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News

Research News Celebrates its One-Year Anniversary

Founding editors look back on a year of challenge and exhilaration and ahead to a future of unlimited horizons

By Michael O. Schwager
(September 1, 2001)

On February 19, 2000, Duke University professor of psychiatry Dr. Harold G. Koenig, then 48, paid a visit to the Bahamas to visit Sir John M. Templeton. Sir John, as he is known, is the founder of the Templeton Foundation and is creator and sponsor of the annual Templeton Prize For Progress In Religion. (See the Research News cover stories for September, 2000 and April 2001.) Sir John is also an author and philosopher on topics at the interface of science and spirituality and a renowned global financier and philanthropist. Four years earlier, Koenig, a pioneer in the emerging field of religion and health, had launched The Center for the Study of Religion, Spirituality and Health at Duke, in the Department of Medicine. That endeavor was motivated by a decade of research that looked at the relationship between religion and mental/physical health and had discovered a host of connections between the two.

Koenig had come to visit Sir John, as he put it, 'with a big proposal I wanted him to fund.' Sir John, however, had something else in mind. 'You know, you're not going to have time to do what you're proposing here because I have something else for you to do.'

Sir John shared with Koenig his vision for a newspaper which would serve as a focal point for communication between the large number of science and religion groups operating in relative isolation from each other. Koenig was immediately appreciative of Sir John's idea: 'I could envision a newspaper that would report on the latest happenings and investigations concerning the relationship between science and health and religion/spirituality. And I could see that mutual awareness could lead to collaboration and further research breakthroughs.'

'Right then and there, Sir John asked me to become editor-in-chief; and right then and there, my life changed because I immediately and excitedly accepted.'

'I saw in this newspaper a great potential,' said Koenig. 'I sensed it could have tremendous impact in terms of being a convergence center that would bring the worlds of religion and science and the worlds of religion and health together.' Koenig adds that he recognized an enormous opportunity to enhance communication between all these groups, interactions that could synergistically affect the integration of these separate fields into one larger field of study, exploration and discovery.

Koenig's first task as editor-in-chief was to find an editor. Dr. Charles Harper, executive director of the Templeton Foundation and former Harvard astrophysicist, suggested Dr. Karl Giberson, a professor of physics at Eastern Nazarene College. Harper had been impressed with Giberson's articles and interviews in *Books and Culture*, a sort of Christian version of *The New York Review of Books*. Giberson had interviewed such notables as John Polkinghorne and Freeman Dyson, Pulitzer Prize winner Jared Diamond, China scholar Jonathan Spence, and others. He had also written essays on everything from Darwinism and Heisenberg, to relativity and the quantum vacuum.

Giberson, 44, in addition to serving as editor of *Research News*, teaches physics at Eastern Nazarene College in Quincy, Mass. He holds a Ph.D. in physics from Rice University, and majored in philosophy, math, and physics at the undergraduate level. He has taught courses in science and religion, sponsored lectures, and published a book and a variety of articles on the science/religion theme.

'After a year-and-a-half of receiving 10 emails a day from Karl, I think I've come to know him pretty well,' said

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Koenig. 'He 's the perfect choice for editor of Research News, and we 're the perfect complement to each other. My orientation and passion is religion and health, and Karl is equally passionate about religion and science. Karl knows everyone, and I mean everyone in the field he just loves interacting with them the topic is in his blood, just as the religion and health topic is in mine,' said Koenig. 'It 's a great balance.'

Giberson is equally complimentary. 'Harold is by far the best boss I have ever worked with. He is supportive, attentive to detail, and does a great job of delineating responsibilities,' said the *Research News* editor, adding with a reflective smile, that 'he scolds me on occasion, but always in a way that is constructive.'

Giberson, in reflecting upon the first anniversary of *Research News* and looking back at what it has taken to reach this point, says that 'even though the past year has been nearly overwhelming in terms of all we had to do in establishing an office, getting the paper out on time and growing from 16 to 36 pages, it was a great year.' He adds, 'We stretched our limited budget by hiring the brightest and best ENC students to do projects for us from running errands and taking pictures, to interviewing a Harvard scholar.'

