

Leaders for a New Day: A Pathways for Tomorrow Project

Update,
Vancouver School of Theology
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Just as it's hard to put a date on the end of the pandemic, it can also be hard to assess what's different now. As lockdowns subsided and schools and workplaces struggled to re-gather staff and students, there was no noticeable date, or character, of the post-pandemic reality. It was like a curtain that was slowly lifting.

Theological field education (TFE), as others have noted, was particularly challenged in the pandemic. How could we get students to reflect deeply on experience in the field when the traditional field was not available? However, most of us found that challenge brought new creativity and exciting possibilities. At the Vancouver School of Theology (VST), we had a student working in the night with a group of Sunday School teachers in Indonesia, supervised by a pastor there and fully engaged with her VST online peer group, many also located in places far beyond our campus on the University of British Columbia in Vancouver, Canada. Similar learning experiences, slightly less challenged by the time zones, became the new reality for TFE.

When the school reopened and students returned, it was clear that TFE had grown into a new age, with hybrid learning becoming the norm and field sites expanding beyond former models. What I started to hear that was new came from the experience of the students in their church contexts. The church was different. In some places, gathering for worship was still restricted; in others, although not restricted officially, people were not there, especially families with children. While live streaming had been a gift in the pandemic period, it was now a challenging part of the new reality. Many pastors responded with creativity and diligence – “Is this camera angle good?” – but some were burning out under the ongoing new demands. Students, energized by their call, were noticing a church that had changed; or rather, the changes that were in motion pre-pandemic were now more noticeable. A local diocese publicly described its ecclesial health as ‘palliative’; churches were speaking about their financial end date – ‘We have six years at best’; one denomination de-linked its minimum salary grid from the Canadian Consumer Price Index, effectively telling its more than 3700 clergy ‘you’re on your own’ with future salary negotiations. Students were observing leaders who

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were tired and even discouraged. The church they were observing was indeed different and, when they thought of TFE, they were being more creative, more expansive. This post-pandemic church was not, of course, the reality everywhere. But I heard students talking about it. Their judicatories were wanting them to move more quickly into leadership positions, put their theological education on the back burner and their service to the fore. “We need your enthusiasm to turn things around,” the students heard as they struggled to focus on their studies, an obvious institutional priority but not necessarily a learners-first approach.

As a multidenominational theological school with an historic and deep commitment to three church partners (the Anglican Church of Canada, the United Church of Canada, and the Presbyterian Church in Canada), VST is increasingly relating to a growing constituency of evangelical churches who find that the school reflects their values of engagement with the big questions, contemporary justice challenges, and key theological commitments out of which such engagement arises. This changing demographic, and the pandemic’s challenge, brought to the fore the school’s need to examine closely how experiential learning, ‘learning in place’ even if that place is virtual, might be made more robust. Through its participation in the Pathways for Tomorrow Initiative of the Lilly Endowment Inc., VST began working within the school’s mission “to form and educate thoughtful, engaged, and generous Christian leaders” in concert with the school’s interreligious and Indigenous studies and to review TFE critically and constructively. We began our Pathways project work by seeking to gain a clear and accurate picture of the current state of the TFE program (including its strengths, challenges, and opportunities) through extensive interviews, surveys, and research. The consultant on the project, the Rev. Anthony Robinson of Seattle, conducted over fifty interviews with students, field education supervisors-mentors, graduates, denominational directors of formation at VST, other denominational leaders, VST faculty, and directors of field education at other schools in North America. In addition, sixty-four responses to online surveys were received reflecting the same categories.

Through this initial research, VST learned that there was much that is excellent in the school’s TFE program and much that our recent graduates have appreciated. We also learned that there were programmatic and structural changes that could be made to the TFE program, including course redesign, enhancements to the preparation and accountability of supervision, and a greater proactive role for students in site selection. This initial work led us to wonder how we might more effectively integrate TFE into the whole curriculum, including connecting points with our interreligious and Indigenous programs. We also became aware of the need for the support of lay ministry vocations and the identification of “thriving congregations” where our students might best learn from well-prepared and skilled mentors and the lay people who minister alongside them.

As we got the project going, we developed a model to help us, and those we would be working with, imagine the way forward and how we might see TFE in the future. We call it the Ecology of Partnership (see figure 1). In that model, the various relationships are described. Individual connections, representing broad categories of partners, started to emerge. For example, we see students as a partnership relationship, and within this relationship we have connected with current students and alumni. We propose seeking some connection with prospective students through the school's Recruitment Office. This will, in coming years, give us some indication of the potential impact of the TFE program as a draw for students.

