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serving Southern Baptist state papers as a news service

BAPTIST PRESS

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Nashville 3, Tennessee

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Dear Baptist Editor:

This is being sent to you for information.

Most of you subscribe to Religious News Service, and use it rather widely. Questions arise from time to time about their handling of news and about their personnel.

We think you will be interested in reading this description of the service from the voice of its director, Miss Lillian Block of New York City.

This is one of a series of three speeches she delivered to the gathering mentioned at the start of the copy. We hope later to duplicate one other of the speeches which seems to be on a subject you might be interested in.

We are not doing this at her request, rather we asked her permission to do it on our own initiative as information to you.

Your friend,



Theo Sommerkamp

TS:nq

Encl: Speech by Lillian Block

RELIGIOUS NEWS SERVICE -- THE WORLD'S ONLY INTERCREEDAL NEWS AGENCY

Talk Delivered by Lillian R. Block, Managing Editor of RNS, at the School of Journalism, University of Missouri, Monday, 2:40 p.m., April 20, 1959.

The goal which I have set for myself this afternoon is to tell you all about Religious News service, whose credit line has become familiar to millions of readers throughout the United States.

Now in its 26th year, RNS has played an increasingly important role in keeping Americans informed of what takes place in the domain of religion generally, both at home and abroad.

RNS is unique among the world's newsgathering agencies. It is the only news service anywhere devoted exclusively to covering religious developments of all faiths. One might point out that there is, for instance, the National Catholic Welfare Conference's News Service in Washington, D. C., or the Jewish Telegraphic Agency with headquarters in New York. But both of these, quite understandably, are concerned with news of one faith.

While there is no comparable general Protestant news service, every major Protestant denomination and agency maintains a news bureau, sometimes designated as an information service, or a public relations department.

Quite obviously, however, in all of these instances the purpose is to promote one faith, or one denomination, or one religious agency.

While these news organizations are performing an important service they cannot be comparable in any way to an objective news service which disinterestedly covers the news of all faiths, judging developments not from the viewpoint of promotion, but for their intrinsic news value and widespread interest.

FILLING A NEED

That there is a demand for such a service is attested to by RNS' 750 clients. These are made up of about 100 daily papers and news magazines throughout the United States, 350 church publications of all faiths, some 200 radio stations, about a dozen TV stations, and 85 denominational headquarters, libraries, seminaries and church organizations and agencies.

Among the secular publications which subscribe to RNS are some of the country's leading papers and news magazines. In New York, for instance, RNS subscribers are the New York Times, Time Magazine, Newsweek, and Life.

Since the great bulk of America's religious publications subscribe to RNS, it is no surprise, for example, to find Catholic items with an RNS credit line appearing regularly in the columns of Protestant periodicals and Protestant items used in Catholic publications. This trend has represented a real contribution to the cause of understanding and goodwill between the country's various religious groups.

Furthermore, the fact that RNS numbers the leading secular newspapers among its clients means that it has been responsible for letting great masses of people who never read a religious publication know what religious groups are doing and thinking, especially in regard to matters of common social interest.

In helping to break down the traditional hands off policy toward religion among secular newspapers, Religious News Service has performed a particularly valuable service to the cause of religious journalism.

As a corollary, it has helped to give readers of religious publications a more comprehensive understanding of world affairs. Such an understanding is impossible without an insight into the religious thinking and motivation implicit in much of what happens in countries everywhere.

HISTORY

Religious News Service was organized in 1933. At that time there was no central religious news agency in existence to gather and distribute news pertaining to developments in the various faiths.

Louis Minsky, RNS' managing editor until his death in December of 1957, conceived the idea for such a news agency. He proposed that it be sponsored by the National Conference of Christians and Jews, then five years old. It happened that Dr. Everett R. Clinchy, founder of the NCCJ and its president until October, 1958, when he resigned to devote full time to heading up World Brotherhood, also had been pondering the need for a religious news service. And so there was a quick agreement. RNS was inaugurated as -- and continues to be -- an affiliated but independently-managed agency of the National Conference, whose activities in combatting racial and religious prejudice have been endorsed and supported by civic, business, labor and religious leaders and organizations.

