

Religion Newswriters Association press releases

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For Immediate Release

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Gay Episcopal Bishop's Ordination Ranked Top 2003 Religion Story

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COLUMBUS--The nation's leading religion reporters overwhelmingly chose the Episcopal Church's ordination of its first openly gay bishop as the top religion news story of 2003.

Bishop Gene Robinson's election fueled threats of a schism both in the U.S. Episcopal Church and throughout the Anglican Communion, and spurred emergency meetings within the church.

More than 80 percent of the journalists, who all cover religion in the secular news media, also selected Robinson as their Religion Newsmaker of the Year, beating out Pope John Paul II, deposed Alabama Chief Justice Roy Moore, and National Council of Churches of Christ head Robert Edgar.

Members of the Religion Newswriters Association ranked 28 news items in a survey conducted Dec. 12 -16, 2003. About one-third of the group's 240 membership responded.

The complete rankings of stories, in order are:

- 1.** Episcopal Church approves and then ordains first openly gay bishop, spurring threats of a schism both in the U.S. and throughout the Anglican Communion, and leading to emergency meetings. The bishop of New Westminster Diocese in British Columbia draws criticism for approving same sex unions.
- 2.** Pending war in Iraq splits religious communities; most mainline denominations, led by the National Council of Churches, oppose it, while many evangelicals support it. Religious groups sponsor follow-up relief efforts.
- 3.** Definition of marriage becomes a hot topic as the Massachusetts Supreme Court overturns a gay-marriage ban; a constitutional amendment on marriage is proposed. Earlier, the U.S. Supreme Court strikes down a ban against homosexual sodomy in Texas, and Ontario's highest court legalizes gay marriage.
- 4.** Ten Commandments monument is finally removed from Alabama Judicial Building after state vs. church debate. Chief Justice Roy Moore, its proponent, is removed from office.
- 5.** Roman Catholic Church seeks to implement plans to combat priestly sex abuse; efforts bring both praise and criticism. Sean Patrick O'Malley of Palm Beach succeeds Bernard Law in Boston and earns high marks. Convicted sex-abuser John Geoghan is killed in prison.

- 6.** Pope John Paul II celebrates 25th anniversary of his election, but growing concerns about his health capture the spotlight and debate over his eventual successor intensifies.
- 7.** Slumping economy forces budget cutbacks in many denominations.
- 8.** Presbyterian Church (USA) retains Fidelity and Chastity clause after lengthy debate, elects first clergywoman moderator.
- 9.** The U.S. Supreme Court agrees to hear this term a California case that challenges the inclusion of the words, 'under God' in the Pledge of Allegiance.
- 10.** Suspension of New York President David Benke for participation in an interfaith service after 9/11 is overturned by the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod; a similar case involving Valparaiso University ends in an apology. A showdown on the subject is expected in 2004.
- 11.** Southern Baptists fire 13 missionaries and accept resignation of 20 others over the denomination's revised Faith and Message statement.
- 12.** Discussions over the legality and worth of Charitable Choice continue, but President Bush issues orders making government funds more available to some faith-based groups.
- 13.** Religious-liberty concerns are raised over the Patriot Act; Muslims complain of lingering persecution in aftermath of 9/11.
- 14.** President Bush signs bill outlawing what are generally termed partial-birth abortions, delighting pro-life advocates.
- 15.** (tie) Jewish and Arab moderates and Middle-East Christians are frustrated as the Road Map to Peace encounters many detours.
- 15.** (tie) A number of evangelical groups-Focus on the Family, Promise Keepers, National Association of Evangelicals, Family Research Council-select new leadership.
- 16.** Florida Legislature and Gov. Jeb Bush intervene to keep brain-damaged Terry Schiavo alive against her husband's wishes and a judicial order, stirring debate on the ending of life.
- 17.** New ecumenical organization, Christian Churches Together in the USA, formed by 30 Christian groups.
- 18.** Attacks continue on Christians in a number of Third World countries, including India, Sri Lanka, Iraq and Indonesia. Some areas see Muslim-Hindu violence.
- 19.** Once-a-decade survey of Jews, though it offers some positive results, reveals that the teachings of Judaism are followed by fewer and fewer people.
- 20.** Mel Gibson's *The Passion* spurs cries of anti-Semitism prior to its 2004 release; several other Hollywood films are popular discussion topics.
- 21.** (three-way tie) Legislatures of several states struggle with following up on the Supreme Court's 2002 ruling approving vouchers for non-public schools.
- 21.** (three-way tie) Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints celebrates 25th anniversary of opening

of priesthood to blacks.

21. (three-way tie) Alabama state tax increase, promoted as an act of Christian charity, is soundly defeated by voters.

22. Controversy grows over authenticity of James ossuary; Israel Antiquities Authority claims the inscription is a fake.

23. Failure of European Union's constitution to acknowledge Europe's Christian heritage draws strong criticism.

24. Anti-abortion activist Paul Hill is executed for the murder of a doctor who performed abortions; earlier, James Kopp is sentenced to 25 years to life for a similar crime.

25. Bill Bright, founder of Campus Christian Fellowship, dies at age 81. Two other evangelical leaders with "B" names - financial adviser Larry Burkett and missionary surgeon Paul Brand - die the same month.

Members of the Religion Newswriters Association have ranked religion stories each year for about three decades.

This year, a preliminary list of religion stories was compiled by retired *Reading Eagle* Religion Editor John Smith and reviewed by RNA officers.

The list was compiled the week of Dec. 1, 2003, and distributed to all active members Dec. 12-16, 2003.

RNA membership is comprised of print and broadcast reporters whose primary responsibility is the coverage of religion in the secular media. RNA works to support excellence in religion coverage, which it does in part through an annual conference, training, and the electronic religion story idea service [ReligionLink](#).

RNA was founded in 1949 and has administrative offices in suburban Columbus, Ohio. RNA's president is Jeff Sheler, a contributing editor for *U.S. News & World Report*.

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