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Baptist college students killed in Missouri crash

BOLIVAR, Mo. (ABP) -- Two students at Southwest Baptist University were among 10 people killed Jan. 23 in a fiery chain-reaction crash on Interstate 29 north of Kansas City, Mo.

Sara Nicole McGaha, an 18-year-old sophomore from Papillion, Neb., and Jay Wetzel, a 19-year-old freshman from New Salem, N.D., were returning to school in Bolivar, Mo., from Christmas break when their car became involved in a 24-vehicle pileup that killed 10 and injured 42.

According to news reports, the couple were sweethearts who became friends in September and started dating in October. Friends said they were inseparable and had discussed marriage. Wetzel had picked up McGaha at her home following a five-week break for the start of a new semester.

McGaha was a red-haired psychology major who sang alto in the university's concert choir. "She was a very good student and was well liked by other members of the choir," said Gregory Parker, a music instructor who directs the choir.

Wetzel was majoring in sports management and a member of the football team. He was a red-shirt this season who played strong safety on the Bearcat practice squad. "Jay was one of the finest young men I've ever been associated with," said athletics director and head football coach Dennis Roland. "His enthusiasm, spiritual commitment and overall positive outlook on life will impact our football program for many years to come."

A memorial service was scheduled on campus Jan. 26. It was to be videotaped for the victims' parents. Counselors on staff were available to work with grieving students.

Friends at the church-related school found consolation in the couple's religious faith. "They were the perfect couple," McGaha's roommate Holly Rhodes told the Kansas City Star. "And they still are. They're in a better place now."

Saddleback pastor launches Internet site for church leaders

By Bob Allen

FOOTHILL RANCH, Calif. (ABP) -- The local ministerial association is going global via a new high-tech ministry tool being promoted by California Southern Baptist pastor Rick Warren.

There is nothing new about pastors and other ministers gathering in various settings to swap ideas, interact and learn from and help each other. Warren and his wife, Kay, hope to replicate that kind of community in cyberspace with a new Internet site named www.pastors.com.

Warren, pastor of Saddleback Valley Community Church in Lake Forest, Calif., said he and his wife have been praying about how to use royalties from his book *The Purpose-Driven Church*, which has sold a million copies in 14 languages.

They decided to use the money to build a site on the World Wide Web to provide free electronic mail and other Internet services to pastors and church leaders everywhere, he said.

"God blessed us through the publication of *The Purpose-Driven Church* book," Warren said, "and we felt compelled to give back to the pastors I dedicated the book to."

Among features is free e-mail for church leaders. Ministers can receive e-mail by their name "@pastors.com," instead of a cryptic user name assigned by an Internet service provider or a less-dignified domain name such as "Yahoo." The address doesn't change when a pastor moves to another state and can be used from anywhere. E-mail can also be encrypted for use by missionaries serving in areas where security is a concern.

Pastors.com also offers clergy chat rooms and bulletin boards, placement notices and a daily devotional. Soon it will offer a church-to-church auction like the popular E-Bay, news and information and on-line stewardship consulting, Warren said.

The Warrens said Pastors.com will especially help pastors of small churches, who otherwise might be left behind by the Internet revolution.

"Rick and I both grew up in pastor's homes so we really care about pastors and their families, especially those in smaller churches," said Kay Warren. "We want to encourage them and help them anyway we can. Now God has made it possible for us to do this."

The Internet site is the latest evolution of Warren's 20-year-old tape ministry, *The Encouraging Word*. Sermons at Saddleback are made available to American pastors at a modest cost, Warren said, and proceeds are used to send them to pastors overseas for free. Millions of tapes have been distributed, he said.

In the last decade, as more churches began adopting Warren's "purpose-driven" church model, the ministry expanded to selling curriculum and other resources. Last year, the ministry branched into offering Internet services, and the name was changed to Pastors.com.

So far, it has spread by word of mouth and is attracting an average of between 50,000 and 70,000 visitors a day, Warren said, and hit a record high of 143,000 on Dec. 8. The site has not been advertised, but Warren recently sent an e-mail announcing the service to contacts around the country.

"I feel God has put two callings on my life," Warren said. "First is to pastor Saddleback, where we are continually experimenting with better ways to reach and minister to people. Second is to serve pastors and church planters and do everything I can to support them. I have very little interest in anything else."

The Warrens started Saddleback Valley Community Church in their home with one family in January 1980. Today, it is reportedly the second-largest attended church in the United States, with 14,000 attending each weekend, and has been the fastest-growing church in America the last three years.

