, and *The Charlotte Observer* are not as heavily discussed in news articles or

⁹ 2012 telephone interview with Deborah Skipper, *The Clarion-Ledger Southern Style* editor.

¹⁰ Ronnie Agnew is my current boss. I asked him to tell me why the religion section was killed.

¹¹ Hannah Elliott, “Religion News Vies for Space as Newspapers Downsize: Economic Concerns.”

scholarly papers as *The Dallas Morning News*. Still, each launched its stand-alone section in the 1990s. As *The Dallas Morning News*, the sections all failed. *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution* eliminated its “Faith and Values” section in 2007, folding it into the newspaper’s “Living” section. *The Charlotte Observer* published its inaugural edition in December 1995 and featured a story about religion’s importance to local readers.¹² The Tennessean archives’ search indicates the newspaper launched its stand-alone religion section beginning September 11, 1999, with three pages. Ten years later, the section was down to two pages. By 2011, the section dwindled to one page on the inside of the Local & Business section.

Background

In the summer of 1993, The Neiman Reports released *God in the Newsroom*, a report that shed light on America’s new religious communities’ changing landscape and provided a narrative on multicultural societies.¹³ This report, along with others, emphasized the challenges of covering religion in newspapers. For example, among journalists, there was a struggle with how to cover religion stories. Readers like clergy and others saw religion coverage as “inadequate, in error and sensationalist.” Former editor of *The Age*, Barney Zwartz, echoes this sentiment. He states that “Religion reporting has several issues in which it was important to have a specialist, someone who could bring some perspective beyond the scandal of the moment and understand the context.”¹⁴

¹² *The Charlotte Observer* religion section, *Editor & Publisher*, Jan. 6, 1996, 75.

¹³ Diana L. Eck, *Nieman’s Report God in the Newsroom Issue*. (Cambridge: Nieman Foundation at Harvard University, Summer 1993).

¹⁴ Barney Zwartz, “Religion in the Media: How Has It Changed, Where Is It Going, Why Does It Matter?”

The progression towards better religion coverage included time, critical conversations, and revelations. According to former religion journalist Gustav Niebuhr, religion helps us to understand the 21st Century. He expressed to the Associated Church Press and the Evangelical Press Association that religion is important, but yet too absent from the news.¹⁵ A National Catholic Reporter editor, Pamela Schaeffer, blasted a *New York Times* writer for making this statement: “When it comes to religion, there is no news.”¹⁶

Steadily, the coverage of religion news became increasingly prevalent among newspapers around the country. Despite challenges, newspapers made efforts toward providing this service to communities. John Dart, *Los Angeles Times* religion writer of 31 years, declared that “faith and spiritual pursuits still influence many Americans.”¹⁷ Perhaps this thought reigned during the 1990s when an insurgent of stand-alone religion sections began. According to Dart, many newspapers began to launch stand-alone religion sections and expanded coverage in the nineties. He asserts that there were “dozens of newspapers” to launch stand-alone sections during this time. Among them were the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* (Atlanta, GA), *The Plain Dealer* (Cleveland, OH), *The Dallas Morning News* (Dallas, TX), and *The Salt Lake Tribune* (Salt Lake City, UT).¹⁸

¹⁵ *Christian Century*. June 16, 2009. 15.

¹⁶ Pamela Schaeffer, “Religion Makes News.” *New York Times Aside, Nation Catholic Reporter*, January 21, 2000.

¹⁷ M.L. Stein, “More Papers Getting Religion.” *Editor & Publisher*, January 2, 1999.

¹⁸ Stein, “More Papers Getting Religion.”

Research shows this trend of expanded religion news coverage spanned for more than a decade before their collapse occurred in the early 21st Century. The highly publicized, stand-alone religion section in *The Dallas Morning News* is a perfect example. *The Dallas Morning News* sustained its new section for twelve years and one month. It is the subject of many editorial and academic publications. Bob Mong, the Dallas Morning News editor, maintains that financial challenges caused the deletion of its highly publicized religion section.¹⁹ When the paper cut the section in 2007, two religion beat writers remained. Editors slashed the religion beat two years later.²⁰

In early 2000, two other papers made a downsizing decision. *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution* dropped its section and combined it with the “Living” pages. *The Wichita Eagle* in Kansas got rid of the religion editor and downsized the beat.²¹²² Because these papers were a part of the initial decline, reporters and analysts speculated about what was happening. They leaned more toward blaming the industry-wide problem of declining circulation and the economic situation of print media. They indicate that not only did religion coverage suffer during these times, but also other specialty beats such as education and science.

Debra Mason, executive director of the Religion Newswriters Association, agrees the fallout is directly related to newspapers' financial woes. However, she does not believe it was a target on religion sections, but all specialty beats/sections were affected

¹⁹ Sarah Pulliam, “Religion Sections Deleted.” *Christianity Today*, April 2007.

²⁰ Sarah Pulliam-Bailey, “*The Dallas Morning News* Cuts Religion Beat.” Christian History | Learn the History of Christianity & the Church.

²¹ Beat is defined as a coverage area/genre that a reporter is assigned to.

²² Hannah Elliott, “Religion News Vies for Space as Newspapers Downsize: Economic Concerns.”

by budget reductions.²³ The Poynter Institute, journalism's think tank, supports Mason, Elliott, and others' position that the departure of religion sections was part of a general downsizing of specialty beats because of a lack of resources.²⁴

The Bible Belt

The Bible Belt is a term used to describe southern states of the United States where religion plays a significant role in society and culture. According to Clifford Clark, a scholar from Northern Illinois University, "There has been general agreement in the literature that the term has come to represent a southern religious pattern involving a) the acceptance of a more or less literal interpretation of the Bible, and b) the importance of the conversion experience associated with the acceptance of Jesus Christ as the savior from sin."²⁵ The Baptist denomination has played a vital role in the religious movements that led to this labeling.

THESIS STATEMENT

This paper examines the stand-alone religion section of five southern newspapers published between 1983 and 2015. This timeframe envelopes the period when newspapers across the country turned a keener focus toward religion coverage. This study is significant because it will show how newspapers focused on religion as an essential aspect of their readers' lives. It analyzes religious perspectives, practices, beliefs, and

²³ Pulliam-Bailey, "The Dallas Morning News Cuts Religion Beat."

²⁴ Rod Dreher, "Why Are Newspaper Religion Reporters Quitting?" *The American Conservative*, September 14, 2013.

²⁵ Clifford Clarke, "The Bible Belt Thesis: An Empirical Test of the Hypothesis of Clergy Overrepresentation 1890-1930." *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*: 210-25.

values of that era. It is also necessary because it provides a broad perspective of how southern newspapers' focus on religion impacted communities.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

This research answered the following questions:

1. What themes emerge in the sections? Did stories discuss religion in relation to social conflicts, gender, race, or politics?
2. Did the sections change over time – in size, types of stories, images, etc.?
3. Universally, was funding the only issue for the decline of the stand-alone religion sections?

METHODOLOGY

The researcher conducted an archival search of primary sources within each newspaper at the respective archives and history location and via web archive sites under the historical research method. The researcher reviewed articles, illustrations, and advertisements for themes, trends, tone, diversity, and other features that helped answer the research questions. The reading and observation of content within each paper allowed the researcher to apply a historical case-study analysis method, which allowed for interpretation of past events, people, ideals, and other subject matter in a descriptive manner to make assumptions about the past and its effects on the present. Each paper's methodology had slight differences and is explained in more detail within each newspaper chapter.

Also, the researcher conducted in-depth interviews with religion scholars, members, and leadership of groups such as the Religion News Service (RNS), Religion

Newswriters Association (RNA). The researcher also interviewed staff writers and editors from respective papers and other industry leaders with knowledge of these sections' development. They provided information about the developments during this era of focused religion coverage. The interviews were face-to-face, via telephone, and by email.

RESEARCH METHODS PER NEWSPAPER

The Clarion-Ledger Newspaper

Archives of *The Clarion-Ledger* are at Mississippi Department of Archives and History in Jackson, Mississippi on microfilm and papers recorded on newspapers.com. This researcher selected this newspaper because of the accessibility of primary sources to the researcher. The research focused on publications between 1983 and 2008. This period is when *The Clarion-Ledger* had a stand-alone religion section. Three hundred eighty-two stand-alone sections were reviewed, which included more than 2,000 articles. Of those articles, the researcher reviewed a little more than 450 for analysis.

Initial exploration for *The Clarion-Ledger's* stand-alone section yielded a conversation with two individuals intricately connected to the new section's development and implementation. Art Toalston was one of the lead writers at the inception of the section but only remained on staff about two months after the new section was published. Charlotte Graham, a general assignment reporter for the "Southern Style" section, became the religion writer shortly after Toalston's departure. Also, the researcher spoke extensively with Ronnie Agnew, who was the managing editor of *The Clarion-Ledger* during this time. Agnew went on to become the first black executive editor of the

newspaper, and it was through one of his columns the announcement was made that the religion section would end. Information from these exploratory conversations yielded valuable information to the research.

The Dallas Morning News

Archives of *The Dallas Morning News* were available through the paper's online archive service. The researcher selected this publication because it has been the source of many articles and research. According to previous research, *The Dallas Morning News* led the charge of expanding religion news coverage in many other newspapers during the early 90s. It had immediate success and won numerous awards.²⁶ Publications reviewed published between December 3, 1994 - January 6, 2007. This is the time period *The Dallas Morning News* published a stand-alone religion section. With nearly 800 publications and more than 20 articles each, *The Dallas Morning News* published more than 16,000 religion and ethics-based articles in a little over a decade. For this reason, the researcher reviewed the first page of each weekly section, and one random section from each quarter was selected and analyzed. The researcher observed changes, common themes, quality of writing, graphic design enhances, number of pages, types of advertisements, and reoccurring writers.

The Atlanta Journal-Constitution

Newspapers.com holds the archives of *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution* from 1997 to 2007. This time frame is significant because this was when the *Atlanta Journal-*

²⁶ Susan K. Willey, "The Founding of *The Dallas Morning News*' Religion Section." *Journalism History* 33, (Winter 2008):194-204.

Constitution published a stand-alone religion section. The researcher selected this paper because it is one of the south's largest papers that attempted to make a stand-alone section successful. There were more than 500 weekly editions made up of more than 4,200 articles produced in the ten-year time span. To address some themes specific to *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution* and the religious climate in the region, 250 cover pages and 198 random articles from subsequent pages were analyzed. In addition to the archives provided, the researcher conducted telephone interviews with several original religion beat writers of the stand-alone religion section.

The Charlotte Observer

Archives are available for *The Charlotte Observer* also through newspapers.com. The researcher selected this paper because it is a southern paper that once had a stand-alone religion section. Publications between December 9, 1995, and February 7, 2015, were accessed. With one of the longer-running stand-alone religion sections, *The Charlotte Observer* published approximately 1,000 weekly editions with more than 5,600 articles. The researcher analyzed a random sample of 500 front pages due to this particular paper's extensive archives. For the inside sections, keywords were used to search for articles matching themes developed from analyzing articles from the randomly selected front pages. One staff member was available for a telephone interview to contribute to the study.

The Tennessean

The researcher accessed *The Tennessean* publications through newspapers.com between September 11, 1999, and February 14, 2009, the timeframe for publishing its

stand-alone newspaper section. This paper was selected because it is a southern paper that once had a stand-alone religion section, and archives are available. The paper produced more than 470 weekly publications that had between six to ten articles each, averaging a little over 3,500 articles as a stand-alone religion section. More than 150 weekly sections were reviewed, and a random selection of 329 articles was reviewed for analysis.

CHAPTER II – LITERATURE REVIEW

A number of scholars and biographers have addressed this topic, and most conclude that religion is an essential aspect of many people's lives and that newspapers struggle with how to report religion news. The efforts to report on religion have been both rewarding and challenging. This literature review underscores varying views of religion coverage in newspapers. It also summarizes studies, books, and scholarly thought on where and how the subject of religion fits into newspapers.

According to Mark Silk, author of *Unsecular Media: Making News of Religion in America*, journalism in America began by offending religion.²⁷ In this book, he chronicles the birth of newspaper publications and the responses to how those publications covered religion that led to the sculpting of religion coverage in newspapers.

- In 1721, the *New England Courant* was one of four newspapers in the colonies but was not published by public officers. It was a weekly broadsheet that included stories and information critical of the colonial government and local clerical establishment. A campaign against smallpox was published that enraged the colonial leadership. This led to an investigation of the *Courant*, and it was found guilty of mocking religion and affronting the government. The owners were run off.²⁸
- After the *Courant* occasion, newspapers abandoned religion coverage for more than a century, except Nathaniel Willis. Willis was the publisher of a

²⁷ Mark Silk, "*Unsecular media: Making news of religion in America.*" Vol. 12. University of Illinois Press, 1998.

²⁸ Silk, "*Unsecular media.*"

Jeffersonian newspaper in Ohio and in 1807 continued to publish articles on religious subjects.

- Willis was criticized for his religion coverage but was determined to practice Christian journalism. In 1816, he helped publish the *Boston Recorder*, which divided its pages between news of the world and religion news. Other newspapers followed this blueprint in short order. They mainly included domination-specific coverage. This was considered the explosion of Christian publishing throughout the 1810s and 1820s and led to the invention of the mass media/mass publication in America by 1835.²⁹
- Mid-1930s, the *Recorder* was driven out of business by the *Penny Press* newspapers that published sensational articles and affronted organized religion.³⁰
- Gordon Bennett's *New York Herald* changed the face of newspaper reporting by including sensational news and religion coverage. His goal was to treat religion as news and not separate it; in 1840, Catholics, anti-Catholic nativists, business people, politicians, and rival publishers were enraged by the *Herald's* impiety, sensationalism, and muckraking. They tried to drive him out of business, but he held on. However, it is noted that he toned down his religion coverage and eventually set journalistic standards.³¹

²⁹ Silk, "Unsecular media."

³⁰ Silk, "Unsecular media."

³¹ Silk, "Unsecular media."

- In 1839, *The North American* started in Philadelphia and devoted its editorial page to moral essays.³²
- In 1860, the *New York Sun* was reincarnated as a religion daily; the *New York World* debuted with church notices on the front page, advertisements for sermon paper and Sunday School, and special clergy rates.
- From the late 1850s to the early 1900s, newspapers covered church revivals extensively. The preachers enjoyed the publicity, and the newspapers reaped the benefits. This era was not without its controversies.³³
- By the 1920s, lively religion coverage waned, and Saturday church pages became a near-universal feature of newspapers in America, focusing on commerce and promotional copy. Newspapers became more and more conscious about not offending any denomination with their coverage. In the 1960s, a survey of Michigan clergy revealed that the church page was their source of disseminating church news. However, religion reporters came to see the Saturday page as a wasteland and had hoped to write “for the rest of the paper.”³⁴
- By 1940 religion was viewed as trouble to editors, and they wanted the coverage to be as inoffensive as possible. Lawrence C. Martin, the managing editor of the *Denver Post*, wrote:

³² Silk, “*Unsecular media*.”

³³ Silk, “*Unsecular media*.”

³⁴ Silk, “*Unsecular media*.”

*“Religion is a fruitful source of controversy; I mean by that the creeds, sectarian differences, and denominational quibbles which are among the human perversions of true religion. In times past, newspapers got into so many scrapes over these religious squabbles that most editors drew in their horns and actually barred from their columns any but the most harmless and non-controversial items about churches and religious topics. Even today, you will find most editors refusing to print letters from readers on religion, for fear of inciting to riot. Thus, through the years there grew up, with good reason, a journalistic feeling that religion in the paper was dynamite.”*³⁵

Mark Silk’s timeline offers clear insight into the door religion reporting opened for newspapers as a mass medium, features the conflict and controversy earlier papers experienced because of religion coverage, and points out successes and downfalls religion coverage would cause within newspapers.

Just as Mark Silk presents a strong connection between journalism and religion, so does Judith Buddenbaum, college professor, researcher, and author of the only textbook on religion reporting.³⁶ Buddenbaum considers religion a staple of American journalism but notes that traditionally journalists thought it a “second class beat.”

According to her 1986 study, in the 1950s and 1960s, journalists focused their religion

³⁵ Silk, “*Unsecular media*.”

³⁶ Judith M. Buddenbaum, “Reporting News About Religion: An Introduction for Journalists.” Willey-Blackwell, 1998.

coverage on local stories that were brief with no depth of meaning. However, according to studies, they did begin to see their roles differently by the 1970s. Religion writers provided more information, explanations, and interpretations within their stories.³⁷

Buddenbaum cites two studies that set the basis for her research. The first study by Hoffmeyer analyzed religion news stories in *The Dallas Morning News*. This study found that religion news stories were longer, fewer in number, more in-depth, and more general. The second study conducted by Hart, Turner, and Knupp analyzed religion news in *Time Magazine* only. The findings suggested that journalists relied on theologians and church leaders from mainstream Judeo-Christian groups for their news. Also, their reporting was catered to the groups with the largest membership among the publication's primary audience. Buddenbaum concluded that religion writers and editors wanted to cover religion just as other beats were covered.

In Buddenbaum's effort to broaden the research, her study consisted of analyzing three newspapers – the *New York Times*, *Minneapolis Star*, and the *Richmond Times-Dispatch*. She concluded that her findings were consistent with the two studies she mentioned – news stories are longer, broader in scope, and more issue-oriented than they once were.

Advocacy for Religion News Coverage

Organizations took notice of the inefficiencies in religion coverage. For example, Susan Willey writes that, in 1981, the Rockefeller Foundation showed concern for mediocre media coverage by hosting a conference attended by newspaper and TV

³⁷ Buddenbaum, "An Analysis of Religion News Coverage in Three Major Newspapers." *Journalism Quarterly* 63 (September 1, 1986): 600-606.

reporters, editors, executives, theologians, and media scholars. They discussed journalism and religion. They published the results of their discussion in a report entitled “The Religion Beat: The Reporting of Religion in the Media.” The report highlighted language barriers between religion and media, a lack of mutual understanding, reporters' inability to recognize the religion dimension within a story, and the lack of educated religion writers. This report pointed out the challenges the media faced when covering religion; it did not affect media coverage much because it was not a priority during that time.³⁸

The Dallas Morning News

Over a decade later in 1993, Willey writes that the Freedom Forum First Amendment Center published a report, “Bridging the Gap: Religion and the News Media,” that did capture newspapers' attention. This organization conducted a nine-month study that included 500 clergy, 550 newspaper editors, and 150 members of the Religion Newswriters Association. The study essentially showed the disconnect between the media and the clergy and sought to bridge the gap of what they considered the “wall of suspicion.” It was widely distributed and received much media attention. Willey’s research notes that this report was recognized as a significant development.

Another report, “The Media Get Religion,” a cover story of the *American Journal Review* in December 1995, summarized highs and woes and took a look at how the media was increasing its coverage of religion news. It highlighted specific newspapers, editors, reporters, analysts, and other industry players.³⁹

³⁸ Susan K. Willey, “The Founding of the Dallas Morning News’ Religion Section.”

³⁹ Fred Vultee, et al., “Faith and Values: Journalism and the Critique of Religion Coverage in the 1990s.” *Journal of Media and Religion* 9 (2010): 150-164.

Religion Beat Obstacles

Articles on this topic often include a discussion on the notion that religion reporting is seen as mediocre. This includes anything from whether or not journalists are informed and educated enough to report on religion to the extent of whether bias exists.

In his 1998 book, *Religion in the Newsroom*, Stewart Hoover quotes syndicated religion journalist Terry Mattingly's article entitled "Religion in the News: are we shortchanging readers and ourselves with biases that filter news?" In this article, Mattingly asserted that the problem of inadequate religion news coverage is born out of four obstacles: space/time/resources (lack of institutional support for the beat), knowledge (lack of expertise), worldview within newsrooms, and prejudices (unfair and negative coverage).⁴⁰

In 1985, Buddenbaum conducted a survey with the person responsible for religion news at 141 newspapers. The results contradict those critical of journalists' lack of understanding, experience, and ability to write religion stories. She published the results in a 1988 article, "The Religion Beat at Daily Newspapers." Buddenbaum concluded that religion writers are as well-qualified as journalists within other specialized areas. She notes that these journalists at larger newspapers are better educated and have more experience than ten earlier years and also that religion writers at smaller papers have similar experience and education that journalists had at larger papers. She does also point out areas of concern for religion reporting and agrees with Mattingly that time, space, and resources are areas of concern.⁴¹

⁴⁰ Stewart Hoover, *"Religion in the News."* (California: Sage Publications, 1998), 64.

⁴¹ Buddenbaum, "The Religion Beat at Daily Newspapers."

Eric Gormly, assistant professor of journalism and telecommunication from Arizona State University, took an alternative approach to the topic and surveyed a group of journalism school and department administrators from accredited programs. Most of those surveyed had experience both as a journalist and educator. Among other findings, his research concluded that administrators overwhelmingly believed that graduates were leaving school without enough basic knowledge in religion and were not informed well enough in religion to do their jobs.⁴²

Gormly asserts that religion is an integral part of American life and that those who study culture see how religion and culture are interwoven. His report is interspersed with features from numerous scholars who wrote conclusions such as:

- Religion coverage could be improved in quantity and quality.
- Journalists are typically uncomfortable with religion, but rarely because of anti-religion sentiment.
- Reporters fail to recognize religion aspects of stories.
- Non-specialist reporters assigned to cover religion often do not have the facts and are too lazy to get them.
- Journalists who report the beat regularly admit they are inadequately prepared.
- The pure complexity of religion is a major factor.

Based on these reports, obstacles were real and prevalent. Scholars offered recommendations, and civic organizations offered resources. For example, Gormly recommended that journalism educators incorporate religion knowledge into the teaching

⁴² Gormly, "The Study of Religion and the Education of Journalists."

of the craft. According to Willey's research, sometime after the Dallas Morning News launch, the Pew Charitable Trust invested in education programs for journalists. The organization supported strengthening religion news reporting.⁴³

More Focused Religion Coverage

Increased religion coverage is the topic of many published reports, articles, and books. At the onset of increased coverage in the nineties, there was a cry for diversity in denomination coverage, but reporters covered Christianity the most.⁴⁴ Yet, at the beginning of the 21st Century editors saw an uptick in the diversity of religion news coverage. There was a larger focus on diversity in religions and religion observances and an increase in the search for faith, values, and meaning in life.⁴⁵

Susan Willey's research of *The Dallas Morning News*' stand-alone religion section discusses how deep probing was absent and core values were simply ignored in religion coverage.⁴⁶ Willey discusses a few reasons for the success of this religion section. She refers to a long-time religion writer, George Cornell, and his notion that journalists wrote about religion in a ghettoish, trivial way. She credited more interest in the subject to events of the '70s and 80's – when a Christian president, Jimmy Carter, was elected; the rise of televangelists like Jimmy Swaggart and Jim Bakker; and the increase of activities in Iran and Islam. Cornell, she wrote, stated that journalists wrongly reported religion stories because they simply did not understand the culture.

⁴³ Willey, "The Founding of *The Dallas Morning News*' Religion Section."

⁴⁴ Vultree, et al., "Faith and Values: Journalism and the Critique of Religion Coverage in the 1990s."

⁴⁵ *Newspaper Research Journal*. Vo. 26. No. 1. Winter 1999.

⁴⁶ Willey, "The Founding of *The Dallas Morning News*' Religion Section."

Another study by Ernest C. Hynds, “Large dailies have improved coverage of religion in the 1990s,” looked at the improvement of religion coverage.⁴⁷ His research concludes that religion news became news, became diverse. Stories covered were typically on issues in religion, feature stories, and church news. Other coverage included interpreted articles on issues, columns by clergy, denominational news, book reviews, church service listings, syndicated columns, self-help information, letters to the editor, mini messages written by clergy, and columns by the editor. There were topics involving conflict. Some areas of conflict and concern within religion coverage included issues with women, sexuality, and doctrine.⁴⁸ The coverage of stories about countries heavily rooted in religion presented even more conflicts.⁴⁹

In addition, other elements may have played a role in more focused religion coverage. Stewart Hoover notes in his book, *Religion in the News*, research completed by David Shaw, a *Los Angeles Times* news reporter. Shaw’s research focused on the growing interest in religion in newspapers. He noted several major world events that ushered religion to the front pages sometimes: The Second Vatican Council, the role of the church during the Civil Rights Movement, the Carter presidency, and the Reagan years, to name a few.⁵⁰

No Revenue, No Religion

Susan Willey’s research on *The Dallas Morning News* confirmed that the move towards and away from stand-alone religion sections were in part due to economics. Burl

⁴⁷ Hynds, “Large dailies have improved coverage of religion in the 1990s.”

⁴⁸ Hynds, “Large Dailies Have Improved Coverage of Religion in 1990s.”

⁴⁹ Vultree, et al., “Faith and Values: Journalism and the Critique of Religion Coverage in the 1990s.”

⁵⁰ Hoover, “Religion in the News.”

Osborne was the publisher of the newspaper at the time the religion special section was launched. Osborne acknowledged that the launch of several news sections, including religion, was an effort to increase readership and expand circulation. By doing so, it set the stage for overall newspaper revenue.⁵¹

⁵¹ Willey, "The Founding of *The Dallas Morning News* ' Religion Section."

CHAPTER III – THE DALLAS MORNING NEWS

Introduction

The Dallas Morning News is the principle newspaper of Dallas, Texas, and is one of the top 20 most profitable newspapers in the United States of America.⁵² From its inception to its award-winning publishing, *The Dallas Morning News* managed to maintain profitability and notoriety through uncertainty over the years.⁵³ One of its most decorated publications was its stand-alone religion section that ran for more than 12 years.⁵⁴ With Dallas being considered as a “buckle” in the Bible Belt by Brunn, Webster, and Archer,⁵⁵ it was inevitable that its largest newspaper’s weekly religion publication would stand out and open the door for other papers to follow suit, particularly in the South.⁵⁶ The Dallas section was unique because it received so much publicity and awards.⁵⁷ Additionally, its editors were invited to serve on many panels and help to put religion news on the agenda for many major papers. *The Dallas Morning News*’ stand-alone religion section ran from December 3, 1994 to January 6, 2007.⁵⁸

History of the Paper

The Dallas Morning News began as an extension of the Galveston news when Alfred Belo saw a great business opportunity in running a newspaper in North Texas.⁵⁹

⁵² Top 100 Newspapers in the United States.

⁵³ Judith Garret and Michael Hazel. “The Dallas Morning News.” Handbook of Texas. Texas State Historical Association.

⁵⁴ Willey, “The Founding of *The Dallas Morning News*’ Religion Section.”

⁵⁵ Stanley D. Brunn, Gerald R. Webster, and J. Clark Archer. “The Bible Belt in A Changing South: Shrinking, Relocating, and Multiple Buckles.” *Southern Geographer* 51, no. 4 (2011): 523-549.

⁵⁶ Vultee, Craft, and Velker, “Faith and Values: Journalism and the Critique of Religion Coverage of the 1990s.”

⁵⁷ Willey, “The Founding of The Dallas Morning News’ Religion Section.”

⁵⁸ Willey, “The Founding of The Dallas Morning News’ Religion Section.”

⁵⁹ H. Bailey Carroll, “35,000 Days in Texas: A History of the Dallas News and Its Forebears.”

Through Belo's dogged determination, the paper became successful amid competition from other daily publications.⁶⁰ Early in the publishing of the paper, Belo's strict protestant upbringing influenced the religion coverage of the paper.⁶¹ Although the paper did not have a stand-alone religion section until more than 100 years later, religion was a topic widely covered in earnest from inception.⁶² By 1887, the paper had acquired its major competitor in North Texas, which was *The Herald*.⁶³ Belo's exemplary vision, keen business acumen led the paper to notable success.⁶⁴ So much so that it is widely regarded that *The New York Times* was modeled after *The Dallas Morning News*.⁶⁵

In 1901, Belo died and his oldest son became his successor.⁶⁶ Belo's son continued to run the paper with his father's principles, and after the passing of the second Belo, the paper continued to operate under the Belo name as a corporation.⁶⁷ Under new ownership, the paper did not falter and continued to succeed by absorbing most of its daily competition well into the late 1980s and early 1990s, when there was only one other local paper left remaining – *The Dallas Times Herald*.⁶⁸ It was during this time that the idea of a dedicated stand-alone religion section began to earn serious consideration.⁶⁹

Origins of the Religious Column

⁶⁰ Charles Peabody, "Memoirs of Alfred Horatio Belo." University Publications of American, 1990.

⁶¹ Peabody, "Memoirs of Alfred Horatio Belo."

⁶² Garrett & Hazel, "Dallas Morning News."

⁶³ Carroll, "35,000 Days in Texas: A History of the Dallas News and Its Forbears."

⁶⁴ Peabody, "Memoirs of Alfred Horatio Belo."

⁶⁵ Garrett & Hazel. "Dallas Morning News."

⁶⁶ David Stebenne, "Belo: From Newspapers to New Media." *The Journal of Southern History* 76, no. 1 (2010): 174.

⁶⁷ Stebenne, "Belo: From Newspapers to New Media."

⁶⁸ Randolph E. Bucklin, Richard E. Caves, and W. Lo Andrew, "Games of Survival in The US Newspaper Industry." *Applied Economics* 21, no. 5 (1989): 631-649.

⁶⁹ Willey, "The Founding of the Dallas Morning News' Religion Section."

The birth of *The Dallas Morning News*' religious column was a culmination of many factors happening precisely at the right time.⁷⁰ As previously discussed, the newspaper was no stranger to religion reporting. It had a well-established "church page" and religion-based articles appeared throughout the paper, often on the front page.⁷¹ However, a series of events presented *The Dallas Morning News* with the opportunity of establishing a religion section that was creatively published and beautifully written.

The seeds for such development were first planted by several religion-based news events that were poorly or incorrectly covered from the 1970s throughout the 1980s.⁷² Events such as the 1976 election of Jimmy Carter provided the United States with a "born again" Christian. Additionally, the Moral Majority began to take rise towards the end of the 1970s, and the era of televangelists, along with their scandals, became prominent in the press during that time.

This prompted institutions such as the Rockefeller Foundation to bring attention to the need for accurate religion coverage in secular publications.⁷³ After the close of the conference, which was held in New York, reportedly gathered "twenty-five newspaper and television reporters, editors, and executives along with theologians and media scholars from across the country to discuss religion and news coverage, p. 195."⁷⁴ From the aforementioned conference, a report was produced entitled "The Religion Beat: The

⁷⁰ Willey, "The Founding of *The Dallas Morning News*' Religion Section."

⁷¹ Willey, "The Founding of *The Dallas Morning News*' Religion Section."

⁷² Willey, "The Founding of *The Dallas Morning News*' Religion Section."

⁷³ Willey, "The Founding of *The Dallas Morning News*' Religion Section."

⁷⁴ Willey, "The Founding of *The Dallas Morning News*' Religion Section."

Reporting on Religion in the Media,” primarily providing much-needed criticism to the media industry about the current practices used to report on religion.

More than ten years prior to that watershed event, *The Dallas Morning News* had already been toying with the idea of establishing a stand-alone religion section.⁷⁵ The paper saw that the readership was there, but at that time, it was still in a turf war with *The Dallas Times Herald*.⁷⁶ At that time, resources, ideas, and energy were poured into making *The Dallas Morning News* stand out from the competition. At one point, the newspaper was adding new columns every week in effort to produce something for every segment of its readership.⁷⁷ At the same time, the idea of a religion section routinely was presented, although it was not denied, at the time, the idea did not receive the interest and funding it deserved.⁷⁸ One example was the column titled “Fresh Ink, ” which became the new business section of the paper.⁷⁹

Another fortuitous event that helped to bring things full circle was a report published on “Bridging the Gap” between accurate religion reporting in secular newspapers.⁸⁰ This report, written after a 1993 news conference in Chicago, helped to legitimize religion reporting as a newsworthy subject.⁸¹ The report was produced by the Freedom Forum, which, at the time, was only glad to receive ample media coverage.⁸²

⁷⁵ Willey, “The Founding of *The Dallas Morning News*’ Religion Section.”

⁷⁶ Garret & Hazel, “*The Dallas Morning News*. ”

⁷⁷ Garret & Hazel, “*The Dallas Morning News*. ”

⁷⁸ Willey, “The Founding of *The Dallas Morning News*’ Religion Section.”

⁷⁹ Willey, “The Founding of *The Dallas Morning News*’ Religion Section.”

⁸⁰ Shupe, “Bridging the Gap: Religion and the News Media.”

⁸¹ Willey, “The Founding of *The Dallas Morning News*’ Religion Section.”

⁸² Willey, “The Founding of *The Dallas Morning News*’ Religion Section.”

This report was carried out several years after the above-mentioned Rockefeller report; however, it was more influential in promoting the importance of religion news reporting.

The report's impact was more far-reaching than realized, as became evident when the organization ended up distributing more than 25,000 copies instead of the 5,000 it had originally prepared for.⁸³ Additionally, notable evangelicals such as the Reverend Billy Graham hosted a conference shortly after addressing the topic, calling for the training and education of reporters so that they could cover religion news in an accountable way.⁸⁴ At that time, many people assumed the reports were biased when it came to religion reporting, but Graham and others say that it had less to do with bias and more to do with improper training that caused breach when it came to religion reporting.⁸⁵

With all this information and “media buzz” around the topic, *The Dallas Morning News* found itself in the ripe position to institute their stand-alone religion section at a time when the public was desirous of such news.⁸⁶ With the right information, the right people, and the right timing – the first stand-alone section was published on December 3, 1994.⁸⁷ Ironically, at the beginning of the year, the proposal request to add a religion section to the budget was denied, but serendipity intervened and with all things in place, the premiere religion section in the country was born.⁸⁸ The new six-page section became reality.

⁸³ Willey, “The Founding of *The Dallas Morning News*’ Religion Section.”

⁸⁴ Randall E. King, “When Worlds Collide: Politics, Religion, and Media at the 1970 East Tennessee Billy Graham Crusade.” *Church & St.* 39 (1997): 273.

⁸⁵ Shepard, “The Media Get Religion.”

⁸⁶ Willey, “The Founding of *The Dallas Morning News*’ Religion Section.”

⁸⁷ Garrett & Hazel, “*The Dallas Morning News*.”

⁸⁸ Willey, “The Founding of *The Dallas Morning News*’ Religion Section.”

KEEPING UP

Blitz Is On
People are invited to help deck the halls — and the living rooms, bedrooms and kitchens — of apartments for the homeless during the December Home Furnishings Blitz. The Communities of Faith Committee for the Homeless is asking for household items from 9 a.m. to 8 p.m. Saturday and noon to 6 p.m. Sunday at 4838 Cash Road. For information, call 980-4965. For more calendar listings, please see Weekly Planner, Page 26.

Yesteryear Yuletide
Travel back to the 15th century this weekend for a Yuletide Madrigal Feast at Northway Christian Church. Performers will provide entertainment and food at 7 p.m. Saturday and 12:30 p.m. Sunday at the church, 7202 W. Northwest Highway. Tickets are \$12.50 for adults and \$9.50 for children. Reservations are encouraged; call 361-6641. For Christmas arts calendar, please see Page 4G.

Holy Days: Hanukkah
Jews will light the final candles of Hanukkah Sunday night. The eight-day holiday recalls a miraculous victory more than 2,100 years ago. A small band of Jews, led by the Maccabees, defeated the forces of the Syrian tyrant Antiochus. After the victory, a ceremonial oil lamp was relit in the Temple in Jerusalem, rededicating it to Judaism. "Hanukkah" is translated as "dedication." Tradition teaches that although only one day's worth of the consecrated oil was left, it lasted eight days, until new oil could be prepared.



Lighting the last Hanukkah candle

The Fabric of Faith

Survey shows a strong sense of spirituality in Dallas adults

By Christine Wicker
Staff Writer of The Dallas Morning News

RELIGIOUS BELIEFS

Almost nine of 10 adults described themselves as being religious.

Somewhat religious.....	51%
Very religious.....	37%
Neither.....	6%
Somewhat non-religious.....	3%
Very non-religious.....	3%

RELIGIOUS ACTIVITIES

Almost everyone participated in a religious activity in the past year. (Multiple answers allowed.)

Prayed.....	88%
Read the Bible.....	66%
Contributed money.....	64%
Watched religious TV.....	47%
Attended Bible study or Sunday school.....	40%
Worked as volunteer.....	36%
Attended worship at least once a week.....	30%

REASONS FOR NOT ATTENDING

Various reasons were given for not attending worship services. (Multiple answers allowed.)

Dislike organized religion/feel it's not needed.....	27%
Hypocrisy.....	22%
Something else to do.....	20%
Just don't.....	13%
Confined to home.....	7%
Don't believe in God.....	6%
Over-emphasize money.....	6%
Haven't found one I like.....	5%
Too social.....	4%
Don't like to go.....	4%

MATTERS OF FAITH

The majority of adults said they believe in:

Power of prayer.....	87%
Angels.....	81%
An afterlife.....	80%
Heaven and hell.....	68%

REASONS FOR ATTENDING

Those who said they attend worship at least once a year gave these reasons. (Multiple answers allowed.)

