

Disruption as Opportunity: Leading Through Reimagining



Marck MacKnight, Vanguard College President.¹

Editor's Note

Between the years of 2016 and 2024, Vanguard College – the academic institution that VJTM is based out of – underwent a period of intense disruption and transition. In this reflective piece, we have worked with college president Mark MacKnight to capture the vision-casting process that got the college through these years. During this time Pastor Mark served as the Program Director of the four-year Pastoral Leadership bachelor's degree, and then as Vanguard's president. The story is a culmination of many sermons and speeches given throughout the period, as the college found itself on a journey of Reimagination.

Branson & Roxburgh quote Charles Taylor, who “posits that disruptions to a groups’ imaginary are the opportunity for them to test their assumptions and practice new actions.”²

Vanguard College has been through a couple of these disruptions over the last four years, and its staff have been testing their assumptions, practicing new actions, and seeing opportunities where obstacles once were. The phrase, “Reimagining HOW we do WHAT we do” became a focal point for the team as we responded to both transition and disruption. Some of these included two presidential changes, the departure of some long-term faculty-directors, and *then* a pandemic. These challenges made it abundantly clear that any organization or congregation, while standing on immovable truths of Scripture, is on a journey. The reality is, “we can’t stay here.”

God is still at work. God is still in control. Therefore, disruption becomes a gift that allows us to reframe the method, while the mission remains unchanging. In the same way that the church must change its methodology to respond to changing contexts of culture without changing the Message that it shares, the College reimagined its method while keeping its mission. The key is to pay attention to what God is up to. Branson & Roxborough (2020) argue that we need to become ‘interpreter leaders’ who are paying attention to what God is already doing.³ In fact, God uses disruption to get our attention and to help us make needed adjustments.

Communicating the New Reality

¹ Mark brings over 30 years of Christian ministry experience to his role as College President. Married to his best friend Pam, they have two great children, Rachel and James, both involved in ministry. Mark’s desire and passion is to encounter the God of unlimited resources who has big plans for His Church and the next generation of leaders.

² Mark L. Branson and Alan J. Roxburgh, *Leadership, God's Agency, and Disruptions: Confronting Modernity's Wager*: (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2020), 90.

³ Branson and Roxburgh, *Leadership*.



Adjustments impact people's lives, so communication with staff and students became an important part of the reimagination puzzle. An announcement containing the following information was made to the student body on March 30th, 2023, to keep them in the loop of "A new & Present reality of Vanguard." Anecdotal feedback suggested that students appreciated the transparency and the communication.

Over the past 4-5 years, student enrolment at Vanguard has decreased from a high of 220 full-time equivalent students (FTE) to 150 FTE students. This change is noteworthy, but also common to many if not most post-secondary institutions during the pandemic years. In a post-pandemic visit of leadership from the Association of Biblical Higher Education (ABHE), statistics were shared that showed a 5-25% decrease in enrollment across all institutions under their umbrella.

A drop in enrolment such as this is significant for multiple reasons. First, because of what Jesus said in Matthew 9:37-38: "The harvest is abundant, but the workers are few. Therefore, pray to the Lord of the harvest to send out workers into his harvest." This problem is just as real and urgent today as it was at the time Jesus spoke these words: Big harvest, few workers. In addition, as the Baby Boomer generation ages, workers are retiring in numbers never seen before, creating unique employment strain on sectors across society. In the church, there is a high percentage of lead pastors who are within striking distance of retirement, and thus there is a great need for the next generation to be raised up to replace them. The purpose and mission of Vanguard has everything to do with this reality. We are here to "develop spirit-empowered leaders to advance fruitful churches and global mission."⁴

The second significance of low enrolment is on the college's economic functioning. Financially speaking, an increase or decrease of every 10 students is equivalent to the impact of approximately \$80,000 on the college's overall budget. With 4-5 years of decreased enrolment, this has created a cumulative revenue decrease of roughly \$560,000 - \$600,000 for Vanguard. It is out of this reality that school leadership has taken on the task of reimagination. However, God remains faithful to the College financially as well. He has put us on the hearts of many individuals and congregations, who in response support the work done here, investing in the lives of our students. Students feel like they pay a lot of money for their education, but the actual cost of a student's year is roughly \$15,000. A student pays approximately \$8000—not including any scholarships or awards they may receive. This means that about half of the actual costs of each student's education at Vanguard College is paid by others on their behalf. This is possible because multiple churches in the PAOC district and many individual partners give sacrificially each month because they believe in our students and our mission. Praise God.