The church was named key church of the year by the Southern Baptist Convention in 1995 and has been recognized as the fastest-growing Baptist congregation in American history.

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EDITOR'S NOTE: The following two stories appear in the Jan.-Feb. 2000 issue of FaithWorks, a Christian lifestyle magazine published by Associated Baptist Press.

Ministerial training no longer equals seminary, experts say

By Pat Cole

(ABP) -- Theological education in America, once largely the purview of classical seminaries, is taking on new forms and new life.

Propelled by the shifting winds of culture and congregational life, a quiet revolution is taking place in ministerial training. At issue: who is learning, what is taught and how and where that education is delivered.

For the churches that will employ these ministers in coming decades, the changes will affect not only the quality of leadership they receive but what those congregations believe and how they relate to the world.

Here's what is happening:

-- Students now face a proliferation of options. New schools are opening. Specialized degrees are cropping up, including many for lay people.

-- Training is taking place in non-traditional venues, such as megachurches, making training more accessible.

-- User-friendly techniques, such as online classes and satellite seminars, are creeping into curricula.

-- The profile of the typical seminary student is changing -- in part the cause and in part the effect of these new options. Students are older, as more pursue the ministry as a second career, and more lay people are studying theology.

-- There is a new emphasis on leadership skills to go along with the classical theological disciplines, and at least some openness to the spiritual experience of postmodern Christians.

-- Partnerships between seminaries and churches are springing up, making theological training more practical and accessible.

Despite these changes -- and in some cases because of them -- seminaries have continued to grow in recent years, even after the invasion and departure of the baby boomers.

Seminary enrollment grew by nearly 6 percent in the last five years and stood at 68,875 in the fall of 1998, says Nancy Merrill, a spokeswoman for the Association of Theological Schools. About two thirds of that growth was in existing schools. The rest came from new schools admitted to the association's membership.

One major factor in the increase is the jump in lay people seeking theological training. Degree programs for lay people are being added by all sorts of schools, Merrill says. "Lay people are taking [the new degrees] for personal development or because of an academic interest in theology."

This trend produces an unusual turning of the tables: At a time when some ministers are choosing local churches over seminaries for training, some lay people are going to seminary for the in-depth education not available at most churches.

Yet critics say seminaries suffer from two common shortcomings:

First, pragmatic church-growth advocates, after witnessing the remarkable growth of megachurches, say seminaries fail to teach ministers how to lead congregations and interpret culture.

Second, many Christians say classical seminary training is too beholden to systematic and rationalistic thinking, both products of the Enlightenment. Such dependence, they argue, leaves little room for the awe and mystery that ancient Christians valued and for which postmodern people yearn.

For both reasons, some aspiring ministers now skip seminary and seek training through churches, professional groups, and even secular universities.

Brad Cecil, pastor of a self-described postmodern congregation in Arlington, Texas, dropped out of seminary after one year and has no regrets. Seminaries, he says, ignore the shift in the way people think and process information.

"There's a return to belief beyond the empirical," says Cecil. "It is not premodern belief. But it has become an enlightened mysticism. We understand the world better than we did 500 years ago, but we are still intrigued by the mystery of the whole thing."

Cecil has turned to short-term training events to find the tools to build a ministry to GenXers. He has found help and like-minded individuals within the young leader's group of Leadership Network, a Dallas-based organization dedicated to equipping congregational leaders.

"Ministry has defaulted not to professionals but to people who are leaders," he says. "A credential or a diploma doesn't qualify you to do ministry now." Cecil's congregation, called Axxess, draws about 120 Sunday-evening worshipers and is part of a much larger traditional congregation, Pantego Bible Church.

Dave Travis, a Leadership Network consultant, concurs with Cecil that the formal educational background of pastors is not a concern for many congregations. "There is a growing number of churches that see a seminary education as irrelevant to whether they call somebody as pastor or a staff member," he says.

Travis also has observed a change in attitudes among a number of regional leaders of mainline denominations. Whereas an accredited master's degree traditionally has been a prerequisite for ordination, some denominations, he says, may allow some flexibility in educational requirements.

Pastors who seek training outside normal seminary channels do not necessarily disparage traditional theological education. Bob Mulkey, pastor of First Baptist Church of DeLand, Fla., is a case in point.

Mulkey values the seminary training he received at the master's and doctoral levels. However, he says his efforts to lead new initiatives in his congregation have been aided greatly by the resources of Willow Creek Community Church, a major teaching church in suburban Chicago.