Fellowship/the people.....	36%
Location.....	24%
Minister/priest/rabbi.....	20%
To worship God.....	13%
Peace of mind.....	13%
Raised there/habit.....	10%
Matches my beliefs.....	9%
Programs/activities.....	9%
Where my family goes.....	8%
To learn Bible study.....	8%
For sermon/message.....	7%
Like the music.....	5%
Prefer small church.....	4%
Bible says to go.....	3%

The survey interviewed 1,911 adults last spring in Dallas, Collin, Denton and Tarrant counties. The maximum margin of error for the survey is plus or minus 3.2 percentage points. Overwhelming majorities in the survey said they believe in God without any doubt, believe their prayers are answered and believe in angels. They also overwhelmingly believe in the afterlife, but fewer are sure about heaven and hell. Dallas area residents may be a bit less likely than other Americans to believe that prayers are powerful, according to a comparison with a 1992 survey.

Figure 1. Dallas Morning News Religion Section

First publication of Religion stand-alone section, December 3, 1994, *The Dallas Morning News*.

The Dallas Morning News used Belo's approach to this section of the paper that had garnered it success in the past — that is, plan for long-term success, focus on great stories, not mediocre ones, and stay well informed.⁸⁹ To do this, the newspaper not only

⁸⁹ Willey, "The Founding of *The Dallas Morning News*' Religion Section."

consulted with the Freedom Forum who published the popular report, but it also consulted with religious leaders from every major group within their readership.⁹⁰ Additionally, the paper was able to hire well-educated and experienced staff members to set its stand-alone religion section off to a good start.⁹¹ The religion section quickly gained popularity, and before long, it received national awards for being the top religion section in a secular paper.⁹² After its December debut, the response was very positive. It caused the paper to receive much publicity in addition to the many awards. Staff members were invited to speak at many conferences related to journalism and religion in the press. The section won first place for best religion section at the Religion Newswriters Association conference in 1995, even though it had only published four sections in the previous year. After that, the section was continuously ranked at the top among other religion sections in the nation. In 2006, it won the best religion section award from the Communicators Council for the ninth time in ten years. It also opened the door for other papers to follow suit.⁹³

Changes over Time

There is a saying in the newspaper business that “nothing is as old as yesterday’s newspaper.”⁹⁴ With that statement in mind, it is understandable why *The Dallas Morning News* saw changes to its stand-alone religion section over time. First, it is just the nature

⁹⁰ Willey, “The founding of *The Dallas Morning News*’ religion section.”

⁹¹ Garret & Hazel, “*The Dallas Morning News*. Handbook of Texas.”

⁹² Previous Contest Winners - Religion News Association. Religion Newswriters Association.

⁹³ Willey, “The Founding of *The Dallas Morning News*’ Religion Section.”

⁹⁴ Bob Hill, “Yesterday’s Newspaper, Tomorrow’s Fruit Tray.” *New Zealand Engineering* 48, no. 1 (1993):32.

of the business.⁹⁵ Second, changes are influenced by the customer base and available resources.⁹⁶

After evaluating more than 350 weeks of the religion section's front pages, there are several key changes that stand out. The first, most notable change is the reorganization of the topics. Within the first three years, there was always a section on the front page that included an article from a religious leader from the community. Each week, it would be a clear polarization between leaders. They would not be from the same religion or denomination, or there would be other clear distinctions such as gender and age.

For example, in one of the early editions, the top story is written from a non-denominational standpoint about the Olympics in Atlanta and Kerri Strugs' miraculous vault, but with a religious spin on it.⁹⁷ The article directly below the piece focused on the Greek Orthodox church and how its new bishop was born in America, and what he would bring to the church.⁹⁸ This juxtaposition was a staple of the front page which offered interesting stories but also promoted interfaith stories as headline articles. Gradually, this feature came to be replaced by the "Revelations" column, which appeared in the same location on the left side of the front page. This new "Revelations" column offered shorter summaries but still was a prominent platform for religious leaders.

⁹⁵ Joy Jenkins & Rasmus Kleis Nielsen, "Preservation and evolution: Local newspapers as ambidextrous organizations." *Journalism* 21, no. 4 (2020):472-488.

⁹⁶ Welbers Kasper et al., "News Selection Criteria in The Digital Age: Professional Norms Versus Online Audience Metrics." *Journalism* 17, no. 8 (2016):1037-1053.

⁹⁷ Blair R. Monie, "Precious Things In Life Often The Result Of Pain." *The Dallas Morning News*. August 3, 1996.

⁹⁸ David E. Anderson & Joan Connell, "A New Era for Orthodoxy." *The Dallas Morning News*. August 3, 1996.

When the article was not written by a religious leader it often reflected on them. One such article reported on a Vatican specialist visiting the University of Dallas.⁹⁹ Directly below, the subsequent article shared the news of the Cathedral of Hope becoming part of the United Church of Christ.¹⁰⁰ This is a notable event because the former is the world's largest church made up of gay Christians, and the latter church had over 12 million members. Although the leadership was not directly referenced, the merger of the two churches was a testament to the will and determination of the leaders who agreed to come together.

Secondly, the paper fluctuated between a two-article centerpiece spread and a one article centerpiece spread. The very first publication had a two-article centerpiece spread with a larger, more prominent display being in the top center, accompanied by a large image. While the second less prominent display would be at the bottom center of the page above the fold with a smaller image and sometimes no image at all. This design style was maintained for the first couple of months that the stand-alone section was printed. After that, the editors allowed designers to continuously test different layouts. However, rarely moved away from the three-column front page with one or two main articles in the center.

Another change that was noticeable was the change from black and white to full-color pages throughout the entire section. With the addition of color printing, the artwork became larger and more abstract; early on, the graphics were mainly photographs and more classically stylized. Additionally, as the number of ads within the religion section

⁹⁹ Robert Lasik, "UD hosting Vatican Specialist." *The Dallas Morning News*. November 4, 2006.

¹⁰⁰ Cathedral of Hope is Now Part of UCC. *The Dallas Morning News*. November 4, 2006.

began to decrease, the length of the articles began to increase to maintain the six-page section. Perhaps the size of the images became larger to aid this as well. The religion ads were split from one large page to two small pages. This change was tested in various print editions from 2000-2005 but became more permanent in the year 2005. This is a strong indication that ads were not selling in the religion section.

With the addition of color to the printing of the section, the masthead changed from a more traditional Old English print in the center to a new-aged script in bold aligned to the left. The Old English print was reserved for the title of the paper but was no longer applied to the title of the section.



Figure 2. Revelations

A feature in the Religion stand-alone section, February 5, 2005, *The Dallas Morning News*.

Community Reflection

Being connected to the community is at the heart of the religion section's success in *The Dallas Morning News*. From its inception, the paper began by including local leaders in the discussion about what the readers wanted from a religion section. One way to see the impact of that religion section on the community is through the increase of subscribers. Additionally, many articles are written by or spotlighted members of the community. This is largely reflected in the paper's coverage of important religious events and celebrations that happened locally. For example, a 1994 article chronicled an elementary school play that brought a fresh depiction of Hanukkah to a Jewish community.¹⁰¹ The revival of the play was incited by new arrangements of music produced by students at Southern Methodist University.¹⁰² The elementary school and the university shared a common link: Simon A. Sargon, who was the music director at the temple and a professor at the university.¹⁰³ Through his tutelage and creativity, a new sound for Hannukah was developed and attracted a wider audience.¹⁰⁴

Another example of a how notable religious leaders were recognized was an article published about the passing of a local televangelist, Zola Levitt.¹⁰⁵ According to David & Yong, obituaries are a way to solidify cultural norms and values within a local area.¹⁰⁶ Levitt was raised Jewish but converted to Christianity in 1971.¹⁰⁷ He spent his

¹⁰¹ Judith Howard, "Old Story, New Music." *The Dallas Morning News*. December 3, 1994.

¹⁰² Howard, "Old Story, New Music." *The Dallas Morning News*. December 3, 1994.

¹⁰³ Howard, "Old Story, New Music." *The Dallas Morning News*. December 3, 1994.

¹⁰⁴ Howard, "Old Story, New Music." *The Dallas Morning News*. December 3, 1994.

¹⁰⁵ "On Sunday, Friends Will Remember Zola." *The Dallas Morning News*. May 6, 2006.

¹⁰⁶ Maya Khemlani David & Janet Y. Yong, "Even Obituaries Reflect Cultural Norms and Values."

¹⁰⁷ "On Sunday, Friends Will Remember Zola." *The Dallas Morning News*. May 6, 2006.

time ministering to other Jews who had also shared his experience.¹⁰⁸ Recognizing local public figures on the front page of the religion sections endeared the paper to the community in a personal way. Depending on the events of the time, community members were also displayed within the inner pages of the religion section. In addition, the last page full of ads and church information displayed pictures and church information of any church leader or congregation willing to purchase a weekly advert.

Publication Imagery

Newspaper design has had many changes over the years and has focused on the different dynamics between a variety of components, including image size, headline size, white space, and the number of photos.¹⁰⁹ As designers try to find the best way to present stories, methods for laying out pages in newspapers have evolved.¹¹⁰ The graphic and creative design of the religion section began to blossom in its early days. Unique overlays and text wrapped to image cutouts presented the articles and information in an aesthetically pleasing way. A great example of this can be found on the section's front page of an August 2005 edition, which focuses on politics and religion. The article titled "Beyond Red & Blue" had two paint cans pouring out red paint from the top left-hand corner and blue paint from the top right-hand corner.¹¹¹ As the paint runs down the page, it is used as a barrier to break the section down into its traditional three-panel design. The paint runs down below the fold and culminates in two puddles of red and blue paint that

¹⁰⁸ "On Sunday, Friends Will Remember Zola." *The Dallas Morning News*. May 6, 2006.

¹⁰⁹ Stephanie Hays, "An Analysis of Design Components of Award-winning Newspaper Pages." *Elon Journal of Undergraduate Research in Communications* 9, no. 2 (2018):44-63.

¹¹⁰ Hays, "An Analysis of Design Components of Award-winning Newspaper Pages."

¹¹¹ Molly M. Blythe & Jeffery Weiss, "Beyond Red & Blue." *The Dallas Morning News*. August 6, 2005.

gradually mixes where the paint colors touch. The text is neatly printed and aligned around the paint that is seemingly running down the front-page of the section.

With the addition of color to the printing of the religion section, creativity became more modern and edgy. When the front page was not displaying a photograph of a person or place, the traditionally stylized art transformed to a more eclectic and eccentric form, adding depth and interest in an unprecedented way. This can be seen in full display on the Christmas Eve article in 2005. The front-page story was written about a Christian author who grew up in an interfaith home with her father being Jewish and her mother being Southern Baptist.¹¹² The graphic designer represented the author's heritage with an interesting photoshopped collage of an old-style doll. The doll had the face of the author and a full red skirt with white fur trim reminiscent of Mrs. Claus' traditional outfit. The upper chest of the doll had a menorah in its center, and in the doll's right hand, there was a golden dove looking like a Christmas ornament. On top of the hand holding the angel was placed a wooden dreidel as large as the doll's torso. The bottom half of the doll's abdomen was a traditional Christian image of the nativity scene.

In contrast to the previous eclectic design, more colorful and abstract images were found on the front page of a May 2005 article. The image was produced by a staff illustrator but represented some of the more mainstream, Avant-Garde works not normally found in traditional newspapers.¹¹³ The image depicts an African American mother and her son attending church service. The mother is stylized with blue, green, and purple hues, and the son is colored with reds, oranges, and yellows, with a dash of pink.

¹¹² Polly Becker, "Happy Holidays." *The Dallas Morning News*. December 24, 2005.

¹¹³ Michael Hogue, "Staff Illustration." *The Dallas Morning News*. May 7, 2005.

The son's face was highlighted while the mother's face was muted. There was a silhouette of a male figure in the background painted primarily in brown. The scale to which the male figure was drawn puts him at a significant distance. In relation to the article, the male figure could represent the church pastor or an absent father.¹¹⁴ Creative pieces like these that accompanied beautifully written work caused the paper to read more like a magazine than print paper with huge front-page editorials.



Figure 3. Example of eclectic design

May 7, 2005, *The Dallas Morning News*.

¹¹⁴ Robin G. Russell, "Family Ties." *The Dallas Morning News*. May 7, 2005.

MAJOR THEMES

Non-Denominational Values

When scouring the archives of *The Dallas Morning News*' religion section, it is easy for one to get a feel of the paper's approach to religion. Religion was embraced as an essential part of the readers' lives, and it was treated with respect, admiration, and, most importantly, open-mindedness. The articles, information, and stories published within the stand-alone religion section reflected the editor's intuitiveness to the interests and desires of its subscribers. Also, it is clear to see the hand of the paper's outside liaisons within the religious community. Everything was done with an iconic panache. The front page generally included two major stories, a piece written by a religious leader and at least one story that offered hope and inspiration.

One of the major themes found on the first page and throughout the additional five pages of the weekly section was the prevalence of non-denominational values. Often when faith was attributed to a topic or a specific article, it was not necessarily linked to a particular religion or denomination. The paper silently proclaimed the notion that faith was a commonality across all religious platforms, and while readers may not agree on every aspect of religion, the importance of faith is something that connected them all and caused them to seek to do good within the community.

In addition, hope, unity, and belief were regularly expressed throughout the pages in one form or another. Stories including these topics were sometimes tied to a particular group, but the way the ideas were expressed in writing left the reader open to embracing the concepts without being offended or feeling indoctrinated by the reporting. The

approach was inclusive and non-biased to the degree that when a specific denomination or religion was mentioned, it acted as a welcoming mat instead of bars of offense.

One interesting way the paper espoused non-denominational values was in a short piece written under its “Revelations” feature, which was a play on words being that the last book of the Bible is titled “Revelations.” In this section, the paper shared short written pieces that were based on conventional wisdom. A specific article titled “It Won’t Kill You to Go to Church” cited a *Wall Street Journal* report stating that people who attended church regularly were healthier and had lower mortality rates.¹¹⁵ The article used scientific evidence as encouragement for church attendance. Nowhere in the piece was a specific religion or denomination mentioned.

Furthermore, the practice of faith is not mentioned either. The information in the article simply informed the reader that there was a physical, carnal benefit to church attendance - nothing more, nothing less. There were no promises of healing or great enlightenment. This pragmatic approach played well to readers from all groups because there were no limitations or restrictions on attendance included in the writing. It was all-inclusive and not discriminatory in any way.

Another article explored something that different religions have in common - a difference of opinion in regard to cloning.¹¹⁶ While some religions are monotheistic and others may be polytheistic, according to the 1997 article, religions from both groups have varying opinions on how the scientific practice of cloning fits into humanity. Articles such as these displayed how *The Dallas Morning News*’ religion section recognized the

¹¹⁵ “It Won’t Kill You to Go to Church.” *The Dallas Morning News*. May 7, 2005.

¹¹⁶ Jeffery Webb, “Religions Aren’t Unanimous on Cloning.” *The Dallas Morning News*. March 1, 1997.

differences and commonalities in a non-denominational manner. It is assumed that the newspaper attempted to build a sense of unity regardless of the situation.

Art, Music & Literature

The Dallas Morning News' stand-alone religion section did not shy away from religion in the arts. In fact, it promoted it. Each week a listing of religion books was printed in the section. One or two book reviews were included, but for the most part, the books were only listed with a short summary. Furthermore, the design of the section itself was rich in religious iconography from all faiths, especially during holiday seasons that were celebrated by multiple faith groups.

One of the earliest articles that displayed religious art as essential to the faith of its readership was found in the second full publication of the religion section in 1994. An article written by Judith Howard explored how the image of the Virgin Mary, called La Virgen de Guadalupe by Mexican Catholics, had such a strong impact of their lives.¹¹⁷ One woman interviewed is quoted saying, "For Mexicans, she's like the female face of God." The article goes on to illustrate that the skin color of the replicas sold played a role in how parishioners related themselves to their God. The story reported that brown-colored images of the Virgin Mary were more favored than the fair-colored ones.¹¹⁸

When read from a narrow point of view, stories like these can seem offensive to some who disagree with the sentiments of the women in the article. However, by utilizing direct quotes from the women themselves, the reporter, as well as the paper, did not

¹¹⁷ Judith Howard, "An Icon of Strength." *The Dallas Morning News*. December 10, 1994.

¹¹⁸ Howard, "An Icon of Strength." *The Dallas Morning News*. December 10, 1994.

directly espouse their beliefs but instead provided them with a platform to share the importance of religious art in the building of their faith and their belief system.

Not only does art have an influence on the lives of believers, but music does as well. An article written by Gromer Jeffers, Jr. uncovered how church music had influenced the careers of popular music artists. Using the popular film *Ray* as his introduction, Jeffers wrote about how church leaders, especially African American ones, had unsuccessfully tried to keep secular music out of the church and vice versa.¹¹⁹ In his writing, Jeffers concluded that gospel music in all of its forms had influenced secular music in America. The article showed that for many people, the church was the first place a person was allowed to express themselves publicly with instruments or by singing; and that while some may stray from the practices of their faith, they never can stray from their musical roots watered by the songs and spirit of the churches they were raised in.¹²⁰

Articles such as these brought a common thread to readers by painting a picture that religion is also a shared experience from early childhood on up for most.¹²¹ This is particularly true in the south, where more than 74% of the residences reported they attend services regularly.

Religious Tolerance

One theme essential to the success of the religion section in *The Dallas Morning News* was religious tolerance. To maintain an unbiased approach to religion reporting,

¹¹⁹ Gromer Jeffers, "Rhythm & Pews." *The Dallas Morning News*. April 2, 2005

¹²⁰ Jeffers, "Rhythm & Pews." *The Dallas Morning News*. April 2, 2005

¹²¹C. Kirk Hadaway, Penny Long Marler, & Mark Chaves, "Overreporting Church Attendance in America: Evidence That Demands the Same Verdict." *American Sociological Review* 63, no. 1 (1998): 122-130.

tolerance and the willingness to share important news and positive stories for all religious groups were practiced.

A particularly appetizing article covered the front page of the section in June of 2005, citing the acceptance of Muslim holidays and how restaurants and stores had begun to stock foods that met Muslim dietary laws.¹²² In addition to the beautiful food photography, the article compared halal and kosher foods. Halal being foods acceptable for Muslims to eat, and kosher being foods acceptable for Orthodox Jews to eat.¹²³ The article was written in a way that it presented a long-time struggle for American Muslims to meet their dietary needs in the United States. It stressed that local businesses could benefit by embracing these practices.

Another interesting story that displayed religious tolerance was the reporting of an anti-religious holiday. The observance of Darwin Day was cited as a special day for non-believers who “champion reason and science while rejecting superstition and dogma.”¹²⁴ An article like this seemingly did not fit in a religion section at all. However, its prominence on the front page of the religion section displayed *The Dallas Morning News*’ openness to all faiths, even those that are deemed anti-religious. Religion can be considered a belief in something important that does not necessarily have to be tied to a deity.

¹²² Michael Kress, “The Halal Way.” *The Dallas Morning News*. June 4, 2006.

¹²³ Kress, “The Halal Way.” *The Dallas Morning News*. June 4, 2006.

¹²⁴ “Sort of the Opposite of a Religious Feast.” *The Dallas Morning News*. February 5, 2005.

Restoration of Faith

As every believer knows, being human comes with frailties, and through those frailties, faith is tested and sometimes lost. As a result, it is not hard to see why the paper chose the restoration of faith to be one of the major themes presented within its pages. One article, entitled “Graceland,” written in 2005, followed a religious professor and his family on a trip across the United States visiting religious attractions with an open mind.¹²⁵ The professor’s wife was a Presbyterian minister, but the family did not limit their stops to places that only supported their beliefs.¹²⁶ In this article, the writer explored how through his open-mindedness, the professor was able to become closer to his family and faith. While some of the attractions did not sit well with his belief system, his desire to want to understand the creators of these places helped broaden his view and his appreciation for his faith.¹²⁷ This particular story shows that the newspaper did not shy away from the ugliness that can sometimes be displayed by religious zealots, but it expressed through the person of the religious professor how its readers should approach such situations which they would all inevitably face. Stories like these embraced the biblical principle of overcoming evil with good. The same principle can be found in the teachings of other major religions as well.¹²⁸

Another story under the restoration of faith theme deals with a famous musician from the rock group “Korn.”¹²⁹ Brian Welch, the guitarist of the popular band, gave his

¹²⁵ Mary Jacobs, “GraceLands.” *The Dallas Morning News*. July 2, 2005.

¹²⁶ Jacobs, “GraceLands.” *The Dallas Morning News*. July 2, 2005.

¹²⁷ Jacobs, “GraceLands.” *The Dallas Morning News*. July 2, 2005.

¹²⁸ Pater C. Hill et al., “Conceptualizing Religion and Spirituality: Points of Commonality, Points of Departure.”

¹²⁹ “Some Fans Will Find This Corny.” *The Dallas Morning News*. March 5, 2005.

testimony of being addicted to methamphetamines and “begging to die.”¹³⁰ In the story, he stated that his friend “dragged him to church,” where he met the Lord, and his life was saved.¹³¹ The title of the article was “Some fans will find this corny,” a play on his former band’s name Korn.¹³² The article said his fans were stunned at the change, but Welch planned to undertake a solo career in order to sing positive messages to audiences who would receive him.¹³³

In November of 2006, the paper published an article that provided an unorthodox approach to restoring one’s faith, particularly for clergy members, through the use of sabbaticals in order to avoid burnout.¹³⁴ In Sam Hodges’ front-page article entitled “Taking A Break,” the readers were familiarized with some of the perils of religious overload and how it could lead to a loss of faith.¹³⁵ Within the story, several churches of different religions and denominations shared their stories of providing the opportunity for their religious leaders to take a break in order to be more effective in the long run.¹³⁶ For some, it was a means of restoring faith, and for one church, the policy was being put into practice for new and interim pastors.¹³⁷ In that case, the church pre-planned for its pastor to have an extended vacation in order for him to maintain his “pastoral groove.”¹³⁸

¹³⁰ “Some Fans Will Find This Corny.” *The Dallas Morning News*. March 5, 2005.

¹³¹ “Some Fans Will Find This Corny.” *The Dallas Morning News*. March 5, 2005.

¹³² Brian Welch, “Save Me from Myself: How I Found God, Quit Korn, Kicked Drugs, and Lived to Tell My Story.”

¹³³ “Some Fans Will Find This Corny.” *The Dallas Morning News*. March 5, 2005.

¹³⁴ Sam Hodges, “Taking a Break.” *The Dallas Morning News*. November 4, 2006.

¹³⁵ Hodges, “Taking a Break.” *The Dallas Morning News*. November 4, 2006.

¹³⁶ Hodges, “Taking a Break.” *The Dallas Morning News*. November 4, 2006.

¹³⁷ Hodges, “Taking a Break.” *The Dallas Morning News*. November 4, 2006.

¹³⁸ Hodges, “Taking a Break.” *The Dallas Morning News*. November 4, 2006.

REVELATIONS



ROBERT LISK

UD hosting Vatican specialist

One of America's top Vatican observers is speaking this evening at the University of Dallas.

John L. Allen Jr., long-time correspondent for *National Catholic Reporter* and a frequent TV and radio commentator, will discuss the relationship between the Catholic Church and Islam under Pope Benedict XVI.

The lecture begins at 7:30 p.m. in the Church of the Incarnation on the UD campus, 1844 E. Northgate in Irving.

Mr. Allen has written two books on Benedict and one on the papal selection process.

Cathedral of Hope is now part of UCC

The Cathedral of Hope in Dallas, the world's largest church primarily made up of gay Christians, has joined the United Church of Christ.

Senior Pastor Jo Hudson said the Cathedral of Hope's "values of compassion, inclusion, tolerance and hope" mesh well with those of the 1.2 million-member UCC.

The cathedral, on Cedar Springs Road near Love Field, has been exploring union with the UCC for years. In 2003, it severed ties with the predominantly gay Universal Fellowship of Metropolitan Community Churches.

"The United Church of Christ was created in 1907. From the beginning of our history," says the denomination's Web site, "we were a church that affirmed the ideal that Christians did not always have to agree to live together in communion."

T.D. Jakes puts MegaFest on hold

T.D. Jakes is taking a break from MegaFest.

The pastor of the Potter's House in Dallas will not host the home Atlanta conference

TAKING A BREAK

Increasingly, clergy seek sabbaticals for travel, study, reflection and rest

By SAM HODGES

It's Sunday at 11 a.m. Do you know where your pastor is?

For about four months earlier this year, Jay Hobbs, rector of the Episcopal Church of the Good Shepherd in Dallas, was absent not just from the pulpit but from the parish altogether.

With the blessing of the congregation, he and wife Sarah hit the road, visiting all the places where they'd served in 33 years of ministry, and spending time with their children and grandchildren on the beach at Destin, Fla.

When I started planning, in 2000,

And a voice said ...

By ADELLE M. BANKS

In a new audio Bible, the Holy Trinity has some familiar voices: Samuel L. Jackson plays God the Father, Blair Underwood performs the role of Jesus, and Bishop T.D. Jakes is the Holy Spirit.

Inspired By ... The Bible Experience features an all-black cast taking on the characters of the New Testament, backed with music and sound effects intended to bring the printed word to life.

Its producers hope the audio version will reach listeners who might not be inclined to crack the pages of a printed Bible.

"We wanted to create a project, a Bible experience, that would communicate to a young generation. And so we felt that we needed to create an urban product to do that," said Lou "Buster" Brown, one of the project's executive producers.

"While it is an all-black cast, it's not a black product by any means, because when you listen to it, you don't hear color," he said. "You hear the word of God."

The 19-CD package, which retails for \$49.99, is to be followed next fall by an Old Testament dramatization.

Originally, the creators thought they'd need a cast of dozens. The list grew to more than 200 voices as word spread and people asked to be included.

"The phone started ringing off the hook," said Mr. Brown.

Denzel Washington and his wife Pauletta recite the Song of Solomon. Angela Bassett reads the stories of the Nativity and the Resurrection.

Others appearing include Ruby Dee, Althea Woodard, LeVar Burton and Kirk Franklin.

"We've used professional voices [for audio Bibles] before, but not of the ilk of Denzel Washington and Cuba Gooding and Angela Bassett and Blair Underwood," said Paul Caminiti, a vice president at Zondervan, the giant Christian publishing house that co-produced *Inspired By ... The Bible Experience*.

The recordings also feature a contemporary orchestral score and ambient sounds. When John the Baptist loses his head, for example, listeners hear an ax chop, followed by screams of disgust.

"These were real stories with real people who were going through joy and pain," said Mr. Brown.

Bishop Jakes appears in four books as the Holy Spirit. Mr. Gooding plays Judas.

Mr. Jackson, who played a foul-mouthed hit man in *Pulp Fiction* and a Jedi knight in *Star Wars*, was originally cast as an angel but got promoted to God. When Jesus

Figure 4. Modern Imagery

Example of article illustration, November 4, 2006, *The Dallas Morning News*.

Religion & Politics

Although a seemingly controversial topic, religion, and politics somehow are unavoidable.¹³⁹ The paper did not ignore that, even in religion, politicking must occur,

¹³⁹ Kenneth Wald & Allison Calhoun-Brown, "Religion and Politics in the United States."

and when it comes to politics, the importance of religion cannot be ignored. *The Dallas Morning News* seemingly embraced this truth and addressed it head-on.

One of the main ways the religion section explored the mix between religion and politics was when it came to the separation of church and state – particularly in the school setting. A study conducted by *The Princeton Review* identified two Texas schools among the top ten most prayerful universities in America.¹⁴⁰ The University of Dallas placed 5th on the list, and Texas A&M University was 10th.¹⁴¹ It was not much of a surprise for UD to be on the list as it was a Catholic school located in Irving, Texas, but Texas A&M is a state school where prayer is not necessarily encouraged. By pointing out the ranking of one of Texas' largest universities, the paper quietly implied that although church and state are separated, God and people are not.¹⁴² Prayer can still go on and be prevalent even in institutions where it is not publicly mandated. While not particularly political, this article was an addition to the many others that dealt with the issue of religion in public and state-sponsored educational facilities.

The reporting of a state-side visit of Nobel Peace Prize winner Desmond Tutu continued to legitimize the marriage between religion and politics.¹⁴³ Tutu, a world-renowned religious leader, faced the political oppression of apartheid in South Africa and solidified his rule on the global stage as he fought for human rights. Civil rights activists who are also religious leaders walk the line between religion and politics. His presence in

¹⁴⁰ "Prayers Abound at UD and A&M." *The Dallas Morning News*. September 6, 2006.

¹⁴¹ "Prayers Abound at UD and A&M." *The Dallas Morning News*. September 6, 2006.

¹⁴² "Prayers Abound at UD and A&M." *The Dallas Morning News*. September 6, 2006.

¹⁴³ "Bishop Tutu Visit in September." *The Dallas Morning News*. August 5, 2006.

the city of Dallas deserved the front-page coverage it received and can be viewed as both a political and a religious statement.

Stories of Triumph

A theme central to the heart of this religion section is stories of triumph. Every week, in some form or another, the newspaper sought to include a story of triumph or something uplifting for its readership. A story written by a missionary serving abroad in Thailand offered one such opportunity.¹⁴⁴ David Allen had been serving in Thailand for ten years, then the tsunamis of 2004 hit.¹⁴⁵ While there, he witnessed tremendous devastation, but he also saw extreme compassion and triumph. The predominant religion in Thailand is Buddhism, but most of the relief aid came from Christian-sponsored programs. Amid the tragedy, Allen witnessed how people of different faiths came together in support of the community and did not focus on their religious differences.¹⁴⁶ While away from home in the midst of catastrophe, a prayer chain was started with more than 7,000 emails being sent on his behalf.¹⁴⁷ Many of which reached him after his own personal recovery. Through the experience of David Allen, readers were able to see the power of faith in the midst of unfortunate situations and how prayers continued to be sent long after tragedy hit, but just in time for continued healing to take place.

Another beautiful story emphasized a different type of triumph: acceptance. The front-page article, “Faith in the Face of Death,” shared the story of a family who lost their

¹⁴⁴ David Allen, “Scenes of Despair, Hope in Thailand.” *The Dallas Morning News*. January 8, 2005.

¹⁴⁵ Allen, “Scenes of Despair, Hope in Thailand.” *The Dallas Morning News*. January 8, 2005.

¹⁴⁶ Allen, “Scenes of Despair, Hope in Thailand.” *The Dallas Morning News*. January 8, 2005.

¹⁴⁷ Allen, “Scenes of Despair, Hope in Thailand.” *The Dallas Morning News*. January 8, 2005.

beloved father, Rabbi Keith Stern.¹⁴⁸ The Rabbi was terminally ill, and the family had planned their final days together.¹⁴⁹ The wife began to help other families experiencing similar situations, preparing for the final journey of a loved one.¹⁵⁰ By helping others, the wife helped herself heal and became the strength that others needed in their time of weakness.¹⁵¹ This article showed that victory could be achieved through faith even when we lose someone we love.

Money & Finance

One theme seemingly unique to *The Dallas Morning News*' stand-alone religion section was its inclusion of articles about money and finance. After the new year in 1995, the front page of the religion section published an article entitled "Money Matters" printed in bold lettering.¹⁵² The article discussed how a conservative Baptist group in Fort Worth, Texas, held a conference discussing how to best deal with donations.¹⁵³ In the article, the reader was informed that in such congregations, the discussion of money was somewhat taboo and that it was considered bold for the group to want to specify how their donations were used.¹⁵⁴ In general, money is a difficult topic to address within family homes, let alone within the church setting. Bringing stories like these to the forefront not only sparked interest but educated readers.

¹⁴⁸ Christine Wicker, "Faith in the Face of Death." *The Dallas Morning News*. December 28, 1996.

¹⁴⁹ Wicker, "Faith in the Face of Death. *The Dallas Morning News*." December 28, 1996.

¹⁵⁰ Wicker, "Faith in the Face of Death. *The Dallas Morning News*." December 28, 1996.

¹⁵¹ Wicker, "Faith in the Face of Death. *The Dallas Morning News*." December 28, 1996.

¹⁵² "Money Matters." *The Dallas Morning News*. January 14, 1995

¹⁵³ "Money Matters." *The Dallas Morning News*. January 14, 1995

¹⁵⁴ "Money Matters." *The Dallas Morning News*. January 14, 1995

Once again, church fundraising makes the front page. This time it is a major gift luncheon with celebrity guest Regis Philbin.¹⁵⁵ Tickets to the event were listed as \$125 per person towards an effort to help The Catholic Foundation raise money and celebrate its 50th anniversary.¹⁵⁶ According to the article, all the money was used to help religious, educational, and charitable endeavors within the Diocese of Dallas.¹⁵⁷ The article did not neglect to mention that the organization had handed out more than \$18 million since its founding in 1955.¹⁵⁸ While fundraising has always been a part of mission work, public advertising and some practices have been viewed as controversial in different religious sectors. Additionally, having a secular television personality as a draw for the event could have been considered inappropriate. Although this article is listed on the front page of the section, it read as more of a promotional piece than a news article.

Conclusion

In conclusion, *The Dallas Morning News* is an exemplary contribution to religion coverage in the form of a stand-alone news section. Its commitment to excellence garnered national attention and numerous awards. Furthermore, its design, layout, and graphic explorations made the print editorial stand out as more than a section of the newspaper. As the demands of the times changed, so did the structure of the religion section. With budget cuts amid the economic recession, the heralded religion section ended its twelve-year run due to financial pressures.

¹⁵⁵ "Regis is Coming to Town." *The Dallas Morning News*, January 15, 2005.

¹⁵⁶ "Regis is Coming to Town." *The Dallas Morning News*, January 15, 2005.

¹⁵⁷ "Regis is Coming to Town." *The Dallas Morning News*, January 15, 2005.

¹⁵⁸ "Regis is Coming to Town." *The Dallas Morning News*, January 15, 2005.

The section was not immune to the economic downturn of the 2000s and was then relegated back to the pages from which it came.¹⁵⁹ Although *The Dallas Morning News* no longer has a stand-alone religion section, the coverage of religion is still a significant portion of its publication and a core topic of its coverage.

The twelve-year and one-month life span of this publication was unique and had a major influence on how religion was covered in secular papers.¹⁶⁰ It helped increase the number of papers that offered a stand-alone religion section because its success was something to be emulated.¹⁶¹ Before coming to an end, the paper explored themes that were important on a global, national, and local level. Getting religion news reporting right was at the heart of the publication, and its goal was achieved. Not only was the religion section recognized nationally, but it also had an impact on its local community and subscriber base. The religion section of *The Dallas Morning News* helped to edify and unify a diverse community with multi-religious groups and ethnicities co-existing within the metropolitan area. *The Dallas Morning News*' religion section's contribution to religion reporting speaks for itself in the many pages it holds within its archives. Its editors' dedication to continuity as well as inclusion is displayed between the lines and on the front pages.

While it takes money to run a paper, financial gain was not the primary driver of the publication. It will continue to serve as an example of unbiased religion reporting for future generations. The newspaper's religion section, during its long run,

¹⁵⁹ Willey, "The Founding of *The Dallas Morning News*' Religion Section."

¹⁶⁰ Willey, "The Founding of *The Dallas Morning News*' Religion Section."

¹⁶¹ Willey, "The Founding of *The Dallas Morning News*' Religion Section."

played a key role in capturing the growing role of the church in the lives of the people who lived in the nation's 4th largest metropolitan area.

The Dallas Morning News once delivered an audience that was easily the largest in Texas. When its religion section began, *The Morning News* had a daily circulation of more than 500,000 subscribers. The number of churches in the metro area numbered in the thousands, and the popularity of the church and faith movement soon birthed what became commonly known as the megachurch. Despite the population and economic growth, dramatic changes to the newspaper economy shifted the public's interest in how news was consumed and disseminated.

The religion section was started in 1994 to fill a need. With church life and all its ancillary auxiliaries becoming ingrained in the family structure, *The News* recognized the importance of the church in its decision to start the section. By the mid-2000s, however, newspaper revenues slumped, and publishers looked to cut costs. Exact figures are difficult to come by, but *The News*, by cutting the 312 pages dedicated to its religion section, saved hundreds of thousands of dollars.

Religion remains a vibrant part of the newspaper's coverage. Depending on what editors determine to be the news value, it is not uncommon for religion content to be found on the newspaper's page 1 or in other news sections. It now also has become an important part of emerging technological news consumption vehicles, such as websites and social media.

CHAPTER IV – THE ATLANTA JOURNAL-CONSTITUTION

Introduction

Perhaps one of the most iconic places in the south, partly thanks to *Gone With the Wind* and Coca-Cola, Atlanta, Georgia, is home to many major American and southern milestones, from the Civil War campaign to the Summer Olympics.¹⁶²¹⁶³ As the largest city in the Peach State, it is also home to Georgia's largest newspaper. *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution* (AJC) is the only major daily newspaper in the metropolitan area of Atlanta, and it is the flagship publication of Cox Enterprises. Founded as two separate newspapers in the 1800s, *The Atlanta Journal* and *The Atlanta Constitution* served as Atlanta's go-to for news and information.