In light of these two enrolment realities, to have no response is not an option. Instead, we reimagine HOW [i.e. methodology] we do WHAT [i.e. mission] we do. Believing that disruptions are a gift from God allows us to build on our strengths while responding to the opportunities that present themselves. We are not working towards and praying for Band-Aid solutions to a crisis but finding direction to propel us forward in our mission.

Responding to the New Reality

Guiding Principles

Thankfully, Vanguard's last major redesign of the curriculum for a "Biblical Studies Paradigm" set us up well for a holistic and balanced "big picture" approach to curriculum that protects us from

⁴ Vanguard College Mission Statement

becoming reactionary with course change after course change. As we examined programs, courses, and operations under that banner, some key principles were set in place:

Simplicity: Complex operations are expensive, putting weight on systems and staff. Less complicated institutional structure for students, faculty, and administration.

Savings: Learning to live within our means. Good stewardship of resources, and viable class sizes.

Scalable: Looking for responsive structures and systems that could be seamlessly scaled up or down depending on enrolment with minimal radical changes. Flexible offerings that can increase or decrease with changing demands and opportunities.

Sellable: Remain compelling and achieve our mission. Attractive and relevant learning experiences based on core values and outcomes.

These four principles created a framework that guided strategic planning and decision-making, inspiring much of our reimagining. The priority was to focus on future directions for the college, not temporary solutions. The college's leadership was determined to see these disruptions not as undesired wounds to patch with a bandage until things went back to normal, but as a God-given opportunity to make long-form changes that would bear fruit for the college over many years. With this in mind, three main changes were initiated which would help us respond to the low enrollment and other disruptions: A new gap year program, a simplification of program-specific classes, and a consolidation of programs.

Case Study: Pursue X

Early into Vanguard's period of disruption, college leadership began conceiving of a new gap-year program called Pursue, which would target the demographic of students who had recently exited high school and were seeking guidance from God on what they were to do with their life. After much preparation, the first year of Pursue ran during the 2021-22 school year, with great success. However, in late summer 2022 it became apparent there would not be enough enrolment in the fledgling program to allow its second year to run. Just a month before the four accepted students were to start their program, we had to make the difficult decision to not run the program. Frustrations abounded: disappointment, devastation, disruption.

BUT – disruption is an opportunity for God to get our attention and to help us make needed adjustments. So, in the 2022-2023 school year, the Lord started to stir up a new imagination: Pursue-X, a gap year with purpose and potential. This program would see students embarking in a traditional gap year experience, but within the context of their own local churches. Classes could be completed through online education platforms, and the college staff would interface with on-site church staff to enable them to support the students as they went through the experience. Given the changing context of Canadian ministry and education, which often requires more flexibility than a traditional on-campus experience allows, this multi-site initiative would enable gap year students already enmeshed in a local church context to deepen their community connections through a year of education. This new initiative, brought about by unwanted disruption, was an incredible opportunity for Vanguard to partner with local congregations and foster a local leadership pipeline.

The specifics of Pursue-X were quickly fleshed out: The goal would be to have five pilots running in Fall 2023. 18 pastors in the province of Alberta were emailed, with 10 quickly registering interest. The leadership team in these churches would identify college-age young adults in their community who would be a good fit for the gap-year program and invite them to participate. These young adults would be enrolled as Vanguard students, with academic courses through newly designed cohort-based online courses and one mod class each semester that they would travel to campus for. Discipleship and practicum courses would be provided in their local church setting.

