

A New Approach

Evangel Seminary Offers Classes For Lay People

By [Tom Mitchell](#)

HARRISONBURG — The spark that fueled Robert Reichard Jr. in his drive for a unique kind of Christian education was kindled during his senior year at Fuller (Calif.) Theological Seminary.

"My senior year, I asked the president of the seminary if there were any plans to expand the 'practical theology' program there," said Reichard, 74, a 1966 graduate of Fuller and co-founder of Evangel Theological Seminary, a non-denominational biblically-based school of theology. "He said 'No — I see Fuller's contribution as academic.' "

An exclusively scholastic climate seemed confining to Reichard, who vowed to someday change the system. Reichard, who founded Evangel's seminary in 1982, runs the school's business from a one-story brick building he leases on South High Street, which has housed seminary classes since 2000.

The vision of Reichard and his son, Robert Reichard III, 51, is on the verge of becoming a reality. At that same building, Evangel School of Practical Ministry begins operations early next year, or roughly five months after the seminary's board of trustees approved the new program.

Evangel School of Practical Ministry gives a choice to people with eyes on something other than full-time ministry. The nine-month program, which costs \$975 per pupil, will open with two classes: Group I, which begins on Feb. 6, and Group II, which starts on April 12.

Each class must finish seven phases, or modules, where students learn practical applications of material already covered.

Off The Beaten Path

Evangel's new program differs from typical seminaries, said Reichard, by its comparatively lighter classroom demands. There is classwork, he says: just less of it. "The main difference between our school of practical ministry and traditional seminary program is academics," said Reichard. "Seminary programs have academic constraints, or standards, on them, and rightly so, because you're working on a masters degree. There is a whole segment of lay people who would love to benefit from some seminary classes, but don't want to invest the financial resources or the time to complete a course and you're talking about a substantial amount of time and cash to complete one course."

This new program focuses more on students being able to take the material and immediately implement it into their daily life ministry. We've kind of taken the academic component out it," he said.

Students in the new school at Evangel will "be able to relax and absorb the material, not for a paper or text, but to look at what it means in day-to-day life — 'How can I take this and use it tomorrow and use it the next day and the next day?'"

The new school, adds Reichard, gives students a "deeper, more intimate" experience with God through individual and joint prayer.

Foundational modules, said Reichard, will give Evangel's new students a "good cross-section of knowledge" of Scripture and churches meant to give pupils an overview of the Bible and a broader understanding of church history.

"The whole point is that students take what they learn and go back to their local churches and are able to more effectively minister or begin to minister," he said. Spectrum Of Students

Reichard's son, known as Bob, shares his father's view that the new curriculum's practical approach accommodates individualized learning, while keeping to the seminary's core concepts.

"We always wanted to provide a biblically-based theologically-sound quality education to a wide spectrum of students," said Bob, the seminary's vice president and program director for the new practical ministry program. "This is our test drive."

Evangel's practical approach, said Bob, serves a triangular aim: to let students meet God in "a deeper, more powerful, more intimate" way; to learn God's plan for them; and to become equipped to do "local" ministry.

"People who take this program are already involved in their church," said Bob, a '93 alumnus of Evangel. He also completed college at EMU in '98, earning a bachelor's degree in management and organizational development. "This program will be an opportunity for them to gain a level of confidence that 'I can do this,' to look beyond their limitations and see their potential."

Tim McAvoy, a teaching pastor at Grace Covenant Church and secretary on the board of trustees for Evangel Theological Seminary, agrees that the practical ministry program at Evangel can effectively train not only potential pastors, but also other people who wish to play larger roles in their churches.

"I think the term 'practical ministry' goes a long way to describe what [the new program at Evangel] is all about — to take ministry and to make it applicable to everyday church," said McAvoy, 42, from Harrisonburg, a 2000 graduate of Evangel who helped plan the new program.

For Robert Reichard Jr., the Evangel School of Practical Ministry amounts to an answered prayer.

"I think it's wonderful," said Reichard. "I felt for several years that we needed to put more practical emphasis on the side of theological education. It's one thing to get 'head' knowledge, but if it can't be transferred to the heart, it's useless."

Contact Tom Mitchell at 574-6275 or mitchell@dnronline.com