The Atlanta Journal published its first edition in 1883, and the afternoon paper quickly challenged *The Constitution*, its more established morning rival. E.F. Hoge founded *The Journal*, then sold it in 1887 to a young lawyer named Hoke Smith for \$10,000.¹⁶⁴ President Grover Cleveland appointed Smith secretary of the interior after *The Journal's* endorsement in 1892. Smith sold the Journal in 1900, and popular innovations followed, including a Sunday magazine that published some of the South's leading writers like Erskine Caldwell and Margaret Mitchell.

Media mogul and former presidential candidate James Cox bought *The Journal* in 1939 and *The Constitution* in 1950, though the papers maintained separate and fiercely

¹⁶² Henry T. Malone, "Atlanta Journalism During the Confederacy."

¹⁶³ Steven P. French & Mike E. Disher. "Atlanta and the Olympics: A One-Year Retrospective."

¹⁶⁴ Wallace B. Eberhard, "Clark Howell and *The Atlanta Constitution*."

competitive newsrooms. Eroding circulation finally ended the battle, but the newsrooms did not fully merge until 1982.

Afterward, they continued printing separate papers until 2001, when the two combined to create the new *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution*. Both newspapers helped nourish the careers of famous journalists such as Henry W. Grady, Margaret Mitchell, and Ralph McGill.

As the paper continued to evolve, on January 24, 1997, *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution* (AJC) ran an ad that included three questions –

- “Did you know seventy-four percent of Southerners say religion is very important to them?”
- Did you know the late Cardinal Joseph Bernardin came to see death as a friend before he died?”
- Did you know Henry Winkler (the Fonz) will address the Atlanta Jewish Federation?”

The following statement let readers know that the newspaper would be providing the answers to these questions and more. It read... “You’ll Know When You Read the Paper.”¹⁶⁵ The very next day was the debut of *Faith & Values*, *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution*’s new section devoted to issues of “religion and spirituality.” The section was introduced with ads throughout the paper, and the newspaper was consistent in advertising the section throughout the week and over the years.¹⁶⁶

¹⁶⁵ Advertisement Introducing New Religion Section the Day Before It Published. *The Atlanta Constitution*, January 24, 1997, p. 31.

¹⁶⁶ *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution*. January 25, 1999.

Faith & Values was a well-planned, six-page section that remained true to the original goals of providing religion news to a religious-diverse state, promoting the importance of community through volunteerism, and allowing readers to have a voice. It was a sustainable plan for the first ten years.

On January 13, 2007, the announcement was made with a front-of-section highlight blurb that *Faith & Values* would move inside the Saturday *Living* section the following Saturday, January 20, 2007.¹⁶⁷ Folded into the *Living* section, *Faith & Values* stories continued to be diverse and timely, focusing on the most important community happenings, the religion connection of notable people from the likes of Bruce Springsteen to Mahalia Jackson, and still had church advertisements and religion announcements. Sometimes the religion story was strong enough to be the cover story of the *Living* section.¹⁶⁸

Although the section became what some may call watered down as the religion content was mixed with movie reviews, the Dear Abby column, comics, retail advertising, movie times, and other non-religion features, religion-focused articles remained inside features for several years after it folded into *Living*.

Focused religion coverage survived during a time of economic downturn in 2009. Shawn McIntosh, the new public editor, announced that the newspaper staff had been working more than a year on a redesigned newspaper that would include changes that some readers would like and some would not. She talked about balancing what readers

¹⁶⁷ Virginia Lewis (Features editor), *Faith & Values* coverage moves to Saturday Living on Jan. 20, with four pages included, *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, January 13, 2007.

¹⁶⁸ *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, 1997-2007.

wanted with economic realities.¹⁶⁹ Three days later, newspaper editor Julia Wallace offered a few more details about the redesign and informed readers that some of the changes they would see in the paper were made because of reader surveys and feedback. She, too, spoke of the need to scale back the paper due to economic necessities.¹⁷⁰ The *Faith & Values* stories remained in the newly designed *Living* section. The coverage of religion waned between one and two pages, and sometimes a story made the front of the section. As time passed, the stories were fewer, and there were fewer religion ads and announcements. By 2010, religion coverage was sparse. To this day, a *Faith & Values* heading appears at the top of a page inside *Living* most Saturdays. That page continues to have religion commentary and no advertising.

Goodbye Olympics, Hello Religion

Despite the fold of the section, religion continues to be a subject of interest in the Atlanta area. The commitment started over two decades ago. On January 25, 1997, debut day, the section was launched with a left column above-the-fold strip ad on the front page – “A New Section Today” was the headline.¹⁷¹ The announcement included the features of the section, where it would be found each Saturday, and a photo of what it would look like.¹⁷²

Veteran journalist Ron Feinberg served as an editor at *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution* starting in 1979. In the mid-90s, he helped to launch the new “Faith &

¹⁶⁹ Shawn McIntosh, “Meet Our New Public Editor, You, Our Readers Are, Our Leading Advisors.” *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, April 25, 2009.

¹⁷⁰ Julia Wallace, “Welcome to Your New AJC.” *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, April 28, 2009.

¹⁷¹ *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, *Faith & Values*, January 25, 1997.

¹⁷² Advertisement introducing the new religion section on the first day it published. *The Atlanta Constitution*, January 25, 1997, p. 1.

Values” section as its first editor. On the day the section launched, Feinberg wrote a column explaining to readers the struggle it had been to work the “G” word into news stories.¹⁷³ He mentioned that the region was in the Bible Belt and that religion was a constant. Feinberg noted that newspapers needed to start paying attention to that fact. He admitted the new section was *The Atlanta Journal Constitution’s* way of paying attention.¹⁷⁴ Feinberg introduced three writers for the new section – Gayle White, John Blake (currently a CNN reporter), and Paula Schwed. Betty Parham was the clerk.¹⁷⁵

In a conversation with Feinberg, he shared how the section came to be. Then editor, Ron Martin, had led the team of feature writers during the coverage of the Olympics. The Summer Olympics in 1996 was monumental for Atlanta. The Olympic Games were held from July 19, 1996, to August 4, 1996, at Atlanta’s Centennial Olympic Park. News coverage of an international event was intense. Martin, according to Feinberg, felt there was a need and desire to have much more involvement with the religion community once the intense events of the Olympics were all over.¹⁷⁶ Section writer, Gayle White, confirmed this, saying that they had spent a lot of energy on and devoted a lot of coverage to the Olympics, and Martin wanted to shift that energy to *Faith & Values*.¹⁷⁷

What seemed like an immediate idea was more than likely well thought through by Martin. It would not be a surprise that after all the added drama surrounding the

¹⁷³ *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution, Faith & Values*, January 25, 1997.

¹⁷⁴ Ron Feinberg, “A New Section for Covering Matters of Spirit.” *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, January 25, 1997.

¹⁷⁵ *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution, Faith & Values*, January 25, 1997.

¹⁷⁶ Telephone conversation with Ron Feinberg on September 9, 2020.

¹⁷⁷ Telephone conversation with Gayle White on September 8, 2020.

Olympics, there was a desire to connect more with readers and to put *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution* in a better light. The Olympic bombing that killed two people and injured more than one hundred was one piece of the drama. The other was that an *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* reporter broke the story about the suspected bomber, initially hailed as a hero for pointing out the bomb. Eventually, he was found innocent.

Although the 1996 Summer Olympics provided many opportunities for news highlights and stories for the *AJC*, it could also be observed that the many highs and lows of that event took a moral and emotional toll on the people of Atlanta and perhaps the editors and reporters themselves. As mentioned above, some of the editors were ready to apply their creative abilities to topics of more substance. According to Gayle White, there were two sections that were started right after the Olympics, *Atlanta and the World*, which covered international news, and *Faith & Values*. The main reason for starting a religion section was that the editor determined that was where the coverage needed to happen.¹⁷⁸ Indirectly, the Olympics awakened consciousness about Atlanta as an international place to live.¹⁷⁹ With that premise, perhaps another focus for the paper was quite possibly a good thing.

¹⁷⁸ Telephone conversation with Gayle White on January 10, 2021

¹⁷⁹ Telephone conversation with Gayle White on January 10, 2021

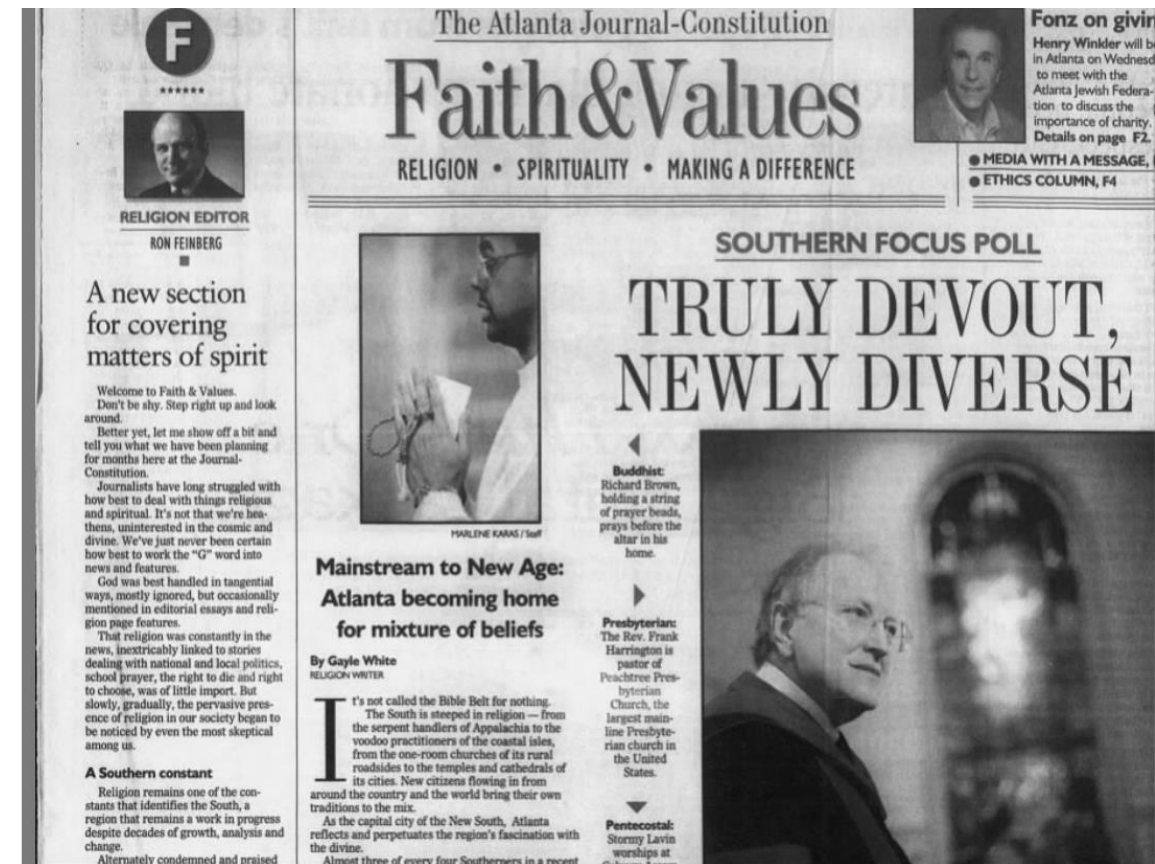


Figure 5. First day of *Faith & Values* section. This was the section's front page.

First publication of *Faith & Values* stand-alone section, January 27, 1997, The Atlanta Journal-Constitution.

"Faith & Values" Editors and Writers

A good section is only as good as its editors and writers. The *Faith & Values* section of The *AJC* was fortunate to have both. Each team member contributed something special in their respective places. Bringing much experience and a solid foundation of faith was the original editor Ron Feinberg. Prior to his retirement, he worked for several notable newspapers, including the *Florida Times-Union* in Jacksonville, Florida, and *The*

Charlotte Observer in Charlotte, North Carolina. He traveled abroad to report on various topics and wrote for religious papers as well, such as the *Atlanta Jewish Times* and Peter Leafman's religion blog, "Speaking of Life."

Another cornerstone writer of the *Faith & Values* section of *The AJC* was Gayle White. She served as a religion writer from 1988 until 2003. She won a Clarion Award for her work for being assigned by the newspaper to be part of its main team covering the presidential race. Her writing helped the *Journal-Constitution* build its religion section, which tied for first place in RNA's Schachern Award competition in 1997 and won the Schachern Award for large papers in 2002. White also wrote a book about the doctrines and customs of religions, called *Believers and Beliefs*, and was the president of the Religion News Association from 1998-2000. In addition, she won the Templeton Foundation's 2002 Religion Writer of the Year award.

Another significant writer for the religion section of *The AJC* was John Blake. He is a native of Baltimore, Maryland, and mainly writes about race, religion, politics, and other assorted topics. During his time being a reporter for *The AJC*, Blake was a general assignment reporter with several beats – mega-churches, black churches, gospel music, and Christian contemporary music. He wrote several award-winning stories on Civil Rights and received feature writing awards from the Associated Press, the Georgia Press Association, the Atlanta Association of Black Journalists, and the Society of Professional Journalists. After his time at *The AJC*, he went to work for CNN, where he is employed at this time. Blake is a published author, writing the civil rights book, *Children of the Movement: The Sons and Daughters of Martin Luther King Jr., Malcolm X, Elijah*

Muhammad, George Wallace, Andrew Young, Julian Bond, Stokely Carmichael, Bob Moses.

The original staff, according to Feinberg, concentrated on different aspects of the section. Gayle White covered religion news across the board and left the beat in 2003 and *The AJC* in 2009. John Blake covered new age religion/spirituality, all things about the black church, and the mega-churches. His articles appeared in the section until it folded into the *Fitness* section. Schwed focused on volunteerism because Martin wanted to go beyond religion in the section. When Schwed left the paper, Derrick Henry, who had been a music beat writer, took her place. Parham was the clerk for the section who mainly did the religion calendar.¹⁸⁰

The staff changed a little over time. Several other writers started to have stories in the section – other reporters from within the paper and also guest writers from the community. Plus, there were more and more Associated Press and Religion News Services articles as the section aged. White stated that once the section was established, its direction was set from the very beginning. Writers focused on covering the diversity of religion in Atlanta.¹⁸¹ With its diverse religious groups consisting of the more traditional Baptists, Pentecostals, and Presbyterians, Atlanta was also home to other radical religious sects such as witches and snake handlers. The core section began to evolve as the writers became more familiar and experienced with the beat.¹⁸² White expressed that the writers were somewhat overly ambitious in the beginning but learned

¹⁸⁰ Telephone conversation with Ron Feinberg on September 9, 2020.

¹⁸¹ Telephone conversation with Gayle White on January 10, 2021.

¹⁸² Telephone conversation with Gayle White on January 10, 2021.

to focus on facts and be professional above all else. This sentiment was also expressed by John Blake in a separate interview stating that working the religion beat helped him to be more careful and factual. He said that his work on this beat helped him to become a better listener as a reporter.¹⁸³

There were four editors for *Faith & Values* as a stand-alone section. Rich Feinberg served as editor from the start in January 1997 to August 2001. He maintains that he was the religion editor, not the religious editor. According to Feinberg, “There is always something going on in the world that is connected to religion.”¹⁸⁴ Furthermore, Feinberg confirms what earlier research found in that the stories in this section were not driven by denominations, but they were based on whether or not the story of the day was tied to a particular religion sector. Other editors included Diane Lore, who took the lead from that time to April 2003. From May 2003 to September 23, 2006, Kevin S. Austin was the editor. It is under the leadership of Marion Manuel, who became editor around September 30, 2006, that the section met its fate and was folded into the *Living* section.

The *Faith & Values* team seemed to have clear direction on what the section should be and the tone it should set. According to Gayle White, the writers had a lot of autonomy. The newspaper even allowed staff to travel abroad to cover stories and write about their experiences. White traveled to Rome to cover the election of Pope

¹⁸³ Telephone conversation with John Blake on January 11, 2021.

¹⁸⁴ Telephone conversation with Ron Feinberg on September 9, 2020.

Benedict,¹⁸⁵ Feinberg traveled to Israel, and one of the paper's photographers even traveled to Kenya.¹⁸⁶

What Did "Faith & Values" Look Like?

The new section appeared in sections D and F of the paper in the beginning. There were consistent stints of it appearing in one section or the other.¹⁸⁷ After a few years, it began to appear in sections B, C, and G as well. Newspapers are printed based on page count, and some of this movement very well may have been a result of that.

The masthead incurred changes too. Initially, the masthead included the newspaper name, new section name, *Faith & Values*, and subheads of *Religion*, *Spirituality*, and *Making A Difference*. It was three-tiered. A little over a year later, on April 18, 1998, the newspaper's name was dropped, making the header two-tiered.¹⁸⁸ Perhaps the newspaper name was attached for the first year to build brand awareness of this new product.

Interestingly, about two years later, on July 1, 2000, the subheads were dropped, leaving only the name of the section. It included quite a bit more promotion of what was on the inside of the section. By this time, the section was a little more than three years old, and readers were familiar with the content. Possibly newspaper leaders thought the name could stand alone at this point, and that it was more important to give a sneak peek

¹⁸⁵ Telephone conversation with Gayle White on September 8, 2020.

¹⁸⁶ Ron Feinberg & Keith Hadley, "Spiritual Journeys." *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, December 6, 2003.

¹⁸⁷ *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, 1997-2007.

¹⁸⁸ *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, 1997-2007.

of what was inside, or it could have had something to do with the cost of newsprint and cutting back on ink.

Again, on April 26, 2003, the masthead changed. The top of the front page had more depth as the title was increased in size, and the two words “Faith and Values” were stacked. The title adorned a more modern look and an added touch of color for the ampersand (blue). Plus, the name of the newspaper was added back. The facelift was refreshing. Surprisingly, just a week later, on May 3, 2003, it changed again.¹⁸⁹

Assumingly, they just did not like the look. They unstacked the two words, “Faith and Values,” and put them side by side. The ampersand color was changed to gold. This look would remain until the section folded into the *Living* section on January 20, 2007. At this time, the heading was of significant size but a simple black script.

Section Features

Faith & Values was presented in a big and bold way each Saturday throughout its stand-alone life. The lead story often had a catchy headline and a corresponding illustration, picture, or graphic that was just as bold and captivating. The front page of the section included a note from the editor or guest columnist and a highlight called the “Amen Corner,” where different announcements appeared.

Usually, there were two or three in-depth stories published within the section with other shorter spotlight stories and features. In addition, the section included the following on a weekly basis: a calendar of events, religious books/magazines and online reviews, religious TV and radio show highlights, and a “Forum” page that featured letters from

¹⁸⁹ *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, “Faith & Values”. May 3, 2003.

readers about various ethical topics. A full page of display church ads separated by denomination categories was consistent early on but dwindled toward the end of the section's life cycle. Other ads from the faith community were also present. According to Gayle White, the section was never a great advertising section.

The Core of the Existence of "Faith & Values"

The first story of the section seemed to set the tone for the very reason the new section came into existence – the Bible Belt state had lots of religions and religious news to share. Gayle White wrote about the growth of diversity of religions in the Atlanta area and how religion is very much a part of the lives of Atlanta citizens. White believed that every story has a religion angle – “from international happenings to turning off life support to a loved one.”¹⁹⁰ She believed *Faith & Values* raised people's awareness about religion coverage and the profile of religion. As a result of the section, more of White's stories showed up in other newspaper sections like business, perspective, and sports. White pronounced that she “loved, loved, loved the beat” and that readers loved the section. “The religious community,” she said, “was happy to have it taken seriously.”¹⁹¹ Feinberg agrees with White that the section was widely accepted and appreciated. He noted, “There was a built-in community yearning for this kind of thing.”¹⁹²

The Black Church Beat and Mega Churches

In a telephone interview, John Blake expressed that one major component of the religion section was the black church and the culture that surrounded it, which he

¹⁹⁰ Telephone conversation with Gayle White on September 8, 2020.

¹⁹¹ Telephone conversation with Gayle White on September 8, 2020.

¹⁹² Telephone conversation with Ron Feinberg on September 9, 2020.

connected with.¹⁹³ Working the religion beat was meaningful for him because religion was a major topic for the constituents of *The AJC*, stating that “Atlanta was the mega-church capital of the country,” and it was fascinating to him as a writer.¹⁹⁴

One example of this was a 1999 piece written about the “unholy trinity,” which according to Blake is power, money, and women.¹⁹⁵ The headline story was about Rev. Henry Lyons, the head of the National Baptist Convention at the time, who was charged with stealing millions of dollars and using some of the money to purchase an expensive home with his alleged mistress.¹⁹⁶ The article was not focused on one particular man of the cloth, although several were mentioned, including Jim Bakker and Jimmy Swaggart.¹⁹⁷ The focus of the piece was to highlight that many ministers began with good intentions, but over time their egos and lack of humility led them into traps that any man could fall victim to. The beauty of this work is that it not only exposed the truth but also addressed it through a lens that is often overlooked - the men are often victims as well.

The black/mega church beat was not only relegated to top scandals, but it also reported on other newsworthy topics. In the spring of 2000, one publication was a major hit in the religious media market, and that was a study Bible aimed at women of color.¹⁹⁸ The “Women of Color Study Bible” was able to cater to two of the top religious consumers in the United States: women, and particularly African American women.¹⁹⁹ The publisher, Melvin Banks II of Atlanta, published the work himself and included

¹⁹³ Telephone conversation with John Blake on January 11, 2021.

¹⁹⁴ Telephone conversation with John Blake on January 11, 2021.

¹⁹⁵ John Blake, “Pulpit Temptations.” *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution*. February 6, 1999.

¹⁹⁶ Blake, “Pulpit Temptations.” *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution*. February 6, 1999.

¹⁹⁷ Blake, “Pulpit Temptations.” *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution*. February 6, 1999.

¹⁹⁸ John Blake, “The Word Goes Out.” *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution*. April 1, 2000.

essays by 200 women. The book particularly catered to women in the black church because it acknowledged the African and Middle Eastern heritage of famous women in the Bible such as Esther, Ruth, and even Martha.¹⁹⁹ The skill of Blake's writing can be found in the subheading, which acknowledges that Banks' work was part of an emerging trend toward specialty Bibles. Not only did Banks cash in on this trend, but so did major publishers like Thomas Nelson and Zondervan. One of the most lucrative publications in this genre was T.D. Jake's "Woman, Thou Art Loosed" Bible, which was also referenced in the article. Articles such as these show how mainstream religious media outlets are looking to help expand the scope of religions whose figures are predominately canonized as Anglocentric or depicted with Anglo-Saxon features.

While the previous article addresses the changing color lines in the Bible with the inclusion of African American women and women of color, a different feature story highlighted how the black churches in the south were more willing to embrace non-black leaders through its exploration of Bishop Michael D. Spires and his interracial congregation. Labeled as a miracle in the article, the members of the Church of Atlanta Lighthouse were made up of both black and white parishioners, apparently an aberration in the south during that time.²⁰⁰ The story reported that in spite of the positive message Spires' ministry could be sending, he received many death threats and taunts from both blacks and whites.²⁰¹ Originally founded by a white pastor for white members, the church developed a significant black following, which led to a rift in the congregation and

¹⁹⁹ Blake, "The Word Goes Out." *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution*. April 1, 2000.

²⁰⁰ John Blake, "Color Blind." *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution*. March 20, 1999.

²⁰¹ Blake, "Color Blind." *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution*. March 20, 1999.

leadership by the time Spires arrived in the mid-60s. However, when he took over the role of pastor, the church was almost finished. Fortunately, his friendships with other notable black pastors helped to make the black members more comfortable with a white pastor.²⁰² Over time, it led to the success of his interracial ministry. This story offered another unique angle to the black church beat, proving that race is not always a barrier.

Blake's work was not only limited to black Christian churches but also reported on black Muslim groups and the rise of Islam. This topic was especially meaningful in Atlanta because during the time the stand-alone religion section was being published, there was somewhat of a revival in the city and surrounding areas in reference to the Nation of Islam. With headlines like "Allah's People,"²⁰³ "Growing Islam,"²⁰⁴ and "The Nation's New Messenger,"²⁰⁵ John Blake and his fellow writers chronicled the rise of Islam across Atlanta and the south.

Another major sub-genre in the black church beat at *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution* was that of the mega church. Notable African American pastors housed their large congregations in the city of Atlanta, such as T.D. Jakes, Eddie Long, and Creflo Dollar. The mega church roster in Atlanta was not limited to African American peerages, with six of the top ten current mega-churches belonging to white congregations.²⁰⁶ Blake's creativity shined in feature titles such as "Amazing Jakes" in his piece about the Dallas preacher who relocated to Atlanta, bringing a "message of hope."²⁰⁷ His article

²⁰² Blake, "Color Blind." *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution*. March 20, 1999.

²⁰³ Gayle White, "Allah's People." *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution*. April 8, 2000.

²⁰⁴ Ken Kusmer "Growing Islam." *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution*. August 4, 2001.

²⁰⁵ John Blake, "The Nation's New Messenger." *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution*. October 16, 1999.

²⁰⁶ Barney Warf & Morton Winsberg, "Geographies of Megachurches in the United States."

²⁰⁷ John Blake, "Amazing Jakes." *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution*. July 31, 1999.

about Bishop Eddie Long's personal and professional transformation was titled "Long View at New Birth," which also used a play on words that included the Bishop's last name.²⁰⁸ Both articles told of the ups and down both men faced as they worked to grow their respective ministries in the Atlanta area.



Figure 6. Bishop Eddie Long Cover Story

Example of story presentation, July 10, 1999, *The Atlanta Journal Constitution*.

²⁰⁸ John Blake, "Long View at New Birth." *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution*. July 10, 1999.

Blake's fascination with the mega church caused him to be a careful and factual reporter. This was especially important when he wrote about the scandals of the leaders. Blake stated that he attended a lot of mega churches because "the spectacle, money, and power fascinated me."²⁰⁹ He likened the mega church leader-congregant relationship to a cult hold. Despite how some pastors were caught in scandals and doing reprehensible things, Blake stated that the congregants remained surprisingly loyal to their churches and pastors.

Blake explained that he once covered a story that resulted in a congressional investigation. Mega church pastor Bishop Eddie Long of New Birth was misusing funds from a charity he created. He was using some of the tax breaks to buy luxury cars and other luxuries. According to Blake, Long and his church members were angered by the report, and he received anger and abuse from them. Blake felt this type of reporting was important and impactful. Blake also wrote about Creflo Dollar's prosperity gospel, which had its own set of experiences for Blake.

²⁰⁹ Telephone conversation with John Blake on January 11, 2021



Figure 7. Pulpit Temptations – example of cover story presentation

Example of story presentation, February 6, 1999, *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution*.

Through his work, Blake was able to produce critical stories that called for accountability, as well as stories about hope and faith. Blake believes the influence that religion had may have played some role in the demise of the stand-alone religion section.²¹⁰ Blake contributes the loss of interest to an increase of non-religious people, although he believes that spirituality is on the rise.

²¹⁰ Telephone conversation with John Blake on January 11, 2021.

Volunteerism is Key

Volunteerism was a consistent theme throughout the first few years of the section. According to Feinberg, it was a part of the section design. Many volunteer efforts in the Atlanta area included getting the youth involved. Kindergartners in Emily Winship's class sometimes took a trip to a homeless shelter in Atlanta called the Open Door Community. Winship believed that parents should give their children the opportunity to feel the reward of giving. Jill Morehouse Lum, director of the Atlanta's Children's Museum, believed that this sort of exposure helps to build character in younger children.²¹¹

Older children participated in volunteering as well. Ninth graders at the Lovette School were sent on a three-day volunteer trip at local homeless shelters and community centers. They spent time in these poor communities helping to make a difference. John Allman, principal of Lovette, said there are multiple benefits from these projects, and they were a great way to build character, which is just as important as intelligence.

Not only did children get to participate in volunteer programs, but some children were recipients of the goodwill from others. Students at nine public schools in Georgia received assistance with their school lessons through The Discovery Program. This program had about 300-400 volunteers who went in on Saturdays to help the students. This program brought people from all walks of life together for a common goal.²¹²

²¹¹ Paula Schwed, "The Art of Giving." *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, February 15, 1997.

²¹² Paula Schwed, "Students, Tutors Thriving with Discovery." *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, February 8, 1997.

Some other recipients of such good will were a bit younger, much younger – babies. When some babies die, they are buried in brown paper bags because their parents cannot afford clothes to bury them in. Some babies who are born prematurely do not have clothes to wear because their sizes are usually too expensive for the parents to buy. These two things bothered Lisa Dempsey, who learned about this on the Newborns in Need website. Newborns in Need is a national organization that helps parents of these babies. Before long, Dempsey started a chapter in Georgia and volunteers joined her.²¹³

Another group helped by volunteer efforts was anyone who needed a coat or warm blanket. Project Overcoat helped the homeless, poor, and refugees who needed the items to stay warm. The key organizations that made this program successful were Federal Express, Winn Dixie, The Salvation Army, United Way, and a local television station, WAGA-TV. Community members were able to drop the coats off at Winn Dixie. Federal Express made daily pick-ups from the grocery store and took the items to The Salvation Army, where they were sorted by United Way volunteers. From there, agencies were able to distribute items to the citizens they served.²¹⁴

Aid for those who were hurting – mentally, medically, physically, and in other ways was also available. The ALS Association of Georgia was featured and made a request for volunteers.²¹⁵ Just as the ALS Association helped those disabled individuals, there was also help for individuals with other diseases. Frances Kuniansky quickly dismissed a doctor's order to put her baby with Down Syndrome in a home and forget

²¹³ Derrick Henry, "Clothing for Newborns in Need." *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, October 2, 1999.

²¹⁴ Derrick Henry, "Project overcoat in 10th year." *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, January 3, 1998.

²¹⁵ Derrick Henry, "Lou Gehrig's: Helping Families, Victims of 'a Very Tough Disease'." *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, September 4, 1999.

about her. She raised her at home. This encouraged her to be an advocate for developmentally disabled children in the Atlanta area. She founded the Atlanta Group Home, where her daughter and others lived. Kuniansky was awarded for her 40-years of advocacy work.²¹⁶ Another volunteer hero was Dannion Brinkley, who founded Compassion in Action, an organization that ensured individuals did not die alone whether they are at home, in hospice, or in the hospital. Brinkley, a Marine veteran, called those who volunteered with her organization The Twilight Brigade. They were trained in the art of transition.²¹⁷ There were volunteer organizations that focused on non-human furry friends as well. Mews for Cats was a nonprofit shelter that helped cats without a home. The shelter provided medical treatment when needed and offered the cats for adoption at a 75% success rate.²¹⁸

Faith & Values focused on the work of volunteers with individuals and pets, but also the work that was done outside in the community, like Mary Anne Hart, who started the Trees Atlanta nonprofit dedicated to keeping Atlanta green with trees. Other organizations promoted include the American Red Cross, Peace Corps, Habitat for Humanities, Junior League, and others.

Many volunteers and volunteer projects were accentuated in *Faith & Values* during the first few years with either a “Focus on Volunteerism” or “Making a Difference” header at the top of the story. After 1999, volunteerism stories continued to

²¹⁶ Derrick Henry, “Crusader for Developmentally Disabled.” *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, November 6, 1999.

²¹⁷ Derrick Henry, “Being There at the Hour of Death.” *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, March 6, 1999.

²¹⁸ Derrick Henry, “Animal Shelter is Good Mews for Cats.” *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, April 3, 1999.

appear in the paper but without the headings. Sometimes there were short blurbs about volunteer opportunities, and at other times, key volunteer stories showed up on the front page and within the section.

There were many volunteer opportunities in Atlanta. Reporters in *Faith & Values* presented many of them. Just in case any Atlantan found a reason to not volunteer, Patty Kovacs said there were no excuses. She even shared her list of reasons why excuses do not work.²¹⁹ Including volunteerism stories in the *Faith & Values* section added a new dimension to the religion section. The section was rich with such stories that shed light on the kindness and generosity tied to the religious stamp of the region.

A Matter of Ethics

Articles and reader feedback on various ethical topics were a consistent feature in the section from its beginning. This feature, with the heading of “Ethics,” was where readers interacted weekly with the newspaper. This feature within the section is where readers could respond to weekly ethical questions. The topics were wide in range. Some dealt with happenings in the community. For instance, the Atlanta courts were retrying a man who had killed his wife. The audience weighed in on the death penalty. This was a topic on more than one occasion, and each time, there was no consensus. Biblical and moral responses were included in the submissions.

Medical concerns were another topic. Readers shared their opinions about laws dealing with organ transplants, fertility, and making decisions to treat minors. Again, the

²¹⁹ Derrick Henry, “No Excuses: There are Many Ways to Help Needy.” *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, December 4, 1999.

responses were varied and frequently extremely passionate. Other topics included but were not limited to, divorce, deception, the privacy rights of political candidates, the whereabouts of sex offenders, integrating society, whether character building in children should be done at home or school, flag burning, too much sex on TV, readers' blame on parents of children who carry out crimes like the Littleton, Colorado school shooting, and so much more.

The takeaway here is the question - Who was reading these comments? Legislators? Activists? Parents? Any game-changer or policymaker? Or was it simply an outlet for readers to share in the journalistic experience? There certainly was a lot of passion and often sound solutions offered among rants and sometimes outlandish banter. Regardless of readership, the opportunity to voice one's opinion is a part of the democratic process. That is what this feature allowed many Atlantans to do on a weekly basis for the first few years of the section.

In the late 1990s, this ethics feature was no longer published. It was not until October 28, 2000, that the ethics focus returned with an introduction to syndicated Columnist Randy Cohen.²²⁰ The section published his "Everyday Ethics" column, where he would answer ethical questions from letters and emails he received from anyone. The focus of this section was no longer Atlanta-centric. The column ran consistently until February 7, 2004, and covered a wide range of topics.

On February 14, 2004, the paper announced in a masthead blurb that Jeffrey Seglin would take over the "Everyday Ethics" column. It is likely the newspaper

²²⁰ Kirk Kicklighter, "Column offers practical advice for everyday ethics." *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, October 28, 2000.

decision-makers thought readers would prefer Seglin over Cohen since he had more degrees and honors. Cohen was not a theologian, nor did he have a Ph.D. He won three Emmys for writing comedy for the Late Night with David Letterman show. He admitted to no expertise in ethics writing.

On the other hand, Seglin had a list of accolades – a master’s degree in theological studies from Harvard, he wrote ten ethics columns for the *New York Time’s* business section, was an ethnic fellow at Poynter Institute for Media Studies, and other crowns. However, apparently, Atlantans preferred Cohen over Seglin. On February 5, 2005, Cohen’s ethics column returned after readers widely requested it.²²¹



Figure 8. Back By Popular Demand – Randy Cohen’s ethic’s column returns
Blurb about Randy Cohen’s column returning, February 5, 2005, *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution*.

²²¹ Back by Popular Demand, *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, February 5, 2005.

Both writers responded to their readers' questions with warmth and understanding. However, one major difference was that Seglin's responses were terse and to the point, while Cohen's responses were more in-depth and came across as "fatherly." Although Seglin listed his experience as a father and grandfather as an asset to writing his column, it appeared as if his educational background strongly influenced his writing style and communication approach.²²² On the other hand, Cohen's lack of doctoral writing discipline allowed his work to be more down-to-earth and easily digested, even though they are wordier. Cohen was keenly aware that his "everyman" persona helped him land his syndicated role with *Sunday New York Times Magazine*.²²³

Churches Fight and Flight with Homosexuality

The gay rights movement has been going on for decades. The gay community was often met with opposition and slow acceptance. *Faith & Value* reporters covered this topic often. It was a recurring theme that caused much upheaval across denominations. For example, in the Baptist community, the Oakhurst Baptist Church was taken off the roll of the Atlanta Baptist Association because the church accepted gay men and lesbians in leadership roles.²²⁴ As in the case with the Episcopal Church, no doubt meetings were held before they reached that decision. In Minneapolis, the national Episcopal Church held a special hearing to confront a Bishop-elect who admitted to being openly gay. After an emotional debate about his possible election, he was affirmed. The committee's

²²² New Columnist Has Practical Approach. *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution*. February 14, 2004.

²²³ Kirk Kicklighter, "Column Offers Practical Advice for Everyday Ethics." *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution*. October 28, 2000.

²²⁴ Gayle White, "Atlanta Baptist Association Dismisses Oakhurst." *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, n.d.

nomination moved on to the House of Deputies for a vote. Eventually, Bishop V. Gene Robinson would be confirmed by the House of Bishops.²²⁵

This confirmation caused much opposition among Episcopalians, even in Atlanta. Two Episcopal priests, Rev. Sam Candler and Rev. David Anderson were on opposite sides of the homosexuality debate after the election of Robinson. Candler, dean of Atlanta's Cathedral of St. Phillips, attended the meeting where Robinson's confirmation was highly debated, and he spoke in support of the confirmation. Anderson was the president of the American Anglican Council, the group that fought against the election of Robinson. His church planned to break away from the national organization.²²⁶

These two priests shared their views on the Robinson election by providing scripture to support their convictions. Candler believed that homosexuality is not a sin and that it is innate. Anderson believed that homosexuality goes against Christian doctrine. Whereas both men have different beliefs and convictions, they both acknowledged their friendships and acquaintances with gays and lesbians, and they both wanted what was best for them.