When World War II saw Naziism write its infamous story of anti-religious oppression, RNS was a comparative youngster. Week by week, however, it kept America's press alert to all that was being done to the churches in the occupied countries. It often was more successful than other news agencies in bringing news from strictly censored countries. When the Nazi rout began, two of RNS' roving correspondents were the first to bring news of the Allied victory into bomb-wrecked Polish and Italian towns.

Since the end of the war, RNS has covered in detail the development of the Communist anti-religious persecution in the Soviet satellites. These developments have been reported largely by a group of correspondents in strategic capitals -- London, Rome, Vienna and various others. In London, RNS has monitored all broadcasts in Communist countries dealing with religion. It now has men in several Communist-controlled countries where new situations of exceptional significance to religious groups have arisen.

RNS has meanwhile recorded the role of religious leaders in the free world in helping to lay the foundations for a new global society dedicated to peace and international understanding.

Now a seasoned veteran of 26 years, it is telling the story of how men of religion are seeking to combat with a spirit of hope and courage the defeatism and pessimism of those whose minds are beset by fears of atomic mass annihilation.

The service is recording what men of religion are saying on the spiritual implications of fast-moving developments in the fields of politics, science, economics and education. It is following day-by-day the battle for souls being waged by the churches in countries ruled by atheistic communism.

It is reporting how churches and individuals are helping to combat racial discrimination and injustice, to cope with the problem of juvenile delinquency, to afford new hope and opportunity to the millions of displaced and homeless throughout the world. It is revealing what churches are doing in the realms of social welfare and labor-management relations, and in the vital effort to integrate communities everywhere in new patterns of international goodwill and cooperation.

DAILY REPORTS

Thus far we have attempted to define Religious News Service, to indicate its scope, and to give a brief review of its history. Let us now examine the various facets of the service so that we have a clear picture of its overall output.

Basic to the entire service are the RNS daily reports. These comprise a domestic service and a foreign service. Up to 75 separate news stories are released each day.

These are selected from as many as 500 news items, frequently more, which arrive daily literally from every corner of the globe. So there must necessarily be a firm standard for determining news value. Basic significance and wide general interest must be the touchstones. The average sermon is certainly not news for a national news agency, even if it is a very good one; neither are local church activities, nor strictly internal church affairs.

On the other hand, issues of Church-State separation, religion in the schools, church unity, and cooperation between the various faiths in social and economic areas are of equal interest to readers in California -- and consequently are news. The same holds true of legislative action of interest to religious groups, church assistance to the needy here and abroad, the role of religion in race relations, and major pronouncements of church bodies and their leaders.

On the foreign scene, religious developments which tie in with church concerns in this country, the struggle of the church against Communist oppression, the development of so-called Younger -- or indigenous -- Churches in growing nationalistic movements, the role of the Church in major international developments, such as the Berlin crisis and the revolt in Hungary or Tibet, are both important enough and have the widespread interest to qualify them for inclusion in a national religious news service. Similarly the deliberations, pronouncements and activities of the World Council of Churches in Geneva and the Vatican in Rome are priority news.

The former has an interest potentiality to 38 million Protestant and Orthodox believers in the United States, and more than 170 million throughout the world. The latter to 36,000,000 Catholics in this country and 550,000,000 in countries on all parts of the globe.

This by no means means neglect of bodies outside these groups, since it is the responsibility of a national religious news agency to report the developments of all religious groups. And if it is remiss in doing this, it will fail in its two-fold obligation of serving the religious forces of the country and the press in general. But I am stressing that newsworthiness must be the touchstone -- and that importance and widespread interest largely determine the newsworthiness.

Discovery, adventure, human interest, the unusual, have the same significance in religious news as they have in secular journalism. Witness, for instance, in the realm of discovery the Dead Sea Scrolls; the so-called Gospel of St. Thomas; Professor Guarducci's finding of an epigraph reading "Peter is buried here" beneath the Altar of the Confessor in St. Peter's Basilica which supports claims that St. Peter was buried there after his martyrdom around 67 A. D.

