

Megadeth star takes thrash metal -- and seminary -- on tour

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CLAYTON, Mo. (RNS) As new students wandered onto the campus of Concordia Seminary last September, they were joined by another group of theological rookies -- mostly midcareer types -- joining the school's program that allows students to train for the ministry online.

As the consultants, electricians, farmers and entrepreneurs in the Specific Ministry Pastor Program met up before reconnecting online from hundreds or thousands of miles away in the coming weeks, one student's story truly rocked.

David Ellefson was an honest-to-God founding member of the legendary thrash metal band Megadeth.

Ellefson's studies at Concordia illustrate why distance-learning seminary programs are increasingly popular nationwide as the convenience of online education brings new candidates to divinity schools who don't have to uproot their lives to attend.

But for Ellefson, his new quest for the ministry is also about a peculiar foray through the apparent contradictions of rock and religion that began in his childhood.

Ellefson grew up in the church. Each Sunday, his family drove from their farm in southwest Minnesota to Our Savior's Lutheran Church, where David attended Sunday school and was confirmed at age 16. His mother sang in the choir; his father

was active on the building committee.

Just a few years after his confirmation in the summer of 1983, Ellefson moved to Los Angeles. Within a week, he had formed a band and named it Megadeth for the unit of measurement equal to the death of 1 million people by nuclear explosion.

Soon, he was playing bass on stage in front of thousands of heavy metal fans in New York with other bands like Metallica and Slayer. In 1985, Megadeth released its first album, "Killing Is My Business ... And Business Is Good!"

In the 1980s and 1990s, Megadeth gained a reputation for an intelligent take on heavy metal, earning several Grammy Award nominations, and was known for its album covers, many of which depicted a character named Vic Rattlehead, a skeleton whose eyes, ears and mouth were fused closed with metal.

But by the time Ellefson was 25, the rock star lifestyle had caught up to him. In a 12-step recovery program, he was reintroduced to his faith and embraced it. He moved to Arizona, married and had children. He eventually landed at Shepherd of the Desert Lutheran Church, a Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod congregation in Scottsdale.

"I came from a good family, not a broken home," said Ellefson, 47. "That became a model for me, and I saw church at (the) center of it."

The Rev. Jon Bjorgaard, pastor of Shepherd of the Desert, asked Ellefson to start a contemporary worship service. Ellefson began to use lyrics from the Old Testament as a springboard for song writing, penning praise music and worship songs with a soft-rock hook.

"For a Christmas service, I remixed some classics, not quite in a Megadeth fashion,

but in a pretty heavy rock fashion," Ellefson said.

Combining his musical abilities and his faith led Ellefson to a deeper exploration of Christianity, he said. And it led him to start a new music ministry within the walls of Shepherd of the Desert.

He called it MEGA Life, partially a play on Megadeth. But it's also a reference to a verse from the Gospel of John: "The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly."

MEGA Life became so popular that Shepherd of the Desert bought a new space for the ministry. Last year, Bjorgaard asked Ellefson and MEGA Life director Jeremy DaPena to enroll in Concordia's Specific Ministry Pastor Program.

"Most people want to become a rock star," Bjorgaard said. "David's a rock star who wants to become a pastor."

After two years at Concordia, Ellefson will be eligible for ordination, something he hopes will happen. "People take you more seriously when you've gone through the proper training to be able to help them," he said.

David Wollenburg, director of Concordia's distance learning, said more than 100 students are enrolled in the program, which is limited to students who have been sponsored by someone already working in the ministry. Classes include "Lutheran Distinctions," "Preaching I & II," "Introduction to Worship" and "Scripture and Faith."

Wollenburg said students are as young as 35 and as old as late 60s, and their interests are just as varied -- from church planting to inner-city ministries. Students return to campus every so often for "residential retreats."

The trend of distance learning at divinity schools "is definitely growing," said Eliza Brown of the Association of Theological Schools, the accreditation body for U.S. seminaries. But there is some debate about its merits, she said.

"Some feel you can't be adequately formed as a church leader unless you're engaged in a residential program that has serious face-to-face formation components," she said. Despite that concern, 124 seminaries accredited by the organization offer some form of distance education.

As Megadeth kicks off a new tour with Motorhead, Ellefson plans to tackle his studies during down time on the Megadeth tour bus with his laptop and some books. He's under no illusion about how difficult it will be.

"This is going to be the acid test," he said.

Classes begin each Monday, and on Tuesday nights, Ellefson and eight other students wired in from around the country sit in on a two-hour live session with a professor teaching from a Concordia classroom. Once a week, he meets with Bjorgaard to discuss that week's work. Finally, late in the week, he uploads his homework for the professor to grade.

"It makes higher education possible for me," he said. "As a guy my age, to be involved in any kind of higher learning is a great thing. And so far, it's worked."