

Adelle M. Banks, Religion News Service



Adelle M. Banks is senior correspondent at Religion News Service, a Washington-based wire service that covers religion and ethics. She has worked at the Orlando Sentinel, the Providence Journal and upstate New York newspapers in Syracuse and Binghamton. She was a third-place winner in the Religion Newswriter Association's Templeton Religion Reporter of the Year contest in 1997 and was a finalist in the same contest in 2004.

Religion journalists and religion scholars have a common interest. Both research and write; both find aspects of religion fascinating or worthy of notice; and both share what is learned with others — through the printed page, via airwaves, or in the classroom.

As a religion reporter, I have come to rely on and respect the work of researchers. They are the experts I seek out to verify that I'm on the right track when I think I've spotted a trend. Sometimes they add analysis to my stories that others I've interviewed did not provide.

A recent example: I wrote a story in October 2006 timed to the 50th anniversaries of women's ordination in the United Methodist Church and the Presbyterian Church (USA). Though I spoke to ordained women, their advocates, and critics, it was the observation of Adair Lummis, Hartford Seminary expert on women clergy, that particularly helped shape my story.

She pointed out that in some of the other denominations — those more conservative than the mainline ones with the anniversaries — women had been ordained for longer but the percentage of female ordination was decreasing.

“You have more women having these milestone celebrations, but remember that in some denominations, like the spirit-centered, evangelical denominations, there were more women ordained 50 years ago than there are now,” she said.

Her interpretation helped me to write not just a story that noted the celebratory aspects of the anniversaries or the contrary reactions to them. It went deeper than that in an approachable way. For example, I contacted a historian of the International Church of the Foursquare Gospel — founded by Aimee Semple McPherson — who confirmed a significant decrease in the percentage of female clergy since its start in 1927.

But this story is the kind that is often a luxury in today's journalism — an article that I worked on for weeks, in part because I contacted a number of denominations to gather statistics on how the percentage of women clergy had changed over the years.

In many cases, time does not permit me to reach scholars. Sometimes I start and finish a story within hours. Given the requirements of work at a wire service and other news outlets. So I'm fortunate if I get the so-called two sides of a story by deadline. But when I do get to speak with scholars, I'm grateful for the perspectives that help me write a better and more balanced story. There usually are really more than two sides to a story and academicians help reporters discover them.

If a journalist contacts you, consider the difference your particular expertise may make in what the readers eventually digest from that story. It may be that you only have a few minutes but can tell them if they're headed in the right direction or not. And if you're not an expert on the topic they're dealing with on that particular day, suggest colleagues who might be helpful — and tell them what areas you might be able to assist with on a future occasion.

Sometimes scholars recommend a book or a soon-to-be published article, thinking they may be good resources for a journalist. They might be, but a reporter often can't wait for a book or an article to be sent because his or her deadline may not permit it. In this age of blogs and Web sites, immediacy has become an even bigger part of the news.

Scholars can also aid journalists before a story breaks. For example, talking with journalists before a big denominational meeting can give them perspectives they can use even as the news develops. When I wrote about little-known Frank Page's surprise election to the presidency of the Southern Baptist Convention in June 2006, an interview beforehand helped me understand how unusual it would be for him to win. When he garnered 50.48 percent of the vote — compared to about 24 percent for each of his two opponents — I was able to quote people with perspectives before and after the election. "If he represents a much higher percentage, that shows much more dissatisfaction out there than what the party in power is perceiving," said David Key, director of Baptist Studies at Emory University in Atlanta, in an interview in Greensboro, North Carolina.

One of my favorite examples of a scholar's assistance with a story relates to a project I did in 2002 on race relations and congregations. I was writing about churches that were intentionally attempting to be racially integrated. People have long spoken of how Sunday mornings are the most segregated time in the country, but sociologist Michael Emerson of Rice University was able to determine a specific statistic that exemplified that sentiment. At that time, he estimated that 5.4 percent of U.S. churches are racially integrated, which he defined as having no one group make up more than 80 percent of the congregation.

"If you go back historically, the leaders of denominations have been denouncing racism and separation for at least 100 years and the people in the pews have been ignoring those pronouncements for at least 100 years," he told me. "There's a complete disconnect."

My story included statistics I collected from various denominational offices and firsthand accounts of worship featuring a multicultural choir and an interracial baptism, but the stats from Emerson crystallized the story, specifically backing up its main point about how unusual such worship experiences remain.

I suspect there are times when academicians open the paper or hear a report and see a reporter's lack of expertise come through in the words they read or hear. I notice when reporters refer to the "National Baptist Convention" and wonder if they meant the National Baptist Convention, USA, or the National Baptist Convention of America. Please don't let such missteps, or missing pieces, prevent you from helping journalists when they call. They can't know some facts until they ask for them, or are told them by people in the know.

If you read or hear a story that could have benefited from your expertise, consider e-mailing or

calling the reporter or editor to say that you'd be open to an interview on its topic — or others — at a later date.

And if you're new to the field, or at least new to the idea of being interviewed, please don't let that stand in the way of having a conversation with a journalist. Reporters should gain insights from long-term experts as well as those with new research developments. It could be the beginning of a mutually beneficial connection, with a reporter verifying facts and the professor gaining publicity or an opportunity for reaction to his or her research.

For those of you who've already had the experience of being interviewed, I suspect some have felt frustration in having a conversation that lasted as much as an hour, only to find the reporter never quoted a word you said in his or her story.

But talking with scholars helps prevent me from putting mistakes in my stories even if I'm unable to credit them in the written text. Often, just sharing the gist of my article with an expert makes the difference in what I write and, sometimes, even influences whether I write a potential story or not. If I get a great quote that I can include in my story, that's just made the conversation more worthwhile.

When a story appears in print or on the air that has fresh facts and a range of perspectives, both scholars and journalists can be satisfied that they've contributed to aiding the public's understanding of the complexities of religion.