

RELIGION | NEWSWRITERS

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MasonDL@RNA.org or 614-313-0441**Religion's role in U.S. presidential election tops 2007 Religion News Stories of the Year**

A poll of the nation's leading religion writers selected the presidential election and the fight for votes among GOP candidates as the top religion story of 2007. Close behind as the No. 2 story were efforts by Democrats to win over voters by showcasing their faith.

For the top religion newsmaker of the year, the journalists chose the Buddhist monks in Myanmar. Hundreds of monks protested last September in support of democracy but were squelched by the military-backed government. More than half of those responding to the survey chose the monks over Pope Benedict XVI, President George W. Bush and U.S. Supreme Court Chief Justice John Roberts, among others.

The 2007 Top Religion Stories as selected by Religion Newswriters are:

1. Evangelical voters ponder whether they will be able to support the eventual Republican candidate, as they did in 2004, because of questions about the leaders' faith and/or platform. Many say they would be reluctant to vote for Mormon Mitt Romney.
2. Leading Democratic presidential candidates make conscious efforts to woo faith-based voters after admitting failure to do so in 2004.
3. The role of gays and lesbians in clergy continues as a deeply dividing issue. An Episcopal Church promise to exercise restraint on gay issues fails to stem the number of congregations seeking to leave the mainline denomination, while in a close vote, Canadian Anglican bishops vote to nullify lay and clerical approval of same-sex blessings. Meanwhile, Conservative Jews become more open to gay leadership.
4. Global warming rises in importance among religious groups, with many Mainline leaders giving it high priority and evangelical leaders split over its importance compared to other social and moral causes
5. The question of what to do about illegal immigration is debated by religious leaders and groups on both sides of the issue. Some take an active role in supporting undocumented immigrants.
6. Thousands of Buddhist monks lead pro-democracy protest in Myanmar, which is brutally crushed after a week.
7. Some conservative U.S. Episcopalians realign with Anglican bishops in Africa and elsewhere in the global South, initiating legal disputes about church property ownership.
8. The Supreme Court by a 5-4 vote rules on the conservative side in three major cases with religious implications: upholding a ban on partial-birth abortions, allowing schools to establish

some limits on students' free speech, and denying a challenge to the Office of Faith-based and Community Initiatives.

9. Death takes evangelical leaders known, among other things, for their television work: Jerry Falwell, Rex Humbard, D. James Kennedy, plus Billy Graham's wife, Ruth, and Jim Bakker,s ex-wife, Tammy Faye Messner. Other deaths include Gilbert Patterson, presiding bishop of the Church of God in Christ, and Bible scholar Bruce Metzger.

10. The cost of priestly sex-abuse to the Roman Catholic Church in the United States surpasses \$2.1 billion with a record \$660 million settlement involving the Archdiocese of Los Angeles, and earlier settlements this year totaling \$100 million in Portland, Ore., and Spokane, Wash.

The survey polled active members of the Religion Newswriters. Of those polled, 80 people responded, for a 27% response rate. The poll was conducted via an electronic ballot from Dec. 7-13, 2007. Respondents were asked to select the top 10 from 20 choices.

Religion Newswriters is the world's only membership association for people who write about religion in the general circulation media. It is the leader in providing tools and training to help journalists write about religion with balance, accuracy and insight. The annual Top 10 survey has been conducted for more than 35 years.

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