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Ethics of assisted suicide  
debated at Stetson forum

By Jackie Kersh and Greg Warner

DeLAND, Fla. (ABP) -- Assisted suicide is the last good thing a Christian can do for a terminally ill person, says ethicist Daniel Maguire. But physician Mark Siegler says assisted suicide represents the "privatization of killing" and threatens the moral integrity of the medical profession.

Both points of view -- and others -- were aired April 6 during a public dialogue on "The Ethics of Dying." The forum, which attracted about 100 health-care professionals, educators and others, was sponsored by Stetson University, a Baptist college in DeLand, Fla.

Siegler, director of the Center for Clinical Medical Ethics at the University of Chicago's medical school, says patients who want to die should not be allowed to seek help from doctors or others. "I think it would be very dangerous for society," he said.

Siegler cited three reasons for opposing the legalization of assisted suicide:

-- It is a violation of standard legal practice and patient-doctor trust. "The patient must be able to trust the doctor and the hospital and know that the syringe carries ease for pain and not the final solution," he said.

Physicians should express their compassion by giving patients the highest quality of life possible and allowing for "a peaceful, appropriate death."

-- Assisted suicide will open the door for coerced euthanasia and discrimination.

"A political system that fosters killing of a patient with consent can also foster killing a patient without consent," he said. "In a society where discrimination is common, such as ours, legalization creates a tool for discrimination against groups such as those with AIDS, the handicapped, the old."

-- Legalization of assisted suicide is not necessary when doctors offer good pain treatment, when family members are involved in decisions, and when patients are permitted to refuse life-support measures that merely delay

death.

Siegler stressed the importance of putting patients in control of medical decisions. Doctors must be more compassionate in administering terminal care, he said, pointing to hospice care as a good example. "Our lives and our dying must be in the hands of reasonable people," he said.

"But I draw the line at putting power in the hands of anybody to deliberately assist people to die or to kill them directly," he said.

Siegler said society now permits killing in only three instances -- capital punishment, self-defense and just war. Each is a public procedure that must be justified in the public arena, he said. Assisted suicide, on the other hand, would operate in the private arena of the patient-doctor relationship, beyond public scrutiny, and thus represents "a privatization of killing," he said.

"We have neither the moral capacity nor the legal defenses to restrict the practice of euthanasia to the terminally ill," he said.

If a right to die becomes a recognized civil right, Siegler said, society would have a hard time denying death on demand to anyone, even those not facing imminent death. "Why deny it to anyone if the fundamental claim is civil rights?"

But Daniel Maguire, professor of ethics at Marquette University in Milwaukee, Wis., said fear of abuse should not end the debate.

"The fact that euthanasia can be abused doesn't take away from its ability to be useful," he said. Euthanasia is a good use of human freedom when "properly recognized as dangerous," he said.

Assisted suicide has a biblical origin, said Maguire, a Roman Catholic whose early writings on euthanasia raised eyebrows at the Vatican.

"As Christians, we have learned that if something is wrong we should try to fix it," he said. "... When dying is the last remaining good, do we say we are no longer good stewards but passive? God gave us the privilege to decide what is good and to go forth and to meet it, especially when the best life offers is death."

Siegler and Maguire were joined on the dialogue panel by Derek Humphrey of Oregon, a pro-euthanasia activist and founder of the Hemlock Society.

Humphrey agreed the right to die should not fall victim to fear of abuse.

"We will never have a perfect society," he said. "Must we wait for a perfect America before death with dignity can come for all?"

The terminally ill "should have the right to decide to go in the cradle of their family, surrounded by friends," Humphrey said.

Some terminal patients are not capable of committing suicide without help, such as those with ALS, Humphrey said. "We should not require the doctor to break the law when the law is out of date and should be changed," he said.

About two thirds of Americans support assisted suicide, Humphrey said, yet the medical profession controls the lethal drugs that allow it. Eventually, he predicted, the medical profession will accept assisted suicide, as it has the concept of living wills.

Assisted suicide should be appropriately restricted, Humphrey said, and only apply to the terminally ill. A law proposed in Oregon, he said, would allow a doctor to prescribe a suicide drug at the patient's request if the patient is terminal and competent, two doctors concur, a waiting period is enforced and the family is informed.

Such standards are lacking in the much-publicized suicide practice of Jack Kevorkian, Humphrey said.

The public forum was sponsored by Stetson's Institute for Christian Ethics. Institute director Dixon Sutherland said the issues of euthanasia and

assisted suicide are "important and daunting challenges" that will dominate ethical discussions in the next century.

