

Pedal to the metal



MIDWESTERN BAPTIST THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

Accelerated pastoral degree programs help young people prepare for ministry in less time, with less debt, and with vocational training along the way

By Gregg Brekke

FOR THE PAST NINE YEARS, the **Kern Family Foundation** has been providing grants to theological schools in the United States to help them establish accelerated pastoral degree programs (APDPs), in which young people can earn both a bachelor's and a master's degree in only five years instead of six to seven. By recruiting students who are interested in full-time ministry at the time when they are applying to undergraduate programs, or shortly thereafter, APDPs provide a way to enter ministry at a younger age, earn a professional degree, and get hands-on vocational experience, at a lower cost, before they turn 25.

The Foundation's grants supporting five-year APDPs have ranged from a few hundred thousand dollars to several million, with grant periods ranging from three to five years. What started with a pilot Foundation grant to fund an accelerated ministry program to **Trinity Evangelical Divinity School** in 2011 has now grown to 37 schools. Interested in how these programs have been working out, *In Trust* recently talked with some of the schools that have established an APDP with grants from Kern.

While communication and collaboration among the schools receiving these grants are strongly encouraged, the programs do not look alike. "There's a lot of diversity in the models, and that's good," says Fred Oaks, program director of the Faith, Work, and Economics program at the Kern Family Foundation, the division that oversees APDPs. The Foundation has already granted or committed \$20 million toward funding these programs. Jay Mason, senior program director at the Kern Family Foundation, says the long-term sustainability of the programs "depends on new approaches and new models that are meeting market need."

In Trust last looked at the Kern Family Foundation's accelerated ministry programs in "Fast-Forward Future," which appeared in the Autumn 2016 issue. To read the article, go to www.intrust.org/Magazine/Issues/Autumn-2016/Fast-forward-future.

Oaks and Mason say research from the first nine years has identified five essential elements that lead to a successful accelerated pastoral ministry program:

1. A passionate program director who dedicates at least half of his or her time specifically to the accelerated program's curriculum.
2. Institutional ownership and academic coordination.
3. A cohort experience for students.
4. Spiritual and pastoral formation of students through mentoring and seminary-church partnerships.
5. Marketing and awareness-raising efforts that include recruiting within and outside the institution.

Six of the Kern-funded accelerated programs are highlighted below. (At the time we conducted these interviews — after the onset of COVID-19 restrictions — all of the programs had switched to online learning.)

Accelerate

Midwestern Baptist Theological Seminary and Spurgeon College

Midwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in Kansas City, Missouri, and its embedded undergraduate division, Spurgeon College, created the Accelerate program to get students into ministry “as quickly as possible without clipping the substance of their education.”

Those are the words of Samuel Bierig, dean of Spurgeon College and assistant professor of Christian studies. While seminary leaders had been thinking about new and innovative educational models before creating the Accelerate program, which began accepting students in 2014, funding from the Kern Family Foundation enabled them to develop the program more rapidly.

“Our leadership team is constantly trying to innovate and think through how we can adapt to changing higher educational paradigms,” says Bierig. “This fits very easily with those plans. We would have likely made the step minus Kern, but Kern made it possible — gave a steroid shot for sure and a laser focus.”

The program coordinator of Accelerate, Taylor DiRoberto, adds that taking part in the program’s cohort structure, while valuable, is not an academic requirement for students. “It’s not something that’s going to show up on the transcript,” he says. “It’s program dinners with ministry experts and writers’ workshops — bagels and coffee and talking through papers.”

Preparing Accelerate students “socially and spiritually” for the tasks of pastoral ministry is an overriding concern for Bierig and DiRoberto, who note they are in the process of strengthening the program’s internship experiences.

Current seminarian Adrian Owen sensed his call to pastoral ministry as a junior in high school. He is currently an administrative assistant at Liberty Baptist Church in Kansas City as he works toward completing his studies in 2022.

Owen says that he thought four years of traditional undergraduate education, followed by three years of seminary, was the normal course of study for ministry preparation. He feared that if he took part in an accelerated program, he might be missing out on some of the education and experience he needed for pastoral ministry. But now his mind is changed. “I feel like I’m gaining, not losing, by taking part in Accelerate,” he says. He adds that many of his friends who followed traditional 4 + 3 programs now wish that they had enrolled in accelerated ministry programs instead.

Vocāre

Azusa Pacific University

The Vocāre accelerated studies program at Azusa Pacific University (APU) began accepting students in 2017. APU offers two accelerated programs: a five-year B.A./M.A. in pastoral studies and six-year B.A./M.Div. program. There are 62 students currently enrolled, including 29 students of color. According to Jennifer Graffius, director of mentoring and formation, the goal is to increase enrollment to 150 students.