'I called in favors from everyone I knew and filled in whatever was left over,' Giberson said. 'I was an editor, a reporter, a reviewer, a photographer, a writer, an interviewer whatever was needed.' He praised his staff. 'My staff had very loose job descriptions and everyone just did what was needed. My old English professor volunteered to help copy edit, an intern from Emerson showed up out of the blue and helped us out. The journalism professor consulted with us from time to time. A good friend from the Boston Globe helped us out with our graphics and overall look. All the layout was executed by freelance journalist Christine White, and Mark Mann, a Ph.D. candidate in theology at Boston University. Both were students working part-time at Research News. My primary writer was Angela Swanson, a former broadcast journalist. Most of our drawings were done by Kelli Nofle, the daughter of one of my colleagues and a graphic design major. I hired an old college friend, Janet Calhoun, who turned out to be a wonderful office manager. She was the glue that kept things held together. And now we have just hired Eric Stark, a very able assistant editor, and I am very excited about this addition. It 's been a merry-go-round but a very exhilarating merry-go-round!'

Giberson also said that, 'I consider it crucial that everyone working on the paper feel a sense of personal investment, that this is 'their ' paper, not just mine or Harold 's. I think my staff works very, very hard because they feel invested in what they are doing.'

As editor-in-chief Koenig keeps a close eye on the balance of coverage in the paper. 'We run three times as much religion/science versus religion/health, which is about right, based on the activity in those areas,' Koenig says, and adds that he is pleased that the coverage of the relationship between religion/spirituality and people 's mental and physical well-being is incisive, probing, and at the leading edge of what 's current and relevant.

'People 's interest in spirituality and health is peaking right now,' said Koenig. 'Who 's not interested in their health, their well-being, their longevity, their quality-of-life? This current issue has a piece on stem cell research titled, 'Life-Giving Stem Cells From Embryo Death ' (perhaps one of the more balanced, less hysterical assessments of the issue, see page 18); and a major cover piece, a groundbreaking study, again in this issue titled, 'Religious Struggle May Increase Mortality: Being Religious May Be a Double-Edged Sword. ' People are interested in these topics,' says Koenig.

When asked about his own personal favorite pieces in the paper, Giberson points to the interview in the summer double issue with Ernan McMullin, the great philosopher of science and Professor Emeritus at the University of Notre Dame in a lengthy piece titled, 'A Lifetime of Meeting Faith 's Challenges: A Conversation with Ernan McMullin.'

'This piece was a tribute to a truly grand old man of science and religion,' says Giberson. 'He has been a part of the intellectual history of the last 50 years; and he is both interesting and humble and still has a lot to say.'

In addition to news stories and interviews with leaders in the field of science and religion/spirituality, *Research News* contains a treasure trove of book reviews.

The paper also has a practical dimension. 'We want to inform and excite those organizations that can provide funding for research in this field and general announcements and winners of grants and prizes sponsored by various groups which support the field of science and religion,' Koenig says. 'While it 's true that we very much want to appeal to, and reach, opinion leaders in science and religion as well as the media, we also believe we have a product that will interest and fascinate millions of others, particularly college-educated people who are intellectually and spiritually curious.'

In commenting on the rapid growth in paid subscriptions to *Research News*, Giberson observed, 'Science has come up dry in providing people with the meaning they want in life. Our natural affinities for scientific truth make us eager to conjoin it with a source of meaning; and *Research News* provides people with this combination.'

'It 's a validated fact,' adds Koenig, 'that 96 percent of the American population believe in God, as do 40 percent of scientists.' As for other scientists and opinion leaders, he said, 'I believe that with a huge population who can become potential readers of *Research News*, we can drive interest in this field further with their support.'

Koenig thinks that *Research News* is 'a good product which gets better and better, and we want people to discover it.' He adds, 'We have a great offer to readers a six-month free subscription! With that kind of opportunity, who wouldn 't want to take a look at our newspaper? In addition, given the quality of the product, the timeliness of the issues, the interest, and the extremely intense interest in religion and spirituality, and certainly the peaking interest in health across the country, this is a newspaper that is potentially ripe for an explosive subscribership.'

Giberson adds: 'I want as many people as possible to appreciate the vitality of the field, the excitement of the research, the fascination with the questions raised.'

Koenig suggests that the ultimate benefit to readers of *Research News* may be to deepen the appreciation of the question Sir John Templeton himself asked in his book, *Possibilities For Over One Hundredfold More Spiritual Information*: 'By learning humility, can we expand our concepts and find that the purpose of life on earth is vastly deeper than previously imagined or that human spiritual potential can be more vast than any human can grasp?'

Koenig, who now suffers from chronic arthritis, used to be very physically active. 'I 've climbed some of the highest mountains in the world Kilimanjaro, and a number of very tall peaks in Colorado,' he said. 'Now, along with Karl, and with the blessings of a great visionary, Sir John Templeton, we climb even higher mountains, and fight the good fight of helping to reveal, through the validation of science, the Creator 's awesome handiwork in this amazing universe of ours.'

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