PIONEERS: First class carved out a path

Faith Refocused
Wake Forest's divinity school to send 20 into service

Peggy Matthews, framed by the classroom door, presents a sermon to fellow students.

WS Journal, Sunday, May 19, 2002
Faith Refocused
Wake Forest's divinity school to send 20 into service

By Michelle Johnson
JOURNAL REPORTER

They are 15 women and five men, ranging in age from 25 to 61. They include a one-time businessman and a former schoolteacher, and represent a cross-section of Protestant denominations, from Baptist to Presbyterian to Moravian.

They are the first graduating class in the School of Divinity at Wake Forest University.

Few in this group receiving their diplomas on Monday are headed for a traditional pulpit. They speak more of social justice than of sin and salvation.

All came to Wake Forest conscious that they were part of an experiment: the creation of an ecumenical divinity school that would, among other things, serve as a counterweight to the conservative domination of the Southern Baptist Convention and its seminaries.

The school is still a work in progress. Students and faculty have struggled to find a balance between honoring Wake Forest's own Baptist roots and promoting religious pluralism and academic freedom.

"It's not without its faults — because whenever you bring all those different voices together, there's tension and disagreement," said Stan Cross, one of the graduating students.

"It's like the Bible. Out of the tension and argument and disagreement comes life," he said.

Because they were the school's first students, this

See DIVINITY, Page A10

AT HOME: Mexican village mostly women

By Amy Frazier
JOURNAL REPORTER

GUSANO, Mexico

Inside the salmon-pink bell tower of a church in the dry hills of Gusano, a man in his early 50s leaned his weight into a rope, signaling the start of the 11 a.m. Mass.

With children and adults, well dressed in fresh, unwrinkled shirts and flowered dresses, shuffled over dusty earth toward the large wooden doors of the church.

Young men are nowhere to be found. About 90 percent of the working age men in this community have moved to the United States, where they often make more in an hour than they could have made in a day working in Mexico.

"This church was built entirely with money from the (United States) and the women put up the stones," said Adriana Cortes Jimenez, a community leader in the Mexican state of Guanajuato where Gusano sits.

The absence of men is obvious during a walk through the community's streets. Women carry black umbrellas to shade them from the sun.

Children gather in the playground of a local public school.

"We're almost purely women here," said Maria de Jesus Vargas de Aguilar, 55, a resident of Gusano. Palmillas is one of 12 villages that make up the community of Gusano — which means "the worm" for the way in which the villages snake through the rust-colored, dry mountains.

Of the 300 families living in the village, there are only 20 or 30 men, Aguilar said.

On the other end of the migration pipeline, North Carolina and other

See MEXICO, Page A5
DIVINITY

Continued From Page A1

A call for moderate voices

Talk of starting the divinity school first surfaced in the late 1980s, a few years after the conservative takeover of the Southern Baptist Convention. Many moderates had left or been forced out of posts at Baptist seminaries because they refused to teach biblical inerrancy, the defining conservative tenet.

The Rev. Mike Queen, the pastor of First Baptist Church in Wilmington and a Wake Forest trustee, was among those who approached the university's president, Thomas K. Hearn, with the idea of starting a divinity school.

They argued that Wake Forest — whose Baptist founders in 1838 envisioned it as a producer of ministers — needed to join other Baptist schools that were re-embracing theological education. Over the years, that training had moved to denomination-run seminaries.

Baptist universities, meanwhile, had grown increasingly independent of the denomination: Wake Forest severed its last ties to the Baptist State Convention of North Carolina in 1986.

But the university made slow progress in creating the divinity school, and some early backers withdrew financial support, Queen said. He nonetheless defends Wake Forest's approach.

"The university is dealing with so many different constituencies about theology space ... we had to make sure that this was going to fit in with everything else," he said.

The school opened its doors in 1999 with 24 students. Moderates and liberals hailed a new era: conservatives questioned whether the school would ever meet a critical challenge: turning out a significant number of graduates who actually wanted to preach.

Today, the ideological divide remains deep. The Rev. Jerry Pereira, the conservative president of the Baptist State Convention, declined to comment about the school, saying that he doesn't know much about it.

But Willie Jennings, the academic dean at the Duke University Divinity School, said that other schools are watching and hoping for Wake Forest's success.