The Methodist church experienced the same disagreements within its organization. Thirty-six pastors from the North Georgia Conference demanded censor of Rev. Karen Dammann, a UMC pastor that revealed she was in a lesbian relationship. The group declared homosexuality as incompatible with Christian teachings. Leaders of the

²²⁵ John Blake, "Emotions High in Debate on Gay Clergyman." *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, August 2, 2003.

²²⁶ John Blake, "Divided on Doctrine." *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, October 4, 2003.

group argued that Dammann should not receive the same opportunity that the Episcopalians afforded V. Gene Robinson.²²⁷

The Episcopalians affirmed Robinson as bishop. The Methodists acquitted Dammann of her homosexual relationship, but the Presbyterians, albeit barely, upheld the denomination's 1978 law that forbid the ordination of "self-affirming practicing homosexuals." The legislative body of the Presbyterian Church voted 259-255 not to allow the ordination of gay clergy and gay officers.²²⁸ Although this measure did not override a traditional law, our world's culture almost dictates that this law will someday be history.

These denominations waged an internal war on whether or not to accept homosexual activity within church leadership. The thought of or the break with traditional laws of their perspective organization put many long-time friends and clergy brothers at odds with one another. The debates and the new realities had just started to be realized within denominations, and the road ahead was sure to become even more splintered.

All Things Religious

As stated earlier by White and Feinberg, religion is found in many aspects of life. Journalists for *Faith & Values* always seemed to find stories with deep meaning, reality, pleasant tones, heaped in tradition, and even ones that may cause an eyebrow to be raised.

²²⁷ John Blake, "Methodist Group Wants Gay Pastor Removed." *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, April 3, 2004.

²²⁸ "Presbyterians Affirm Ban on Gay Clergy." *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, July 3, 2004.

Here is a look at a few headlines and front cover stories that evoked varied responses and emotions:

- “Icons of hope”²²⁹ – a story of ordinary objects that hold special meaning to people. Some examples included rocks, pieces of wood, or some other object that was special to them because they give hope in some sort of way.
- “A crying need for rituals”²³⁰ – there is a Jewish ritual that tells you exactly what to do when a person dies. The ritual, according to Stuart Blickstein, tells you what to do when you really do not know what to do.
- “Pulpit temptations”²³¹ – religious leaders and pastors are not immune from wrongdoings. Greed, power, and money have often caused leaders to fall. The article describes a trapping cycle that many leaders have no intention of falling into.
- “God online”²³² – Reverend Charles Henderson is an ordained Presbyterian pastor who leads the First Church of Cyberspace. His online congregation was diverse in beliefs and lifestyles. Yet, they connected on personal levels. Cyberspirituality was a revolution. Some experts warned that any congregation that does not seek out online services would perish. Others believed being connected online was important but did not replace in-person worship.

The headlines and front cover stories each week ranged from serious topics like changing the state flag and how presidential candidates Bush and Gore were going after

²²⁹ John Blake, “Icons of Hope.” *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, February 1, 1997.

²³⁰ Anne Rochell, “A crying need for rituals.” *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, January 24, 1998.

²³¹ Blake, “Pulpit Temptations.” *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, February 6, 1999.

²³² John Blake, “God Online.” *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, August 5, 2000.

the Catholic vote to stories like “Do animals have souls?” The stories were always present because a religious thought can be found in just about every aspect of life.

Religion Wrapped Up

The Atlanta-Journal-Constitution opened with a question but also provided an answer for the spiritual desires whispered by its readership. Joining the trend a little later than some of its contemporaries, a choice compensated for by content and style, *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution* was blessed with a team of dedicated writers who really took the religion beat to heart. Although the city of Atlanta is considered somewhat of a melting pot of the south, its gentrified population had a major influence on the direction of the religion section through its denominational representation. Overall, the stand-alone religion section represented its readership well and maintained a well-rounded reporting style throughout its publication life.

The reporters had religion news aplenty from which to draw. Atlanta’s historic black churches were formerly anchored by such fiery pastors as Martin Luther King Jr., the Rev. C.T. Vivien, and the Rev. Ralph Abernathy, among others on the front line of change. They left behind legacies that would serve to cement the historical church’s lasting role in Atlanta’s religious community, even as more modern worship styles began to emerge. The reporters treated religion news with the same level of importance that they covered the governor’s office with, and they were committed to exploring issues that demonstrated and highlighted Atlanta’s religious diversity.

There were decades when newspapers reported huge earnings. It was then that the Atlanta newspaper established bureaus in several growing regions of its vast metropolitan

area. Religions of all types, from Islam to Judaism, from Christianity to Hinduism, all became a part of the religion section's coverage. Demographic shifts in the city created urban sprawl that gave people choices: Remain loyal to their "home" church – which was often as far as 45 minutes away from upstart communities -- or find new places to worship closer to their homes in developing neighborhoods.

Even when Atlanta's religion section was created, mega churches – defined as a church with 2,000 members or more – were popping up all over the metropolitan statistical area. To this day, Atlanta is one of the cities in the nation with the most mega churches. The faith and values that defined such religious diversity, and the sheer number of different faiths in the city, made the Atlanta section one where readers were interested in how faith transforms and permeates society, one that had to be read. To the end, reporters stayed true to the mission of covering religion at a high level. They, too, have left behind an archive that shows the depth of their work, and the people who occupy today's newspaper have also found that there is still an appetite for religion coverage. It is simply no longer anchored in a section of its own.

Although it came to an end, *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution's* stand-alone religion content and themes spoke to their readership and continuously produced hard-hitting stories that could sometimes jump off the pages with a strong rebuke for the public, and at other times inspire and provide food for thought that promoted racial harmony in the midst of a civil rights hot bed. The section itself boasted highly qualified writers who went on to become published authors and award-winning journalists, who look back fondly at their time with *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution*. Many of the writers

credit the section with developing their passion and giving them the experience they needed to have successful careers in the long run. Throughout its lifespan, the stand-alone religion section helped to shape the worldview of not only the writers and editors but also the loyal readers of the paper. While faith and values were at the heart of each story, the section was not lacking in its pursuit of good morals through ethics features and public discussion. The impact of *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution's* stand-alone religion section continues to be felt in the digital aspect of reporting in the area even today.

CHAPTER V – THE CHARLOTTE OBSERVER

Introduction

The Charlotte Observer was founded on March 22, 1886, as *The Charlotte Daily Chronicle*.²³³ It competed with the original *Charlotte Daily Observer*, taking its name when the *Daily Observer* went out of business. Shortly before the 1929 stock market crash, *The Charlotte Observer* sold its stocks, amassing a small fortune that enabled it to expand operations during the Depression.²³⁴ As such, *The Observer* offers an unparalleled glimpse into the throes of the Depression, as well as World War II, the New Deal, and the events that followed. By the 1950s, the paper had again changed direction and became a strong voice in favor of desegregation and civil rights.²³⁵ Additionally, the advertisements, photographs, and classifieds included in its archive offer insight into the daily life of Carolinians across the 20th century.²³⁶ The paper remained under private individual ownership until 1954, when the Knights bought it for about \$7.2 million. The Knight and Ridder newspaper corporations merged in 1974.²³⁷ *The Charlotte Observer* joined the McClatchy company in 2006 after McClatchys purchased the Knight-Ridder company.²³⁸ Today, *The Charlotte Observer* is the largest newspaper in North Carolina and has won several Pulitzer Prizes during its reign.²³⁹ The paper has received high praise from the journalism community, receiving four Pulitzer Prizes-two for meritorious public

²³³ W. J. Williams, “*The Charlotte Observer*.” Retrieved November 10, 2020, from <https://www.ncpedia.org/charlotte-observer>

²³⁴ Jack Claiborne, “*The Charlotte Observer: Its Time and Place, 1869-1986*.” UNC Press Books, 2018.

²³⁵ Williams, “*The Charlotte Observer*.”

²³⁶ Walker R. Turner, “Charlotte, North Carolina: A Brief History.” (2011): 92-94

²³⁷ Claiborne, “*The Charlotte Observer: Its Time and Place*.”

²³⁸ Richard Perez-Pena, “McClatchy Plans to Cut 15% of Staff.” *New York Times*, March 10.

²³⁹ Williams, “*The Charlotte Observer*.”

service (its 1981 series on brown lung disease, which afflicted textile workers in the Charlotte area, and its 1988 coverage of the scandal surrounding the “Praise the Lord” ministry of Jim and Tammy Bakker).²⁴⁰

The paper is still in operation today and added an online platform in the early 2000s. To date, daily printed copies are still available but are in stark decline.

Unfortunately, the McClatchy company has lost over 95% of its stock value since the purchase of *The Charlotte Observer*.²⁴¹ In spite of this, it is still the most important paper in the greater Charlotte area. Like the queen from which it takes its name, *The Charlotte Observer* has experienced many ups and downs but still maintains a stately influence in North Carolina. From the beginning, *The Observer* linked its future to that of Charlotte and the Piedmont Carolinas.

Religion News Can Stand Alone

As a southern state, North Carolina is deeply religious. According to a 2014 survey by the Pew Research Center, 73% of adults in North Carolina say their belief in God is certain, and 15% of adults reported that their belief in God was fairly certain, bringing the percentage of belief in God to 88%.²⁴² Through researching the topics published in the paper over the decades, it is easy to see that religion news made the front page often and peppered the many sections of the paper from business to opinions. Religion news and topics can be found making headlines as early as 1873 when the paper

²⁴⁰ Williams, “*The Charlotte Observer*.”

²⁴¹ Perez-Pena, “McClatchy Plans to Cut 15% of Staff.”

²⁴² Religion in America: U.S. Religious Data, Demographics and Statistics. Retrieved November 10, 2020, from <https://www.pewforum.org/religious-landscape-study/state/north-carolina/>

was still using the masthead *Daily Observer*.²⁴³ The paper regularly published a religion page that also included advertisements and church invitations. However, the changing news reporting climate of the mid-90s made it apparent to the powers that be at *The Charlotte Observer* that the paper needed a stand-alone religion section. The shift began in the mid-70s to late 80s, when researchers like Judith Buddenbaum began to study how religion was reported internationally.²⁴⁴ As sensational news began to have more and more religious tones, nonprofit agencies began to have conferences, forums, and produced literature to help spread the awareness. Long-time *Charlotte Observer* reporter Ken Garfield states that there was a full-time religion reporter long before he arrived. By 1992 he became a full-time religion writer, but his stories were dispersed throughout the paper, as the stand-alone religion section had not been created yet.²⁴⁵ According to Garfield, Charlotte was a good place for religion-based reporting because it had a large number of churches and a higher church attendance rate than most of the United States.²⁴⁶

From 1993 to 1995, several important reports were published citing the need for educated religion coverage in the media.²⁴⁷ One titled “The Media Get Religion” focused on how more and more daily papers were creating stand-alone religion sections of various page lengths.²⁴⁸ Another titled, “A Plea for More Coverage of Religion,” took a look at Rev. Billy Graham’s influence on the media and the population’s desire for

²⁴³ Science and Religion. *Daily Observer*. September 7, 1873.

²⁴⁴ Buddenbaum, “The Religion Beat at Daily Newspapers.”

²⁴⁵ Garfield, Telephone interview January 11, 2021.

²⁴⁶ Garfield, Telephone interview January 11, 2021.

²⁴⁷ Stewart M. Hoover, “Religion in The News: Faith and Journalism in American Public Discourse.” Sage Publications, 1998.

²⁴⁸ Alicia C. Shepard, “The Media Get Religion.” *American Journalism Review* 17, no. 10. (1995):18-26.

religion news.²⁴⁹ These reports described a media that had begun to recognize a need, as well as an incentive, to cover religion. The reports also described some of the major hurdles to providing it: suspicion on one side and ignorance on the other. Religious leaders had long complained about the coverage was inaccurate or oftentimes sensationalized. In 1993, an article produced by the Freedom Forum First Amendment Center described the media at large as ignorant of religion.²⁵⁰ The purpose of this organization is to educate the public about the importance of the First Amendment. So, its interest in news reporting and religion in the media was noticeably clear. The media's attempt to remedy this problem was demonstrated by many major newspapers starting religion sections and hiring religion specialists.²⁵¹

Around the same time, the Religion Newswriters Association had grown from a handful of members in the early 1990s to more than 400 members, which represents a significant increase of interest and market for religion news and knowledgeable writers.²⁵² The news climate of the late 80s and early 90s saw a U.S. president who used a lot of Biblical rhetoric, rising tensions in the Islamic state, and growth of Christian evangelical congregations across the country.²⁵³ Industry leaders also cited an ignorance in religion reporting that often translates as negativity; writing about the subject more

²⁴⁹ Debra G. Hernandez, "A Plea for More Coverage of Religion." *Editor & Publisher* 127, no. 18 (1994): 22-23.

²⁵⁰ J. Dart & J. Allen, "A First Amendment Guide to Religion and the News Media." New York: Freedom Forum First Amendment Center.

²⁵¹ Willey, "The Founding of The Dallas Morning News' Religion Section."

²⁵² Willey, "The Founding of The Dallas Morning News' Religion Section."

²⁵³ "Willey, "The Founding of The Dallas Morning News' Religion Section."

knowledgeably requires more knowledgeable reporters who are less likely to write in broadly negative tones.²⁵⁴

In 1999, Coverage of religion was increasing, and newspaper editors agreed that it would probably continue to increase. Schools of such thought likely influenced the decision by *The Charlotte Observer*'s editors. In a Poynter Report, Mattingly writes:

*"... newspaper executives have been bombarded by research showing that religion news ranks high in the interests of ordinary readers and that religion stories often make the annual Associated Press list of top news stories. Moreover, religion stories often hit the core of many human issues, whether politics, education, legal affairs, and more. No story is without a religious or moral angle – from President Bush's quasi-Old Testament rhetoric following 9/11 to his decision to attack Iraq, from ignorance of Islam and Muslims abroad to intolerance of New Religious Movements in the United States."*²⁵⁵

Examples as such have been pervasive in the media, and the media's effectiveness in conveying messages has a direct impact on the public's understanding of the issues on which those messages are based. The case is no different at *The Charlotte Observer*.

According to industry leaders, these reasons support the idea that religion coverage deserved greater attention from journalists and scholars. A former news editor said at a conference more than three decades ago,

"A dialogue between press and religion is needed. It may be noisy, but it is necessary for the survival of both. Readers have been clamoring for more religion

²⁵⁴ Willey, "The Founding of The Dallas Morning News' Religion Section."

²⁵⁵ Judith M. Buddenbaum, "Blind Spot: When Journalists Don't Get Religion." (2010):47-51.

*coverage ... It has always cropped up in reader surveys, but now, to a greater extent, editors are listening to what readers want”.*²⁵⁶

This reflects an attitude on the part of this editor that religion is an everyday part of readers’ lives. It also suggests that worship in the circulation area such as that of Charlotte, North Carolina, is an activity that involves a large portion of the community. With faith and values increased its presences in print and on the small screen and not long after the introduction of the “Faith & Values Channel” in the winter of 1994, *The Charlotte Observer* began print of its stand-alone religion section of the same title in 1995. *Faith & Values* debuted on December 9, 1995, with writer/editor Ken Garfield basking in the joy of introducing the new section to readers. In his introductory message, he likens the new section to heaven for religion writers. Garfield goes on to express the importance of the new section, including what readers could expect - from celebrating the harmonies of religious life to examining all sides of spiritual issues.²⁵⁷

The inaugural section included two front-page stories - one about the diversity of Christmas cards and how greeting card companies realized the need for both Christmas and non-Christmas messages on cards; the other story, “Keeping the Faith,” shares the story of one woman’s passion for her religion and her connecting that passion to being a citizen of the Bible Belt. This story also included results from *The Charlotte Observer*/WBTV News 1995 Faith and Values Poll in which 599 Charlotte-area residents participated. Two data points were on the front page and included how 25% considered

²⁵⁶ Abby Day, “The Conflict Between Religion and Media Has Deep Roots.” *Religion and the Public Sphere* (1016).

²⁵⁷ Saturday, Dec. 9, 1995, *Living: Faith & Values*, G1

themselves Southern Baptist, twice as much as the next denomination (Methodist at 11%), and 94% polled said they pray.

The Charlotte Observer

Pastor uses a crafty idea
Pineville's Bill Mauch lets colorful puppets do his preaching at Lifespring Church
Page 36

Living
Faith & Values

... SATURDAY, DECEMBER 9, 1995 ... Section **G**

Inside
Movies 50
Comics 60
Tell Me A Story 70
Car Talk 80

Olivia Fortson tells us about a take-a-boy party

KEN GARFIELD
On Faith

Today's new section looks like a religion editor's dream

I think I've arrived in journalistic heaven.
For a religion editor already blessed to be chronicling faith in the Carolinas, heaven comes in the form of this sweet little section in your hands today.
It's the place each Saturday morning where we will open the sanctuary doors to show the compassionate and complex world of faith, values and ethics.
It's the place where we'll celebrate the harmonies of religious life, honor saints and challenge sinners. We'll examine all sides of spiritual issues and shine the spotlight on the churches, synagogues and mosques where we live a rich part of our lives.
And you thought you were on your way to the comics and TV pages! Stay calm, you are. But you have also arrived at The Observer's new "Faith & Values" pages, which deserve some explaining. Pardon my indulgence, but if you ask me, they also deserve a little praising.

From ethics to Graham
When I first started covering religion four years ago, I likened it to a journey to new and wonderful places.
I've tapped my feet to the beat of gospel-singing city bus drivers in west Charlotte and felt chills watching elderly German-born Billy Graham's altar call in the Ruffalo Valley.
I've been fascinated by your ethical-minded reaction to the Carolina Panthers breaking the rules to lend a coach. If it's wrong to violate the NFL's code, many of you missed, what about violating these little hotel rules?
Most of all, I've been awestruck by the great numbers that come every Sunday to share scriptures, song and fellowship with the church family of their choice.
For a journalist who craves color — and who as a middle-aged father searches for life's deeper meaning — I didn't think it could get any better than chasing faith stories.
Then we at The Observer began to see how even more tightly religion has wrapped itself around our readers' lives. Sales of books on spirituality have skyrocketed. Always the "city of churches," Charlotte has now become home to some of America's best and largest congregations, from Hickory Grove Baptist to St. Gabriel Catholic Church.
We began to see the light, which in a newspaper's case means realizing the need to devote greater resources to coverage of faith, values and ethics. In The Observer's case, it means presenting the Living section pages that arrive this morning.

Keeping the faith
Religion rules the Carolinas, though change peeks through the traditions

By **KEN GARFIELD**
Religion Editor

The intensity and tradition of Carolina faith may surprise those whose life isn't built around prayer and praise.
But to Meg Comp of Hickory, our devotion is as natural as the grace her 5-year-old son seeks before the family meal.
It's as important as the scriptures she reads every day.
And as The Charlotte Observer-WFTV News 10's Faith and Values Poll dramatically illustrates, it's as much a part of who we are as grits and growth.
"It's called the Bible Belt, isn't it?" asked Comp, 32, a Presbyterian and stay-at-home mother of three. "I was just raised that way. It's all I know. What does it mean to me? It's the only way I can live. It brings meaning to my life, joy to my life."
Camp isn't alone in her joy. A survey of 599 Charlotte-area residents interviewed for today's debut of The Observer's weekly Faith & Values section shows that:
■ Twenty-five percent consider themselves Southern Baptist, more than twice as many as the next denomination — Methodists at 11 percent. Taken together, the mainstream denominations — Baptists, Methodists, Presbyterians, Lutherans and Episcopalians — make up a total of 65 percent of those surveyed.
■ Ninety-four percent say they pray.
Please see **TRADITION** page 36

Charlotte Observer/WFTV News religion poll page 36

Figure 9. Keeping the Faith - design update.

First day of new *Faith & Values* stand-alone section, December 9, 1995, *The Charlotte Observer*.

Senior editors had the idea of starting the stand-alone religion section when they agreed to create a features section for every day of the week. The sections needed to be developed, but it brought about a great change for *The Charlotte Observer*. According to Garfield, *Faith & Values* were born more out of developing the sections more than anything else.²⁵⁸ The new religion section had fresh content every week, but breaking news in religion did not get saved for Saturdays and was published throughout the week. A short while after, a second reporter was hired, Tim Funk. He was a TV critic writer for a long time and a Raleigh political correspondent. He also had a serious liberal Catholic background, which probably drew him to the section. In Garfield's own words, "we were good complements – I was more breaking news focused and he wrote from a feature perspective."²⁵⁹

At the outset of the section, reporters felt that religion was not a great beat because it mainly included announcements about bake sales and Bible studies.²⁶⁰ Over time, religion stories became paramount as the community began to grow. Several elements made the section grow in popularity. At the time there were more than 600 houses of worship in the Charlotte area, and the Jewish and Muslim communities were steadily growing.²⁶¹ Charlotte is also the hometown of several notable televangelists, such as Billy Graham and Jim Bakker. Plus, it was a hotspot for mega evangelists like T.D. Jakes, Joel Osteen and Benny Hinn. The Catholic Church scandals and the endless battles against homosexual rights in churches provided much religion news to report on.

²⁵⁸ Ken Garfield, Telephone interview January 11, 2021.

²⁵⁹ Garfield, Interview.

²⁶⁰ Garfield, Interview.

²⁶¹ Garfield, Interview.

By degrees, the section began to explore beyond the usual borders and limits and sought out what its readers wanted to know about or attempted to answer questions the readers might ask. Furthermore, the coverage became more people-oriented and expanded beyond the philosophy of religion.²⁶² While meetings of national organizations still received coverage, the section writers and editors strove to go beneath the bureaucratic stories to find ways in which local people were affected. Gradually, *The Charlotte Observer's* form of religion reporting began to pay more attention to broad movements and issues that affected many denominations.²⁶³

The Pictures in the Print

The design and layout of the stand-alone religion section of *The Charlotte Observer* tell a story in itself. Although the content of the section was different every week, the graphic design style remained the same, varying only a little from the set guidelines. Over the course of the publication, the placement of religion articles, and the number of photographs that accompanied them, did not change significantly. However, a significant difference was found in the number of religion stories versus the number of advertisements that were published between 2000-2012. They continued to fluctuate. When the section included more advertisements, more graphics were used for the advertisements, but less was used across the articles. The inverse applied when the number of advertisements in the section was down, and the number of articles increased; the section included more graphics to accompany the stories.

²⁶² Ken Garfield, Telephone Interview January 11, 2021.

²⁶³ Garfield, Interview.

Another important observation is that the religion section largely followed a traditional newsprint template presentation and did not include large tracts of color printing until the advent of online publications in the early 2000s. The primary color applied to the section is the “C” of the CMYK print group, cyan. The cyan embellishments are largely found on the front page, accentuating the header. The remainder of the section remained the traditional black and white.

In design and typography, the *Faith & Values* section combined the classic heritage of the past with the best of the modern. The cover achieved this effect with its combination of the classic. The feature articles, contemporary in interest, were set and captioned in modern types; in their choice of typefaces, *Faith & Values* follows the more traditional printing format using Poynter font.

The graphic images in the section were large photographs with less than 25% of them being composed of artwork, sketches, or digital designs. Among the photographic images, many styles were incorporated into the design of the section largely in relevance to the accompanying story. In one particular publication, the section included a religious cartoon with political undertones, which was very refreshing and quite a true representation of the subject material. The image was produced by the Pulitzer Prize-winning artist associated with the paper, Kevin Siers.²⁶⁴ Each redesign suggested a modernization of the column. Although the paper and its readership moved online throughout the 2000s, the print version of the section continued to remain largely traditional.

²⁶⁴ Kevin Siers, *The Charlotte Observer*. Retrieved December (2001).

More than Just Religion: An Evolving Section

When *The Charlotte Observer* changed from its one-page religion section to the multipage stand-alone section when it was given the title *Faith & Values*. While religion does encompass both faith and values, faith and values can expand beyond religion. Many of the articles and stories printed in the section often related to universal human principles such as good morals, hope, brotherly love, and triumph over adversity. Although changes in religious leadership were one of the most reoccurring types of articles, the section also reported on stories that did not have a distinct religious affiliation. Topics related to values rang true, especially in articles about education and community issues that united the readership across religious orientations.

Another topic that spoke to faith and values without religious connotations is that of family relationships and family bonding. Throughout the life of the stand-alone section, the name varied; one was “Faith and Ethics,” another “Values and Ethics.” The term “ethics” is often strongly related to morals but not always entirely associated with religion. In spite of the attempts to find a title that aptly defined the various topics covered within the section, the paper largely stuck with the title *Faith & Values*.

Other oscillating changes were the page numbers, as well as the number of pages. The section generally maintained a two to six-page spread during its existence before it was finally downgraded to one page on February 21, 2015.²⁶⁵ Originally found in section G, *Faith & Values* also found its home on the pages of sections including, but not limited to, A, C F, H, and L. There was no consistent pattern to identify. The page changes

²⁶⁵ *The Charlotte Observer*. February 21, 2015.

appeared random, most likely due to printing press standards. The *Faith & Values* section was often included as a subsection of *LIVING* or *Carolina Living*, so the page changes could be related to the title changes, but from simple observation, this correlation cannot be factually determined.²⁶⁶

²⁶⁶ *The Charlotte Observer*. February 22, 2014.

TV/RADIO



MARK WASHBURN

Byrnes is back after cancer treatment

Steve Byrnes was at a Charlotte Knights baseball game last July with his wife and son when he realized something wasn't right. He felt a bump on his tongue.

"I'm not a run-to-the-doctor kind of guy, but I went anyway," says Byrnes, a veteran motorsports expert for Fox Sports 1.

Soon, he had his diagnosis: throat cancer that had spread to a lymph node. Byrnes is not a smoker or drinker.

"My world turned upside down," says Byrnes, 54. Soon he went on leave from his job as co-host with Danielle Trotta and Adam Alexander of "NASCAR Race Hub" produced at Fox Sports 1's Charlotte production center.



COURTESY OF HINDU CENTER OF CHARLOTTE

Here's what the new Hindu temple in Charlotte will look like when it is finished.

New temple, new future



Figure 10. Shortened Masthead

First day the word value was dropped from masthead, February 22, 2014, *The Charlotte Observer*.

Balance Among Beliefs

Religion story topics showed continuing diversity. While the most common topic was general church news, and although Charlotte is predominately Christian, the religion stories encompassed an impressively broad range of coverage. From a review of the articles and their contents, the decrease in negativity toward religion was more or less steady throughout the time of the stand-alone section. By the early 2000s to mid-2000s, the tone was generally neutral when specific denominations and religious affiliations were made, but when articles were written with respect to abstract religious ideals with no particular associations, the tone was positive, encouraging, and unifying.

A key newsworthy event to take into consideration is the reporting of the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks. After 9/11, a rise in animosity towards Islamic people increased significantly,²⁶⁷ but the years following that devastating time have seen a decrease in this sentiment, which is evident within *The Charlotte Observer's* religion section pages – and the paper at large.²⁶⁸ The trend among stories indicated that there would be more positive reporting in relation to Islamic-based religion stories, which would be reasonable, considering that Islam was the fastest-growing religion in the world and in America.

Another reason coverage of Islam likely would not become negative again is political correctness, which was a trend in regard to religion reporting as a whole. It would make sense that newspapers, in order not to offend their readers, would respond to more sensitive issues with more sensitive and less negative coverage. The change since

²⁶⁷ Richard Scheinin, "It was evil...They're not Martyrs'." *The Tennessean*. September 22, 2001.

²⁶⁸ Brian Lewis, "Two Muslims Hope To Unify Those in Area." *The Tennessean*. April 26, 2003.

the late 90s was gradual but apparent. The increased religion coverage in the media during that time indicated responsiveness to individual communities and audiences, and the decision for *The Charlotte Observer* to produce a stand-alone religion section reflected the dynamics of its geographic region and its sensitivity to the interests of its readership.

Just as Judaism and Christianity are two major religions in the world, they were also the two largest Christian religions among *The Charlotte Observer's* constituency.²⁶⁹ However, this did not cause a lack of support and reporting of other religions within the section. When it came to the reporting of the facts either in regard to Christianity, Islam, or other faiths, a high percentage of stories were neutral in tone. Aside from distinct religious faiths being covered in the stand-alone section, stories that were more aligned with the faith and values aspect were more widely reported in a positive way and seemed to take care not to emphasize a specific religion but to send a message of hope and inspiration.

THEMES

Education as a Source of Faith & Values

Although it may sound counterintuitive, education does play a major role in the development of a person's faith and values. A major theme featured in the weekly stand-alone religion section was important news regarding educational developments and issues across the region from K-12 to post-secondary institutions, both religious and secular. Character education is important within the religious tradition but tends to be viewed

²⁶⁹ Religion in Charlotte, North Carolina. Sperling's Best Places.

with suspicion by educators who privilege autonomy as the aim of a liberal education. Equally, religious believers may have concerns that character education places too great an emphasis upon good works rather than grace.²⁷⁰

The religion section of *The Charlotte Observer* took the approach that character education need not be indoctrinatory in the pejorative sense, on the one hand, nor conflated with religion on the other as a reflection of the communities' sentiments. Although historically, the family has held the primary responsibility for values education, the broader society also has a role in producing good citizens, lending credence to the idea that a strong community will help raise children to become good citizens, which in today's society largely means the public school system. When issues regarding education were discussed within the pages of the religion section that frequently addressed the point of view that the school system played a key role in the development of societal values, education-related articles often pointed out school activities or acts of community service.

From a secular point of view, the purpose of values education is to develop in young people the knowledge and understanding, skills, and attitudes necessary for them to function as responsible citizens both as individuals and as members of society. The emphasis is on behavior or doing the right thing by others in society, and values are seen as something individuals have, something they choose to adopt for life. Many articles throughout the *Faith & Values* section support the belief that moral education is a civic responsibility jointly shared by families, schools, and society.

²⁷⁰ *The Charlotte Observer*. "Faith & Values". July 27, 2002.

Although articles regarding education are found in the religion section, they are presented in a way that supports the secular principles espoused above. The researcher believes this is done to maintain neutrality, as education often expands religious boundaries, even when the school has a specific religious affiliation. People of all faiths will choose to send their children to schools of other faiths if they believe that the school will offer quality education and good moral principles.²⁷¹

One example of this is related to an Islamic student at Appalachian State University who had an affinity for the design and welcoming feeling of Christian church buildings.²⁷² However, the marquee on the outside of one church denouncing Islam and Muhammad hurt him deeply. He says it was through his experiences at the school and the teachings of Islam he learned to love and be tolerant of other religions and to be respectful.²⁷³

Power of Prayer

Another unifying theme was the power of prayer. This theme appeared quite frequently through the religion section, with articles and stories being printed about once every two weeks. In *The Charlotte Observer*, the theme of prayer was addressed in a wide spectrum of perspectives - from the Christian and monotheistic points of view to polytheistic expressions as well. Additionally, prayer was not tied to a specific religion, as illustrated in the article discussing a chain of prayer, while the National Day of Prayer reporting exposed an interfaith divide.

²⁷¹ However, "Christianity 101 class evolves into exploration." *The Charlotte Observer*. February 16, 2002.

²⁷² *The Charlotte Observer*. "Faith & Values". June 15, 2002.

²⁷³ *The Charlotte Observer*. "Faith & Values". June 15, 2002.

In the 2004 article about joining a chain of prayer, the author discussed how he was initially overwhelmed with prayer and felt pressured to participate in the various ways prescribed by his faith. However, when learning about the chain of prayer, it became something the writer could more easily commit to. It was through its simplicity that the writer became more aware of his prayers and became more active in his faith.²⁷⁴

A 2002 article covered the front page of the religion section with a huge black and white photo of a Bible study group who examined The Lord's Prayer. The article described how the group was reviewing the prayer line by line to understand its significance.²⁷⁵ The Lord's Prayer may not spread across religions, but within the confines of Christianity, it transcends denominations. The prayer is noted for offering unity, consistency, peace, and humility. By studying the prayer together, the group was reported to feel a sense of community. *The Charlotte Observer's* treatment of this particular piece stresses that prayer is central to someone's faith and values, particularly within the Christian community. However, because of the way the piece was written, readers of different faiths could have been persuaded to just take a look at the famous prayer of Jesus, even though he may not be their chosen deity. Furthermore, the article lays out all the different aspects of the prayer in such a pragmatic way that even a non-believer would gain something from the key takeaways without being discouraged by the religious rhetoric.

²⁷⁴ Bryant Steele, "Joining a Chain of Prayer." *The Charlotte Observer*. November 28, 2004.

²⁷⁵ Jim Remsen, "Class Makes Close Study of the Lord's Prayer." *The Charlotte Observer*. September 21, 2002.

The theme of prayer was addressed in a completely different light when it was coupled with a prison ministry at Catawba Correctional Center.²⁷⁶ As an answer to a former inmate's prayer, Rev. Reggie Longcrier, who functioned as the prison's chaplain, had seen prayer work in the darkest of circumstances. In the article, Longcrier exposed an unfortunate truth – it was hard to raise money for prison ministry. However, it was through his dedication and perseverance that the ministry continued to function. The article shared with its readers that Longcrier was once an inmate himself and needed spiritual guidance, and since his release, he returned to the prison in order to help other inmates who may feel ostracized from society. Although addressing a heavy topic, the article presented an upbeat and hopeful tone. The article's photograph of Longcrier's bright smile also contributed to the mood. Furthermore, the article worked as a bit of advertising by mentioning Longcrier's construction business and the fundraising needs of the prison ministry.

On a lighter note, another article connected prayer and chocolate through the practice of Lent. The author was able to show humility, sacrifice, lightheartedness, humanity, and sincerity, all in a piece about the giving of chocolate. The confession of her weakness for chocolate and social media sites made her very relatable. She compared her choice for Lent to something that children would do, but she also admitted that when Lent was over, she could be found eating the ears off the chocolate bunny.²⁷⁷ While her writing style appeared to be very witty on the surface, the meaning of, and need for, prayer is very evident throughout the article. This piece displayed one of the many ways

²⁷⁶ Jen Aronoff, "Prison Prayer Fulfilled." *The Charlotte Observer*. July 22, 2006.

²⁷⁷ Aronoff, "Prison Prayer Fulfilled." *The Charlotte Observer*. July 22, 2006.

the editors selected pieces to make religion reporting very approachable, even that coverage related to a specific religion.

Coming from a perspective of conflict, which is sometimes attributed to prayer, the section addressed a supreme court ruling directed towards pre-game prayer during football games.²⁷⁸ It was by addressing themes like this in a variety of ways that *The Charlotte Observer* succeeded in reaching its readers, who may or may not practice a specific religion or religion practice.

Public Acceptance Influences Public Opinion

Charlotte, North Carolina is considered to be one of the major “buckles” within the Bible Belt region, and, with sweeping civil rights changes being given to same-sex couples, the coverage of such topics was addressed in correlation to changing views of the public’s opinion.²⁷⁹ While some traditionally think of religion as being a category or lived practice that has only excluded queer, transgender, and gender-nonconforming persons due to homophobia and transphobia, the reporting within *The Charlotte Observer’s* stand-alone religion section showed how LGBT persons engaged with religious traditions on their terms, historically and in contemporary contexts. However, this method of reporting did not negate that some still espoused those traditional belief systems towards religion.²⁸⁰

²⁷⁸ Chris Fletcher, “Supreme Court Tackles Pregame Prayers.” *The Charlotte Observer*. March 27, 2000.

²⁷⁹ Brunn, Webster & Archer, “The Bible Belt in a changing south: Shrinking, relocating, and multiple buckles.”

²⁸⁰ Aronoff “*Prison Prayer Fulfilled.*” *The Charlotte Observer*. July 22, 2006.

The issue of marriage equality is the source of great conflict, not only in society but also in churches.²⁸¹ The first half of 2013 was a season of change in the United States regarding the legal status of same-sex marriage. In *The Charlotte Observer*, more than half of the event- and issue-based articles center on this issue. The Pew Forum on Religion and Public life showed how public opinion about same-sex marriage had changed over the years. The stand-alone section of *The Charlotte Observer* reflected this change in its reporting.

Furthermore, similar to the coverage of non-Christian-related articles, LGBT topics were covered with a non-negative or non-biased tone. The articles are not particularly positive or upbeat but often reports the stories as they are. When LGBT news stories were presented in the religion section, they came from a factual point of view often presenting both sides of the story to avoid any bias.

As Christian denominations across the American South were forced to deal with LGBT rights in the community and inclusion within the church, more issues garnered local and national attention. In the instances of reporting, it seems that the paper favored the terms “gay” and “same-sex” over the use of LGBT, which is more common today.²⁸² The religion section presented quite a number of articles that called attention to some of the ostracism the community faces within the public sphere.²⁸³ With the increase of support groups and public acceptance, more articles and stories were reported that coincided with the change in public views.