We are now two and a half years into the project – what we've called Leaders for a New Day – and several elements are moving forward. One of the key pieces is the hiring of a new director, the Rev. Mary Nichol, a well-connected ecumenical faith formation leader who has taught at the school as a sessional instructor. Below is a summary of other developments.

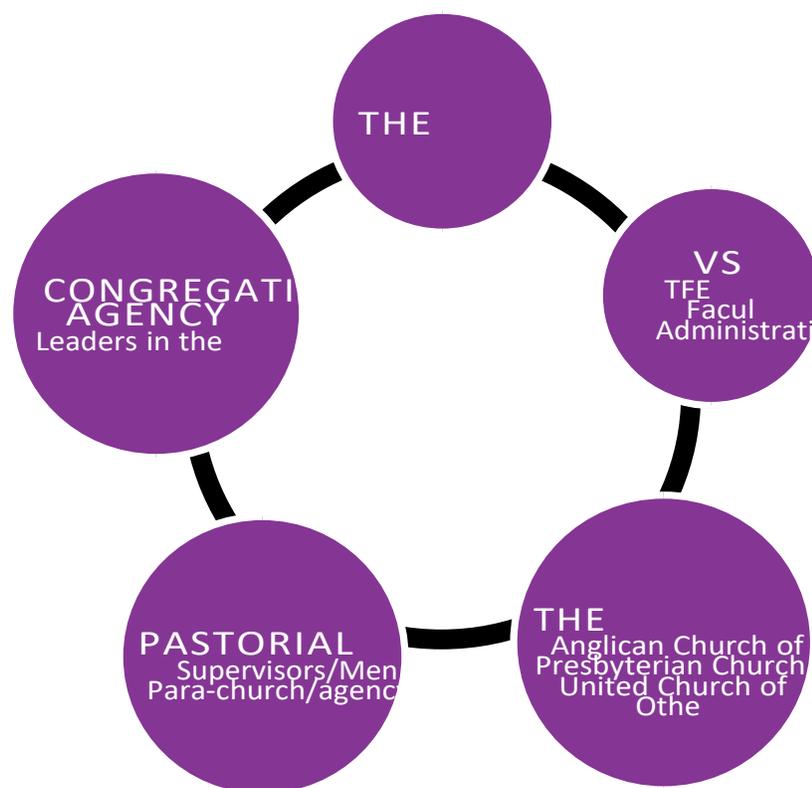


Figure 1. Theological field education (TFE) at Vancouver School of Theology (VST) – ecology of partnerships.

COURSE REDEVELOPMENT

Following a review of the courses related to TFE, it was determined that there was some repetition in the course content that needed to be addressed and that we could develop a more logical flow if some adjustments were made. These course

adjustments also emerged out of our research finding that some students were not well enough prepared to enter their TFE site. We could do better to enhance their readiness for in-place learning. We combined some courses and provided more hours and depth of study in the course that initiates TFE, specifically adding a stronger focus on theological reflection. The incoming director will have the opportunity to develop that new course and influence the program going forward.

STUDENT STIPENDS

Throughout the research, surveying, interviewing, and consultation phase of the project we heard a strong call for funding of students during their TFE programs. This echoed the expressed need for increased bursary support throughout the whole school fee structure.

VST students had not been funded for TFE, as at some schools, but neither had they been charged tuition for their field site work. Courses that run alongside field

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hours were tuition bearing. It had been clear for some time that many students have significant financial challenges through their degree programs and that the TFE requirement, although the cost is moderate in the context of the whole program, seemed to them to be a place where some assistance could be offered.

In the consultations with students, in which we heard them clearly describing their financial challenges, they noted that other professional education programs (law, medicine, social work) often include a stipend for a practicum, internship, or fieldwork. They wondered why their theological education program did not. This was also where we heard that some denominations, and judicatory leaders, were pressing hard for students to begin working in ministry before the completion of their degree. While this is historically not new, and many school's programs run in parallel to ministry in the church, our consultations sought to understand this better. We recognized a lot of concern coming from the denominations to put new, recently trained leaders in the church to 'make a difference' in the face of decline or discouragement. From the school's point of view, we were concerned that the final months of a student's education could suffer. Some students were tempted by two things – the desire to get into 'real ministry' as soon as possible and the need to earn money. We began to see that a TFE stipend might relieve this situation somewhat and keep some students more fully engaged in their program until its completion.