Perhaps one example each will suffice for the other three categories. Some time ago five Protestant missionaries courageously penetrated the Amazonian jungles of Ecuador to work among the headhunters of the savage Auca Indians there. The expedition was shortlived. All five were found slain, the victims of those whom they had come to serve. Five missionaries, members of an evangelical group not too widely known, are not especially news. But their courage and sacrifice have the human appeal which is basic to any adventure story and hence good religious news.

When you can report, as we could in this instance, that the wife and sister of two of the missionaries returned to the headhunters to show them a better way of life you have satisfied a universal instinct to want bravery and courage and risk not to be in vain.

Does the straight human interest story have its place in religious journalism? The following brief item which was widely picked up in the press and over the radio speaks for itself. The story came from our Paris correspondent:

PARIS (RNS) -- Worshippers at a Mass in the Roman Catholic church at Lannion in Brittany were shocked when a woman's voice echoed through the building exclaiming: "Oh, my Sunday dinner!"

The parishioner had just found in her handbag, carefully wrapped in greaseproof paper, a piece of beef which she thought was cooking in a stew in her kitchen.

Chilled by a sudden suspicion, the lady ran home immediately and found her prayerbook floating with an assortment of holy pictures among the vegetables in the stewpot where she had popped it in her haste to get to church.

And, as an example of the unusual, there's the story about the 45 American blood-line relations of Pope John XXIII who were discovered in Cleveland and in Old Forge, Pennsylvania. Confirmed by the receipt of two letters -- one from the Papal Secretariate of State in the Vatican, and the other by a parish priest in the province of Bergamo, the Pope's birthplace, the relationship has made the Cleveland Roncalli clan "humbly proud" and immensely happy. But perhaps more unusual is the Montgomery, Ala-

bama, youth director of a Baptist revival center, who claims to be a third cousin of Pope John.

So much for a definition of religious news from the perspective of a national news agency. I have said that RNS gets about 500 pieces of news a day from all points of the world. Where does it all come from?

NEWS SOURCES

Fundamental to RNS' operation is its network of correspondents, comprising about 450 domestic news correspondents, 150 foreign news correspondents located at strategic points throughout the world, and about 350 photo correspondents in this country and abroad. In all, a correspondents' network of 950. At the moment, however, we are concerned with the news correspondents.

The largest number of domestic news correspondents are religion editors of outstanding dailies. They are in a strategic position to send us the religious news in their areas which has wider than local significance. When an important meeting is scheduled to take place in St. Louis, Cleveland, San Francisco, the correspondent in that city is notified to furnish coverage and is given instructions on anticipated developments which he ought to watch especially. But he also is responsible for those developments about which he has not been given specific instructions -- for the events which break without any forewarning.

In addition to the general news correspondent, the domestic network includes denominational correspondents and representatives for the various faiths, especially in those areas where one group is predominant. In this way, RNS is sure to get all newsworthy developments involving Methodists, Disciples, Presbyterians, Baptists, Lutherans, etc.

In a city such as Boston, for example, with a large Catholic population, RNS has a regular correspondent, who is a staff member of the Boston Globe; and a Catholic correspondent, the editor of the Boston archdiocesan paper, who sends us Catholic developments in the area. When there is a duplication of material -- as there sometimes is -- both correspondents receive credit.

The legislative correspondent is still another breed of domestic correspondent. In each state capital of the country, RNS has a legislative correspondent whose special duty it is to report all bills of religious interest, hearings on the measures, and their final disposition. Many editors regard RNS' legislative coverage as one of its most valued contributions. This has been something of a specialty of the service its earliest years.

In Washington, D. C., RNS has a seasoned political as well as religion expert heading up its coverage in the nation's capital. And at the United Nations an RNS representative keeps his eyes and ears alert to all developments of interest to religious groups at the international agency.

A quick check of an RNS file for a year shows how thoroughly the service has groomed its correspondents to search out and develop stories on topics in which all religious groups are mutually interested.