²⁸¹ Laurie A. Drabble et al., “It’s Complicated: The Impact of Marriage Legalization Among Sexual Minority Women and Gender Diverse Individuals in the United States.”

²⁸² *The Charlotte Observer*. “Faith & Values”. 1996-2015.

²⁸³ *The Charlotte Observer*. “Faith & Values”. 1996-2015.

A particularly interesting story was when a nun, who did not identify as LGBT, was silenced by her parish from speaking and ministering to those who did identify as LGBT and their family members.²⁸⁴ Although the nun was forbidden from speaking within the Catholic parish, a Baptist minister opened up his doors, allowing her to speak and minister to her designated audience.²⁸⁵ When the parish was aware that doors were open to her, they forbid the Baptist minister and any other religious institution to allow her a platform. In spite of all their insisting, the nun was able to speak and continue her ministry without her home church's approval.²⁸⁶ Instances like these expressed the changing climate within the community and between faith groups. This article was important because it explored the unique changes that were happening within churches and denominations at the time. Stories like this showed that many people of faith sympathized with the LGBT community even though they may not identify as LGBT themselves.

Another article reported the opposite response highlighting a United Methodist church whose clergy provided a statement declaring that the responsible use of sexuality is not dependent on the gender of the partner.²⁸⁷ With this statement, they acknowledged homosexual relationships and even sanctioned marriage. The statement was contradictory to the official church teaching, but the 25 clergy members were willing to make the statement in order to serve a community who they believed were deserving of their

²⁸⁴ Tim Funk, "Nun Banned by Bishop to Speak at Myers Park Baptist." *The Charlotte Observer*. May 9, 2015.

²⁸⁵ Funk, "Nun Banned by Bishop to Speak at Myers Park Baptist." *The Charlotte Observer*. May 9, 2015.

²⁸⁶ Funk, "Nun Banned by Bishop to Speak at Myers Park Baptist." *The Charlotte Observer*. May 9, 2015.

²⁸⁷ "United Methodists Faction Gives Gays Support." *The Charlotte Observer*. November 30, 2002.

ministry.²⁸⁸ The article also reported how many of the pastors affiliated with this particular church organization spoke out against the statement. Both sides of the story were reported. By describing what the faction believed to be right and also giving the voice to the pastors who opposed that belief, the writers of the religion section allowed LGBT issues such as these to be presented in a factual, non-sensationalized way. It presented the church's doctrinal position on the issue and included the specific wording of the statement issued by the faction, providing information to the readers, which allowed them to formulate their own opinion on the situation. The section did not take a position for or against the issue but reported the facts as presented and gave space for each party to express their opinion.

Articles related to LGBT issues in the religion section predominately described opposition of the emergent rights movement within churches. Often these articles reported on issues such as marriage equality being brought to national church organizations for voting. One such article reported on the area Presbytery in Charlotte, who voted to uphold a ban on noncelibate gays serving as pastors, elders, and deacons in their church. The church leaders involved in this vote were a part of the national Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). According to the article, the Charlotte Presbytery's vote reflected that of its national churches' majority, which had more than 100 of the 173 regional bodies supporting the ban.²⁸⁹ The article did not give any further details but reported that the Charlotte Presbytery represented a little under 45,000 people in more

²⁸⁸ "United Methodists Faction Gives Gays Support." *The Charlotte Observer*. November 30, 2002.

²⁸⁹ "Charlotte Presbytery Upholds Ban on Gays." *The Charlotte Observer*. March 2, 2002.

than 130 churches in the area.²⁹⁰ Articles such as this can be seen as statement pieces to an extent because they only presented facts that support the traditional church views.

The editors did include pieces that allowed readers to share the experience on the other side of the debate. A great example of this was found in the “Everyday Ethics” column entitled “Gay Man Should Pick His Battles,” in which an openly gay reader wrote into the column to ask how to respond to an RSVP addressed to him and his assumed female partner.²⁹¹ The unknown man asked how best to respond in a polite manner, asking permission to bring his boyfriend, which caused him to feel belittled. Articles and features like this brought about a more vulnerable and relatable side to the LGBT struggle to be embraced within societal norms. The writer responded that the reader was not obligated to clarify gender but should be specific about race and religion.

Nevertheless, if the reader would like to avoid further uncomfortable situations, it might be best to notify the host that his guest is his same-sex partner. Either way, the reader would probably feel marginalized in some way, but he should “pick his battles” because everyone, businesses included, is not yet so forward-thinking. It is interesting that the only mention of religion in this topic was for the sake of seating arrangements more than for its moral standards, yet this was included in the religion section as a topic on ethics. Articles like this send a message that, although people may be opposed to same-sex relationships due to religious and moral beliefs, every person should be treated with respect.

²⁹⁰ “Charlotte Presbytery Upholds Ban on Gays.” *The Charlotte Observer*. March 2, 2002.

²⁹¹ Randy Cohen, “Gay Man Should Pick His Battles.” *The Charlotte Observer*. March 20, 2004.

Through these examples, the editors of the *Faith & Value*” section displayed a mature approach to addressing the sensitive topic of LGBT rights, especially in the realm of religion and ethics. The articles selected to be published over the tenure of the religion section were a strong reflection of the sentiments of the changing times regarding this issue. Facts were presented in a neutral tone, and, when possible, opinions from all parties were expressed within the articles.

Traditions and Local Landmarks

Charlotte and its surrounding areas are among the oldest colonized places in America, and with this comes rich traditions and significant landmarks.²⁹² As a historically religious community, many of the traditions and landmarks exhibit some religious connotations.²⁹³ A common type of article reported regularly is that recognizing the age of many of the local churches and parochial schools, many of which were established more than 100 years ago within white and African American communities.

In the spirit of tradition and local landmarks, one notable story covered both in one topic – the summer revival at Balls Creek, which was held every year for 150 years at the time of the article publishing. Balls Creek camp meetings developed in the 1700s for revival and socializing in the rural south when it was still a part of the western frontier.²⁹⁴ The tradition survived and continues to invite people of all ages to fellowship, eat, and “hear the word.”²⁹⁵

²⁹² William Henry Foote, “Sketches of North Carolina, Historical and Biographical: Illustrative of the Principles of a Portion of Her Early Settlers.”

²⁹³ Gray, “Preservation Planner, and Dear Mr Gray.”

²⁹⁴ “Tradition Thrives at Balls Creek.” *The Charlotte Observer*. August 16, 2003.

²⁹⁵ “Tradition Thrives at Balls Creek. *The Charlotte Observer*.” August 16, 2003, P 3F.

When it comes to the recognition of traditions, the section did not exclusively cater to denominations within the Christian faith. Traditions of the local Islamic, Jewish, and additional faiths in the area were recognized and celebrated. In addition to having significant Jewish and Islamic communities, Charlotte had quite a few other eastern religious groups in the community, such as Buddhists, Hindus, and Hare Krishnas.

Charlotte was once known as the “City of Churches.”²⁹⁶ Nearly 97% of North Carolinians considered themselves Christians. Just under half of them considered themselves evangelicals, with about one-quarter of all North Carolinians part of a Baptist church.²⁹⁷ The Catholic Church had one of the largest parishes in the country in Charlotte.²⁹⁸ There was a growing nondenominational movement in Charlotte, with several mega-churches that catered to the city’s booming young professional class.²⁹⁹

A little-known religion and its community in Charlotte that received an ample amount of coverage is that of Hare Krishna.³⁰⁰ Hare Krishnas believe that the sound vibration of the mantra has a direct impact on the soul.³⁰¹ According to the philosophy of ancient India, the soul is spiritually asleep.³⁰² Apparently, Charlotte had a thriving, multicultural community that practices their faith in the public center of town, as well as through media outlets.³⁰³

²⁹⁶ County, Mecklenburg, “Charlotte, North Carolina.” Population.

²⁹⁷ County, Mecklenburg, “Charlotte, North Carolina.” Population.

²⁹⁸ Andrew Dunn, “The 16 Largest Charlotte Churches, by Membership and Attendance.”

²⁹⁹ Dunn, “The 16 Largest Charlotte Churches, by Membership and Attendance.” Axios Charlotte. Charlotte Agenda.

³⁰⁰ “Hare Krishna Membership Grows.” *The Charlotte Observer*. April 6, 2002.

³⁰¹ “Hare Krishna Membership Grows.” *The Charlotte Observer*. April 6, 2002.

³⁰² “Hare Krishna Membership Grows.” *The Charlotte Observer*. April 6, 2002.

³⁰³ The Charlotte Observer. “*Faith & Values*” 1996-2015.

No faith or group of believers went unrecognized by the religion section. Traditional holidays of both common and uncommon faiths were equally recognized throughout the tenure of the stand-alone religion section.³⁰⁴

Repentance and Redemption

Another interesting theme that can be experienced within the section is that of repentance and redemption. It is not surprising that this is a prominent theme, as it is an integral part of the human experience and can be found expressed through most religious teachings. The section looks at repentance and its relationship to faith without religious attachments. While several front-page articles tell the stories of those who have overcome addiction through their faith, which some attribute to Jesus and others attribute to Krishna, the unifying message is that faith conquers.³⁰⁵ Many of these same people tell stories of how someone was there to show them the way, and as a result, they felt the need to give back. In each story, someone had to come to a place of repentance.³⁰⁶

Interestingly enough, the religion section did tend to take a “preachy” tone in a few rare articles by reminding its readers that all choices have consequences – albeit these pieces are also presented without denominational or religious attachment, they definitely have a “Southern Baptist” manner.³⁰⁷

One of the reoccurring columns within the section was titled “Faith Journeys,” which offered tales of redemption, repentance, and devotion.

³⁰⁴ The Charlotte Observer. “*Faith & Values*. ” 1996-2015.

³⁰⁵ The Charlotte Observer. “*Faith & Values*” 1996-2015.

³⁰⁶ The Charlotte Observer. “*Faith & Values*”. 1996-2015.

³⁰⁷ Williams, “Hellfire, Damnation, and those Halloween Hell Houses.” *The Charlotte Observer*. November 7, 1999.



Figure 11. Puppets Give a Helping Hand

Example of Faith Journeys feature, December 9, 1995, *The Charlotte Observer*.

In 1996, a tale of medical evangelism featured a general practitioner from Charlotte discouraged with policy changes traveling abroad to Russia to witness, minister, and provide medical services and training.³⁰⁸ However, before he arrived, he had no clue of why he was going and what his purpose was.³⁰⁹

Through his service, he was connected with a Russian youth from a battered home who served as an interpreter during their trip. It was towards the end of his stay that the American felt led to invite the young man to America to live with him and his wife while

³⁰⁸ Ken Garfield, *Faith Journeys*. *The Charlotte Observer*. August 19, 2000.

³⁰⁹ Garfield, *Faith Journeys*. *The Charlotte Observer*. August 19, 2000.

he continued his medical training.³¹⁰ After the student returned to Russia, the doctor planned to return to eastern Europe with his wife as they both joined the mission work. While the article does not clearly state the emptiness felt by the doctor and his wife, the words and descriptions used within the story indeed showed that the doctor was dissatisfied with his life, although he outwardly appeared successful, and the mission work brought purpose to his life and closeness with his wife.³¹¹

Religious Leadership

Rarely a week went by without the acknowledgment of some religious leader, an act of giving, and the mention of a faith-based business. However, one thing *The Charlotte Observer's* stand-alone religion section did well was that it covered these topics from a simplistic viewpoint, which made good reading for even a person who was not entirely knowledgeable of such subjects. Furthermore, the paper tended to “poke fun” at religious leadership in its lighter columns and even its few comic editorials.

Religious leaders were often recognized when they retired, installed, or achieved some significant accomplishment. The top front-page occurrences often featured religious leaders as related to religious events and meetings such as crusades, tent meetings, revivals, and concerts. In light of a blameless lifestyle, religious leaders were often held in high esteem. Subsequently, when religious leaders were found at fault, there were no reporting restraints. In those cases, it was evident that the paper tended to avoid

³¹⁰ Garfield, *Faith Journeys*. *The Charlotte Observer*. August 19, 2000.

³¹¹ Ken Garfield, *Faith Journeys*. *The Charlotte Observer*. August 19, 2000.

sensationalism and reported the facts. When the facts were not positive, they were not glossed over.

The Practice of Giving

Various forms of giving were reported on within the section. From building funds, to selling spaghetti plates, to raising money in central Charlotte. It is a theme that was addressed from all angles. Faith-based businesses were spotlighted often in terms of giving. Churches are considered faith-based businesses, and giving to churches, from churches, and other financial matters were addressed. For instance, one article cited a study advocating regular pay for clergy members. As the clergy played a significant and tangible role in various functions of the church, often a salary-based pay would allow them to serve the ministry more freely. Other faith-based businesses promoted were volunteer organizations, such as shelters and soup kitchens.

One special publication had the entire main page riddled with major acts of giving, beginning with the African American Community Foundation awarding more than \$20,000 in grants to three local charities that focused on educating children and teens in urban areas.³¹² On the same page, a food drive was highlighted. It produced 14 million pounds of food by the Society of St. Andrew, which fed people in every county of North Carolina.

In the mid-2000s, a column was added to the *Faith & Value*” section that focused solely on acts of kindness called “Faith Forum.” In this column, readers would write in sharing their personal stories. One expression was written by a student who attended

³¹² Jeri F. Krentz, “Group Gives \$20,000 in Grants”. *The Charlotte Observer*. February 22, 2003

Queens University. Their vehicle broke down while travelling to the grocery store. The student described how he/she attempted to push the vehicle up an incline. Soon came along ten guys to help.³¹³ That act of kindness was something the student always remembered. By including reader experiences like this in the column, the *Faith & Values* section allowed readers to share without the need to specify religion or denomination.

A Sum of All Views

In conclusion, the stand-alone section of *The Charlotte Observer* is a model production of religion and faith-based publishing. Although the section started towards the latter end of the 1990s, it ran significantly longer as a stand-alone section in comparison to others in the Southern region - approximately 19 years. During its tenure, the *Faith & Values* section published culturally relevant articles that represented not only the changing times but also the interests and concerns of its surrounding community. With a reputation of factual reporting, the writers and editors presented non-biased and non-framed material to their audience, allowing them to form their own opinions and experience the uplifting values of unifying messages without always tying them to religion. Taking its tones from the public, the section adapted to the changing times and key issues around the world, across the country, and within the region without trying to indoctrinate or alienate its readers. Furthermore, the section did not focus on politics. It is understood that religion, faith, and moral values impact how people process and judge information about political candidates. As a result, the section strived to report facts on both sides of an issue to avoid any biases.

³¹³ Aaron Brantly, "In Charlotte, More Kindness Saved Me". *The Charlotte Observer*. March 27, 2004.

Religion stories were still printed throughout the paper, but the dedicated section held most of the religion opinion columns, institutional reports, notices, and controversies. It also contained some non-religion news stories. In short, most anything concerning faith and values was included in the religion section, though many were feel-good stories about local religious groups or informational pieces about religions local, national, and international. Overall, it is clear that over the course of its 19-year run, the editors of *Faith and Values* changed and expanded the way they covered religion. Originally the reporting was traditional and somewhat “starchy,” but over the years, the reporters and the topics covered became more encompassing of issues beyond just faith and values, also focusing on community, volunteerism, ethics, and plain old wholesomeness. According to Garfield, “Senior editors in features felt like readers were best served with the religion news being dispersed throughout the paper. They decided to de-theme the section without research or community feedback. Eventually, because of financial reasons, the paper lost the section and a dedicated religion writer.”³¹⁴

It also evolved artistically. The section started in section G, titled *Living: Faith & Values*, stacked, on December 9, 1995. Mid 2008, the masthead went to a stacked version with a name change to *Carolina Living Faith & Values*. On February 22, 2014, a more modern look adorned the section. *Carolina Living*, with the word “Faith” above “Living,” is how the name of the section appeared. The “& Values” was dropped. This was the final representation of the *Faith & Values* section. On February 14, 2015, the section name

³¹⁴ Garfield, Ken. Telephone Interview January 11, 2021.

changed to *Your Weekend*. The word “Faith” was dropped. However, “Faith” appeared at the top of page two of this section. With this, *Faith & Values* was no more.



Figure 12. Stand-alone Section Moved

First-day religion news on inside of section, February 14, 2015, *The Charlotte Observer*.

Looking back at what the section produced, its content had its unique flavor, which focused on interreligious and interdenominational collaborations in addition to its coverage of the many traditional Christian denominations. One of the long-running features of the section, focused on faith journeys, provided an opportunity to highlight different faiths and denominations on weekly basis, but with a common vein – faith takes each believer on their unique journey. It is through the production of this particular stand-

alone religion section that a correlation can be made between the different faiths, which includes the triumphs and failures of religious leadership. Overall, the section maintained an inclusive and neutral tone, producing stories that were highly community-oriented. It is clear that the editors of the section promoted reporting that provided a positive outlook to its readers and tried to provide them with a “silver lining” lens to apply to their own lives and situations. The stand-alone religion section of *The Charlotte Observer* provided history with a well-documented window into the hearts and minds of a community whose very foundational institutions were based on faith and values.

CHAPTER VI – THE TENNESSEAN

Introduction

The Tennessean has a rich history dating back to 1812, when it was first titled the *Nashville Whig*.³¹⁵ After several ownerships and name changes, surviving the great depression, and merging with another local paper, *The Tennessean* emerged as the most popular newspaper in Nashville.³¹⁶ Its history is connected to the prohibitionist movement, a failed election bid, a resulting murder, bankruptcy, and consolidation.³¹⁷ A Hollywood-styled movie could be produced and still not have enough time to portray all the interesting details which make up the life and current existence of *The Tennessean*. Beginning as a political paper, *The Tennessean* established itself as a supporter of religious freedoms.³¹⁸ Over the expanse of its long and controversial run, the modern-day version of this newspaper saw fit to produce a stand-alone religion section within its pages solely dedicated to religious interests entitled *Faith & Values*. This section of *The Tennessean* ministered, inspired, and motivated its readers to strive for ethical and moral ideals.

The Tennessean's Revelation

With a backstory like that, it is no wonder religion is an irreplaceable part of the paper's identity. Read an edition of the historied publication from any decade, and that issue will be peppered with religion-based articles from front to back.

³¹⁵ Tennessee Electronic Library.

³¹⁶ John Seigenthaler, "*The Tennessean*: 108 Years and Counting."

³¹⁷ Seigenthaler, "*The Tennessean*: 108 Years and Counting."

³¹⁸ History of '*The Tennessean*' Stretches Back to Region's Early Settlement.

Prior to the production of the stand-alone section, a letter to the editor points out that religion does offer answers people want.³¹⁹ A series of articles were written in 1980 titled “A Report Goes to Church” by W.A. Reed, who acted as an early religion beat writer. Each Monday, Reed’s column shared his experiences of visiting different churches and sometimes interactions with religious leaders.³²⁰ Not only were church visits making headlines during the 80s, but news related to religious institutions were as well. When Scarritt College, a Methodist school, was in severe financial trouble, the topic was placed on page 24 of the Sunday edition.³²¹ These simple examples reflect the notion that religion topics could be found throughout *The Tennessean*.

With reminders of the importance of moral values and the influence of faith on politics, religion reporting was an integral part of what made *The Tennessean* special. Surprisingly enough, an official religion section did not appear in the long-standing paper until almost the year 2000.³²² So, what change occurred that caused *The Tennessean* to dedicate a specific section to *Faith & Values*? First, in comparison to other papers across the south, the *Faith & Values* section was a common thread for most major cities in the mid-80s.³²³ From this perspective, *The Tennessean* is a late bloomer in relation to its contemporaries. As one of the enduring members of the “Bible Belt,” the southern style religion particular to the locale of Nashville and its surrounding areas can be labeled as

³¹⁹ “Religion Does Offer Answers People Need.” *The Tennessean*. January 2, 1996.

³²⁰ W. A. Reed, “Pastor: New Building Vacuum Without God.” *The Tennessean*. January 7, 1980.

³²¹ “Sadly, Scarritt Is in Trouble.” *The Tennessean*. January 6, 1980.

³²² *The Tennessean*, *Faith & Values* Section, November 6, 1998.

³²³ Buddenbaum, “An Analysis of Religion News Coverage in Three Major Newspapers.” *Journalism Quarterly* 63, no. 3 (1986): 600-606.

racially charged, resilient, community-oriented, and open to interpretation.³²⁴ Nashville was a hot bed for racial injustice and subsequently civil rights obtainment, with nearby Fisk University playing a significant role in civil rights organization and participation. During the reconstruction era, notable journalist Ida B. Wells, an early Civil Rights advocate, reported on the many lynchings that happened across the south and were eventually run out of town by the owner of *The Tennessean*. Although many shameful and unjust acts took place in and around Nashville, the community and the businesses that supported it remained resilient, and it was able to find success by embracing racial differences instead of exacerbating them. When viewing the reporting during that time, the sentiment of the community should be viewed objectively, considering the socially accepted norms of that time in the south.

When the Bible Belt is mentioned, images of conservative, Bible-carrying believers come to mind. Believers who shared a commonality in appreciating the “southern” way of life. Depending on who you asked, a vision of black or white southern Baptist may fill one’s imagination when you encourage them to picture the average Tennessean. No matter the race, one thing was resolute: religion was at the forefront of southern culture, especially in Nashville.³²⁵ With a label like the Bible Belt, it was evident that the primary religion was Christianity. However, when it came to *The Tennessean*, perhaps its late start allowed the *Faith & Values* section to begin more progressively than most. While Christianity was the predominant religion covered,

³²⁴ Brunn, Webster & Archer, “The Bible Belt in a Changing South: Shrinking, Relocating, and Multiple Buckles.”

³²⁵ Herman Albert Norton, “Religion in Tennessee 1777-1945.” Univ. of Tennessee Press, 1981.

Judaism and Islam were also prominently featured in the weekly section. The paper displayed everything from religious writings from clergy members to holidays, family outings, camps, fundraisers, and other events centered around distinctly differing religions. There are even pieces that challenged the idea of religion and its evolution in modern society.

It is important to note that Christianity constitutes almost 80% of the religious practices in the southern region of the United States.³²⁶ Because of this, it was evident that religions such as Judaism and Islam benefitted greatly from unbiased representation in prominent newspapers such as *The Tennessean*. Because the paper is particularly metropolitan, the wide range of subscribers provided an opportunity for less common religions to advertise and share their beliefs, practices, and traditions with a greater audience.

Furthermore, it is important to note that media reporting had a strong influence on its readership, and *The Tennessean's* approach to its *Faith and Values* section promoted a stronger sense of community by giving prominence to inclusion in a region once known for extreme conservatism, racism, and segregation. Such reporting, advertising, and organization within the stand-alone section clearly reflected a common value shared by all major religions - the message of peace, family, and a community.

The *Faith & Values* section appeared as a stand-alone religion section within *The Tennessean* with extremely limited specifics. The publication did not indicate or illustrate the events leading to the creation of the section. The editor appeared to be Ray Waddle, a

³²⁶ Caroline Nagel & Patricia Ehrkamp, "Immigration, Christian Faith Communities, and the Practice of Multiculturalism in the US South.

writer who had his picture included on the front page of the section. However, it was not made clear just from reviewing the available archived articles. Although it is not clear what caused the section to fold, it is generally attributed to the modernization of media reporting and budget cuts.



Figure 13. Faith & Values First Cover Page

First day of Faith & Values stand-alone section, September 11, 1999, *The Tennessean*.

The section was unique when compared to the other sections covered in this research. It was launched as a special section within section B of *The Tennessean*. From the time of its launch on September 11, 1999, until February 14, 2009, three pages were

dedicated to religion news - 3B-5B. Placement was consistent throughout the life of the section. Even when it went to two pages on February 21, 2009, religion articles remained on pages 3B and 4B. About a year and nine months later, on November 6, 2010, the religion content was decreased to one page that included a column written by a former *Tennessean* religion writer, a half-page of ads, and a religion calendar - all moved to page 18 of section A. The other thing that was consistent about *The Tennessean's Faith & Values* section was its title treatment. There were only minor tweaks to it throughout the section's lifecycle.

Section Presentation: Layout and Evolution

The Tennessean represented the interests and concerns of its readers and evolved to meet their needs successively. Because of this, religion has always been a topic of interest for the readers of *The Tennessean*, with at least one or more writers assigned to religion topics throughout the history of the paper. One article published in January of 1910 asked the readers the question, "Does religion pay?"³²⁷ Despite its faithful dedication to religion-oriented articles, it is difficult to locate a specific section or column related specifically to religion topics prior to the late-1990s. Exploring the archives of the premillennial publications of *The Tennessean*, the mentioning of faith and values appears sporadically before the mid-1990s. Any articles mentioning faith and personal values were usually based on ideas as expressed by a well-known or famous person who had transitioned from a secular point of view to a faith-based one.³²⁸

³²⁷ *The Nashville American*, January 15, 1910

³²⁸ "Ripken leads MVP parade down stretch." *The Tennessean*, July 14, 1991.

The first printing of the term “*Faith & Values*” as a title within the paper belonged to a new television channel owned by VIACOM in 1995 that had become available on cable within *The Tennessean*’s geographic reach that February.³²⁹ According to a 1995 *Tennessean* article, as reporters began to explore the content being produced on the Family Channel and the Faith & Values channel, now being broadcast across the state, more topics became public interest and even held some esteem in the arena of religious politics.³³⁰ Not long after the television channels were available in homes across Tennessee and Kentucky, a *Faith & Values* section began to be printed in the paper itself, with the first printing being published on November 6, 1988.

Although there is not clear connection between the VIACOM channel and the stand-alone religion section being developed shortly after, the similarity in name and the popularity of the channels probably indicated the interest in religion and moral topics in the media. After the stand-alone section was established, religion articles still occurred in various sections throughout the paper, but each Saturday, and sometimes on Friday, a section dedicated to faith and values began to be published regularly. Although the paper, seemingly randomly, alternated between which day of the week that the sectioned was published on, it was never published on a Friday and Saturday simultaneously.

While taking a trip through the past by viewing each publication one by one, a clear evolution formed. First, it was published as an interest piece that heavily relied on graphics and design elements to garner the reader’s attention. On Sunday, February 11,

³²⁹ *The Tennessean*, February 7, 1995

³³⁰ *The Tennessean*, February 25, 1995

1996, a two-page spread explored the top ten faith and value trends.³³¹ The popularity of this piece marked the introduction of *Faith & Values* as an official section a year and a half later. Prior to the well-put-together editorial, many notable religious issues had taken hold of the Nashville community. After that initial publication, the *Faith & Values* section began to take on a more standard form, which more closely resembled a traditional newspaper section.

Religion in a Variety of Topics

A common hot topic was the issue of religion's place in the school setting, to which several front-page headlines were dedicated from September 1995 through the entirety of 1996. Titles such as "Public School's Approach to Religion Should Be Academic"³³² and "Schools and Religion Clarified"³³³ to headlines that read "Religion, Not Indoctrination, Is Constitutional in Schools,"³³⁴ "Faith is on the Decline, Not By This Yardstick,"³³⁵ and "Religious Literacy in Schools Could Solve Tough Problems."³³⁶

Not only did the evolution of such topics from front page to Op-ed to the *Faith & Values* section improve over the life of the publication, it is important to note that the publishing of such articles was exemplary from the aesthetic point of view. From perusing the printed publications reviewed in the archives, it is evident that special care was always taken for the layout of the topics separately or included in the *Faith & Values*

³³¹ *The Tennessean*, *Faith & Values* Trends, February 11, 1996

³³² Charles Hayes, "Public School's Approach to Religion Should Be Academic." *The Tennessean*. December 29, 1996.

³³³ Ray Waddle, "Schools and Religion Clarified." *The Tennessean*. August 11, 1996.

³³⁴ Charles Hayes, "Religion, Not Indoctrination, Constitutional in Schools." *The Tennessean*. October 13, 1996.

³³⁵ Charles Hayes, "Faith is on Decline, Not by This Yardstick." *The Tennessean*. September 13, 1998.

³³⁶ Ruth Kitchen, "Religious Literacy in Schools Could Solve Tough Problems." March 19, 2012.

section to be arranged artistically so that headlines and specific topics would garner the readers' attention and engage their interest.

Furthermore, the wide range of topics that represent religion, faith, and values paid homage to the liberal origins of *The Nashville Whig*.³³⁷ It is evident that, although the editors adhered to Democratic ideology when it came to politics, in the case of religion, *The Tennessean* is somewhat of a constitutional echo of religious freedom. Controversial topics were covered, such as abortion and same-sex relationships, with both being addressed from polarizing points of view. With titles such as "Bad Religion Still Causes People to Lose Their Faith,"³³⁸ "Here's How Dangerous and Healthy Religion Differ," and "Religion Should Unify, Not Conquer and Divide," it is clear that *The Tennessean* was evolving to address the new ideologies of religion while maintaining the old principles that are integrated in the heart of the Bible Belt.

Reading Between the Lines: Content Overview

The title "*Faith & Values*" extends beyond the concept of religion. Because a person does not necessarily have to be religious to have faith and/or values, this newspaper section reflects the stylized meaning of its title by representing various aspects of the community in relation to faith and values without necessarily referencing religion specifically. Nevertheless, religion topics and articles continued to appear in *The Tennessean* in various other sections as they did prior to the section dedicated to faith and values. When it came to *Faith and Values*, readers found articles about acts of goodwill,

³³⁷ History of 'The Tennessean' Stretches Back to Region's Early Settlement.

³³⁸ Martin Thielen, "Bad Religion Still Causes People to Love Their Faith." *The Tennessean*. May 28, 2011,

brotherhood, brotherly love, kindness, selflessness, and basic moral values. This expression of faith and values in the absence of a particular religion or denomination allowed non-committed readers to connect with common experiences without being alienated through direct or indirect indoctrination.

A good example of this was an article featuring a believer who viewed the entire world as her place of worship. She did not identify with any specific church, synagogue, or mosque. Neither did she give a name to the deity which she worshiped and connected with.³³⁹ Another example shared a similar tone in references to nature transcending religious affiliations. The article included the religious poetry published in a book. The poems were compared to prayers, and the author believed her work encompassed an ancient connection to religion without being affiliated with a specific sect.³⁴⁰

Readers who did not claim a particular faith or denomination could have found themselves gravitating towards uplifting stories of hope and support groups that varied from bereavement to being single in the 21st century. Another topic frequently addressed was the embracing of artistic expression as an extension of spirituality. Opportunities to volunteer abound, and invitations to weekly and weekend services could have filled even the emptiest of calendars if a person was willing to step out of their comfort zone. Between the lines of the *Faith & Values* section of *The Tennessean* was a message of acceptance.

³³⁹ “Believer Finds Spiritual Connection with Outdoors.” *The Tennessean*. April 26, 2003.

³⁴⁰ Ray Waddle, “Poetry Provides Ancient, Unfettered Spiritual Solace.” *The Tennessean*. April 20, 2013.

THEMES

Politics and Religion

Politics and religion can be viewed as the foundation of *The Tennessean*.³⁴¹ When viewing the importance of these two themes about their greater influence in society, few human activities are as imperfect as journalism.³⁴²

In the realm of religion, the topics can be viewed as a comfort for the afflicted and affliction to the comfortable. The many contrasting stories published in the *Faith & Values* section likely attracted a wide variety of readers.

One of the main themes often addressed by *The Tennessean* is the separation of church and state. It is evident that *The Tennessean* fully supports the separation of church and state and champions a limited government within schools and religious activities.³⁴³ At the same time, it is clear that readers believe that religion is losing influence in public life.³⁴⁴ This can be supported by many headings and titles published in the pages of *The Tennessean*. While some say, this is a good thing, many more viewed it as a negative development, reflecting the broad tendency of southerners to see religion as a positive force in its society. Articles in *The Tennessean* took the clear position that religious institutions should stay out of politics. Additional articles published in the mid-2000s expressed the view that churches should not come out in favor of one candidate over another during elections. When politics and religion mix, particularly within the

³⁴¹ Robert Hunt, "Luke Lea, the Legionnaires, and the Legacy of Two Wars: The Politics of Memory in the Mind of a Nashville Progressive, 1915-1945."

³⁴² Barney Zwarts, "Religion in the Media: How has it Changed, Where is it Going, Why does it Matter?"

³⁴³ David Campbell & Robert Putnam, "God and Caesar in America: Why Mixing Religion and Politics is Bad for Both."

³⁴⁴ Steve Farkas, Jean Johnson & Tony Foleno, "For Goodness' Sake: Why So Many Want Religion to Play a Greater Role in American Life."

Nashville community, topics would likely be addressed on the front page instead of within the dedicated religion section.

While political ideologies were not welcomed in the *Faith & Values* section, religious groups exercising their right to vote were promoted and sometimes even celebrated. During one election year in the early 2000s, a Muslim community set a goal to get 100,000 members registered to vote.³⁴⁵

Faith and Religious Practices

The theme of faith and religious practices is one that is often displayed throughout the *Faith & Values* section of *The Tennessean*. Many articles focus primarily on faith over religion. A common thread within the specific section is that religion is presented objectively, while in other places within the paper, such as in the opinion section, religion is addressed more directly. Many articles emphasized small acts of faith that resulted in a changed lifestyle or a different outlook on life, from cancer survivors to those who used faith to assist them in their planned deaths, a topic that is often viewed as anti-religious, is considered as an act of faith within the *Faith & Values* section of *The Tennessean*.

Other practices are more commonly related to religious holidays within Judaism, such as Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kipper, and Hannukah.³⁴⁶ Islamic traditions such as Ramadan were regularly featured.³⁴⁷³⁴⁸ *The Tennessean*, although published in a predominantly Christian subscriber base, did not neglect any religion within the region.

³⁴⁵ *The Tennessean, Faith & Values*, March 2, 2002

³⁴⁶ Rice & Rice, "Rosh Hashanah Celebrates All the Goodness in the World." *The Tennessean, Faith & Values*, September 8, 2007.

³⁴⁷ Awadh Binhazim. "Olive Tree Seeks to Inform Public of Muslims, Islam." February 3, 2007.

³⁴⁸ Sabina Mohyuddin. "Ramandan Serves as Intense Spiritual Training Session." *The Tennessean*. September 15, 2007.

Articles acknowledging Hinduism and Buddhism were printed, although not as prominently as the major religions previously mentioned.³⁴⁹

The uniquely African American holiday of Kwanzaa was covered within the paper. In December of 2007, the *Faith & Values* section featured the importance of Kwanzaa to the community. The story follows one Kwanzaa observer who was first introduced to the celebration in the early 1970s. The article discussed the history of Kwanzaa and the controversial political figure who founded it.³⁵⁰ The piece echoed the sentiments of Kwanzaa's faithful observers that it fills a need within the African American community and teaches good moral and ethical values. Stories such as these exemplified diversity within the section.

On the tone of diversity, there is one religious practice that transcends all faiths - the practice of prayer. Prayer was a reoccurring topic that was not necessarily tied to Christian theology. Prayer was addressed from a political, spiritual, and holistic standpoint in various articles. One article focused on the controversy caused by the National Day of Prayer and the conflicts that arose between the different religions.³⁵¹ As all endorse the practice of prayer, the conflict was discussed as an opportunity to come together through prayer instead of being used as a dividing factor between faith communities. Throughout its publication, *The Tennessean* continued to stress the

³⁴⁹Ray Waddle. "Retreat will welcome those who take refuge in the Buddha." *The Tennessean*. June 10, 2000.

³⁵⁰ Bob Smietana. "Kwanzaa is a Celebration of Family, Culture and Community." *The Tennessean* December 29, 2007.

³⁵¹ Becca Milfeld. "Bible Booms Forth at Capitol Marathon Reading." *The Tennessean*. May 3, 2008.

importance of faith and religious practices striving to remain unbiased and open to promoting all faiths and practices that were prevalent among its readerships.³⁵²

Following the theme of faith and religious practices, articles found under the *Faith & Values* section also followed trends on the increase and more often decrease in common practices, such as church attendance, Bible study (or study of other religious texts),³⁵³³⁵⁴ observance of religious holidays,³⁵⁵ and other significant milestones like baptisms and pilgrimages.³⁵⁶³⁵⁷³⁵⁸ Articles from the mid-2000s and after indicated a decline in many basic practices, such as weekly service attendance and observance of religious holidays by attending special services at places of worship.³⁵⁹ However, it appeared that televised, online, and virtual worship attendance was an emerging trend as early as December of the year 2000.³⁶⁰³⁶¹ The arrival of secular entertainment, such as the NFL football team, the Tennessee Titans, was indicated as a battle for parishioner's physical attendance and attention since football games were on Sundays.³⁶² Not only did this have an effect on televangelism increasing and in-person worship attendance decreasing, but the traffic challenges also presented to community members traveling to

³⁵² Thomas Hardgrove. "People Turn to religion among turmoil." *The Tennessean*. September 15, 2001.

³⁵³ Joshua Graves. "We Need More, Better Stories to Shape Our Lives." *The Tennessean*. February 9, 2013.

³⁵⁴³⁵⁴ Ray Waddle. "Book Guides Parents, Grandparents in showing children the Spiritual Life." *The Tennessean*. June 2, 2001

³⁵⁵ Ray Waddle. "As Another Lent Begins, Questions for Ages Arise." *The Tennessean*. February 16, 2013.