While the issues are being discussed in academic and medical circles, Sutherland said, the Stetson forum was designed to bring the debate into the public arena. The three internationally recognized experts answered questions from the audience.

When medical professionals began grappling with ethical issues in the 1950s, Sutherland said in an interview, the religious perspective was purposely excluded. "They saw themselves as being objective, and religion represented emotionalism and prejudice," he said. "They feared religion would get in the way."

Yet religion has been a pivotal factor in almost every landmark case to date, Sutherland said. "It is a factor that can't be ignored because of the role it plays in decision making," he said. Yet, he added, "we are not dealing with it very well."

Maguire agreed religious voices are essential in the right-to-die debate.

"How we die has changed greatly," he said. Advances in medicine mean people live longer and death is experienced differently. "We must find new approaches to the process."

Public discussion is a step in the right direction, he said.

"Mercy death is discussable," he said. "We can even pray for light on the subject."

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Baptists differ over role  
of Baylor's new seminary

By Chuck Lindell

WACO, Texas (ABP) -- Baylor University will return to the seminary business this summer -- leaving conservatives galled, moderates elated and Texas Baptists more divided than ever.

The George W. Truett Theological Seminary, founded by Baylor, will open later this year. In 1907, Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary was founded on the Baylor campus.

Southwestern, which later became one of six seminaries owned and operated by the Southern Baptist Convention, has been the latest battleground in the struggle between conservative and moderate Baptists.

The new Truett Seminary, created in response to fears that Southwestern will become a "fundamentalist" institution, will be more than a training ground for Baptist pastors and lay leaders. It already is a strong political statement from moderate Baptists.

"Truett Seminary will be the flagship of mainstream Southern Baptist life in terms of theological education," Dean Robert Sloan said. "Texas Baptists have rejected the fundamentalist movement."

Classes will begin in August. Expect controversy to continue long after.

"It's a slap in the face," said Jack Chambers of Austin, Texas, an outspoken proponent of the conservative Baptist cause.

"I think this is an attempt by the so-called moderates in the Southern Baptist Convention, especially those in Texas, to create a training camp for a new generation of moderate pastors and missionaries," he said.

Chambers fears that moderates, whom he characterizes as more tolerant of liberalism, will allow unbiblical teachings into the classroom and,

therefore, behind the pulpit.

"Professor Sloan has a reputation of being one of the more conservative religion professors at Baylor, so at least that's encouraging," Chambers said.

Sloan said the seminary will remain true to Baptist principles such as the authority of Scripture and a commitment to evangelism.

"The fact is we are not a theologically liberal institution; we are a mainstream Baptist institution," he said.

Until a permanent facility is constructed on the south end of Baylor's campus, probably around the turn of the century, Truett will operate out of three Sunday school classrooms at First Baptist Church in Waco.

As many as 100 students will be accepted for the first year, and Baylor is just days away from hiring the first of three-to-five faculty members. Eventually, enrollment could reach 1,000.

Given the turbulent nature of the conservative-moderate rift, Baylor's seminary was never going to have a quiet opening. But events at Southwestern Seminary, 90 miles to the north in Fort Worth, shifted greater attention to Truett and cemented its position as Texas' moderate seminary.

In March Southwestern's conservative-led trustees fired President Russell Dilday, creating a wave of controversy that has yet to subside.

Moderates have had a field day with the dismissal, calling it arrogant, political, and mean-spirited proof of conservative intolerance. Many Texas Baptists -- an independent lot who considered Southwestern their seminary -- believe the trustees appointed by the national convention were guilty of meddling.

Enter Truett, which has the benefit of Baylor's good name among Baptists, offering a distinctive place for moderate students to learn.

"We will be perceived as the mainstream seminary," Sloan said. "Southwestern will be regarded more and more as extremist -- a marginal institution to Southern Baptist life."

Since Dilday's dismissal, Truett has been inundated with telephone calls, some from Southwestern students contemplating a transfer. Some observers expect a portion of \$15 million in canceled Southwestern donations to end up at Truett.

"We hear a lot of rumors about pledges, but they haven't made their way to us yet," Sloan said.

The seminary was conceived in 1990, when Dilday's job was again on the line. Baylor President Herbert Reynolds delivered a message to Southwestern's trustees: if you fire Dilday, Baylor will start its own seminary.

Though Dilday kept his job, Baylor decided to proceed with a seminary, realizing it was only a matter of time before Southwestern was brought into the conservative fold, Sloan said.