Besides the flow of news each day from its correspondents, RNS gets publicity releases from every religious organization in the country and from many secular organizations which from time to time have news of religious interest. In handling this material caution must be exercised in distinguishing promotion and propaganda from news.

Exclusive stories in which the time element is not urgent come by fastest mail. Urgent developments come by wire or over the telephone.

Foreign correspondents cable their news. Exclusive foreign stories and news features not dependent on the time element are airmailed. Throughout the day there is a steady flow of news -- by mail, wire, cable, telephone and special messenger.

RNS foreign correspondents literally blanket the globe. In some foreign capitals we have two correspondents. Rome is an example. A special Vatican correspondent is responsible for all news emanating from the Holy See. Another correspondent has the specific task of reporting non-Catholic news in the area. Be it London, Capetown, Geneva, Singapore, Hong Kong, Melbourne, Sydney, Buenos Aires, Vienna, Laos or Moscow, there is a representative covering for Religious News Scriver.

Recently an important American churchman made a world tour. As far as Religious News Service was concerned, he said on his return, he felt right at home wherever he happened to be.

A monthly newsletter to correspondents attempts to make them feel part of the RNS family, to keep their goodwill, remind them of their responsibilities, hand out bouquets and, when necessary, hurl brickbats. It has served to keep the correspondents' ranks a lively network. And it is one of the tasks of the managing editor to keep up a steady flow of correspondence with the agency's representatives throughout the world.

In connection with news coverage, RNS produces once a month a "Future-Date," listing all major upcoming events. This is sent to clients and also serves as an assignment sheet for the managing editor.

FEATURES

Besides the daily news reports, RNS produces several weekly features. One is The Week in Religion, which deals with the outstanding religious trends and provides the background and interpretation necessary for understanding them. This feature appears regularly on the church pages of some 50 newspapers.

Another feature is a weekly 15-minute religious news script for radio called The Religious News Reporter. The script is now used by more than 200 local stations on a sustaining basis or under the auspices of religious or civic groups in the community. A TV package combines the script with RNS photos and is made available to groups who place religious programs on television.

Other features are Religion in Review, a pony report of the week's religious developments motivated for some medium and smaller-sized dailies that are not equipped to handle the comprehensive RNS daily reports, and Religious Remarkables, a matted cartoon along the lines of Robert Ripley's Believe It Or Not.

Once a year -- in December -- RNS produces The Year in Religion, a feature widely used by non-clients as well as client publications.

PHOTO SERVICE

Of special interest is the RNS photo service which releases outstanding newsphotos as well as other types of religious pictures. Like the news service, the RNS photo service is the only agency in the world specializing in pictures of interest to all religious groups. Although the photo service is a much later development than the news service, it already has built up one of the largest files of pictures on religious subjects in the world.

MORGUE

No discussion of Religious News Service can fail to mention its library which unquestionably is the most extensive general religious "morgue" in the country, or perhaps anywhere else. The morgue is often used by outside writers and others doing research. It is constantly used for background and checking purposes by the RNS staff, all of whom are trained newsmen with a wide knowledge of the religious field.

Many a one-line cable has produced an authoritative, complete story on a major development, thanks to the morgue. A good example of this is the story we released when Bishop Eivind Berggrav, one of Norway's greatest modern churchmen, died last January.

The cable read "Berggrav died today." We released a 1,000 word story -- widely picked up in the press -- which related the notable role played by the former Primate of the State Lutheran Church in Norway in the history of spiritual defiance of Naziism during World War II. Because we had followed Bishop Berggrav's career, and had on record many exclusive stories about him over the years, we were in a good position to release a story of unusual interest.

Where background stories are concerned, the morgue is invaluable. On the day Alaska was admitted into the union, RNS ran a full story on the new state's Christian heritage. Last month, when the way was paved for the 50th state, the RNS morgue again provided the opportunity for an exclusive story on the significant role of the Churches in Hawaii's history.

RNS editors placed a premium upon accuracy and interest in writing religious news stories. Without sacrificing news values, we attempt to demonstrate that religious news need not be "explosive" if facts are presented with care, and that it can vie in interest with any other kind of news, if it is written with imagination and skill in the best journalistic style.