“I feel like we’ve got some of the best students in our school,” says Graffius. Building on 18 units of biblical studies required of each student, the program emphasizes four main components — academics, mentoring, vocational discernment, and community.

Compared to more traditional degree programs, Graffius explains that the Vocāre program offers students more rather than less; it’s an enhanced, not an abbreviated program.

“We’ve really worked to give [students] access to the leadership in our department and make them see that this is a really special opportunity for them,” says Graffius. Community building among students is encouraged, as are personal relationships with the dean, assistant dean, and professors.

Opportunities for students to get practical experience, such as engaging in leadership roles, are manifold. For example, some students work as resident directors, and others coordinate formation activities on campus or are already serving in ministry roles in churches.

“I really would love to see healthier pastors being launched into ministry,” she says. “We’re really working on that. We’re walking alongside them so that they are pastors who have a sense of community and are not so isolated.”

Community formation continued even while students were finishing the spring term at home because of COVID-19 restrictions. They took part in online mentoring groups and getting together with peers for socializing and online “watch parties.”

Summer Bakos, who graduated from the Vocāre program in 2019, is now director of middle school ministries at Flipside Church in Rancho Cucamonga, California. She attributes her successful experience in seminary to the quality of her undergraduate studies at Azusa Pacific and the contributions of her



Vocāre students from Azusa Pacific University on an educational trip to Jerusalem.

mentors. "The quality of the professors and someone coming alongside me, an adult who had worked in ministry, made all the difference," she says. "It's a scary thing going into seminary. I was nervous about it but quickly learned I was well equipped for it."

B.A.+M.A. program in preaching and pastoral ministry

Biola University & Talbot School of Theology

Like many accelerated programs, the one at **Biola University**, a Christian liberal arts college in La Mirada, California, enables students to complete two degrees — bachelor's and master's — in five years. All undergraduates at Biola take at least 30 credit hours of biblical studies as part of their courses of study. Doug Huffman, associate dean of biblical and theological studies, says it is this foundation that enables the school to prepare undergraduate students for an accelerated theological studies program and integrate them into masters-level courses at Biola's **Talbot School of Theology**.

After completing the requirements of the program during the sophomore and junior years, students begin taking seminary classes during their senior year. To qualify for this, they must apply to the graduate program at the end of their junior year. At the end of their senior year, they can earn a B.A. and then be on their way to a one-year M.A. in preaching and pastoral ministry.

In 2015, the program admitted its first six students, all of whom were sophomores. By the end of spring 2020, 24 students were in the program, says Matthew Williams, director of the B.A.+M.A. program and professor of New Testament.

He says relationships and mentoring set their program apart, especially as it seeks to form younger students for pastoral ministry. They hold an annual retreat for program students, on-campus events, and one-on-one mentoring with faculty. "I'll grab students and say, 'Hey, let's go get a coffee. Let's get a smoothie and just talk through life right now,'" he says. "I've only been in this program since December and I feel like I know probably two-thirds of the students really well already. The gifts the Kern Foundation has given us have made this possible."

Current student A.J. Boncore gives Biola's program high praise. He is only two courses away from completing his Talbot studies and is already serving on the pastoral staff at Saddleback Church in Yorba Linda, California.

"I feel like my seminary experience came more from Biola [the undergraduate program] than it did from Talbot, even though technically Talbot is the seminary," he says. "By the time I got to Talbot, I felt like I was so prepared for whatever they had had to give me that I was just enjoying the fruits of my labor."

Saying he would not change a thing about his experience at Biola, Boncore believes the connective aspect of the program was integral to his success. "I think more [important]



Talbot student A.J. Boncore (left) greeting members outside Saddleback Church in Yorba Linda, California, where he is already on the ministry staff.

than what I learned are the relationships that I formed. The wisdom that I gained from these professors — they opened up their lives to [students] in the Bible department."

"The things we're able to do because of Kern grant money are amazing," says Huffman. "For the Kern Family Foundation, a million dollars probably isn't that much, but the influence that money has had at Biola is, as the commercial would say, priceless. The 24 students we now have are the highest-quality students."

Barnabas Pastoral Program

Grand Canyon University

The Barnabas Pastoral Program at **Grand Canyon University (GCU)** is open to students who enter before they are 21. Peter Anderson, assistant dean in the university's College of Theology, says that before 2018, most of the seminary applicants were adults. With urging from the Kern Family Foundation, he explored how the seminary could bring the "vibrant sense of community" present in the undergraduate population of their school into the accelerated program. "It was super exciting to see this opportunity where we could get students into a traditional seminary space," he says. "We could keep them around campus, and we could make it cost-effective, which is the heartbeat of what we're doing here at the university."

The program also advances one of the objectives of the university's mission — providing quality spiritual leadership to communities in the Phoenix region.