Baylor reserved the name George W. Truett, adding yet another bit of controversy.

Truett had entered Baylor in 1893 after spearheading a statewide campaign that saved the university from financial ruin. He went on to become pastor of First Baptist Church in Dallas, distinguishing himself as a preacher and a leader.

But today, First Baptist is a conservative stronghold, and former pastor Joel Gregory blasted Baylor for a "grossly unethical" attempt to "co-opt Truett's legendary reputation for what is a renegade effort."

Ridiculous, Sloan said.

Truett "was one of the greatest figures in the history of Baylor University," he said. "George Truett was a great preacher, and we want to emphasize preaching."

Though Truett Seminary will be linked with the moderate cause, Sloan is

hoping for a broader appeal.

"If all we are is a reaction to the fundamental-conservative takeover, then I don't think we have a future," he said. "Reactionary institutions don't have a long life."

To that end, Sloan said, Truett will offer a unique curriculum that gives students experience not only in preaching and theology but also in budgets, counseling, funerals, weddings and the myriad other tasks of a pastor.

"Most preachers learn how to be pastors by the seat of their britches," Sloan said. "We've tried to orient everything toward ministry."

Setting up what is in effect separate seminaries for conservative and moderate students is seen by some as proof that a Southern Baptist schism exists in all but name. Moderates have a separate source for missions money, the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, which has given Truett about \$182,000 in the past two years -- in addition to \$16 million in private donations.

Sloan isn't convinced a formal schism is inevitable.

"Clearly we are closer to two different denominations today than we were five years ago -- no question about that," he said. "But I don't think it necessarily has to happen."

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American denominations face  
'in-between time,' Leonard says

By Bob Allen

BIRMINGHAM, Ala. (ABP) -- American religion stands at a peculiar "in-between time" in which major denominations are losing their influence but new forms of religious identity have not yet emerged to replace them, a Baptist historian told a recent gathering of religious communicators.

Bill Leonard, chairman of Samford University's religion department, spoke to the communicators during a joint session of the Religious Public Relations Council and the Baptist Public Relations Association April 7-9 in Birmingham, Ala.

American Protestants facing the next millennium find themselves in a period of transition similar to the beginning of the 19th century, Leonard said.

In that earlier time of increasing diversity and mobility, Protestants turned to denominationalism, which by the mid-19th century became "the shape of religion in America."

Amid developing pluralism, the rise of denominations helped establish new institutions and a new identity, helping pioneers "develop a sense of place in a new land" and "articulate specific ways of living among themselves and the broader constituency," he said.

Now, however, those denominational loyalties are beginning to erode, Leonard said.

Recent studies show that Americans increasingly are non-affiliated and as many as 40 percent of religious Americans will switch their affiliation sometime during their life, he said.

"Fewer and fewer religious Americans think of their primary religious identity in terms of a denominational identity," Leonard said. "The decline

of denominational identity is with us already."

With those changes, American religion is moving away from the corporate model of denominational organization "toward what Baptists called in their beginnings the society method." Churches are more interested in "shopping around" for ways to do missions, theological education and other causes.

"That is the trend for the future, and the denominations that fail to recognize that are going to have the most difficult time in the future," Leonard said.

With the waning of denominational identity, religions must find new ways to distinguish between what is distinctive and what is negotiable, Leonard said.

"The denomination, whatever else it used to do, used to offer sources of identity. It doesn't do that anymore."

As denominations become less able to create a religious identity, local churches must become more intentional about doing so, Leonard said.

"Churches must ask in this in-between time about new paradigms," he said -- ways of organizing and understanding religious groupings that are more regional and local in nature.

The most significant model pointing toward a new paradigm is the rise of the megachurch, Leonard said.

The megachurch model -- typically with several thousand members, centered around a charismatic and authoritarian minister, aimed at specific cultural groups and organized around marketing principles -- is setting a religious agenda for all churches, Leonard said. However, he added, it is uncertain if the megachurch is here to stay.

"What we don't know is if megachurches are one of the primary ways of organizing religion for a new century or only one form of transition," he said.

"Can the megachurch pass on an identity to the next generation, or is it simply this decade's shopping mall that will be bypassed by next decade's shopping mall?"

"Churches that are built on marketing techniques may have only a decade of life," Leonard said. "We don't know that."

Leonard predicted continued growth of the charismatic movement and "in a variety of different forms a return to the liturgical."