The 2023-2024 school year was a success and ran the planned eight months with six students enrolled. Growth edges were identified, and staff have taken the 2023-2025 school year to develop the program further before it is redeployed. One such change is a shift from Pursue-X to a Pursue Discipleship Program that can be provided by Vanguard to local leadership. As we move towards an on-campus version for the fall of 2026, we continue to learn and reshape our gap year offering.

Simplification of Program-Specific Classes

The reimagining work continued in other sectors of the school, such as Field Education. Previously, every program had its own practicum class in each of the four years. However, as Vanguard's degree program offerings expanded, this format became unsustainable. It was decided there would be a single first-year and a single second-year practicum class, which all students would take irrespective of program. This change would have multiple advantages: First, it would reduce the number of distinct adjunct faculty needed to teach the variety of program-specific classes, which were usually small in size. Smaller classes can be more expensive to run and don't always yield the best results for student's experience. Second, the practicums would become theme-based, bringing the on-campus experience to match the online experience. This change created simplicity, fostered stewardship, and improved student experience. In addition, the need for first- and second-year students to select a program so early into their degree can create unintended stress; with the fear that if they choose 'wrong' and want to switch later, they will have to take extra courses to catch up. Having general practicum classes for the first two years of the program alleviates this pressure and makes it easier for students to transfer between programs in their later years. In the third year, a student's field education practicum class will be smaller in size and specialized to their degree program, and will prepare them for their internship experience in the fourth year.

Another area of complexity at Vanguard was our first-year certificate programs, where we offered seven versions of a similar one-year experience. Reducing these offerings to just a single one-year certificate allows for a common starting point for every student in their first year at Vanguard. Instead, all students would take a general certificate program that included two electives (one each semester) by default. This change is advantageous as electives are attractive to students, and are easier to choose early in their academic career: All they require is some academic advising to start them in the direction of a potential focus or program.

Simplification of the practicum classes and certificate programs was chosen as a solution to economic difficulties brought on by enrollment disruptions because they would allow the college to simplify their offerings, increase savings, remain scalable for future endeavors, and increase marketability. Additional benefits were also realized as students enjoyed a real-time Vanguard context before fully committing to a specialization and enjoy more shared experiences resulting in a unified #wearevanguard culture.

Program Consolidation

With simplification and savings in mind, another solution was conceptualized which would further reduce the complexity of the college's program offerings. With six distinct programs being offered to a student body of 150-200 students, each program faced challenges regarding class sizes, stewardship, and savings. With this line of thought there initially were some obvious motivations for reimagining work, but out of that grew real excitement and compelling purpose. In the end, the mergers between programs became more like marriages between compatible partners. The programs selected for reimagination were the Pastoral Leadership and Missions programs, becoming Global

Pastoral Ministry; and the Youth and Children's Ministry programs, becoming Next Generation Ministry. The impetus behind each is as follows:

Global Pastoral Ministry: Pastors and global workers share the common calling and mission of bringing good news to people who have yet to hear it and believe. They have a common goal of establishing a healthy, holistic expression of the church on Earth. In the words of Brian Rutten, one of the new program's directors, "pastoral ministry is the heart of mission, and this will bring missions to the heart of the church." Missing out on this missional focus in our view of pastoral ministry has dire consequences. There are three changes happening to our Canadian context which make the marriage of Pastoral Leadership and Missions education advantageous. First, the late Eugene Peterson warned that pastors in North America were becoming religious shopkeepers, concerned mainly with image and economics rather than the heart of Christ.⁵ In order to provide authentic and effective pastoral leadership to our churches, we need to keep God's mission at the heart of our mission. Second, as Canadian culture becomes increasingly multiethnic, the need for interculturally skilled pastors in our local churches grows. Third, with the increase of post-Christian perspectives in our culture, we can no longer begin ministry with the assumption of a Christian worldview. With these understandings in mind, it becomes apparent that all Pastoral Leadership, local or international, is Missions work. Leaders need to develop cultural competence in order to advance fruitful churches and global mission.