³⁵⁶ Randy Hammer. "Spiritual Trips Can Happen Close to Home." *The Tennessean*. March 15, 2002.

³⁵⁷ Brian Lewis. "Pastor Who Visited West Bank to Speak About Life Under Israeli Occupation." *The Tennessean*. May 18, 2002.

³⁵⁸ African Orphanage Restoration Proves to Be Mission of Renewal. *The Tennessean*. August 18, 2007.

³⁵⁹ Betty Hassler. "Easter Can Be Full of Hardship, Hope." *The Tennessean*. March 3, 2013.

³⁶⁰ Ray Waddle. "Methodist Turn to Television to Get Their Message Out." *The Tennessean*. December 2, 2000.

³⁶¹ Tennessee News Service and Staff Reports. "To Survive, Church Must Build Participation, Futurist Warns." *The Tennessean*. January 27, 2001.

³⁶² Ray Waddle. "Friday service caters to changing view of Sunday for church.

and from the football stadium influenced many Sunday-going worshippers to stay at home to avoid the extra-long commute that began to plague downtown Nashville.

With these changes, the stand-alone religion section carefully began to question its subscribers' willingness to compromise their traditional religious practices in exchange for newer, more convenient methods of worship. Despite the emergence of virtual and distance worship, some religious practices remained a cornerstone of the community and local churches.³⁶³ One of those practices was Sunday School. The advertisements, listings, and information provided throughout the *Faith & Values* section indicated an unrelenting appreciation for the benefits of Sunday School attendance.³⁶⁴ One article informed of how Sunday School classes saw a resurgence in attendance due to its earlier time schedule in comparison to that of traditional Sunday morning classes. As Nashville and its surrounding community marched towards the 21st century and developed into a more metropolitan center, faith and religious practices became more cosmopolitan.

Faith-based Organizations

Faith-based organizations made up a significant portion of the information published in *Faith & Values*, and additional references were often found in various other sections of the paper as well. From archival evidence, faith-based community organizations played an important role within the community at large. They aided in community development, community improvement, and social outreach, among other

³⁶³ Brian Lewis. "Compline Worship Services Offer Quiet, Prayer-filled Experience." *The Tennessean*. January 24, 2004.

³⁶⁴ Bonnie Burch. "Sunday School Class Raises \$10,121 for Habitat." March 3, 2000.

benefits. This is specifically influential in Bible-based regions such as Nashville. Faith-based organizations were often more than places of worship and used as places for community organization, mission work, community outreach, fellowshiping, and places to meet new people. Each week, the *Faith & Values* section listed upcoming events and prominent support groups within the community.

Volunteers were increasingly being relied upon for provided care and support for community members across the Nashville area and had a large impact in the success of most faith-based organizations within the community. With the opportunity to promote their organizations, missions, events, and outreach ministries, faith-based organizations would benefit greatly. *The Tennessean* provided a valuable outlet to help keep these organizations functioning. As a result, the community as a whole benefitted from such organizations.

Support groups were additional faith-based organizations that were one of the pillars of community success. One of the more prominent support groups aided those undergoing chemotherapy and other cancer treatments.³⁶⁵ Groups such as these helped ease the burden family members faced when caring for their loved ones. Additionally, support groups acted as a surrogate family for community members struggling to cope on their own. From 4-H to weight loss support groups, the *Faith & Values* section played a role in ministering to the “whole man,” not just the spiritual aspect of humanity.³⁶⁶ There was something for everyone looking to socialize. Each week more than 75 different support groups and faith-based organizations advertised their services throughout

³⁶⁵ Groups & Volunteers. *The Tennessean*. October 27, 2006.

³⁶⁶ Groups & Volunteers. *The Tennessean*. January 6, 2007.

Nashville.³⁶⁷ In some high-needs areas, there was more than one support group offering the same service. When reviewing the types of organizations and support groups advertising within the paper, several unique challenges appeared to be more prevalent than others, especially that of bereavement and cancer support.

Another type of community organization that was promoted included youth outreach programs. One memorable program, RISE, was featured in an article addressing how the program functioned during spring break and was used to help children deal with experiences of violence and suffering.³⁶⁸ In the article, the program's coordinator, a once-troubled youth who found success in the medical field, was found giving back to the community he grew up in and offered hope to others who lived in environments similar to his own. Stories such as these showcased the importance of values being restored to the community without a specific religious connotation. Even though Baptist organizations were providing support through transportation and other efforts, the heart of the program was orchestrated through Vanderbilt University and operated by interfaith volunteers.

A similar outreach program reported on used science and theater to bring a fresh outlook of the Bible to its young attendees of Vacation Bible School. East Brentwood Presbyterian church opened its doors during the summer of 2006 to Nashville youth looking to stay active and engaged while school was out.³⁶⁹

³⁶⁷ Groups & Volunteers. *The Tennessean*. February 5, 1999.

³⁶⁸ Groups & Volunteers. *The Tennessean*. January 21, 2005

³⁶⁹ Summer Program for Youth. *The Tennessean*. Faith & Values. May 11, 2006.

In the Brentwood area of Nashville, a group of another kind sprang up. With a headline that read “Men Open Up About Their Lives in Early Morning Fraternity,”³⁷⁰ readers learned the story of a Baptist church that was successfully attracting non-members through their morning men’s group. Success of programs such as this continued to prove that support groups were important to the people of Nashville. The theme of faith-based organizations and their contributions to community members of all ages was a reoccurring feature within the *Faith & Values* section.

Religious Leadership

The pages of *The Tennessean* have long been a platform for religious leadership in the greater Nashville area. Many pastors, evangelists, and theologians were able to share their beliefs, ideas, and even their sermons in *Faith & Values*. *The Tennessean*’s approach to addressing leadership was to praise the righteous and to condemn the guilty. Religious leaders were taken to task and forced to make their callings and elections sure. As expressed in other themes, the religious leaders who appeared in the newspaper were not limited to Christian evangelicals but also included leaders from minority religious groups within the community. It is no doubt that many of the leaders were overwhelmingly Christian, but even those Christian leaders who had published works tended to be more liberal in their acceptance of other religions and more willing to fellowship with unbelievers.

One particular headline proclaimed that “Extremists Need to Witness a Loving God.” It was written exactly one month after the September 11th attacks on the World

³⁷⁰ *The Tennessean, Faith & Values*, January 20, 2006

Trade Center.³⁷¹ This article and others like it showcase *The Tennessean's* willingness to promote peace at time when such a message was not so popular and promote the essence of what it meant to hold on to faith and values amid controversy. Another example of this, found in an article published on June 22, 2002, describes an instance of interfaith support for Muslims after a leader of the Southern Baptist denomination openly spoke against an Islamic leader.³⁷²

Regular writers of the section were not afraid to question authority and motives within churches and religious institutions. In 2001, the section's editor, Ray Waddle, suggested that mistrust of religious leaders was a contributing factor in the decline of traditional religious practices and its role in the current society.

Even the great Billy Graham was not safe from cross-examination within paper's religion section. At the age of 83, Rev. Graham was still being held accountable for antisemitic comments he made publicly more than 30 years prior. Through a series of communications, Rev. Graham gave his sincere apology, which was accepted by Jewish leaders in Charlotte, North Carolina.

Contrasts such as these emphasize *Faith and Values* as a well-rounded production willing to share observable truths with its readers. Along the same lines, articles that extol and recognize upstanding clergy members, their beliefs, opinions, and their trials of faith were common. As religious leaders held a significant place within the community, *The Tennessean* reinforced positive ideologies when the opportunity arose. Especially when leaders of different faiths banded together for a unified cause.

³⁷¹ Pennell, "Extremists Need to Witness a Loving God." *The Tennessean*. November 12, 2011.

³⁷² *The Tennessean, Faith & Values*, June 22, 2002

Through its religion section, *The Tennessean* also provided information such as changes in leadership, important landmarks, anniversaries, and retirements. For instance, in the summer of 2002, the 150th anniversary of Holy Trinity Episcopal Church was honored and recognized. The article featured a large image of the church and one of its parishioners, as well as a detailed history of the predominantly African American church and the role it played within the Nashville community.³⁷³

In 2006, the paper recognized the new pastor of Triune Baptist Church, Rev. Reed Buntin. The article detailed the transition of leadership and interviewed one of the church's members, Bill Cox.³⁷⁴ The article gave a thorough history of the church, including its founding pastor, Rev. Lloyd Lawrence, who started the church with just eight members in 1992.³⁷⁵ The piece listed some tragedies the church had survived, indicating a strong foundation. Additional information, such as the church's order of service and worship times, was included in the article.³⁷⁶

Church leaders were not only given a platform to evangelize and share their personal opinions, but they were also able to advertise their church services and activities. The *Faith & Values* section offered several instances when a newly built church or established congregation was introduced to the Nashville community through its pages. One specific article along this thread featured the celebratory service of a 7th Day Adventist congregation leading an instrumental processional into its newly built

³⁷³ Brian Lewis. "Holy Trinity Stands Tall...For History and the Future". *The Tennessean*. June 29, 2002.

³⁷⁴ New Pastor to Hold Tribune Baptist Pulpit. *The Tennessean*. January 13, 2006.

³⁷⁵ New Pastor to Hold Tribune Baptist Pulpit. *The Tennessean*. January 13, 2006.

³⁷⁶ New Pastor to Hold Tribune Baptist Pulpit. *The Tennessean*. January 13, 2006.

house of worship.³⁷⁷ A large picture of the drum corps filled with African American youth is in the middle of the page. Below the image, a listing of the church's new amenities was described for readers. A brief history of the church and its mission was also listed in the photo.³⁷⁸

Religion in Arts and Entertainment

Although art is widely regarded as a significant aspect of religion, entertainment is often shunned as carnal or worldly. However, *The Tennessean's* editorial team's approach to these two key elements of modern society was done in such a way that mainly focused on the divine aspect of the cultural phenomenon. One article focused on one viewer's reaction to the religious film "*The Passion*."³⁷⁹ The article took an unbiased approach to the film and evaluated the opinion of those who praised and condemned its influence on the moviegoers. One side argued that the movie had a positive influence, while the opposing perspective was that the people being moved by the suffering of Christ were sinful. The piece included a panel of religious leaders who offered their unique perspectives and points of view. One particular leader did not side with either of the two prevailing opinions but saw the film as anti-Semitic, as it continually blamed the Jewish religious leaders for the painful crucifixion of Christ because of their own jealousy.³⁸⁰ From an entirely different perspective, another theologian did not believe the violence in the film to be any worse than that which has previously depicted in films

³⁷⁷ *The Tennessean*. Faith & Values. November 28, 1998.

³⁷⁸ *The Tennessean*. Faith & Values. November 28, 1998.

³⁷⁹ Gentile, "Movie Studies Divine Ways to Market to the Faithful." *The Tennessean*. September 25, 2005.

³⁸⁰ Gentile, "Movie Studies Divine Ways to Market to the Faithful." *The Tennessean*. September 25, 2005.

about American slavery. By exploring many viewpoints of the film, the editor allowed the readers to form their own opinion based on the information provided.

In addition to films, the paper reviewed religious and historical plays, and the remembrance of historical religious events such as the 1898 murder of Jesuit Priests in El Salvador.³⁸¹ Services as such allowed for mourning and artistic expression as a meaningful way to express one's faith. One memorable article told of a pastor who used a ventriloquist's dummy as his "alter ego" to help spread his message and minister to children.³⁸² These articles introduced an element of theater.

In June of 2001, the *Faith & Values* section covered the Christian comedian Robert G. Lee, who insisted that God, the creator of heaven and earth, had a great sense of humor and that through humor, people can celebrate their likenesses and differences across religions and denominations. Lee's comedic show was aptly titled "The Jokes on Thee."³⁸³ Lee's humor was evident throughout the article and in his interview. He used humor to address some fundamentally debated issues of religion, one being the theory of evolution.³⁸⁴

The arts were not neglected. Many artists who were not afraid to share their faith and religion were recognized. Art and art-based themes were regularly explored. Father Moore, a Catholic priest who began drawing comic books as a boy, had been able to earn financial benefits because of his artistic calling. His paintings were in such high demand

³⁸¹ Ray Waddle, "1989 Massacre of Jesuit Priests Remembered." *The Tennessean*. July 15, 2000.

³⁸² "Church to Host Ventriloquists." *The Tennessean*. February 28, 2009.

³⁸³ Ray Waddle, "Heaven and Hell, Creation, Worship...Religion Can Be a Laughing Matter." *The Tennessean*. June 2, 2001.

³⁸⁴ Waddle, "Heaven and Hell, Creation, Worship...Religion Can Be a Laughing Matter." *The Tennessean*. June 2, 2001.

that some sold for more than \$5,000. Many of his patrons considered his artwork to be spiritual. Pieces of his work that were displayed in the *Faith & Values* story were said to offer hope to artists who practiced a specific religion or viewed their artwork as an extension of their faith.

The artform of music, covered in the religion section, could not avoid spiritual encounters with one of Tennessee's most famous resident – Elvis Presley. A special concert held at the Mississippi State University football stadium was deemed a spiritual experience by many of its attendees who came to commemorate Elvis and what his legacy meant to them – especially women who sought liberation in an oppressive South. The entertainment provided by the original Elvis, and subsequently by those who impersonate him, instilled feelings of freedom and power in the way some experience traditional religion. A piece such as this could be considered as anti-Christian, but the writers of *Faith and Value* offered faith, values, and spiritualism in ways that defy the traditional points of view.

Another aspect of entertainment the religion section addressed was sports and parochial schools. The story of St. Raphael and its new playing field offered a unique insight into the world of parochial sports and its influence on the appeal and success of the school.³⁸⁵ According to the article, St. Raphael beat out other bidders for a new playing field for its school's extracurricular activities. In the south, high school sports, especially football, are a major form of entertainment that bring entire communities

³⁸⁵ Tucker, "Fight Over Fields Is Part of Church State Dispute." *The Tennessean*. January 2, 2010.

together. Articles such as this showcased the versatility of the religion section and also displayed how faith and values are ingrained in every section of human society.

Homosexuality and Religion

When it came to religion, the topic of gay and lesbian rights was often deemed as taboo. However, *Faith and Values* did not shy away from its coverage of the topic and the pursuit of gay rights in every arena of modern living. The earliest found archived article in *The Tennessean* was in 1974. After that time, the issue was covered mainly outside of the religion section and often on the front page. For instance, bans on gay marriage as well as a more uncommon issue was brought to light when a Southern Baptist group in Nashville started a boycott against the Disney Corporation for giving benefits to gay employees.³⁸⁶ The group indicted the company with drifting away from traditional values previously espoused by the organization. It wasn't until the mid-2000s that the theme of homosexuality in context to faith and religion began to appear more often in the pages of the *Faith & Values*.

One headline article focused on the decision of the progressive United Methodist Church to uphold its stand against homosexuality. The meeting titled "the war on the shore" was inundated with protesters at the lakeside Methodist lodge where the church meeting was held.³⁸⁷ From the article, it was evident not everyone in leadership agreed that the homosexual lifestyle should be shunned by the church. In the end, the traditional point of view won out, but not without controversy.³⁸⁸ Silent pro-gay protesters were able

³⁸⁶ "Disney-Baptist Feud Provers Even Nastier Than Thought." *The Tennessean*. May 3, 1998.

³⁸⁷ Elizabeth Murthaugh, "Law on Gay Pastors Divide Methodists." *The Tennessean*. August 10, 2002.

³⁸⁸ Murthaugh, "Law on Gay Pastors Divide Methodists." *The Tennessean*. August 10, 2002.

to make it to the main rooms and stood in front of the podium. Eventually they were moved. At the time of the article, the church focused on aiding homosexuals to transition to heterosexual lifestyles, although they did establish a specific program to do so. The article indicated that many were expecting the church to take a forward-thinking approach to homosexuality within its congregation as it took a different approach when it came to abortion.³⁸⁹

Several months later, another article highlighted a similar situation transpiring within the Presbyterian Church, where its leaders gathered together to vote on “Amendment O,” which would deny religious ceremonies to homosexuals, citing Biblical definitions of marriage between a man and a woman. The vote did not permit same-sex couples to wed in the Presbyterian Church, with a vote of 112 to 90.

A year later, the *Faith & Values* section featured yet another religious organization voting for or against homosexuality. This time it was the Southern Baptists. Just like in the previous stories, this event was attended by protesters. Differing from the other articles, a particular gay rights advocate group is named directly, Soulforce.³⁹⁰ The mission of the group was described, but the outcome of the event was not reported.

These articles focused on the facts and tended not to insert any biases in support of or against the church’s decision. Nevertheless, they were not omitted from the section and often were boldly displayed in a prominent position.

³⁸⁹ Elizabeth Murthaugh, “Law on Gay Pastors Divide Methodists.” *The Tennessean*. August 10, 2002.

³⁹⁰ Brian Lewis, “Southern Baptist to Elect New Leader, Hear Former Captives.” *The Tennessean, Faith & Values*. June 8, 2002.

In contrast to the previous articles, a subsequent piece called attention to the scientific research of same-sex issues to be carried out by Rev. James Child, Jr., in Chicago. The article stated that a four-year study had been requested by an assembly of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America. The article does not go into further details, but keeping in context, focused purely on the facts.³⁹¹

Additionally, a later published article expressed the opinion of one conservative pastor who believed most evangelical practices mirrored the behaviors of the pharisees and Christ, particularly when it came to ministering to homosexuals. In 2002, Rich Nathan published a book entitled *Who is my Enemy?* playing on the question the pharisees asked Jesus when stating, “Who is my neighbor.”³⁹² In his book, Nathan detailed the importance of lovingly welcoming those whom society rejects, namely homosexuals. In this article, readers found a traditionally conservative pastor challenging social norms and reaching out to the gay community.³⁹³ In the article it is not clear if Nathan condones homosexuals, but the tone of the piece is written in support of their social dilemma.

In the *Faith and Values* section, writers tended to focus on how homosexuality fit into the greater context of religion, faith, and values. Taking the standard, unbiased approach, articles explored how this lifestyle was deemed as contrary to most religious

³⁹¹ “Lutheran’s Look to Task Force.” *The Tennessean*. September 18, 2004.

³⁹² Ray Waddle, “Conservative Pastor Say Evangelism Standards Often Imitate Pharisees, Not Christ.” *The Tennessean*. March 2, 2002.

³⁹³ Waddle, “Conservative Pastor Say Evangelism Standards Often Imitate Pharisees, Not Christ.” *The Tennessean*. March 2, 2002.

teachings, not just Christianity. Despite this widely held belief, the paper reported on homosexuals who identified with a religious group of Christian denominations.

Through these articles, the paper explored how such people were accepted within the religious community and how they practiced their faith and religious beliefs while being largely ostracized and unrecognized by the church, particularly within the auspices of the family dynamic.³⁹⁴ It appears that *The Tennessean* took a concerned, if not sympathetic, tone in regard to topics and themes surrounding homosexuality in context to faith and religion.

Conclusion

In conclusion, *The Tennessean's Faith & Value* stand-alone religion section was a stellar example of the evolution of a southern newspaper that held religion and faith-based topics as a part of structural identity. The section presented as a more liberalistic expression of religion in the greater context of how it was traditionally viewed in the South. This stand-alone religion section embraced the idea of marrying religion and politics and did it in a way that was comprehensive, but not polarizing. Sometimes this included holding religious leadership to high standards and even exposing their shortcomings. At times community members were even invited to share their views on the intersection of religion and politics, particularly in the arena of education.

The section also published a wide array of community-influenced features, topics, and articles showing that it was focused on the interests of its readership, which was

³⁹⁴ Susan Wiltshire, "From a Jail Cell, Group Prayed to Change the Anti-gay Policies of Churches." *The Tennessean*, June 9, 2006.

expanded beyond the greater Nashville area. This religion section was very inclusive and brought out the culture side of religion by highlighting stories that promoted art and entertainment from a religious point of view. Again, taking its cues from the community, which offered many art and entertainment religious venues on a smaller level from children's plays to school and community programs that happened beyond the traditional holiday setting.

The Tennessean did not let its past influence the evolution of coverage of religious subjects. Instead, the paper took its cues from its readers and strived to offer an unbiased and truthful expression of religion in its various forms and was not afraid to show the downside of becoming a religious extremist. Topics concerning faith and values were left open for interpretation in some cases, while offering unique perspectives and making spiritual connections to activities that are traditionally viewed as secular. Through this style of publishing, *The Tennessean* allowed its readers to share their faith without being evangelized in a polarizing way, but still challenging them to embrace the golden rule – treat others the way you wish to be treated.

While a focus on faith and values was paramount, the writers and editors of this section took a more progressive tone and even challenged the idea of religion itself from a traditional standpoint. It is this type of reporting that *the Tennessean's* stand-alone religion section provided that will add to the story of print papers and their history.

CHAPTER VII – THE CLARION-LEDGER

Introduction

Finding its home in the capital of the Bible Belt, Jackson, Mississippi, *The Clarion-Ledger*'s hometown may have the smallest population in comparison to the other four papers in this research. Nevertheless, the paper boasted a large circulation for many years. It circulated statewide in all 82 Mississippi counties. Beginning with a bit of a tumultuous backstory, *The Clarion-Ledger* was able to overcome its adversity and shine across the state of Mississippi.

The Clarion-Ledger was founded in 1837 in Paulding, Jasper County. Known initially as the *Eastern Clarion*, in less than a year, it was sold and moved to Meridian, Mississippi.³⁹⁵ The Civil War had a huge impact on the paper, and it was relocated to Jackson after the war ended. It was at this time that it merged with the *Standard* and became known as *Clarion*. Owners Col. J. L. Power and Col. Robert H. Henry renamed the paper *The Daily Clarion-Ledger* after combining it with the *State Ledger* (printed in Brookhaven and Newton) in 1888. The company is listed as the second-oldest corporation in Mississippi.³⁹⁶ After several purchases and name changes, Robert and Thomas Hederman purchased the paper and changed the name to *Daily Clarion-Ledger* in 1920. It became *The Clarion-Ledger* after it was sold to Gannett in 1982.

The Hederman family ran a racist newspaper for fifty of the sixty years they owned it. Under their leadership, the paper openly supported the suppression of black voter registration and led a ploy to block a segregated college basketball game between

³⁹⁵ Sarah E. Ryan, "Reclaiming the Relevance of Journalism: The Case of *The Clarion-Ledger*."

³⁹⁶ Ryan, "Reclaiming the Relevance of Journalism: The Case of *The Clarion-Ledger*."

Mississippi State University and Loyola University Chicago, which had black players on the team. The game went on after MSU defied Governor Ross Barnett's order not to play. Loyola won the national championship that year. This event is associated with a move towards breaking down racial barriers in sports.

Rea Hederman was the last Hederman to own the paper, and he made great efforts to recompense for the sins of his ancestors who long incited hate through the newspaper. Rea Hederman diversified the newsroom of *The Clarion-Ledger* by covering stories within the black community and by adding black journalists and staffers. This effort increased after Gannett took ownership.

Why Add a Religion Section Anyway?

Although the paper may have been behind the times when it came to its political reporting and race relations, it is safe to say that it was ahead of the times when it came to religion reporting. In 1983, *The Clarion-Ledger's* management team made the decision to launch a stand-alone religion section that published once a week on Saturday. This decision came eleven years and eight months before *The Dallas Morning News* launched its section. This is a significant point because *The Dallas Morning News* received many awards and accolades for starting its section, but *The Clarion-Ledger* received none, even though it was clearly the forerunner for this idea.

The Clarion-Ledger is Mississippi's largest daily state-wide newspaper. It is the main news source in the state, and perhaps leaders recognized the paper's leadership role and deemed it necessary to put a spotlight on religion news in a state with a strong religious populous. Mississippi has long been considered a part of the Bible Belt of the

South and the most religious state in the United States; therefore, this move seemed inevitable.

The Clarion-Ledger had covered religion in the past, but only on a limited basis. Prior to April 1983, the religion news included a church directory, a Sunday school lesson, weekly columns, and a religion round-up. The round-up was called “Pulpit and Pews” and included a listing of churches, church services, and special religious events. At the time, these features appeared within either the State-Metro/B section or a section that was once called *Impact*, a societal/community news and information section.

This paper explores the *Southern Style Religion* section from 1983 to 2008. This time period is significant because it focuses on the dedicated religion coverage provided by the largest newspaper in Mississippi. This research is important because it shows how *The Clarion-Ledger*, Mississippi’s largest and only state-wide daily newspaper, focused on religion as an important aspect of the lives of its readers, and it looks at religious perspectives, practices, beliefs, and values of that era.

The Clarion-Ledger has long been hailed as Mississippi’s watchdog and Mississippi’s primary news source. It played a major role in the history of Mississippi through its credible reporting, investigative reporting, and taking the lead on key issues. *The Clarion-Ledger* won the Pulitzer Prize for Public Service for its coverage of the education system in Mississippi. A *Clarion-Ledger* reporter, Jerry Mitchell, was a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize in 2006 for his investigative reporting that led to the successful

prosecution of a man accused of orchestrating the killing of three civil rights workers in 1964.³⁹⁷

In addition to Rae Hederman's efforts to turn the paper's dark racist reputation around, Mitchell's investigative reporting further redeemed *The Clarion-Ledger's* reputation with the black community. Rex Nelson, senior editor for the *Arkansas Democrat-Gazette*, wrote an opinion piece, "Jerry Mitchell's Mission," where he quoted a reporter from *The Baltimore Sun* as saying, "The Hederman family ran what probably was the most racist newspaper in the nation. Some of its past reporting, when reviewed today, is nearly unbelievable. *The Clarion-Ledger* covered the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr.'s historic 1963 march on Washington with a picture of the mall littered by trash and a headline that proclaimed, 'Washington is Clean Again with Negro Trash Removed.'"³⁹⁸

Ronnie Agnew, *The Clarion-Ledger's* first black executive editor, sums the history of the paper up this way - "For many years, *The Clarion-Ledger* has been the newspaper of record in Mississippi. At its peak, the newspaper was distributed in all 82 counties, giving it a reach that surpassed most papers of its size." There was great demand for the newspaper because the journalism at the time was of such high quality. *The Clarion-Ledger* had the right mix of news and investigative reporting. It had a strong, award-winning sports department that was responsible for building the careers of a number of state, college, and professional athletes. The newspaper's features section, *Southern Style*, routinely challenged for the best section nationally against much larger competition. Perhaps the heart and soul of the newspaper was its Opinion page, which

³⁹⁷ "Finalist: Jerry Mitchell of The Clarion-Ledger, Jackson, MS."

³⁹⁸ Nelson Rex, "Rex Nelson: Jerry Mitchell's Mission," June 24, 2020.

wielded influence that moved those in power to action. The Opinion page had a group of assigned columnists to hold accountable lawmakers, city officials, and local politicians in various communities. The newspaper had it all. And it was rewarded handsomely for producing content that mattered, content that had impact, content that truly challenged a state to recognize the need for change. Its Pulitzer Prize for reporting on education reform will forever be one of its shining moments. Its dogged reporting on civil rights crimes of the past led to the resolution of cases once thought unsolvable. Byron de la Beckwith, Sam Bowers, Edgar Ray Killen all spent their last dying breaths in Mississippi prisons for their civil rights crimes due to *Clarion-Ledger* investigations. For a number of Mississippi journalists, *The Clarion-Ledger* was the only place in the state where they desired to work. The talent was so deep that it was impossible to keep them all. It would be common for *The Clarion-Ledger* to lose some of its top talent to several of the nation's largest and most influential newspapers. But when journalists did leave, there were always others looking to come through those doors to participate in historic journalism.”³⁹⁹

The newspaper served its audience by adding new sections to the entire weekly lineup, publishing special one-time sections, or running a series on an issue that needed addressing. This type of coverage included politics, education, natural disasters, and even religion.

Adding a religion section to the newspaper's weekly line-up followed the historical decisions of how the newspaper reported on important topics and issues. Past

³⁹⁹ Email note from Ronnie Agnew on January 21, 2021.

and present Gallop polls reported that Mississippi was the most religious state in the U.S. - most recently, March 2012, citing only 11 percent of Mississippians saying they are non-religious. The poll reported that over half of Mississippians consider themselves “very religious.”⁴⁰⁰ Gallop began tracking religious indicators in 2008. The percentage of Americans who identify as very religious saw a slight decline over the years until 2016. Mississippians remained number one for nine years in a row – 2008-2016, with some fluctuations over those years.⁴⁰¹ Data suggests Mississippians remained most religious even after the special section was no longer published.

Analysis of Southern Style Religion

A textual analysis of *Southern Style Religion* helped to answer the aforementioned research questions. An archival search of *The Clarion-Ledger* newspaper, conducted at the Mississippi Department of Archives and History in Jackson, Mississippi, yielded primary resources on microfilm. The years analyzed for content include 1983-2008. The initial goal was to determine when the stand-alone religion section’s first publication date began. To determine this, papers published prior to the dates included in this research were searched. A casual examination of those issues was also conducted to see how religion news was covered prior to the publication of stand-alone section. The *Southern Style Religion* section was assessed for a twenty-five-year period. The analysis included a review of 450 newspaper articles.

In addition, interviews were conducted with two staff writers who were employed with *The Clarion-Ledger* at the time this section was developed. Art Toalston was one of

⁴⁰⁰ Frank Newport, “Seven in 10 Americans Are Very or Moderately Religious.”

⁴⁰¹ Frank Newport, “Mississippi Retains Standing as Most Religious State.”

the lead writers at the inception of the section but only remained on staff about two months after the stand-alone section began publishing. Charlotte Graham, who, at the time, was a general assignment reporter for the newspaper's feature section, *Southern Style*, became the lead religion writer shortly after Toalston's departure. Information from their interviews supplied added insight into what actually occurred at the paper during the development of the new stand-alone section.

Southern Style Religion is Born

The Clarion-Ledger launched its stand-alone religion section on Easter Sunday, April 3, 1983. The newspaper published a short story about the decision to start this new section on the front page of the section on its first published day as a stand-alone. It read:

*The Clarion-Ledger/Jackson Daily News today debuts Southern Style Religion, a new section designed to give you expanded religion coverage from across the state and South. The section, to be presented each Saturday in this place, will provide you with your regular favorite columns – you can find Pulpits and Pews and Sunday school lessons inside – as well as some new features. “This shows an increased commitment to coverage on an important part of life in Mississippi,” executive editor Charles Overby said in announcing the changes.*⁴⁰²

⁴⁰² Staff, “New Section Brings You Religion - Southern Style.” *The Clarion-Ledger*, April 2, 1983.

154

old at the time he started work at *The Clarion-Ledger*. He was a Mississippian who studied history at the University of Mississippi and did graduate work at Georgetown University and the University College in Oxford, England. Clark had worked as press secretary for Governor William Winter. Art Toalston was a 32-year old seasoned religion writer who had written for Christianity Today, the Religion News Service (RNS), and Ohio newspapers, which was his home state. Toalston graduated from Bowling Green State University and was also a high school journalism teacher.⁴⁰³

Section Presentation: How it Emerged

When the paper decided to place an expanded focus on religion news, it seemed to struggle with how to present it. When the section was first launched, the masthead of the section prominently displayed the *Southern Style* section title with “*Religion*” as a tag. It remained this way for the next two years. During this two-year period, there were some inconsistencies of placement, and perhaps it was a play with page design. However, on occasion, the “*Religion*” tag changed position⁴⁰⁴ and was even dropped altogether.⁴⁰⁵ Even when it was dropped, the section still included the expanded coverage.

In 1985, the newspaper made the decision to make the word “*Religion*” more prominent in the masthead. On June 8, 1985, the masthead read *Religion Southern Style*.⁴⁰⁶ This move made sense because the focus of the section is totally religion news. The section appeared as *Southern Style* the rest of the week. The masthead font changed

⁴⁰³ *The Clarion-Ledger Southern Style Religion*. April 2, 1983. D1.

⁴⁰⁴ *The Clarion-Ledger* (masthead), December 10, 1983.

⁴⁰⁵ *The Clarion-Ledger* (masthead), January 28, 1984.

⁴⁰⁶ *The Clarion-Ledger* (masthead), June 8, 1985.

from time to time as well. The look of the stand-alone section changed, but the commitment to religion news coverage remained constant.

Graphics and illustrations played a key role in presentation of the news. The page designers played with page layout on occasion. Sometimes the front page was an elaborate display of several photos, one big photo or interesting graphics;⁴⁰⁷ other times there were fewer graphics and pictures and more copy. For example, there was sometimes a bigger focus on listing all the holiday events in the “Pulpit and Pews” section.⁴⁰⁸ This fell in line with presentation practices at other newspapers. Religion news took on various presentations. Local and national religious-oriented photos were quite prevalent.⁴⁰⁹

Placement of the section was also inconsistent. *Southern Style Religion* was published some weeks as section C and others as section D. The only issue this may have caused would be confusion to readers expecting the section to be in the same place each week.⁴¹⁰

An important part of the section was the advertisements. Advertising was steady in the section during the first few years. Retailers of all kinds purchased ad space. The list included Cook & Love Shoes, D H Holmes Department Store, and Juniker Jewelers. In addition, retailers like bowling alleys, theaters, casinos, and others purchased smaller ad

⁴⁰⁷ *The Clarion-Ledger* (illustration), December 10, 1983.

⁴⁰⁸ Staff, Pulpits & Pews, *The Clarion-Ledger*, December 21, 1985.

⁴⁰⁹ Earnest Hyndes, “Large Dailies Have Improved Coverage of Religion in 1990s.”

⁴¹⁰ *The Clarion-Ledger* (masthead), April 21, 1984 and April 14, 1991.

spaces. Churches also purchased display ad space to announce their services or advertise special events. In addition to the display ads, many more churches purchased line ads.⁴¹¹

Editors and Writers Get No Clear Direction

Writers did not receive clear directives on what types of stories to cover. Graham readily acknowledges that she had no experience in writing religious news. She stated that she had never been to theology school, but when asked by her editor to write for the section, she agreed to “give it a try.” Graham felt that because she was a Christian, they thought she could do it. Once she became acclimated to writing for the section, she began searching for unique stories with no direction from editors.⁴¹²

Toalston was the total opposite of Graham in terms of experience. He had written religion news for some time. Toalston recalled that there was never any discussion on what he was writing and believed that editors did not seem to know what to do about religion. There was no dialogue because the belief was if a person came in knowing what they were doing, editors did not bother them. “They didn’t know what to do about religion and was not prepared for a true religion beat,” Toalston said.⁴¹³

Acceptance of the Writers

Art Toalston was well known within the religious sector. He spoke about his membership with the First Baptist Church and all of his relationships with various leaders. He noted his friendship with members within the Catholic, Baptist, and Methodist churches. Toalston built many relationships by attending community meetings.

⁴¹¹ Line ads include only words, no pictures or graphics.

⁴¹² Charlotte Charlotte Graham. phone conversation with author, Hattiesburg, MS, November 27, 2012. Graham remained the lead religion beat writer for the section for over twelve years.

⁴¹³ Art Toalston, phone conversation with author, Jackson, MS, November 17, 2012.

His passion for writing about religion could be heard in his voice. Toalston discussed his writing as intentional and not mainstream, meaning that he wrote from personal convictions, while others seemed to write stories because they were sociologically interesting.⁴¹⁴

Charlotte Graham remembers having a difficult time being accepted among the different religious groups. She said that whites were hesitant to talk to her because she was a black woman, and Baptists were not accepting of her at first either. Gradually, these relationships grew stronger. She credited Dr. Frank Pollard, the local pastor of one of the largest Baptist churches in Jackson, with helping her get established within the Baptist denomination. Graham recalled that the Catholics were the most receptive of her from the start. They told her they were more “universal,” and it did not matter that she was black. They even encouraged her to join the church. The Methodists were accepting, too, especially after learning that her father was a Methodist preacher.⁴¹⁵

Content Overview

Stories were written mainly by staff writers, with an occasional associated press/wire story and a story written by local clergy. During Easter, editors and writers played it safe, sticking with the majority Baptist coverage - perhaps because of the Baptist religion’s role in Mississippi. There was not much focus during this ten-year period on relatively controversial religions such as Pentecostals, Charismatics, or Jehovah’s Witnesses.

⁴¹⁴ Art Toalston, phone conversation with author, Jackson, MS, November 17, 2012.

⁴¹⁵ Charlotte Charlotte Graham. phone conversation with author, Hattiesburg, MS, November 27, 2012.

The coverage during Christmas time shifted a bit. There were local and regional stories not so much about denominations, but the focus was on social and civic organizations and their work within communities. Based on the stories selected and published, the goal of the writers and editors were perhaps to bring the message of hope to their readers and to educate them on where that hope resides – whether from a church, an organization, or program that helps individuals get on their feet. The message of love was prevalent.