The Florida church leaned heavily on Willow Creek materials to begin a contemporary worship service in 1993, Mulkey said. He and others from the congregation have attended Willow Creek conferences.

Mulkey still refers to his former seminary professors in glowing terms, and he continues to read serious theological works. Nevertheless, he believes ministerial education is more than cerebral. "I think the weakness of my seminary training was that I didn't get enough practical teaching about how to be a leader."

A focus on practical teaching attracted 65,000 ministers and lay people to training events offered in 1999 by Saddleback Community Church in Lake Forest, Calif., says Andrew Accardy, Saddleback's director of church leader training.

Saddleback conferences are held on site and around the world via satellite simulcast. Accardy acknowledged some ministers might attend conferences in lieu of seminary. But he says the church has never considered its events to be in competition with seminaries.

"We support seminaries, but there is some information you get directly from a church, a church that God appears to be blessing, that tends to create some energy," says Accardy. "It tends to be viewed more as something that can be used."

Yet ministry cannot be reduced to a set of skills such as preaching, leadership and conflict management, says Wayne Stacy, dean of the M. Christopher White Divinity School at Gardner-Webb University in North Carolina.

"While all of those things are important, ministry is fundamentally about calling, and without a solid theological substructure, then all of our skills simply become a bag of tricks," Stacy says.

Stacy and other theological educators say both classical studies and practical preparation are needed. But there is no consensus on how that should take place and what is the proper mix.

Traditional theological education has been in transition since the 1960s, observes Bill Leonard, dean of Wake Forest University's divinity school. Part of the transition has been driven by the inclusion of pastoral care and other practical disciplines into curricula, he says. "You have to ask, how large is this transition."

Meanwhile, studies have shown pastors feel inadequately trained for today's ministry realities, says Carol Childress, a researcher for Leadership Network.

"At the five-year point, seminary grads understand that the subjects they were taught in seminary, while valuable for creating sermons, exegeting Scripture and so forth, have not equipped them to deal with leadership and the other issues facing pastors," she notes.

Part of that pastoral frustration might stem from trying to manage the smorgasbord of programs offered by "full service churches," says Larry Parsley, pastor of Valley Ranch Baptist Church near Dallas.

"Some of the new skills required in the new ministry milieu include marketing, public relations, volunteer recruitment, project management, change management, facilities management, financial forecasting and reengineering savvy," Parsley says. These skills, he adds, are more likely to be possessed by a mid-level corporate manager than a seminary-trained pastor.

In an attempt to place more emphasis on leadership, Golden Gate Baptist Theological Seminary has overhauled its curriculum, says Don Simmons, director of continuing education at the Southern Baptist Convention school in Mill Valley, Calif.

The change includes more than simply requiring courses in managerial theory. Rather, Golden Gate attempts to lace every course with a focus on leadership, Simmons says.

"The process of leadership is engineered and organic," he explains. "We ask how do we intone that through lifestyles and in the classroom. We tell students, 'You are not just going to be a pastor or a minister of education. You are going to be a leader.'"

Asbury Theological Seminary in Wilmore, Ky., recently adopted a new master-of-divinity curriculum that "orients the whole process of ministry formation around the mission of the church in the world and a sense of vocation or call," says Joel Green, dean of Asbury's theology school.

Golden Gate and Asbury carry a strong commitment to contextual education and online learning. At both schools, master-of-divinity students may earn one-third of the required course credit online, the maximum allowed by the institutions' primary accrediting agency.

While church leaders with a postmodern bent may applaud an increased focus on leadership and contextual training, they believe there should be a fundamental restructuring of theological methods.

"We are going to need theologians more than ever, but we are going to need theologians who are creative and not just theologians who will repeat old formulations," says Brian McLaren, pastor of Coral Ridge Community Church near Washington, D.C.

McLaren says theology will resemble narrative more than propositions and will integrate theology, spirituality, liturgy, architecture, mission and art.

Cecil, the GenX pastor from Texas, says the theology of the modern period has ignored mysticism. "You go to Scripture, you observe, interpret and apply," says Cecil. "That's the same as the scientific method. Whether liberal or conservative, Scripture is reduced to one meaning."

In postmodernity, people gather in community to share theological and biblical views, Cecil says. "I need to have other people to help me see clearly. People [in postmodern contexts] don't look at opposing views as threats. They just look at them as different perspectives."

Such exchanges are not spurred by people's fear that their opinions are wrong, Cecil says. Instead, it is recognition that every person has a limited perspective.