Next Generation Ministry: The marriage of the Children's Ministry and Youth Ministry programs was an obvious change to make, as this kind of merger has been a trend in education and ministry for over ten years.⁶ In its current form, the Next Gen program trains leaders to minister to young people from 'cradle to college'. This holistic approach to discipleship is not just emerging in larger churches in larger cities, which some think are the only populations large enough to sustain this structure of ministry, but in many small churches in smaller communities as well. We need to disciple students in the transitions.

Conclusion

The period of disruption that Vanguard College has been experiencing was not desired, but positive impacts have resulted from it. The changes we made were not just practical, operating out of simple necessity, but over time came to have vivid purpose as they took on a life of their own. We are excited, as it is the right work for Vanguard College to be partaking in at this time. Reimagining disruptions as opportunities takes work. The decisions we make now will have an impact on the shape of Vanguard, including its operations, facilities, and mission, for many years to come.

We long to be like the Issacharites "who understood the times and know what Israel should do" (1 Chronicles 12:32), asking the Lord of the Harvest to send workers for us to train and participate in their growth and journey. We want to be like Wayne Gretzky, knowing and then skating to "where the puck is going to be." We desire to be the best version of ourselves, fulfilling the mission set before us.

Each one of Vanguard's staff and students has been led here at this point in time for God's purposes. And each one of us, not just as a team at Vanguard, but as individuals, needs a 'fresh wind' of the Holy Spirit. We are already sensing a semester of God at work, as students who are hungry and receptive to His moving fill our halls, classrooms, and chapels. Vanguard College does not exist in a vacuum but is part of a larger national fellowship (ABNWT-PAOC). In 2024, our district congregations

⁵ Eugene Peterson, *Working the Angles*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1987. 2.

⁶ Penner, James (et al.). *Hemorrhaging Faith: Why and When Canadian Young Adults are Leaving, Staying and Returning to Church*. EFC and Young Adult Ministry Roundtable, 2013. Accessed 04.01.2025: <https://faithformationlearningexchange.net/uploads/5/2/4/6/5246709/hemorrhaging-faith-april-4-2013.pdf>

saw growth, increasing their footprint by over 5,000 individuals. This kind of growth and vitality is bound to have an impact on increased numbers of students coming to Vanguard.

So, when disruptions come in your life or your ministry, know that the Lord is still on the throne. He is not surprised. He remains sovereign and is at work. Pay attention to what the Lord wants to say. Pray for CLARITY in this, and then COURAGE to act it out. Face the future with obedience, because when disruptions come, a person can choose to respond with fear, folly, or faith. Know that “the zeal of the Lord will accomplish it” (2 Kings 19:31b NIV) and that prayer is active dependence on the One who is already at work. Resilient hope is not wishful thinking, it is a sure thing. Hold on to this truth and demonstrate it in action. Kevin Gannon notes, “Perhaps the fundamental truth about teaching in higher education in 2024 is that disruption is the new precedent,”⁷ and Bible colleges are no exception. I dare you to reimagine your next disruption as an opportunity from the Lord, and just see what He will do in you and through you.

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Savings
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Sellable
attractive & relevant learning experiences
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Figure 1: Reimagining

References

- Branson, Mark L. and Roxburgh, Alan J. *Leadership, God's Agency, and Disruptions: Confronting Modernity's Wager*. Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2020.
- Gannon, Kevin, “A Faculty Survival Guide for the New Academic Year” *Chronicle of Higher Education*, August 21, 2024. <https://www.chronicle.com/article/a-faculty-survival-guide-for-the-new-academic-year>
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⁷ Kevin Gannon, “A Faculty Survival Guide for the New Academic Year” *Chronicle of Higher Education*, August 21, 2024. <https://www.chronicle.com/article/a-faculty-survival-guide-for-the-new-academic-year>