Controversial religious groups and topics were covered as the section matured. An example is when the atheists held a convention in Kentucky on Easter weekend in 1984. This convention was led by Madalyn Murray O’Hair, who in 1960, along with her son, were plaintiffs in the landmark U. S. Supreme Court ruling that outlaws organized prayer and Bible reading in public schools. Oddly enough, her “turned Christian” son, whom she had not spoken to for years, was also in Kentucky during the same time. O’Hair was promoting her atheist beliefs on one side of town, while her son preached a message of Christ on the other side.⁴¹⁶ O’Hair was considered America’s best-known atheist since the 70s.⁴¹⁷

There were atheists in Mississippi who believed in O’Hair’s mission. Paul Tirmenstein was one of them. He was the lone atheist in New Albany, Union County, and called himself a born-again atheist. Tirmenstein said he could not wait to leave his father’s home as a child because religion was pushed down his throat. He led a crusade to

⁴¹⁶ Anne Crowley, “Atheists, Christians Square Off in Bible Belt.” *The Clarion-Ledger*, April 21, 1984.

⁴¹⁷ The Associated Press. “Atheists, Son May Fight Over O’Hair Burial.” *The Clarion-Ledger*, March 17, 2001.

get Section 265 of the Mississippi Constitution, known as the atheist ban, overturned.

This law stated that atheists could not hold public office. The article reported that the ban was ruled unconstitutional.⁴¹⁸

The coverage of atheists in the paper showed that the reporters reached across all topics related to religion and those who opposed any religious affiliation. Stories about atheists, atheist organizations, and movements were consistent during the publication of this section. Many of the articles published were about events happening outside of Mississippi, but frequently the Opinion section published letters from readers on the topic. Mississippi obviously had atheist readers who appreciated stories like these and other readers who were angered by the topic. When U.S. District Judge William H. Barbour ruled Section 265 unconstitutional, Tirmenstein and other atheists who were a part of the lawsuit were interviewed.⁴¹⁹

⁴¹⁸ Kevin Kevin Jones. "Atheist Wages Crusade Against 'Brainwashing.'" *The Clarion-Ledger*. June 22, 1985.

⁴¹⁹ Tom Brennan, "Court Gives Atheists Right to Hold Office." *The Clarion-Ledger*. April 25, 1985.



Figure 15. Religion Southern Style

Example story, June 22, 1985, *The Clarion-Ledger*.

Other headline stories focused on a myriad of topics - Sunday services, special events, family, and church collaborations. In addition, cultural and social topics were also plentiful. On occasion, there was coverage of controversial issues such as pornography and immigration.

On the topic of immigration, in one story, headlined “Sanctuary council collecting money to help refugees from El Salvador,” readers learned that a local council was following federal guidelines to help individuals from Central America find a haven in Jackson as they went through the process of becoming legal citizens. The funds the council raised helped to bond the individuals out of detention centers and get them into

homes.⁴²⁰ Bishop Joseph Latino of the Catholic Diocese of Jackson wrote about immigration in the *Faith Forum* feature. Latino shared his thoughts on the legal and illegal facts surrounding immigration, but his message was more pointed toward the humanity factor.⁴²¹ A more lighthearted story pointed out that in the 90s, baby boomers were looking for how their needs could be met and the meaning of life. The story mentioned that church attendance was changing as people searched for these things. It mentioned that because of immigration, people had more choices and that more blacks were converting to new religions than other groups.⁴²²

Coverage of immigration was important because it was such a controversial topic in the country and Mississippi. Illegal immigration and how to govern it was a household conversation and a legislative one, too. Immigration influenced jobs, wages, crime, and other concerns. It was important for this topic to be reported on so that readers would be aware of policy, and from a religious perspective, what they should be praying for.

Some coverage was not headline news but smaller mentions. In one paper, in a small box announcement, there was a short blurb about a Church of England report that called for acceptance of homosexuality among lay persons but abstinence from such practice among priests.⁴²³ The section in which this type of announcement occurred often

⁴²⁰ Kevin Kevin Jones. "Sanctuary Council Collecting Money to Help Refugees From El Salvador, *The Clarion-Ledger*. May 3, 1986.

⁴²¹ Joseph Latino, "Immigrations Policies: Justice Should Be Tempered with Mercy." *The Clarion-Ledger*. September 27, 2008.

⁴²² Kathryn Canavan, "'90s Will Be Decade We Decide to Search For Meaning Of Life." *The Clarion-Ledger*. January 6, 1990.

⁴²³ Staff, In the News, *Clarion-Ledger*. December 21, 1991.

focused on non-local religion news, included religion polls and reports and focused on issues that denominations encountered and/or supported. The section included:

- Reading Religiously – a listing of the publisher’s religious best sellers
- On the Issues – highlighting major issues in the world. This section could include short blurbs about happenings in other countries and their handling of key issues like the right to die.
- In the News – hot topics – from homosexuality to relationship building between Muslims and Jews
- They Said It – Quotes from various individuals on different topics – concerning anything from the meaning of Christmas to domestic problem solving
- Milestones – announcements of pastoral retirements,
- Denominations - conventions, missionary journeys, evangelistic happenings, and the like from within various denominations

These topics changed quite frequently. This section is a good example of how the paper attempted to diversify its coverage and provide readers of all denominations and beliefs with in-depth information or enough information to encourage them to do more searching on a particular subject.

A Call for Diversity in Coverage

Graham vividly recounts the time when editors began to become more concerned about religion coverage. She said that writing for the section was initially more like a newsletter for her, and the stories she covered were focused more on Christians and Jewish denominations. As diversity in coverage became an issue, Graham was given

more direction. Editors urged writers to cover Christian and non-Christian stories. She remembered being told that “it’s a religion section and not a Christian section.” It was then that she started to search out stories on Islam, Hinduism, and other religions. Graham noted that Christians were not too happy about this. Readers called and wrote letters but came to appreciate the diverse story lines.⁴²⁴

Adding diversity was no easy feat for Graham. She had to find contacts within other religious groups and build relationships with them. She was met with some skepticism from some of the groups. For example, the Muslims and Sikhs thought that the newspaper had hidden motives for seeking them out. They thought the paper was trying to do something to make them look bad, but as they became more familiar with Graham, they clearly saw that she was trying to learn about and educate others on their religion and their style of worship. Progressively, Graham became a regular guest in their temple and at their services.⁴²⁵

Diversity in coverage was realized in several ways – from stories written about religious differences to features on specific religions and practices. One story expressed how a Muslim led the Tennessee State Senate in prayer by reading from the Koran,⁴²⁶ a noted first in America. Another story described how denominational differences and religious preferences can affect families, children in particular.⁴²⁷

⁴²⁴ Charlotte Graham. Charlotte. Phone conversation with author, Hattiesburg, MS, November 27, 2012.

⁴²⁵ Charlotte Graham. Phone conversation with author, Hattiesburg, MS. November 27, 2012.

⁴²⁶ Staff, A First for Tennessee, *Clarion-Ledger*, March 30. 1991.

⁴²⁷ Lawrence Kutner, “Decisions on Religious Practice Best Left to Adults.” *Clarion-Ledger*. December 22, 1990.

It was important to expand coverage of religious groups because the landscape was changing. More and more religious groups started to make Mississippi their home. For example, the Hindu community was growing, as evidenced by the groups building of a new \$4 million temple in Brandon, Mississippi.⁴²⁸ The Muslim community was growing as well. Jean Gordon wrote about two Muslims' prayer rituals at their jobs and noted there were 2,000-4,000 Muslims in the state. The article announced the upcoming Islamic Eid ul-Adha celebration that had brought 800 people to the Jackson area the year before.⁴²⁹ The focus to be more diverse in coverage added more depth to the section. It allowed readers to learn about those who lived in their communities that they may have either feared or shunned for the lack of knowledge.

Religious Holidays

Religion news during Easter and Christmas was plentiful. Writers often found interesting feature stories of events and people. One may think that covering religion during the holidays was easy and pleasant, but Toalston did not enjoy writing for the holidays. He said they were harder to write about if you wanted something fresh year after year. He felt it was the toughest time to get something good.⁴³⁰ Toalston left the paper shortly after the stand-alone religion section debuted and only got to write one Easter story and never wrote a Christmas story for the stand-alone section.⁴³¹ The Easter story he wrote was about an Easter sunrise service that happened at the 'Holy Land' in

⁴²⁸ Jean Gordon, "Sacred Space: \$4M building project reflects Hinduism's growth." *The Clarion-Ledger*. August 9, 2008.

⁴²⁹ Jean Gordon, "'Every Corner of the Globe.'" *The Clarion-Ledger*. January 7, 2006.

⁴³⁰ Art Toalston. Phone conversation with author, Jackson, MS. November 17, 2012.

⁴³¹ Toalston had been a religion writer with The Jackson Daily News, sister paper of *The Clarion-Ledger*, and had written for holidays before. That is how he could speak passionately about reporting on holidays since he only wrote briefly for the stand-alone section.

Lucedale, Mississippi. A Reverend W. Harvell Jackson built this 500-seat garden/amphitheater in 1960 to honor what he calls the “most sacred day of the year.” Jackson claimed that more than a million people from around the world had visited the site.⁴³²

Graham’s attitude was opposite of Toalston. She enjoyed writing “seasonally” and found it sometimes harder to write fresh ideas off season. According to Graham, Christmas and Easter were reported on initially, but when the editors began to pursue diversity in religion coverage, they began to include stories that focused on religious holidays of other denominations. For example, they began to write more about the Passover, the Jewish New Year, and Hanukkah. Sometimes the push for diversity in coverage was a political move. Graham noted that Jewish coverage was initiated because a local school board member was Jewish.⁴³³

It is ironic that Graham enjoyed writing for the holidays because one of her earlier stories, published on Easter Sunday, had nothing to do with Easter. It was a story about the fight of one religious group against Holiday Inn for having pornographic movies available in their rooms. The National Federation on Decency launched a boycott against the Holiday Inn chain because of one satellite communications carrier, Hi-Net, that provided television programming to 964 of 1,450 hotels in the chain. Hi-Net reportedly did not carry X-rated programs. The vice president of corporate communications for Holiday Inn was quoted in the story and declared, “The movies we show are no different from Rambo and some of these other movies shown on television.” Regardless, folks

⁴³² Art Toalston, “‘Holy Land’ Tour Just a Day Trip Away.” *Clarion-Ledger*. April 2, 1983.

⁴³³ Charlotte Graham. Phone conversation with author, Hattiesburg, MS. November 27, 2012.

attending the Baptist Missionary Association of America convention canceled reservations at the Biloxi Holiday Inn.⁴³⁴ Although the Biloxi hotel did not receive its services from Hi-Net, the Baptist group boycotted because the leaders believed the chain needed to “get out of the porn business.”⁴³⁵ The story was timely, and Graham felt it important to publish at that time, keeping in alignment with news reporting standards. Of note, she did not completely ignore Easter; the page was adorned with a large drawing of an Easter lily that spanned from top to bottom in the center of the page. Plus, a long list of Easter service announcements ran in the left column.

Another seasonal holiday that Graham enjoyed writing about was Christmas. Her early Christmas stories included a story about how the bells at Calvary Baptist Church in Jackson had been silenced because of repair needs for about ten years. The story related how the bells had been repaired and how it made long-time members nostalgic about their childhood days there. Another story was totally unrelated to Christmas but featured an organization called MadCAAP and told of its goal to break the poverty cycle.⁴³⁶

As time went on, Graham found her niche. She began writing stories about families who gave unique gifts like the gift of love to foster children,⁴³⁷ neighborhoods pulling together to make a bold statement about the ‘Reason for the Season’ by decorating their yards with themed messages,⁴³⁸ and even promoting attractions away from home, like the year-round nativity scene at Gatlinburg’s Christus Gardens.⁴³⁹

⁴³⁴ Charlotte Graham. Biloxi Holiday Inn Hurt by Picket Call, *Clarion-Ledger*. April 18, 1987.

⁴³⁵ Charlotte Graham. Biloxi Holiday Inn Hurt by Picket Call, *Clarion-Ledger*. April 18, 1987.

⁴³⁶ Charlotte Graham. “MadCAAP Fights to Break the Cycle of Poverty.” *Clarion-Ledger*, December 19, 1987.

⁴³⁷ Charlotte Graham. “Giving the Gift of Love.” *Clarion-Ledger*. December 24, 1988.

⁴³⁸ Charlotte Graham. “‘Reason for Season’ Goes Out Front.” *Clarion-Ledger*. December 23, 1989.

⁴³⁹ Charlotte Graham. “It Always Looks Like Christmas at Christus.” *Clarion-Ledger*. December 22, 1990.

Easter Coverage was Education

Southern Style Religion made targeted efforts to be geographically and topically diverse in their Easter coverage. Coverage included stories from different parts of the state of Mississippi, as well as regional and international.

The section offered scholarly historical insight on various denominations, religions, rituals, and events. For example, the Easter publication in 1984⁴⁴⁰ explained the meaning of a Tenebrae service, which helps people relive and reenact the hours leading up to Jesus' crucifixion. Tenebrae is a Latin word meaning darkness. These services told a story in a very somber way and ended in total darkness in the performance area. A guest minister wrote a "Message" for the section on April 6, 1985.⁴⁴¹ This message explained how an English scholar, Wesscott, wrote that the events of the resurrection are highly recorded; and Dr. Paul Vaier, an ancient history professor at Michigan University, notes that the resurrection has never been disproven.

Research studies were highlighted in the religion section as a form of educating readers. One article highlighted the results of a study on the popularity of such preachers as Billy Graham, Jimmy Swaggart, Pat Robert, and Oral Roberts, who had huge followings. Church organizations and religious broadcasters were interested in knowing if TV preachers diverted people from attending their local churches. The study was conducted by the Annenberg School of Communication at the University of Pennsylvania and the Gallop Organization. It was paid for by mainline church organizations. The

⁴⁴⁰ Kevin Kevin Jones. "Services Recall the Darkness Before Easter's Light." *The Clarion-Ledger*. April 21, 1984.

⁴⁴¹ Earl Craig, "Message." *Clarion-Ledger*. April 6, 1985.

answer was a welcomed “No” to religious organizations but not so welcoming for TV preachers.⁴⁴²

Education also came in the form of helping individuals fulfill their dreams. International Images was a Christian-based modeling and talent agency in Clinton, Mississippi. The agency taught young ladies lessons in self-esteem and moral principles. They were also taught the importance of walking away from something that did not feel right. The agency did not teach religion but worked to instill Christian values and how to spot trouble. This agency worked to prepare individuals for modeling and acting careers.⁴⁴³ This story provided information on a Christian, non-traditional route to become a model or actor. These are a few examples of how the section educated readers. According to Charlotte Graham, the focus of the section was initially more entertaining, but it evolved into more of an educational tool for her as a writer and for the readers.⁴⁴⁴

Heavy Coverage of Baptist during Easter

Over ten years, subject matter varied, but a resounding standing ovation is in order for coverage of Baptists. Baptist events quotes from Baptist ministers, and mentions of some Baptist organizations appeared in nearly all publications. According to Toalston, Mississippi was demographically sixty percent Southern Baptist during this time period, therefore, because of populous, there would be more Baptist coverage.⁴⁴⁵ Graham added that Mississippi had a reputation for being a Southern Baptist state, and they had to

⁴⁴² Jim Castelli, “Who watches TV preachers? Not many, study shows.” *The Clarion-Ledger*. April 28, 1984.

⁴⁴³ Charlotte Charlotte Graham. “Christianity on the Catwalk.” *The Clarion-Ledger*. March 8, 2003.

⁴⁴⁴ Charlotte Graham. Phone conversation with author, Hattiesburg, MS. November 27, 2012.

⁴⁴⁵ Art Toalston. Phone conversation with author, Jackson, MS. November 17, 2012.

“make them happy.” When asked if they were told to cover Baptist stories, she replied that it was unspoken but understood that the coverage would be there.⁴⁴⁶

Although it is clear that the Baptist denomination dominated Easter coverage, diversity in coverage was still top of mind as other religions were mentioned. They included Episcopal, Jewish, Methodist, Presbyterian. Many of the religions were mixed in stories. For example, in the story “Mississippi religious leaders share essence of Easter,” there were quotes from Catholic, Baptist, Presbyterian, Methodist, Church of Christ, and other preachers.⁴⁴⁷ Multi-denominations were mentioned in the Listings of Places to Worship feature, as well as listings of special Easter services. The religions were covered in different ways, but not all the time associated with Easter. In the case of the Episcopal church, their Tenebrae services were reported on,⁴⁴⁸ as well as their involvement in missions to Honduras.⁴⁴⁹ There was an Associated Press story about the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) having to cut jobs.⁴⁵⁰ Although Jews do not celebrate Easter, they do celebrate their liberation from Egypt over 3000 years ago; therefore, such a story was published in this section.

⁴⁴⁶ Charlotte Graham. Phone conversation with author, Hattiesburg, MS. November 27, 2012.

⁴⁴⁷ Staff Writers. “Mississippi Religious Leaders Share Essence of Easter.” *The Clarion-Ledger*. April 6, 1985.

⁴⁴⁸ Kevin Jones. “Services recall the darkness before Easter’s light.” *The Clarion-Ledger*. April 21, 1984.

⁴⁴⁹ Smith, “Mississippians familiar faces in Honduran Mountain Village.” *The Clarion-Ledger*. April 4, 1998.

⁴⁵⁰ Associate Press, “Presbyterian Church Prepares for More Job Cuts.” *The Clarion-Ledger*. April 15, 2006.



Figure 16. Mississippi Religious Leaders Share Essence of Easter

Example Easter story, April 6, 1985, *The Clarion-Ledger*.

This research did not observe any stories about Muslims in Easter publications. In addition, as mentioned earlier, atheists also received coverage/mentions in at least two stories. Toalston discusses how important it is to be certain to cover when other religions are doing things and have a story to tell.⁴⁵¹

⁴⁵¹ Art Toalston. Phone conversation with author, Jackson, MS. November 17, 2012.

Christmas: A Time for All

Southern Style Religion focused on messages of love, hope, outreach, family, and community in Christmas coverage. Christian and Jewish religions were the key highlights of the section. Unlike the Easter coverage, there was significantly less focus on the Baptist religion, and there were even mentions on the more controversial religion of Jehovah's Witnesses, who do not celebrate holidays like Christmas. In one story, "Christmas isn't for everybody," one Jehovah's Witness said that Dec. 25 is a day celebrated by the Romans for the birth of the sun god and said the date has nothing to do with the birth of the Son of God. She also noted that Santa Claus, Christmas trees, and reindeer have nothing to do with Jesus Christ. She called these things lies and explained that they teach their children what is Bible-based.⁴⁵² Similar to Easter coverage, various religions were mentioned in lists of special services and the Places of Worship feature.

⁴⁵² Charlotte Graham. "Christmas isn't for everybody." *The Clarion-Ledger*. December 24, 1988.

Christmas isn't for everybody

■ Some religions and denominations don't celebrate this time of year.

By Charlotte Graham
Jackson Daily News Religion Writer

No Christmas carols will be sung, gifts received or Christmas tree lit in the homes of some Jackson residents during this holiday season.

To some a Christmas is a man-made holiday that has no significance, and to others it's simply a holiday that is not observed by their religion.

Lynn Turner, a member of the Jehovah's Witness Capitol Hills Congregation of Jackson, said "when you do references on the holiday, you find that it is not a celebration of the birth of Christ at all."

"The *Americana Encyclopedia* tells you that the date, Dec. 25, is celebrated by the Romans as the birth of the sun god, not the birth of the Son of God," she said. "The Christmas tree, Santa Claus and reindeer have nothing to do with Jesus Christ. It's just not Bible-based."

Turner said Jehovah's Witnesses teach their children the "Bible truth" and don't tell them lies about Santa Claus being the bearer of great gifts. "We begin teaching them at an early age about the love of Jehovah God," she said. "We try to get them things at different times."

See NO CHRISTMAS, 3C

Origins of Christmas trees

In the Middle Ages, people might have brought evergreens into their homes to remind them of the plays that used to be held on Adam and Eve's Day - Dec. 24. As props for the play, evergreen branches decorated with apples represented the Tree of Paradise.

▲ Queen Victoria's husband, Prince Albert, helped popularize Christmas trees.

▲ The Moravians, who lived in Bethlehem, Pa., decorated trees as early as 1747, following German custom.

▲ By the 1930s, Christmas trees were so popular in the United States that they were grown on tree farms.

▲ Until 1939, when the United States started making glass ornaments, most came from Lauscha, Germany. Before then, most people made ornaments out of tin, cotton, paper, ribbons and other materials.



▲ Strings of electric lights were invented in 1907, but lights on trees were used as early as 1882. Grover Cleveland was the first president to use electric lights on the White House tree. Each light had to be wired separately.

Source: Research by Eva Lee Ngai

Figure 17. Christmas Isn't for Everyone

Example Christmas story, December 24, 1988, *The Clarion-Ledger*.

Christmas stories often carried tones of persuasion and encouragement, particularly ones focusing on topics of renewal and self-awareness. In one story, "Wake up churches, unchurched await,"⁴⁵³ pastors and church leaders were encouraged to look at their churches and determine why people were not coming to church. They were

⁴⁵³ Michael McManes, "Wake Up Churches, Unchurched Awaits." *Clarion-Ledger*. December 24, 1983.

encouraged to reach out to non-going church individuals by using various teaching methods to attract them.

“Christmas messages offer hope,”⁴⁵⁴ an Associated Press story, focused on how different the atmosphere is of Christmas today, with individuals shopping and full of glee, but the “original event” was centered in a more hostile environment – a stinky stable, with rustic shepherds, and in a country killing babies. However, the message was that Jesus identifies with everyone – good, bad, rich, poor, broken families, drug addicts, jobless, and the list went on. The story reminded readers that Jesus is present at all times and it should be a time of joy. These two stories offered clear messages of hope to readers.

What is Christmas without Christmas stories of lights, and trees, and presents? So, of course, there were also lessons on Santa Claus and Christmas trees. In the story “Group works against Santa Claus theology,”⁴⁵⁵ a non-profit organization, Alternatives, urges people to avoid the commercialization of Christmas. They encouraged people to celebrate St. Nicholas instead of Santa Claus. This group suggested that many poor children are disappointed because Santa Claus does not visit them, but wanted readers to understand that Santa gave to the poor and the needy as well.

Sometimes a story did not even mention Christmas, but the overall theme pointed to the essence of the season. For example, the “Christian groups minister to poor with

⁴⁵⁴ George Cornell, “Christmas Messages Offer Hope.” *Clarion-Ledger*. December 22, 1984.

⁴⁵⁵ Gannett News Service, “Group Works Against Santa Clause Theology.” *Clarion-Ledger*. December 20, 1986.

self-help projects”⁴⁵⁶ story told how individuals and groups in the small Mississippi town of Cary focused on helping individuals with medical, dental, employment, and other personal issues. One of the groups was quoted as saying, “The church is the agent of society that ought to be working in the gaps where others are not working.”

Christmas stories were educational as well. The Jehovah’s Witness story previously mentioned included an illustration on the origin of the Christmas tree and the *Americana Encyclopedia*’s description of December 25th. Readers learned about Hanukkah on several occasions. In one particular story, readers learned that Hanukkah is a Jewish holiday that is celebrated eight days instead of one like Christmas, and gifts are received each day. Perhaps children reading that story might have considered celebrating Hanukkah. As well, readers learned about community outreach opportunities. The section published a story on Hope House, a non-profit, non-Christian affiliated ministry, offers a place for seriously ill outpatients and their families to stay.⁴⁵⁷

In addition to stories on churches and members, various organizations were featured. The work of organizations like the World Council of Churches, Campus Crusade for Life, and Pastors for Peace was highlighted for their work in the community and for nurturing stronger lives and souls.

⁴⁵⁶ Kevin Kevin Jones. “Christian Groups Minister to Poor with Self-help Projects.” *Clarion-Ledger*. December 21, 1985.

⁴⁵⁷ Charlotte Graham, “Hope House Board begins Fundraising to Enlarge Home.” *Clarion-Ledger*, December 21, 1991.



Figure 18. Closing Cover Page

Masthead changed/last day of stand-alone section, December 27, 2008, *The Clarion-Ledger*.

Religion in Societal, Racial, Gender and Sexuality Themes

Social issues were covered frequently in the new section. Graham recalls how editors did not think addressing social issues like abortion or race relations belonged in the religion section;⁴⁵⁸ however, the topics surfaced from time to time. Stories like religious groups picketing hotels because they showed pornography on their television

⁴⁵⁸ Charlotte Graham, Phone conversation with author, Hattiesburg, MS. November 27, 2012.

stations⁴⁵⁹ and about refugees finding homes in Mississippi⁴⁶⁰ did get published. The pornography issue was addressed more than once. It was a sore spot for one Methodist minister, who started a religious organization that boycotted RCA. He argued that the shows sponsored by RCA were full of sex and violence. His mission was to reach out to all churches regardless of denomination and fight in what he considered a spiritual war.⁴⁶¹ Another Jackson, Mississippi hotel, Holiday Inn Southwest, had a less controversial service - a hotel minister on call for guests who needed to talk.⁴⁶²

Women in the Church

The role of women in the church was a consistent topic over the years. As mentioned earlier, Madalyn Murray O'Hair's role as a leader of the atheists was shared. Another story, "Conference targets women's spirituality,"⁴⁶³ introduces readers to Billy Graham's daughter, who spoke at the conference. The conference was hosted by a Baptist church but was promoted as a non-denominational event that sought to encourage women to live more spiritual lives. Likewise, short stories about women included topics like the Methodist Church witnessing an increase in women pastors⁴⁶⁴ or more women being ordained into the priesthood.⁴⁶⁵ Women were installed as ministers and leaders within many dominations, including the Unitarian Universalist.⁴⁶⁶ This group was active in Mississippi in various ways. The Unitarian Universalists are members of UUA, which is

⁴⁵⁹ Kevin Jones, "Wildmon Wages New War on Porn." *Clarion-Ledger*. April 21, 1984; Charlotte Charlotte Graham. Biloxi Holiday Inn Hurt by Picket Call, *Clarion-Ledger*. April 18, 1987.

⁴⁶⁰ Charlotte Graham, "Young Refugees Find New Homes in Mississippi." *Clarion-Ledger*. April 2, 1988.

⁴⁶¹ Kevin Jones, "Decency Redirected." *Clarion-Ledger*. April 21, 1984.

⁴⁶² Michael Culbreth, "Motel minister on call for guests." *Clarion-Ledger*. January 11, 1986.

⁴⁶³ Charlotte Graham, "Conference Targets Women's Spirituality." *Clarion-Ledger*. March 25, 1989.

⁴⁶⁴ Staff, "Short Takes." *Clarion-Ledger*. March 30, 1991.

⁴⁶⁵ Staff, "Denominations." *Clarion-Ledger*. April 18, 1992.

⁴⁶⁶ Charlotte Graham, "Unitarian Universalists to Install Minister." *Clarion-Ledger*. October 8, 1988.

the central organization for the Unitarian Universalist (UU) religious movement in the United States. The UUA's 1000+ member congregations are committed to Seven Principles that include the worth of each person, the need for justice and compassion, and the right to choose one's own beliefs.⁴⁶⁷

In the early eighties, Roman Catholic bishops began feeling the pressure to allow women to play a larger role in church. The bishops met with Catholic women's groups to discuss the topic.⁴⁶⁸ Trainings for women ministers also occurred. A Jackson, Mississippi pastor, Rev. Amzie Cotton, established the Ami Cotton School of Ministry for Women to train and provide licenses to women ministers.⁴⁶⁹ The UU was a part of a Jackson network of churches that sought to help Central American refugees.⁴⁷⁰ In 1986, this church celebrated 35 years in the Jackson area.⁴⁷¹ It was still active in 2002 when Charlotte Graham wrote an article describing the group and its beliefs.⁴⁷²

Social Issues

The section focused on many social issues, concerns, and activities. Issues like the war on drugs⁴⁷³ and homosexuality⁴⁷⁴ were addressed. For example, there was coverage of the many citizens participating in the week-long Mid-Town Praise Crusade in Jackson,

⁴⁶⁷ Fedreic Muit, Alex Zamalin & Lindasusan Ulrich. "Over 1,000 Congregations Promoting Compassion, Justice, and Spiritual Growth.," January 4, 2021.

⁴⁶⁸ Staff and Wire Reports, "Bishops Key on Women's Church Role, *Clarion-Ledger*. November 12, 1983

⁴⁶⁹ Charlotte Graham, "Jackson Pastor is Bishop in Congress of Churches, *Clarion-Ledger*. October 19, 1991.

⁴⁷⁰ Michael Culbreth, "Church Work to Aid Refugees." *The Clarion-Ledger*. September 26, 1987.

⁴⁷¹ Pulpits & Pews, "Unitarian Homecoming." *The Clarion-Ledger*. July 19, 1986.

⁴⁷² Charlotte Graham, "Unitarianism: A People of Faith." *The Clarion-Ledger*. February 9, 2002.

⁴⁷³ Staff, "Gospel Musical Takes Crack at Drug Epidemic." *Clarion-Ledger*. December 22, 1990.

⁴⁷⁴ Staff, "In the News." *Clarion-Ledger*, December 21, 1991.

Mississippi. The purpose of this crusade was to push drugs out of the area.⁴⁷⁵ National organizations targeted the church community to help fight the war on drugs. DREAM (Developing Resources for Education in America) developed educational materials and guidebooks to help churches incorporate the drug-free message into their services during Red Ribbon Week.⁴⁷⁶ A group of churches even raised funds to help purchase bulletproof vests for the Jackson Police Department.⁴⁷⁷ When it came to homosexuality, one-story emphasized the Rev. Victor Paul Furnish speaking at Millsaps College, saying that the “Bible’s allusion to sex is unclear.”⁴⁷⁸

Often, accounts of how individuals helped within the community were reported on. A couple, Robert and Carolyn Ward, planned to open a home for the homeless and mentally ill. They stated that their drive to do so was rooted in the scripture Matthew 25:40, which says, “Verily I say unto you, Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me.”⁴⁷⁹

Race Relations

Blacks and black culture were the subjects of stories. Graham wrote an article about a benefit concert featuring Mabel King,⁴⁸⁰ a movie and TV star. The story, “Mabel King is ‘What is Happening’ Sunday Night,” was not simply about the concert but about how proceeds from ticket sales would benefit a Hattiesburg-based program, Community

⁴⁷⁵ Charlotte Graham, “Army of Believers Marches to Push Drug Dealers Out.” *Clarion-Ledger*, July 21, 1990.

⁴⁷⁶ Charlotte Graham, “Preaching Prevention.” *Clarion-Ledger*. October 10, 1992.

⁴⁷⁷ Charlotte Graham, “Churches in-Vest in Police.” *Clarion-Ledger*. July 11, 1992.

⁴⁷⁸ Cullen Clark, “Bible’s Allusion to Sex Unclear, Says Speaker.” *Clarion-Ledger*. November 12, 1983

⁴⁷⁹ Charlotte Graham, “Jackson Couple Works to Provide Shelter for Homeless.” *Clarion-Ledger*, October 10, 1992.

⁴⁸⁰ Charlotte Graham, “Mabel King is ‘What is happening’ Sunday Night.” *Clarion-Ledger*, March 25, 1989.

Coalition for Drug Abuse Prevention. This program focused on educating young black children in low-income areas. Yet another story focused on Grover Cooper, a young black man who was heavily involved in the Campus Crusade for Christ organization. The story⁴⁸¹ describes his mission at Jackson State University and the details of various topics discussed that concern black college student life.

Various denominations focused on blacks in some regard. Black Catholic bishops encouraged blacks in Catholic churches to “share the gifts of their blackness.”⁴⁸² The Christian Methodist Episcopal Church started the American Academy of Arts & Science Black Church Project, which was created to provide informal math, science, and computer education for black children in that community.⁴⁸³ The Southern Baptist Convention supports racial reconciliation, acknowledging that “we are a domination born into a family of slave owners and nurtured by segregationists.”⁴⁸⁴

It was important for the churches to play a role in the lives of families and youth to help direct their attention to positive things. Hinds County, which is the county of Jackson, in 2000 had a population of more than 50% blacks. In Forest County (Hattiesburg), the percentage of blacks was around 30%.⁴⁸⁵ In many underserved communities in Mississippi, where resources were scarce, the support of the local church was needed.

⁴⁸¹ Cullen Clark, “Career Crusader Takes Commitment to College Campus, *Clarion-Ledger*, December 24, 1983.

⁴⁸² George W. Cornell, Bishops’ letter urges fellow black Catholics to share spiritual gifts.” *Clarion-Ledger*, January 5, 1985.

⁴⁸³ Charlotte Graham, “Church Project to Push Math, Science for Blacks.” *Clarion-Ledger*, January 27, 1990.

⁴⁸⁴ Charlotte Graham, “Focus Turns to Racial Harmony.” *Clarion-Ledger*, February 11, 1989.

⁴⁸⁵ Census.gov, “Population Estimates Program, Population Division, U.S. Census Bureau.”

Religion Behind Bars

The life and well-being of prisoners were accented in stories. The interfaith group, Concerned Women of Faith, sponsored a panel discussion about the need for prisoners to receive education and religious education, which would help with rehabilitation.⁴⁸⁶

Rehabilitation could certainly come in the form a chapel. The Evergreen United Methodist Church in Brandon, Mississippi, supported raising funds for a new chapel to be built at the Rankin County Correctional Facility.⁴⁸⁷ In 1988, another effort to build a chapel occurred. Inmates and churchgoers from across the state banded together on this project at the Mississippi State Penitentiary, the country's third-largest prison.⁴⁸⁸

Individuals also found their callings to help prisons and those who found themselves behind the prison walls. One article highlights the passion of Sister Kathleen Spurlin, a teacher of 28 years and a nun. She provided a listening ear to many prisoners and became one of the most trusted persons at Parchman.⁴⁸⁹

When prisoners get quality help and rehabilitative services, many times, it is effective and helps the individuals get back on track to lead quality and productive lives. This is evidenced by the Project Second Chance program created by Governor Bill Allain. This program was highlighted in an article, "Ex-inmates get helping hand."⁴⁹⁰ Through this program, ex-offenders were paired with people who helped them get reacquainted with living in society. Both religion and practical support were given. At the

⁴⁸⁶ Michael Culbreth, "Panel Agrees Education Top Inmate Need." *Clarion-Ledger*. October 27, 1984.

⁴⁸⁷ Charlotte Graham, "Church Backs Prison Chapel Effort." *The Clarion-Ledger*. July 23, 1988.

⁴⁸⁸ Mary Dixon, "Mississippi Churches Pitch in To Build Parchman's Chapel." *The Clarion-Ledger*, October 19, 1985.

⁴⁸⁹ Michael Culbreth, "Former Teacher Finds New Ministry at Prison." *The Clarion-Ledger*, October 19, 1985.

⁴⁹⁰ Kevin Jones, "Ex-inmates Get Helping Hand." *The Clarion-Ledger*. May 24, 1986.

time, the article reported that 50 inmates had gone through the program, and none had returned to prison.

It is important to care for those in prison and that they are not locked up and forgotten. Many individuals in prison are guilty, and there are others who are in prison for crimes they did not commit. Nevertheless, they all are humans with the opportunity to live productive lives. Many prisoners feel alienated once they are sentenced and behind bars. They measure their worth by visits, calls, and letters from family and friends. Many, as in the stories mentioned here, get their hope from strangers. Covering these types of stories provided information to readers who could lend their service to mankind in this way.

Politics and Religion

Politics and religion do come together in *Southern Style Religion*. One story, “Methodist Bishops Take Strong Stand against Nuclear Weapons,” details how Methodist bishops drew up a document against nuclear weapons. They reportedly stated that “no one can imagine Jesus using a nuclear weapon.”

An ordained minister and seminary professor in Iowa, Donald Bloesch, from the United Church of Christ, agreed that the church has its place in politics. He was quoted as saying, “This is the political mandate of the church, to bring the law of God to bear on abortion, the nuclear arms race, the breakdown of the family and the growing disparity between the rich and the poor.”⁴⁹¹

⁴⁹¹ Bruce Buursma, “Christians: Shore Up ‘Crumblin’ Foundations’.” *Clarion-Ledger*. December 22, 1984.

Voting was a topic as well. One story focused on how the Catholic votes would affect the presidential race between Walter Mondale and President Ronald Reagan. The article discussed how the Democrats and the Republicans were wooing the Catholics.⁴⁹² Another story in the same section discussed how the Jews were being wooed too.⁴⁹³

Religious leaders and lay persons' actions within the legislature were covered. Religious leaders lobbied at the State Capitol opposing legal gambling on the Mississippi Gulf Coast, fighting for pro-life, asking for flashing fire alarms to be installed in hotels, among other requests.⁴⁹⁴ A group of Christian families also approached legislators and other government leaders, giving Bibles to them because they believe government officials need spiritual guidance.⁴⁹⁵

Other stories were short yet included enough information to inform readers. One such blurb was about the Pax Christi church in Queens, New York, encouraging families not to purchase war toys⁴⁹⁶; yet another focused on American Jews' attitudes during the Gulf War toward Arab-Israeli conflicts and the Palestine issue.⁴⁹⁷ These stories focused on providing knowledge, possible solutions to healing social wounds, and recommendations for resolving social conflicts from a religious point of view.