As we moved to consider a funded approach to a robust TFE program in experiential learning alongside academic offerings, we did wonder whether a stipend for TFE might deepen the expectation and the "sense of value" for experiential learning – or would it play into a consumerist mindset of "work/ministry is only valued when it is paid"? We clearly didn't want a stipend to change the perception of TFE from a

“learning model” to an “employment model”. We determined that all the programs’ leadership would need to keep a strong focus on experiential, in-place learning. Eventually, we reached a decision to move ahead with a stipend for TFE students of \$1500 per 100 hours of field site work. We were grateful that we could begin immediately with the funding available from the Pathways program. We also knew that we would have to build in sustainability for this financial arrangement to continue.

SUPPORT AND DEVELOPMENT OF SUPERVISORS

Supervisors are invaluable to a robust TFE program, and, although we knew this well, our research phase had brought it to our attention even more clearly. With the possibility offered by the Pathways Initiative, we knew that we could improve the role of supervision in our program, but we needed to find the best ways to do that. We consulted with other schools, with judicatories, and, of course, with current supervisors. We began to identify that they desired support, encouragement, leadership development, increased access to resources, and – possibly, we thought – financial remuneration. As a school, we started with our innate assumption: perhaps these people would benefit from a certificate program offered by the school in “Ministry of Supervision”. We quickly learned that this was not an interest of most supervisors. They did want to learn and to be supported in that learning by a stronger relationship with the school as a partner in their work with students. Relationship. Partnership. These words started to go deeper in our thinking about how we might work with supervisors.

As remuneration was an early assumption we had, and with the financial resources we now had through the Pathways program and the possibility of growing further funds, we wondered whether we should consider paying supervisors. Some schools do; VST had not been doing so. We heard from judicatory leaders that they didn’t think this was a good idea. We also heard from a small group of supervisors that they didn’t think so either. We weren’t sure, so we put the idea on hold – even as we moved ahead with funding for students in TFE – and focused on the two words: relationship and partnership.

We felt one way to build relationship and to signal our intent to be solid partners would be to invite past, current, and potential supervisors to a gathering in Vancouver, with expenses mostly paid by the project funds. We cast our invitation net wide, and in November 2023, thirty-four participants and our leadership team of six gathered for two and a half days, meeting both in a local church in downtown Vancouver and at VST. We called the event Leaders for a New Day. Long-time TFE leader and advocate Barbara Blodgett spoke about the current context of TFE, highlighting the important role that supervisors play in the teaching ecology of theological education. Congregational and university campus minister the Rev. Min Goo Kang invited us to raise our intercultural awareness through an exploration of identity, space, and food.

The Rev. Canon Anne Privett, a local priest in Kelowna, British Columbia, reflected on the distinction between resilience and perseverance out of her experience of the pandemic, a ‘heat dome’, wildfires in the community, and the need for parish renewal, all against the background of a community farm project that has transformed leadership.

Our purpose for the event was fourfold:

To gather current and recent supervisors-mentors to establish a ‘learning community’ of ecumenical ministry mentors affiliated with the school.

To offer a VST educational event that would strengthen the TFE program through support of those mentors.

To enhance our ‘ecology of partnerships’ in the redevelopment of the TFE program, with the prioritizing of, and support for, our supervisory partners.

To create a relaxed atmosphere with time for reflection and consideration of ministry leadership through peer learning and reflective practice.

It was an ambitious event, and while not all our goals were fully met, the attendees expressed overwhelming appreciation for being honored and well respected by the school. They were grateful for the opportunity to gather with peers with similar interests. We learned many things from the participants that will guide our work with supervisory partners in the months ahead.

In her presentation, Barbara Blodgett referred to the work of Bill Kincaid, who has observed that a field site is often a place where students may need to “wrestle with [their] tradition in order to interpret [their] faith in a lively and credible manner.”² Recalling that this interactive theological work has often been characterized as “lived theology,” in contrast to the subject matters of systematic or practical theology, she led the group in an engaging workshop. Through a case study process, the participants lived the theological experience of a student and their supervisor who were struggling with a lived and painful moment of pastoral life. In addition to that workshop, a panel discussion on offering feedback invited participants to recall the power of helpful feedback and the challenge of that which was not so helpful. An opening conference address from VST president Dr. Richard Topping reflected on the theological power of imagination as “students learn how faith works in the world not just by lecture but from motions, movements and silences.”

²NOTES

William B. Kincaid, *Finding Voice: How Theological Field Education Shapes Pastoral Identity* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2012), loc. 112, Kindle.

As we move forward in our Pathways Initiative project – Leaders for a New Day – we see many opportunities to continue to engage in the *ecology of partnerships*. We know that our program activities will need to be self-sustaining at some point in the future, and financial development for that purpose has begun. We know that our supervisors expect us to continue to find ways to support and encourage them. And most of all, our student partners in this ecology are expecting a program that will guide them and prepare them in their leadership for the emerging future of communities of faith.