Leonard said that historically uncertain times lead to greater emphasis on ritual. In a modern setting, he predicted "an enlightened traditionalism" to emerge, in which new and rediscovered rituals function as "moveable feasts which provide a place for religious people."

Clyde Crews, professor of theology at Bellarmine College, a Roman Catholic school in Louisville, Ky., told the communicators that an increasingly uprooted and fragmented "shopping mall culture" in America is growing "more hungry for stability points, mooring places and roots."

Major religions can be a major force in the nation's search for identity, he added, but to do so they must develop a "corporate sense of themselves."

"You can't give away from what you haven't got," he said. Churches "must be aware of their rootage," Crews said.

"Bringing home" the Christian values of faith, hope and charity is "a special mandate" for American religion as it enters a new decade, century and millennium, Crews said.

"Faith doesn't sound very interesting or exciting, especially in an age that is in an entertainment frenzy," Crews said.

Before dismissing the Christian values of faith, hope and charity as "dull or routine," Americans should consider the alternatives, he said. Suppose, he suggested, a society which turned those virtues on their heads

and made its driving values cynicism, despair and hate. "Try to build a life or society on those antivalues and you don't have life, you've got hell," he said.

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Post-modern churches must emphasize  
'binocular' view, scholar says

By Bob Allen

BIRMINGHAM, Ala. (ABP) -- People will not come to churches in the 21st century because they seek meaning and purpose but "the rapture of being alive," a scholar told a recent gathering of religious communicators.

"We are moving from worship that is basically sit-and-soak to worship that is participatory," Leonard Sweet, chancellor of United Theological Seminary in Dayton, Ohio, told a joint session of the Religious Public Relations Council and the Baptist Public Relations Association in Birmingham, Ala.

One key shift in moving from a modern to a post-modern worldview is the move from "representation" to "participation," he said. In that shift, he said, the orientation moves from "does it make sense?" to "was it a good experience?"

"People aren't looking for meaning and purpose. They're finding purpose in everything," he said.

Post-modern people "don't have a hard time believing," Sweet said. "They just have a hard time believing the right things."

To be effective in the post-modern world, churches must reverse their assumption that correct teaching comes before an orthodox religious experience. In a participational model, churches must create correct experiences that will translate into correct doctrine, he said.

"Ministry today is the ability to evoke experiences of the transcendent," Sweet said. "It is not giving people something to believe in."

Along with the emphasis on participation, Sweet said an equally important shift toward a post-modern paradigm is the move from "a hi-fi mono to stereo and soon-to-be surround-sound culture."

The old representational model, Sweet said, "was heavily into big middles" -- a mass culture with a middle class, middle income, "middle brow" culture and middle age.

Those middles "are demassifying," Sweet said. Post-modern life is being transformed into a series of "divergent unities" -- the rich are richer while the poor are poorer, society is increasingly global yet local; people seek to "unplug" while at the same time they computerize; and television screens get both larger and smaller.

"It is a binocular and no longer a monocular world," he said.

Worship, Sweet said, is becoming both more liturgical and more free-form at the same time. "The Episcopalians and Pentecostals have won," he said. Though at opposite ends of the Protestant spectrum in many ways, "both are based on participatory forms of worship," he added.

"In the post-modern world, safety is not found in seeking to stand in the middle of the road," he said. "In the post-modern world, if you stand in the middle of the road, you will get hit by both sides, because the sides are growing."

The post-modern world has a "double ring," Sweet said, in which either-or messages are replaced in a "both-and culture."

"The key is to strike a balance," Sweet said. He noted that the earliest definition of the ancient Greek word "logos" was that which brings the contradictory together.

Sweet said the trend of marketing churches to mass audiences is becoming passe.

"I'm not one of those who says, 'Go after the Boomers.' I'm arguing, 'Go after the Boosters and the Busters and put them together.' I call it hot-fudge-sundae worship. You bring them together and the Boomers will come."

The methodology employed in targeting Boomers based on tailoring churches to their likes and dislikes has special problems for a "gospel that's based not on pierced ears but pierced hands," Sweet said. Go too far to accommodate preferences in the way the gospel is presented and "the content is in jeopardy."

Ministry in a binocular world requires church leaders who are prepared to function both as members of a team and as "a superstar," Sweet said. That concept, he admitted, goes against the grain of the old egalitarian model that emphasized middles.

"We live in a world where we don't like superstars among ourselves," he said.

Still, he challenged religious communicators, "Give up the solo stuff, but start thinking 'teams' and 'superstars.' You bring the whole thing together, and you ain't seen nothing yet."

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