Jason Hiles, dean and professor of theology at the seminary, is especially pleased with the internships, mentoring opportunities, and supervised ministry opportunities available to students in the program. He adds that it is important for local congregations to make an investment in students, to partner with them much in the same way Barnabas (the GCU program's namesake) accompanied Paul in the New Testament. "We hope over the five years a number of students will learn to do ministry in this context and will learn to love Phoenix."

To help the program continue to thrive, especially because of the large number of recruits to the program each year, Anderson says it will be necessary to increase placement opportunities for students to get practical experience. He is encouraged that area churches have expressed “incredible enthusiasm” about deepening their relationships with Grand Canyon students, especially in the areas of mentoring and internships. Referring to the Phoenix churches that are on board with the program, he says: “We think the opportunity to help prepare some of these young men and women going into ministry is going to be very healthy in terms of the long-term spiritual health of the Phoenix community.”

Hunt Scholars Program

College at Southeastern and Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary

The Hunt Scholars Program is a joint effort of the **College at Southeastern** and **Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary**, affiliated institutions in Wake Forest, North Carolina. The program prepares students for pastoral ministry through a five-year combined undergraduate degree in pastoral ministry and a master of divinity degree, and is now graduating its sixth class.

Scott Pace, dean of the College at Southeastern and associate professor of pastoral ministry and preaching, says students are engaged in an immersive program where intentional mentoring, special on-campus learning opportunities, cohorts, and ministry experiences are keys to success.

He says one benefit of accelerated programs is they eliminate the duplication of the material students are taught first in undergraduate school and then again in seminary. Even though it is an accelerated program, Pace says no compromises have been made on the quality of undergraduate or graduate education. “We didn’t compromise any of the core of our bachelor of arts,” he says. “Then on the master’s level, we’ve streamlined it and consolidated it so we’re not duplicating.”

While COVID-19 restrictions have introduced uncertainties — recruiting students for the upcoming year, moving all internships and mentoring online — Pace is confident that in the coming years, the program will continue to prepare pastors who are “theologically trained, practically prepared, and mobilized for mission.”

“The primary goal is that God would multiply their influence,” he says of his hopes for current and future program graduates. “That was Christ’s model for discipleship and mentorship. We’re putting students out there who are well qualified and well equipped to absorb whatever ministry challenges they face and to be faithful in those.”

Kairos

Sioux Falls Seminary

The Kairos program at Sioux Falls Seminary follows a competency-based educational model that combines classroom learning and contextual education. Like other competency-

based programs, Kairos focuses on helping students achieve mastery of a set of competencies that they will need in their vocations. The seminary recently received regional accreditation for its new undergraduate program.

“April was the first month with our first group of [undergraduate] students,” says Nathan Helling, the seminary’s chief financial officer and vice president of operations. “We have a group of students who are working their way through the application process, but the plan is to have another 10 to 15 students in this cohort that will be progressing through an undergraduate degree in Christian thought and practice.”

With an emphasis on contextual learning — that is, education that takes place in the settings where students already live, work, and worship — most coursework is accomplished remotely, although some intensive courses are on-site in Sioux Falls.


Helling expects that there will always be students who want to pursue more traditional theological educational opportunities, but those are not the students whom Kairos is trying to recruit.

“We tend to attract people who are developers by nature,” he says. “We’ve found that our five-year students often have already said no to the traditional experience for whatever reason. Many of them did a gap year on a mission field.”

According to Helling, Kairos students are already pursuing service opportunities, engaging in self-directed studies, and seeking mentors involved in ministry. Self-motivated learners especially thrive in the program. “They thrive in our system because we are building education around their life and ministry,” he says. In other words, the seminary provides additional mentoring and support for students who already want to chart their own paths.

A viable model for the long run

Kern’s Jay Mason says he certainly expects that by the time the Foundation closes its doors in 2035, that the grant-receiving institutions, and theological education as a whole, will have embraced accelerated programming as a “vibrant and sustainable model that plays a long-term role” in educating young people for pastoral ministry.

The Foundation’s goal is not to undermine traditional models, says Fred Oaks. “We have a deep respect for the riches of a scholarship in theological education.” Rather, the Foundation hopes accelerated ministry programs will serve as one way to get theological scholarship and training into the next generation of pastoral leaders. 

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The Kern Family Foundation was created by Robert and Patricia Kern to “invest in the rising generation of Americans, equipping them to become tomorrow’s leaders and innovators.” This includes a special focus on current and future pastors who are considered instrumental in shaping the country’s leaders and national morals.

For information about the Kern accelerated pastoral degree grant program, contact Fred Oaks at foaks@kffdn.org or (262) 201-2023. The Kern Family Foundation has supported the publication of this article.