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RNA HONORS THORKELSON FOR LIFETIME ACHIEVEMENT

COLUMBUS -- A journalist who covered religion for more than a half century is the winner of the first Lifetime Achievement Award from the Religion Newswriters Association.

Willmar LThorkelson, 82, began covering religion news for the Minneapolis Star in 1945 and continued his reporting on religion as a full-time freelancer for nearly two decades after his 1982 departure from the paper.

Soon after becoming a religion reporter, Thorkelson joined the RNA in its earliest days. In 1955 he won the association's Supplemental Religion Writer of the Year Award and served as RNA president from 1962-64. He also conducted the RNA's annual Top 10 Poll during most of the 1980s and 1990s.

"Mr. Thorkelson is a symbol of commitment to a profession we all love. Even after a distinguished career as a religion journalist, he continued to make generous contributions of his time and talent to the RNA," said RNA President David Briggs. "It is our privilege to present him with the Lifetime Achievement Award."

In addition to covering the four history-making sessions of the Second Vatican Council, Thorkelson says he is the only journalist who has covered all eight assemblies of the World Council of Churches, including the 1998 gathering in Harare, Zimbabwe. He also covered four Billy Graham crusades in the Twin Cities.

Thorkelson has won many awards and citations over the years, including the prestigious Wittenberg Award, given by the Luther Institute. He also holds an honorary doctorate from his alma mater, Concordia College of Moorhead, Minn.

Thorkelson's award will be presented this fall during the Religion Newswriters Association's Sept. 21-23, 2001, annual conference.

The RNA board established the Lifetime Achievement Award in 2001 to honor an individual who has made exceptional contributions to the RNA and the religion beat.

The Religion Newswriters Association, with 350 members and subscribers, is the nation's only organization promoting excellence in coverage of religion in the secular press.