GenXers take their spiritual journey beyond the Bible and find the sacred in movies, music and various elements of culture, Cecil says. "The one thing that I was taught was that you interpret Scripture. One of the skills I'm trying to acquire is to interpret culture in the mystical sense."

Gardner-Webb's Stacy commends the postmodern emphasis on spirituality. Yet he is troubled by its subjectivism, which he says could "devolve into ideological egalitarianism."

"There must be some things that are true or false no matter what you think or what I think," Stacy says. "The Bible does not speak of the democracy of God. It speaks of the kingdom of God."

Exactly how postmodern thought and more attention to leadership will shape theological learning is difficult to forecast. In some ways, it is not clear how comfortably the two can coexist.

Some postmodern pastors reject the consumer orientation of the megachurch movement. Cecil says churches too often use astute marketing techniques to draw large crowds and then claim success. The true measure, Cecil contends, is their effectiveness in transforming their communities.

Some church leaders foresee more partnerships between seminaries and churches, not competition.

Rather than usurp the role of seminaries, Saddleback Community Church has joined forces with Golden Gate to offer courses at the congregation's Southern California campus. Currently about 35-40 Saddleback members are studying for a master of arts in theological studies.

Katie Brazelton, Saddleback Church's seminary director, said the program is primarily to train lay people to serve more effectively in the congregation. She acknowledged, however, that some may be offered paid ministry positions at Saddleback, and others may be called to serve in other congregations.

Stacy speculates that theological education may become church-based in the same sense that medical education is hospital-based.

"Schools like ours could partner with congregations and supply faculty and students, who would be involved as members of the congregation," he explains. "What will happen is that a divinity school will be a home base. It will coordinate activities and do quality control."

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Seminaries going online to meet changing needs

By Marshall Allen

ST. PAUL, Minn. (ABP) -- As the tides of culture and communication turn to the Internet, many seminaries are exploring online education.

Using Internet technology, students from all across the country are able to learn in a virtual classroom, reducing the need for a centralized location for training. Few seminaries are using cyberspace to teach their students yet. But a handful are cutting a trail that others likely will follow.

The "distributive learning" program at Bethel Seminary in St. Paul, Minn., is in its fifth year and has 170 students enrolled. Bethel offers a master-of-divinity degree -- and is introducing two new master's degrees -- where students can go to seminary without having to leave their current vocations. Students complete their

degree through intensive courses on campus, interactive distance courses and participation in ministry.

Bethel's dean of instructional technology, Greg Bourgond, used technology to the advantage of his students recently to teach a leadership and management course from a distance. Each week, Bourgond's lecture was voice-streamed (real-time audio) on the Internet, accompanied by a PowerPoint graphic presentation. At the beginning and end of the semester, he facilitated a conference call using the school's audio bridge system.

Bourgond also led the class in a threaded (not real-time) discussion on the Internet. He started the discussion with thought-provoking, class-related questions and students responded to his, and each other's, thoughts. The threaded discussions forced students to think before posting their answers, requiring them to interact with the material -- and with each other -- in ways that they might not naturally do in a typical classroom.

Bourgond, meanwhile, presided as the "lurking professor," virtually watching over their shoulders as students bantered with each other. He also assigned ministry-related Web sites for students to visit and evaluate.

"Students love these classes because they are coming to seminary with a matrix of learning styles," Bourgond explains. "They are visual, auditory, independent and experiential learners. The Internet gives a professor the opportunity to construct the course to appeal to different learning styles."

Other schools -- like Asbury Theological Seminary in Kentucky and Fuller and Golden Gate seminaries, both in California -- are dabbling in online learning.

Fuller Seminary recently finished its first quarter of online courses. The program is mostly text based at this point, but it is in its infancy, explains Dave McMartin, Fuller's director of distance learning. "It's experimental to us, but I think that the trends will be that we'll see more seminaries and colleges who will offer degrees [online] because that's what students are asking for."

As technology expands, so will online education. The educational architects at Bethel look forward to using streamed video, where they can actually communicate face-to-face, even across thousands of miles. But for now, the technology used in these classes requires no more than a Pentium-based computer and a 28.8 modem.

Neither Fuller nor Bethel proponents of online education feel that the Internet will ever totally replace traditional classroom instruction. But it provides an option for many students who are in need of quality training.

"We are presenting timeless truth in a timely methodology," Bourgond said. "Seminaries need to find out where the culture is moving, and design programs to produce leaders who can minister effectively to the culture."

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-- Marshall Allen is a seminary student, writer and student worker in Colorado Springs, Colo.

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