"Everyone understands that Wake Forest's seminary is significant and has are members of Wake Forest Baptist Church, which holds services in the chapel.

Parker is also a member of the inaugural divinity-school class.

The university allowed the ceremony in September 2000 — but not before a very tense hesitation as officials tried to reconcile the differences between conservative alumni and more liberal faculty and students.

Leonard would later describe the controversy as a "tar baby."

"It just fell on me," he recalled in a 2000 story published in the Biblical Recorder, the newspaper of the Baptist State Convention. "I didn't go looking for it."

The controversy erupted at the very time that the students and faculty were trying to figure out what it meant to be starting a divinity school at Wake Forest.

The controversy erupted at the very time that the students and faculty were trying to figure out what it meant to be starting a divinity school at Wake Forest.

"We didn't want this union to define us," Wyatt said. "When we talk about the first year, we don't talk about the union ceremony. We talk about the anxiety — of saying who are we as a community, as a school, going to be and what does it mean?"

Making a minister

Many members of the divinity-school class remember what Professor Frank Tupper said to them on the first day of theology class in 1999.

"Divinity school is like taking your heart out, holding it in your hand and examining it while still depending on it that mirrored what was going on in me," Wyatt said.

"Divinity school helped me find ways for all these parts of myself to talk to each other," Wyatt said.

Today, Wyatt's home congregation in Knoxville, Tenn., which has ties to both the Southern Baptist Convention and the moderate Cooperative Fellowship of Baptists, is voting on whether to ordain her.

If the congregation does, as expected, Wyatt will be the first woman to be ordained by the congregation. She plans to work for the Baptist Joint Committee in Washington, a nonprofit organization that deals with issues of religious liberty and the separation of church and state, and eventually return to graduate school for a doctorate in biblical studies.

For Cross, the divinity school curriculum, which includes instruction in biblical studies, church history, theology, homiletics (the art of preaching), spirituality and pastoral care, transformed him from a self-described "moderate to conservative Baptist" to "one of the more radical students," he said.

He almost didn't come to the school when he found out that it had an open-admissions policy and that Parker, his classmate, was a lesbian.

Now she is one of his best friends.

"My whole attitude about homosexuality is changed because of her," he said.

"That's one of the ways in which I've transformed," he said. "I want to help the church step out of the boxed situation it seems to be in."

Cross entered divinity school at 48, after a career in business. He has found

"Better we how to have a Jill Crainshaw, the director of development tended to h

"The current from what is the most "ministerial vocational pat

The South forbids the even in other "minimal

That has p

"I intend to h the majority of th

"My passi

"We reali

"We all felt part of that pioneering experience," he said. "That awareness adds a sense of responsibility and a real desire to make things work and do our best."
Classmates and professors listen as Jennie Hemrick preaches her last sermon as a divinity-school student at Wake Forest.

JOURNAL PHOTO BY CHRIS ENGLISH

are members of Wake Forest Baptist Church, which holds services in the chapel.

Parker is also a member of the inaugural divinity-school class.

The university allowed the ceremony in September 2000 — but not before a very tense negotiation that aimed to reconcile the differences between conservative alumni, and more liberal faculty and students.

Leonard would later describe the controversy as a "tar baby."

"It just fell on me," he recalled in a 2000 story published in the Biblical Recorder, the newspaper of the Baptist State Convention, "I didn't go looking for it.

The controversy erupted at the very time that the students and faculty were trying to figure out what it meant to be starting a divinity school at Wake Forest.

Parker's classmates supported her, but were angry that all the attention of the outside world focused on the union ceremony, said Stephanie Wyatt, a graduating student.

"We didn't want this union to define us," Wyatt said.

"When we talk about the first year, we don't talk about the union ceremony. We talk about the anxiety — of saying who are we as a community, as a school, going to be and what does it mean?"

Making a minister

Many members of the divinity-school class remember what Professor Frank Tupper said to them on the first day of divinity class in 1999.

"Divinity school is like taking your heart out, holding it in your hand and examining it while still depending on it to give you life," Wyatt recalled.

"It begins to form an identity about who we are as a community, a school, going to be and what does it mean?"

Better ways to talk

"Better ways to talk to people who know how to have a certain presence," said Jill Crainshaw, an associate dean and the director of the school's vocational development program. "I've never intended us to have a toolbox mentality.