Faith and Religious Practices

The section included many stories on various religious practices and tenets. Faith was often a theme in stories. In "Faith yields prognosis of healthy life," it is reported that

⁴⁹² Jim Castelli, "Catholic Vote: Candidate Must Count It for Win." *Clarion-Ledger*. October 27, 1984.

⁴⁹³ Jim Castelli, "Select Issues Targeted to Woo Jewish Voters." *Clarion-Ledger*. October 27, 1984.

⁴⁹⁴ Kevin Jones, "Religious Lobbyists Take Causes to Capitol." *Clarion-Ledger*. January 11, 1986.

⁴⁹⁵ Charlotte Graham, "Legislators, Council Members Receive Bibles for Guidance." *Clarion-Ledger*. January 9, 1988.

⁴⁹⁶ Staff, "Christmas Protesy." *Clarion-Ledger*. December 24, 1988.

⁴⁹⁷ Staff, "On the Issues." *Clarion-Ledger*. December 21, 1991.

a certain surgeon will not perform a surgery if the patient did not believe they would get well.⁴⁹⁸ The article provides several ways that religion can help one be healthy.

Prayer was another practice emphasized in *Southern Style Religion*, from stories of how impactful prayer is to how it is put into practice. One article outline how Catholics and farmers prayed together to stop flooding in the Mississippi Delta because the crops were being ruined. The parishioners wanted to show the power of prayer. The sun came out.⁴⁹⁹

Church attendance and missionary work were topics throughout. In the “Church service left in the dark” story, it shares how right after the events of September 11, 2001, many people attended church services throughout the week, including evening services.⁵⁰⁰ However, churches started to experience a decrease just several months later when things got back to normal, and families returned to their usual routines. Missionaries encouraged gathering and getting to know one’s faith. There were several stories over the years concerning the visits of Rabbis⁵⁰¹ and Jewish⁵⁰² students to Mississippi. They were sent to encourage Jews to get to know and/or be strong within their Jewish faith. A good example of this tells the story of David Gurary and Meir Shur, who traveled from Israel to Mississippi to reach out to local Jews who share their faith but have not experienced their culture.⁵⁰³ The Jewish Rabbis were visiting as part

⁴⁹⁸ Rev. C. E. Deweese, “Faith Yields Prognosis of Healthy Life.” *The Clarion-Ledger*. January 7, 1984.

⁴⁹⁹ The Associated Press, “Parish Raises Voices to Dry Up Wet Spell.” *The Clarion-Ledger*. October 27, 1984.

⁵⁰⁰ Charlotte Graham, “Church Service Left in The Dark.” *The Clarion-Ledger*. January 12, 2002.

⁵⁰¹ Charlotte Graham, “Rabbis Push Pride in Jewish Heritage.” *The Clarion-Ledger*. July 23, 1988.

⁵⁰² Charlotte Graham, “Hasidic Missionaries Visit State to Remind Jews of Heritage.” *The Clarion-Ledger*, July 27, 1991.

⁵⁰³ Charlotte Graham, “Rabbis in Metro Area to Further Outreach.” *The Clarion-Ledger*. July 20, 2002.

“Lubavitch,” which is a Jewish outreach program that sends missionaries and rabbinical students to encourage Jewish and non-Jewish people to do what is right. A part of the mission is also to share the culture and encourage local Jewish people to stick with their faith. Seeing Rabbis in the traditional Jewish attire apparently had a major effect on those who came in contact with them.

Tithes & Offerings

How can a church survive without tithes and offerings? On occasion, this topic was raised. In one story, “Beyond bake sales,” express the sentiments of Rev. Charles Amos of Sweet Hope Baptist Church that members are not paying tithes as they used to, thus, the need for creative fundraising.⁵⁰⁴

Faith-based Community Organizations

The coverage of the services provided by community organizations was very prevalent in *Southern Style Religion*. These stories provided information about service offerings and sometimes sought help. Catholic Charities provide services for women who have had to put their babies up for adoption. Often, these women become depressed and deal with a great deal of pain. This story shares information on how young women who have experienced different trauma situations (early sexual encounters, incest, and adoptions) can attend a new support group.⁵⁰⁵

⁵⁰⁴ Charlotte Graham, “Beyond Bake Sales”, *Clarion-Ledger*. January 4, 1997.

⁵⁰⁵ Cullen Clark, “Program Aims at Women In Need.” *Clarion-Ledger*. January 7, 1984

Another organization, the Mississippi Delta Habitat for Humanities, was formed by Methodist minister Rev. Butch East, ministers, and lay people to help build homes that will be sold to the poor.⁵⁰⁶

Child Evangelism Fellowship of Central Mississippi served young people as well. This was an interdenominational worldwide organization mainly interested in introducing boys and girls to Christianity.⁵⁰⁷ Other organizations target young people as well, like Young People in Action Ministries⁵⁰⁸ and His Ranch Ministries, providing an opportunity for youth to build academic and business skills.⁵⁰⁹

Religion Leadership

Leadership within the different denominations was often written about for various reasons. Celebrated or shamed, the writers of *Southern Style Religion* followed the story. It could be how one prominent priest left the priesthood to marry a former nun,⁵¹⁰ or how forty-five Baptist ministers were ousted in a year,⁵¹¹ or how clergypersons need counseling when they were uprooted⁵¹²

The lives of religious leaders were followed, and they were often profiled, as was the case on January 13, 2007, with the story of how Rev. Dewayne Picket returned to the pulpit for the first time after being severely injured in a car accident.⁵¹³ On this same day,

⁵⁰⁶ Kevin Jones, "Helping those Who Help Themselves." *Clarion-Ledger*. July 7, 1984.

⁵⁰⁷ Charlotte Graham, "Fellowship Seeks Help Reaching Children." *Clarion-Ledger*. January 9, 1988.

⁵⁰⁸ Charlotte Graham, "Youth Ministry Puts One Troubled Young Life on Right Track." *Clarion-Ledger*. January 11, 1992.

⁵⁰⁹ Charlotte Graham, "Rounding Up a Better Life." *Clarion-Ledger*. January 11, 1992.

⁵¹⁰ Kevin Jones, "Jackson Catholic Leader Leaves Priesthood to Marry." *Clarion-Ledger*. July 6, 1985

⁵¹¹ Kevin Jones, "Number of Ousted Baptist Ministers Climbs, Experts Say." *Clarion-Ledger*. July 6, 1985

⁵¹² Kevin Jones, "Uprooted Clergymen May Need Counseling to Get Lives Back on Track." *Clarion-Ledger*. July 6, 1985

⁵¹³ Jean Gordon, "Crash Course in Life: Minister's Resolve Strengthened After Wreck." *Clarion-Ledger*. January 13, 2007.

another story depicted how Bishop Jeffery Stallworth returned to the pulpit after the United Methodist Conference suspended him for a sexual offense misdemeanor conviction in Maryland.⁵¹⁴

In 2006, the coverage of religious leaders was varied. Several themes stood out with reporters:

- Legal battles – Jeffrey Stallworth, as mentioned above, failed at getting his name removed from the sex offender registry; Rev. John C. Evans was charged with child abuse; Rev. Hosea Hines was barred by Youth Court from counseling a family;
- Ordination - The Catholic Diocese of Jackson ordained three priests from Mexico;
- High profile visits – Bishop T.D. Jakes, Rev. Jerry Falwell, Juanita Bynum, Joyce Meyer, and others visited Jackson;
- National scandal – Ted Haggard, head of the National Association of Evangelicals, resigned amid allegations of gay sex and drug use.

Other themes spoke clearly through the headlines –

- When pastors come and go
- Pastor Seeks Presidency of Missionary Baptists
- Pastor training intensifies worldwide
- Pastor's 18th-year celebration holds twofold significance
- Missionaries bring work home
- Embattled Baptist minister faces judgment

⁵¹⁴ Jean Gordon, "Stallworth's Word and Worship Celebrates New Building." *Clarion-Ledger*. January 13, 2007.

- In addition to sharing the lives of these leaders, reporters wrote stories and shared information that could help them. There was a feature titled “Sunday School” in each Saturday’s section. On July 23, 1988, Jack B. Scott shared the lesson “Ministers since Moses struggle with burn-out,” which expresses how religious leaders of the time try to be all and do all within the church.⁵¹⁵ The lesson encouraged leaders to delegate.

Denominational Divides

There are many issues within dominations. No church is without its issues, and some of them were written about in *Southern Style Religion*. In the Baptist denomination, the Southern Baptist Convention president sought reconciliation within a divided organization.⁵¹⁶ Baptist leaders attempted to meet with educators from Baptist Convention affiliated schools to discuss awareness and the changing of doctrinal teaching.⁵¹⁷ The Methodist grapple with un-ordained ministers being able to serve communion,⁵¹⁸ and the Jewish Institute sends Rabbis to churches in small towns where congregations have dwindled.⁵¹⁹

In the Catholic denomination: Mississippi Catholics meet to ensure Mississippi does not follow the national trend of priest shortage. They emphasized recruiting in Mississippi heavily and pinpointed Mississippi-native seminarians who were in theology

⁵¹⁵ Jack B. Scott, “Ministers Since Moses Struggle with Burnout.” *Clarion-Ledger*. July 23, 1988.

⁵¹⁶ Charlotte Charlotte Graham, “Baptists Urged to Return to Purpose.” *Clarion-Ledger*. July 21, 1990.

⁵¹⁷ Staff and Wire Reports, “Southern Baptist Colleges President Urges Leaders, Educators to Meet.” *Clarion-Ledger*, October 20, 1990.

⁵¹⁸ Charlotte Charlotte Graham, “Methodist Panel Studies Restructuring of Ministers’ Duties.” *Clarion-Ledger*. January 12, 1991.

⁵¹⁹ Shelia Hardwell-Byrd, “Once-thriving Rural Jewish Congregations Dwindling.” *Clarion-Ledger*. July 27, 2002.

school around the country;⁵²⁰ the Archbishop contemplates asking the Pope to endorse married priests to help combat priest shortage.⁵²¹

Religion in Arts and Entertainment

Religion is pronounced, introduced, and spread through so many different channels. . . even in the arts and entertainment arenas. Jackson Revival Center uses theater to spread Biblical messages.⁵²² A popular AM gospel radio station gets a position on the FM frequency allowing the radio station to reach listeners within a 35-mile radius, giving the station a 30-mile radius increase.⁵²³ Brookhaven, Mississippi deejay, Rick Tober, creates a radio program that combines southern gospel, traditional black gospel, and contemporary gospel to create a combined listening experience among Christian music listeners.⁵²⁴ Religious movie, *Left Behind II: Tribulation Force* sparks conversations about end-time prophecies.⁵²⁵ National recording harpist holds a benefit fundraiser for Piney Woods School.⁵²⁶ Monks visit Jackson, Mississippi, to share ancient sand painting rituals.⁵²⁷ Heavy metal band seeks to gain youth attention through its music,⁵²⁸ and a group of clowns doesn't clown around when it comes to spreading the gospel.

⁵²⁰ Charlotte Graham, "Priest Shortage Closes in On State." *Clarion-Ledger*. October 20, 1990.

⁵²¹ Jodie DeJonge, "Archbishop Mulls Asking Pope to Ok Married Priest." *Clarion-Ledger*. January 12, 1991.

⁵²² Charlotte Graham, "It's Theater with a Twist Of Theology." *Clarion-Ledger*. February 11, 1989.

⁵²³ Charlotte Graham, "Gospel Radio Ace WOAD Expands with FM Station." *Clarion-Ledger*. October 19, 1991.

⁵²⁴ Charlotte Graham, "Beautiful Music Together." *Clarion-Ledger*. January 18, 1992.

⁵²⁵ Charlotte Graham, "Left behind with 'Tribulation Force'." *Clarion-Ledger*. October 19, 2002.

⁵²⁶ Local events, *Clarion-Ledger*, Section D. October 27, 2007.

⁵²⁷ Jean Gordon, "Tibetan Monks' Ritual Reflects Beauty, Impermanence of Life." *Clarion-Ledger*. October 27, 2007.

⁵²⁸ Kevin Jones, "Heavy Metal Rockers Hit Home." *Clarion-Ledger*. January 5, 1985.

Celebrations and Acknowledgements

Controversies, calls for unity, requests for help, and stories of triumph were all present in *Southern Style Religion*. So were religious events and crusades. The Mississippi Gospel Music Awards event was showcased each year for several years, and crusades like the Me-Jesus crusade that encouraged people to think about the blessings of God were promoted.

Milestones of churches, denominations, and organizations were celebrated in the section. Some include:

- The first Hindu temple opened in Mississippi
- Museum of the Southern Jewish Experience was first to be built in the south
- Shelby Methodist Church celebrates centennial
- Pleasant Valley Methodist Church celebrates 150 years
- Mississippi College opens a branch of the New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary
- The Pentecostal Churches of the Apostolic Faith Incorporated hosts a convention in Jackson, Mississippi
- Jackson, Mississippi Bishop leads the Southern First Jurisdiction of the Church of God in Christ
- New Hope Baptist Church builds family life center

All Things Considered

When *The Clarion-Ledger* introduced *Southern Style Religion*, the newspaper did not win any awards, but this act opened a line of communication with an audience that was once unattended to. In addition, the resources allocated, the talent hired, and the stories published proved that religion had a reserved seat in the pulpit. According to Ronnie Agnew, then Executive Editor of the newspaper, “*The Clarion-Ledger* was one of the first to start a stand-alone religion section in the country, and they did it for the right reason.”⁵²⁹

What was the right reason? According to Agnew, “While some newspapers were searching for new advertising revenue streams, including through new religion sections, *The Clarion-Ledger* leadership realized the importance of church and faith in the lives of Mississippians. For the many years that the section was successful, they were proved correct. Sunday mornings on Mississippi streets, one would be hard-pressed to find traffic. Mississippians would be in church, Sunday School, and then church service. When I was editor of *The Clarion-Ledger* during the last years of the section, it was very clear to me that people loved reading about their church and other churches. That let me know that when the section began all those years ago, the newspaper had made a wise decision.”⁵³⁰

In the early 80’s, the content of *The Clarion-Ledger*’s stand-alone religion section was more mainstream and void of focus. As it evolved into the 90’s, a diverse conversation began to take place in the section. More religions and denominations were

⁵²⁹ Telephone conversation with Ronnie Agnew on August 22, 2020.

⁵³⁰ Email from Ronnie Agnew on January 20, 2021.

covered (though coverage of the Catholic, Baptist, and Jewish religions consistently received more coverage), an increase in social coverage emerged, and a sense of focus developed in terms of what message needed to be told to readers.

The Clarion-Ledger's Religion Southern Style met the fate that so many other stand-alone religion sections witnessed. On December 28, 2008, Agnew wrote in his column that eliminating the religion stand-alone section was the most significant change the paper was making due to the economic downturn. He noted that church news would be on pages within the *Metro/State* section.⁵³¹

Religion coverage continued strongly throughout the year of 2008, reporting on the happenings within various denominations and within communities. Within the Pentecostal world, Robert Fortson, Sr., who had been a member at Greater Bethlehem Temple Apostolic Church in Jackson for three decades, was voted in as new pastor after the passing of founder, Bishop Phillip Coleman, Sr.⁵³² In addition, the only Greek Orthodox Church in Jackson, Mississippi also welcomed a new priest who had big plans grow and relocate.⁵³³ What seemed to be a more contemporary focus on religion was prevalent. There was an AP story about online offerings⁵³⁴ and the growth of mime ministries,⁵³⁵ which is worship through movement and expression. Locally, writer Jean Gordon wrote about how churches started to welcome dance as a form of worship;⁵³⁶ and she published a profile story on the young Stan Jones from Clarksdale, Mississippi, who

⁵³¹ Ronnie Agnew, "Economy Dictates A Restructuring of Paper's Print Editions." *Clarion-Ledger*. December 28, 2008.

⁵³² LaReeca Rucker, "3 Decades a Member, Today a Pastor." *Clarion-Ledger*. March 15, 2008.

⁵³³ Jean Gordon, "Relocation, Outreach Planned." *Clarion-Ledger*. June 8, 2008.

⁵³⁴ AP Bob Smietana, "Online Offerings." *Clarion-Ledger*. May 10, 2008.

⁵³⁵ Richard Lake, "Mime Ministry a Growing Movement." *Clarion-Ledger*. February 9, 2008.

⁵³⁶ Jean Gordon, "A Moving Message." *Clarion-Ledger*. July 12, 2008.

produced and co-produced songs for the popular Williams Brothers and Kirk Franklin.⁵³⁷

In November, Gordon wrote another profile story on the chef of Stewpot, a place Jackson, Mississippi, homeless residents depended on for food.⁵³⁸ Then, in December, the day before Agnew's announcement, and when the final issue of the stand-alone section was published, the front page of *Southern Style Religion* had only AP or national stories.

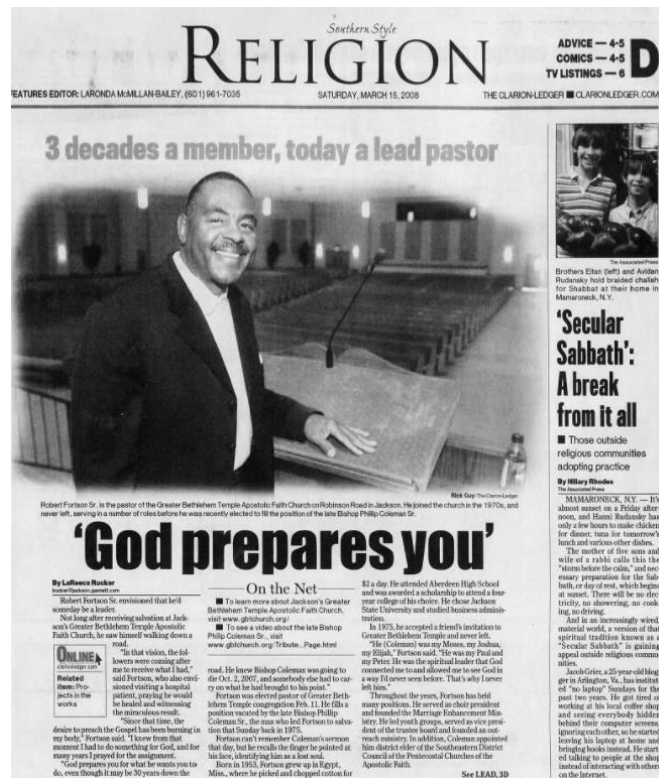


Figure 19. God Prepared You

Example story, March 15, 2008, *The Clarion-Ledger*.

⁵³⁷ Jean Gordon, "The Journey Continues." *Clarion-Ledger*. October 11, 2008.

⁵³⁸ Jean Gordon, "Putting Stock in Stewpot." *Clarion-Ledger*. November 15, 2008.

The Clarion-Ledger did not give up on targeted religion coverage. From January 3, 2009, until August 2012, the paper continued to have a religion beat writer. Although the section was folded into the *Metro/State* section, it retained a noticeable masthead – “Religion” – in most publications. During these near four years, subject matter remained largely the same – profile stories of people, churches, and community organizations; and a mixture of local and what appeared to be quite a bit more AP and national stories.

The research unveiled a sense of uncertainty during this time. The religion section appeared all over the place. Placement of the section within the newspaper was inconsistent. Though 6B was the most popular place to read religion news, it also showed up on 8C, 1D, or 2D in reviewed sections. The section kept the dominant masthead until June 23, 2012, on 8C. On the next Saturday, June 30, 2012, religion stories appeared, without a masthead, on D2 in section D of the paper, now called *Fitness*.

Agnew cleared up what the researcher sensed as “uncertainty.” As stated in the literature review, one of the main reasons often cited for the fall of stand-alone religion sections was economics. Agnew affirmed, “It was all about ad sales. In 2008, the newspaper economy changed. Layoffs in newspapers around the country were happening. At *The Clarion-Ledger*, it was either cut pages or people.” Agnew opted to save jobs. He stated that the section moved around so much because they were doing a balancing act on page count during publishing time. Agnew passionately maintains that “digital started to change how people received their news” and that “Gates and Jobs were way ahead of newspapers in providing digital news.”⁵³⁹

⁵³⁹ Telephone conversation with Ronnie Agnew on August 22, 2020.

Agnew said he felt a sense of responsibility for cutting back on religion news coverage that many readers valued. According to Agnew, advertising in the stand-alone section was good in the beginning but could not be sustained. He noted that overall ad sales were good. “We were making enough money in other parts of the paper, so advertising didn’t matter as much in the religion section.” However, he pointed out, “Because it (the religion section) didn’t make money, it was the easiest to cut when the economy failed.”⁵⁴⁰

One scholar noted that religion is a part of everyday life and should be in the running with stories about education, health, government, crime, or poverty.⁵⁴¹ Toalston and Graham agree on this one point – religion news belongs in the paper, throughout the paper. Toalston argues that religion writers should push to compete to get their stories in the main sections, and it is important to be a part of the main paper.⁵⁴² Graham mirrors this thought and believes that fashion, education, and all facets of life include a religious nature at some point or another.⁵⁴³

⁵⁴⁰ Telephone conversation with Ronnie Agnew on August 22, 2020.

⁵⁴¹ Paul Moses, “Reporting Religion: Holiness in the Ordinary.”

⁵⁴² Art Toalston, Phone conversation with author, Jackson, MS. November 17, 2012.

⁵⁴³ Charlotte Graham, Phone conversation with author, Hattiesburg, MS. November 27, 2012.

CHAPTER VIII – CONCLUSION

This study has explored how religion sections in southern newspapers have played an integral role in the growth, importance, and accuracy of religion news reporting in secular papers across the United States. Traditionally termed “the Bible Belt,” southern states and their principal newspapers have always emphasized religion reporting.⁵⁴⁴ However, during this particular period, the importance of “faith and values” even began to show up on the small screen with dedicated television channels for such programs.⁵⁴⁵ Consequently, the last decade of the twentieth century saw religion stories gain traction and evolve into a stand-alone section in many of the “buckles” along the Bible Belt: Jackson, Mississippi, Atlanta, Georgia, Nashville, Tennessee, Dallas, Texas, and Charlotte, North Carolina. Steadily, the changing financial climate and the advent of online news consumption brought about an end to the stand-alone religion sections. However, their historical and moral impact has not waned, even in the online media environment.

This study seeks to understand the historical impact of such publications and what events influenced their development. It also takes a unique perspective in assessing how each paper used its religion section to harmonize with the public's sentiments at the time. Although published in distinctly different regions within the south, many major news stories touched each community simultaneously. The responses in each paper reflected the community it served and provided a snapshot of the intricacies that make up a central

⁵⁴⁴ Christine Leigh Heyrman, “Southern Cross: The beginnings of the Bible Belt.”

⁵⁴⁵ M.S. Tatarnic, *The Mass Media and Faith: The Potentialities and Problems for the Church in our Television Culture.*”

southern metropolitan area. While some papers in the study developed a religion section out of competition, others did so by tapping into the nation's heartbeat, which cried out for more focus on faith, family, values, and fraternity within local communities.

As a result, the body of work produced by print papers is enriched by the addition of such efforts. So much so that those who seek to understand a simpler time in the American South and would like to witness it progress to where it is today are now able to do so by reading, researching, and immersing themselves in the stand-alone religion sections produced within these five major Southern cities. Because of this unprecedented and often overlooked era, future historians can gain a better insight into what drove the communities during the time. The contributions of each religion section can not only benefit historians but also anthropologists and other social scientists from various fields. Although the sections are no longer in print and barely exist online, the importance of faith and values will forever be on record for those who choose to seek it out.

A Sign of the Times

During the late '80s and early '90s, a perfect storm of high-profile religion news events, growing public interests, and willing writers expressed that this form of reporting needed no longer be sub-par, inaccurate, or ignored, but instead presented to the public in a prolific and inspiring way to celebrate individual communities and unite them through shared stories. As a result, stand-alone religion sections began to crop up across the country, even in the American South.

With more journalists being interested in religion reporting, training, and education in this particular area, reporting became more accessible.⁵⁴⁶ Even though the United States was heading into the age of technology, the country's moral compass was becoming once again aligned to its founding principles it seemed to have drifted away from. When you look at this on a community level, who are the most influential individuals outside of the business owners and local government officials? It is the religious and civic leaders, and more so the former. Southerners believe strongly in church attendance and fellowship, and even the "Sunday morning Christian" spends a significant amount of time listening to the ideas and beliefs of the voices from the pulpit. Therefore, it is reasonable to see how notable religious scandals could drive a call to a return to morals in the front lines of outreach.

As these events became the forerunners for the magnified interest in accurate religion reporting, the production and demise of these sections also provide insight to the signs of the times that are here and yet to come. As the impact of religion reporting became less lucrative, it can also be considered as a signifier of a reduction in traditional faith, values, and morals across the countries most notoriously religious regions.

Race is Not an Option

In a region known for its residual racial tensions and disparities, faith became a common ground for people to connect despite their differences.⁵⁴⁷ Religion is a part of the cultural experience in the South. Although some congregations may still be

⁵⁴⁶ S.M. Hoover, "Religion in the News: Faith and Journalism in American Public Discourse."

⁵⁴⁷ Marylee C. Taylor, "How White Attitudes Vary with the Racial Composition of local Populations: Numbers Count."

segregated, when it came to religion reporting in this study's five researched publications, it was clear that within that arena, race was not an option to be explored in a negative connotation.⁵⁴⁸ There were times when racial issues were reported in the religion sections, but the reporting was overwhelmingly unbiased and factual, never sensationalized. From a historical point of view, the graphic imagery that made racial backgrounds more apparent to the ratio of black to white religious figures being published is not distinctly disproportional, although African Americans are a minority.⁵⁴⁹ When leaving the dichotomy of white and black, images of church leaders of other ethnicities were less prominent, but the stories were represented well in proportion to their populations in the given area. Even for the most jaded reader looking for a racial "angle," it would be hard to find any consistency in respect to racial discrimination within the religion sections. More often, stories of racial harmony were reported.

Once upon a time, some of these same publications were blatantly and unapologetically racist, but by the development of their stand-alone religion sections, the issue of race as a divisive force was left out of religion, and that particular section of the paper was a place free of such expressions.⁵⁵⁰ All faiths and ethnicities were celebrated without partiality. Common ground was found and promoted through various articles that often made its appeal to readers through the simplicity of embracing the human condition and facing it with down-home, good morals.

⁵⁴⁸ J.B. Boles, "The Southern Way of Religion." *The Virginia Quarterly Review*, 75(2),226-247.

⁵⁴⁹ Andrew Billingsley, "Mighty Like a River: The Black Church and Social Reform."

⁵⁵⁰ Clive Webb, "Freedom for all? Blacks, Jews, and the Political Censorship of White Racists in the Civil Rights Era."

Politics Free Zone

One of America's founding principles is the separation of church and state. Nevertheless, the combination of these ideas has a magnetic attraction when applied to public discourse and makes for compelling news stories. This is particularly true when it comes to hot-button issues like marriage equality, religious extremism, and, surprisingly, philanthropy. Despite the opportunity for such topics to control the stand-alone religion sections researched in this study, each paper respectfully did not display politically fueled religious issues within its pages. Many of which were entitled Faith & Values, the religion sections, remained true to their name and focused on faith and values and largely left political reporting to the other sections of the paper.⁵⁵¹ However, as most churches function under a hierarchical governing body, church organizations' politics and their leadership and institutional changes were astutely reported, but mainly from a factual discourse and not from an opinionated or idealized point of view.⁵⁵²

Church leadership received a significant amount of attention across all five papers, mainly regarding leadership changes or fundamental portions of a church organization's doctrinal beliefs. One type of article that could be frequently found in each of the five publications was pastor anniversaries and the installation of a new pastor at a long-established church. The articles, which sometimes felt as if they were meant to be promotional, often listed the church history and the old and new pastor's achievements. While much insight was publicly shared about the religious leaders, little was reported about their political views.

⁵⁵¹ Walter Lippmann, "Liberty and the News."

⁵⁵² Clare Walsh, "Gender and Discourse: Language and Power in Politics, the Church and Organisations."

In all the efforts made to keep the religion sections free of political ideology, there was also one issue that straddled the fence – prayer in schools. Prayer was expected to be held in private education facilities from primary school all the way up to colleges and universities. However, for publicly funded institutions, this was not the same. When the selected papers addressed this issue across the board, it was mainly introduced in question form, allowing readers to take their position instead of being provided one.

Current and Future Days

The readings and review of the content published across the selected papers provide historical context that allows for a better understanding of the current and future pathways of each of the individual communities where the papers are distributed. This is particularly applicable for *The Clarion-Ledger* and *The Tennessean*, as they are two of the few remaining papers that are mostly distributed statewide.

Due to the diminished demand for printed papers, the stand-alone religion sections have basically been dissolved and expressed in either a shortened form or throughout multiple sections of a given paper.⁵⁵³ In spite of this, a review of these publications tells a story of community growth and development by highlighting the building and expansion of new church edifices, community facilities, and charitable organizations. By reading the sections, week after week, month after month, year after year, the individual communities develop within the pages of the publications. In the mid-90s stories of impoverished neighborhoods being restored held top billing, but by the mid-2000s, the progress of the same neighborhoods was told as well. Thoroughly

⁵⁵³ Claros Flavián & Raquel Gurrea, “Digital Versus Traditional Newspapers: Influences on Perceived substitutability.”

reviewing the articles, the research shows foundations being laid for better communities. In another respect, viewing the change in church leadership and the challenges that modern living has brought is also written between the lines. Church organizations that had votes win by narrow margins later have articles written reporting that some congregations have split on controversial issues. Sometimes the death of a pastor leads to the death of a church. Other times, the ostracizing of a nun leads to interfaith relationships that would have never been imagined. Each weekly publication told the story of how each community arrived at where it is now and where it may be headed in the future.

In a conversation with Mark Silk, he reiterated how important religion is in the lives of Southerners and stated that “newspaper people usually catch on.” Certainly, they caught on with acknowledging the need for expanded religion coverage during the timeframe both Silk, Feinberg, and other industry folk considered the heyday or golden age of newspapers. As the research points out, newspapers were focused more on the people and their belief systems rather than churches as institutions.

What does this history tell us about today? We have seen growth in communities and in the diversity of the religious community in the south. This research has echoed the sentiments of religion news reporters that religion is everywhere and in everything we do. We have learned that religion is also about the non-religions, or “the Nones” as John Blake called these individuals. This history ultimately tells us that there is a place in the media for religion and if we look around we can see that our faith, ethics, and value systems guide everything we do – from going to a sporting event to accepting the sexual

orientation of a co-worker. Blake mentioned the need for religion beats may be more necessary now than ever because of how secular our world is becoming. In Blakes words, “People are not attending churches as they used to. Younger folks are not going to church. Religion is not as meaningful as it once was. Religion is more than organized religion and more than covering churches or mosques. People are embracing spirituality.”⁵⁵⁴

Where Blake and other religion reporters and those close to the industry believe that religion reporting is very necessary, the reality is the seasoned reporters like Blake, White, Garfield, Toalston, Feinberg, Agnew, and others are no longer working the such beats. Experience and talent have moved on to other institutions and industries. It took a while for the newspaper industry to develop the religion beat. Thanks to all the efforts and promotion that went into the development of *The Dallas Morning News*’ religion section, the need was realized. Formal and on-the-job training occurred when the spotlight was on. Now, for the most part, the ink has been dried on religion beats for nearly a decade. Who is left to tell the story of these ever-changing communities where even more religions are emerging and others steadily growing? Right now, the religion beat is beat.

Limitations

While this study offers an interesting perspective and fresh look into the development, content and distribution of stand-alone religion sections of five major newspapers in the South, there were limitations. First, the research was limited by the

⁵⁵⁴ Telephone interview with John Blake on January 11, 2021.

availability of newspaper archives. The second major limitation was time. As some newspaper archives were more in-depth than others, time constraints had to be placed on the historical observation and research of each paper. Furthermore, the interpretation of the meaning and influences related to the published articles are filtered through the researcher's personal experiences and knowledge. Another limitation is the number of religion sections explored and the states they represented. Only five of the sixteen southern states were represented in the study. Some articles attracted more attention to detail out of intrigue and sometimes novelty. Researching each paper's religion section required modifications to the methodology based on the consistency of the publisher. Some religion sections were not printed every single week, and others' publishing days changed; this also contributes to the limiting factors of the study. Another significant limitation was interview availability to editors and writers who actually had knowledge of the behind-the-scenes influences of changes on the individual papers.

Implications

The belief that faith and values within a community can transcend any preconceived notions and social constructs that have been ingrained in an established society is one key implication of this research. As the times changed, so did the standards for religion reporting. Articles and topics were read with interest, and readers desired quality attention to detail to be spent on how such stories were reported. As a result, better content was created, and more people were drawn to news that offered a different perspective. A review of the historical data shows that communities desire to read "good news," material that promotes good morals and brotherly kindness. Although each

section was deemed religious, oftentimes editors would allow religious beliefs to be questioned and challenged. Furthermore, religion itself is not the only subject matter given attention. An uplifting story that shares a common thread of hope, a leap of faith, or even a road to redemption was printed, often without any association to a particular religion. Another implication provided in this study is that Christians and Christianity are not always reported in a protagonist manner. Editors of the researched sections allowed themselves and their writers to present stories that would allow the reader to take the point of view of other faiths that sometimes are in conflict with Christianity.

Dr. Debra Mason is a commanding voice on how religion is covered by the media. She led the Religion Newspaper Association for about twenty years and is now publisher emeritus of the Religion News Services, which is a wire service providing only religion stories. Mason also serves as professor emerita for the Missouri School of Journalism. Because she is highly regarded as the leading resource on religion reporting in the world, her perspective is important to add to the conclusion of this research.

Without having time to do any in-depth searching for specific data and information, Mason shared her broad perspective of newspapers having stand-alone religion sections. When asked how many newspapers published a stand-alone religion section, she wrote,

“This data does not exist. I wish I knew!! Certainly, it was mostly in daily newspapers primarily. I don’t think newspapers under 50K really had much ability to have a specialized section or reporter. I suspect at one time many of the newspapers between 75K-300,000 circulation had one, but this is entirely

speculation on my part. The very large newspapers have never had sections, mostly. While there were some exceptions, for the most part, they did not segregate religion news to a section.”

The notion of sections itself was not necessarily considered “good” by all religion reporters. There definitely was a split in terms of whether or not it was a good thing.” Based on Mason’s comments and given her rapport in the industry, it is evident that covering religion was debatable not only in content but also in how newspapers chose to package the stories.

Mason’s sentiments concerning having religion stories throughout the paper are also the sentiments of religion writers quoted in this research. Gayle White, Ron Feinberg, John Blake, and others mentioned the importance and desire to have religion stories appear in other sections of the paper. Mason further explained, “Religion sections were very ‘institution’ focused, and that’s not the most interesting thing about religion (in my view). Some journalists felt that by being stuck having to fill a weekly section, they didn’t have time to write more entrepreneurial stories. And some felt that sections ran on low circulation days (mostly Saturday), keeping religion stories away from the larger circulation day audiences.”

Regardless of this notion that stand-alone sections were not always considered a good thing, they were well received by readers in large part. Yet, they were not sustained. When asked about the folding of the sections, Mason wrote,

“This is a complicated question, and I have theories but not really any proof. The reality is that newspapers were seeking new revenue and put a lot of money into

sections in the 1990s due to some reasons that would take too long to explain here (and again, are mostly my hunch). But the short answer is that at this same time, newspapers started getting squeezed financially, and let's face it—churches and other religious groups are not known for having a lot of money for advertising in newspapers. So, the short answer is economics. That reason is no different from any other section that had been created and then reduced.”

Mason's comments mirror those of other scholars who have researched this topic.

The one thing that rings through very clearly from this research is that religion is a particularly important part of the lives of many people in the South. The need to report on it is high and, in some instances, demanded by readers. Mason believes that “there is more religion news now than ever before and it is more diverse than before. Religion sections do exist today — mostly as online only sections but some print sections still exist as well.”

Future Research

Future researchers can approach this same topic from a different perspective. One major difference is by focusing mainly on interviewing editors and writers who actually participated in the publishing of these religion stand-alone sections. Those who are still knowledgeable of the events and happenings of the time can provide much-needed insight as to what fueled many of the decisions that caused the lead to the final product left on record. Another approach would be to compare and contrast one publication from each of the sixteen southern states and look for similarities and differences such as beginning and ending, number of articles, types of articles, color use, print layout,

formatting, and advertisements. To contribute to the body of knowledge, future researchers can also select specific themes and evaluate their prevalence across each section to see how they influence and reflect the expressions of the individual communities. A more novel approach would be to look at the number of subscribers over time and evaluate how the subscriptions increased or decreased based on certain points in the history surrounding notable religion news stories.

There are many ways in which this study has highlighted the significance of the stand-alone religion section by looking at its contribution to secular news reporting at large to its ability to connect multi-ethnic and multi-faith communities through sharing stories that speak to the commonalities that all people share. Although such publications are no longer produced as widely as they once were, they still have a place in history that tells a story within itself, a story that is still being written on a foundation of faith and values as pillars of community growth.

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