"That has presented a special challenge for the divinity school as it tries to guide this year's graduates — the majority of them women — into jobs that will allow them to do their chosen work, Crainshaw said.

"That's one of the ways in which I'm transformed," he said.

"I want to help the church step out of the boxed situation it seems to be in."

Cross entered divinity school at 48, after a career in business. He has found a job as the minister to men at the Rescue Mission in his hometown of Roanoke, Va.

Leonard has always made it clear that he wanted a divinity school, one that reflected the state of modern religion. The faculty includes a Benedictine monk, a black preaching professor and a feminist biblical scholar, along with well-known academics who are veterans of the struggle between conservatives and moderates within the Southern Baptist Convention.

There is, however, no self-described conservative Baptist. And diversity for the student body has been a challenge, as it is at many schools.

The graduating class is all white, and mostly female. Subsequent classes have brought more balance: Seven out of the school's last 18 students were black. Men were also better represented.

"We're trying to recruit students," Leonard said. "We don't know what future profiles will look like, and we won't know until we get accreditation."

"Because it is so new, the school has not been accredited by the Association of Theological Schools. The accreditation process begins this summer but will not be completed until 2005.

"I think we all get impatient with that," Leonard said. "It really is stages of growth.

Graduation from an accredited school is generally a prerequisite for ordination, but students can ask for exceptions in some denominations.

A work in progress

Even though many of these graduates will not have a traditional pulpit, they will be asked to preach from time to time in church. If ministers by what they say, said Brad Brawner, the divinity-school professor who teaches the art of preaching.

"Those first graduates will begin to develop the school's reputation in the outside world.

"It begins to form an identity about who students come here to do," Crainshaw said.

"Jennings said that historians will be watching closely to see how the school deals with issues of diversity, theology and the complex interplay between cultural issues and religious beliefs.

"In many ways, it's unprecedented — to have a major university found a seminary at the end of the 20th century," he said.

"It's going to be a very important test case for gauging the character of Christianity in the South in a very modern university at the turn of the century," he said.

"In many ways, it's unprecedented — to have a major university found a seminary at the end of the 20th century," he said.

"For his part, Leonard downplays such talk.

"I think theological education in general is a test case," he said. "We're a microcosm of what schools all over the country are facing. We have an advantage because we're new. We haven't gotten to turf issues yet."

"Parker, who will be ordained at Wake Forest Baptist Church next Sunday, said that the school faces a struggle:

"We're really trying to prepare students for religious communities that are in what I call a state of permanent transition, and we are doing it inside a university that is trying to diversify itself. I find that challenging and a bit invigorating, tremendous innovation," he said.
Nine women who requested the ceremony, Susan Parker and Wendy Scott, the two caught up in the maelstrom surrounding the first year, said Stephanie Wyatt, a graduating student. The university allowed the ceremony, said Stephanie Wyatt, a graduating student.

The controversy erupted at the very time that the students and faculty were trying to figure out what it meant to be starting a divinity school at Wake Forest.

Parker's classmate supported her but were angry that all the attention of the outside world focused on the union ceremony, said Stephanie Wyatt, a graduating student.

"We really have to prepare students for what it means to be a woman, a Baptist, and a Southern Baptist church, that means choosing ministerial work," she said.

"Better we form people who know how to have a certain presence," said Jill Crainshaw, an associate dean and the director of the school's vocations development program. "We never have tended us to have a toolbox mentality.

The curriculum aims to help people form what is called in church circles "ministerial identity," she said. Students are required to complete internships in churches or other ministry settings as a way of figuring out the vocational paths.

That has presented a special challenge for the divinity school as it tries to guide this year's graduates — 91 of them — into jobs that will allow them to do their chosen work.

The Southern Baptist Convention forbids the ordination of women, even in other denominations, the traditional ministry remains male-dominated.

"That's one of the ways in which I'm making a minister," she said. "We really want them to do well."

Jennie Henrikck, 49, worked as an advocate for battered women before she entered divinity school. She is entering Presbyterian ordination and hopes to work in ecumenical social ministry.

"My passion is to help faith communities understand that there are two people involved in domestic violence... We can no longer say that doesn't exist in our church homes," she said.

Leonard also sees no single career track for divinity-school graduates.

"We really have to prepare students for religious communities that are willing to have a state of permanent transition, and we are doing it inside a university that is trying to diversify itself find that challenging and a bit invigorating... certainly invigorating," he said.

Part of the challenge is knowing if many people in this new generation of ministers wear their denomination affiliations loosely, Leonard said, a way to ordination is through Chicano denominations.

"Denominations still become a necessary entry point, but they're not necessarily helpful in dealing with broader cultural issues," he said.
“Better we form people who know how to have a certain presence,” said Jill Crainshaw, an associate dean and the director of the school’s vocational development program. “I’ve never intended us to have a toolbox mentality.”

The curriculum aims to help people form what is called in church circles a “ministerial identity,” she said. Students are required to complete internships in churches or other ministry set­tings as a way of figuring out their vocational paths.

The Southern Baptist Convention forbids the ordination of women, and even in other denominations, the traditional ministry remains male-domi­nated.

That has presented a special chal­lenge for the divinity school as it tries to guide this year’s graduates — the majority of them women — into jobs that will allow them to do their chosen work, Crainshaw said.

Three of the graduates will complete residencies in the Clinical Pastoral Ed­ucation Program at Wake Forest Uni­versity Baptist Medical Center.

Jennie Henrick, 43, worked as an advocate for battered women before she entered divinity school. She is seek­ing Presbyterian ordination and hopes to work in ecumenical social ministry.

“My passion is to help faith commu­nity leaders understand that there are two people involved in domestic vio­lence... We can no longer say that it doesn’t exist in our church homes,” she said.

Leonard sees no single career track for divinity-school graduates.

“We really have to prepare students for religious communities that are in what I call a state of permanent transition, and we are doing it inside a uni­versity that is trying to diversify itself,” he said. “I find that challenging and a bit invigorating... certainly invigorating,” he said.

Part of the challenge is knowing that many people in this new generation of ministers wear their denominational affiliations loosely, Leonard said. Yet the way to ordination is through Chris­tian denomi­nations.

“Denominations still become a nec­essary entry point, but they’re not nec­essarily helpful in dealing with these broader cultural issues,” he said.

JENNIFER HENRICK, right, a graduate of Wake Forest Divinity School, with her professor, Kristin Jennings, left.

Many members of the divinity­school class remember what Professor Frank Turner said to them on the first day of theology class in 1999.

“Divinity school is like taking your heart out, holding it in your hand and examining it while still depending on it to give you life,” Wyatt recalled.

Turner’s words resonated with the group over time as they realized that their education depended on their ability to take their faith apart without killing it or losing it.

For Wyatt, who has deep roots in the Southern Baptist church, that meant asking some very hard questions about what it meant to be a woman, a Baptist, an academic and a person passionate about social change.

“There was a sense of the tug and pull in terms of the voices at the school that mirrored what was going on in me,” Wyatt said.

“Divinity school helped me find ways for all these parts of myself to talk to each other,” Wyatt said.

Today, Wyatt’s home congregation in Knoxville, Tenn., which has ties to both the Southern Baptist Convention and the moderate Cooperative Fellowship of Baptists, is voting on whether to ordain her.

If the congregation does, as expected, Wyatt will be the first woman to be ordained by the congregation. She plans to work for the Baptist Joint Com­mittee in Washington, a nonprofit or­ganization that deals with issues of religious liberty and the separation of church and state, and eventually return to graduate school for a doctorate in biblical studies.

For Cross, the divinity school cur­riculum, which includes instruction in biblical studies, church history, theolo­gy, homiletics (the art of preaching), spirituality and pastoral care, trans­formed him from a self-described “moderate to conservative Baptist” to “one of the more radical students,” he said.

He almost didn’t come to the school when he found out that it had an open­admissions policy and that Parker, his classmate, was a lesbian.

Now she is one of his best friends.

“My whole attitude about homosex­uality is changed because of her,” he said.

“That’s one of the ways in which I’m transformed,” he said. “I want to help the church step out of the boxed situa­tion it seems to be in.”

Cross entered divinity school at 48, after a career in business. He has found a job as the minister to men at the Rec­cue Mission in his hometown of Roanoke, Va.

DIFFERENT PATHS

Hearn said in 1999 that he hoped many students would ultimately choose ministerial work.

But the conservative challenge — that liberal divinity schools don’t make ministers — is still out there.

Leaders at the Wake Forest divinity school are careful to argue that “min­istry” should be broadly defined.