

CASE STUDY

A Bold Step into Coaching

By Dr. Jerry Graham, Director of Coaching, Vanguard Ministries

How does an organization maintain contact with a geographically diverse group of men and women engaged in various aspects of ministry...especially if relationship and accountability are both high values of the membership and clearly set forth in the organization's four-fold purpose for existence. That was the challenge faced by the leaders of Vanguard Ministries...an apostolic network of churches and ministries founded in 1999 in Chesapeake, VA. In fact, Bobby Hill, Vanguard's founder and International Director, stated at its launch, "I envision a network of churches and leaders bound together by a common DNA of vision and values who have made the quality decision to walk in the unity of the Spirit. We are to be an organization which is established and maintained along relational lines — not hierarchical authority." (For a good overview of the founding tenets of Vanguard Ministries, go to:

<http://www.vanguardministries.org/foundation.asp>.

For a description of apostolic networks, go to page 3 of:

http://www.vanguardministries.org/theenvoy/Envoy_vol1.pdf.)

In short, other than at the annual gathering of the membership, Vanguard talked relationship and accountability, strongly believed in it, but had no way to provide it to the membership.

Serendipitously, two of the key leaders of Vanguard, Dr. Joseph Umidi and Doug Fike, joined with Tony Stoltzfus to create an organization to meet the ongoing need to see true transformation in Christian leaders' lives over and above the cognitive delivery systems so predominant in our culture. These three men had accrued a lifetime of experience observing the difficulties, frustrations, and often painful failures of leaders who weren't equipped, for one reason or another, to finish well in their ministry calling. That organization was dubbed Transformational Leadership Coaching (TLC) and centered around the goal of raising up Christian coaches who could draw alongside leaders and coach them on to their destinies.

Vanguard, continuing to look for a way to solve its membership challenges, watched as the three TLC principals designed and launched an organization that quickly was recognized by a broad base as having a unique offering that was in great demand. As TLC gained more and more experience with its coaching paradigm, it became increasingly clear that coaching was God's provision to meet Vanguard's needs. Coaching had the potential to go beyond the needs for relationship and accountability and provide the membership with a sense of personal touch that Vanguard is taking a proactive role in the individual member's development. Because of that potential, Vanguard took the bold step of making coaching a mandatory benefit of membership. Vanguard literally doubled the member's annual dues in order to remunerate the coaches who would be providing that service to the Vanguard members. (As of this writing, it is too early to judge the fallout from this step. Undoubtedly, there will be some who choose to leave the fellowship because of the "forced" emphasis on coaching and there will be some who will be attracted because of that same emphasis.)

Vanguard looks to TLC to provide a list of certified coaches and then contracts directly with the coach for their services to the members. (Note that many, but not all, of the coaches are members of Vanguard Ministries.) Each member is entitled to ten hours of coaching per membership year. For some, that may be enough, for others, the member is free to contract directly with the coach for additional coaching time at a rate agreed to by the coach and the Vanguard member.

While it is still early in the implementation of the TLC paradigm within Vanguard, the initial reaction has been one of great enthusiasm regarding the potential synergy of coaching incorporated into the Vanguard structure. Vanguard members who have experienced the coaching are stepping forward and testifying to the receipt of immediate help with some of their life and leadership issues. One pastor who was experiencing a major transition wrote, “The result of my coaching experience ... has been a closer walk with God and a deeper understanding of the next steps of God’s will for my life and ministry.” Another testified that his decision to pastor a church was a direct result of the coaching he received as he had previously felt (and was actively pursuing) a call to a parachurch ministry. The intriguing part of that is that many of these are issues that the member would never have envisioned Vanguard to be a source of assistance. In fact, there have even been cases where the Vanguard member was in personal crisis, and without this coaching paradigm, the Vanguard leaders might well have never known about the crisis until after the fact—which would have been too late to help.

One of the major lessons learned from this experience has been that the primary impediment to the transition to mandatory coaching is that some of the members don’t have a good feel for coaching and how it might contribute value to them. There is still confusion, for instance, regarding the difference between coaching and counseling. A common question is, “Do I have time for this?” As the experience and number of testimonies increase, this should be a short-lived limitation. It is also clear that the request for coaching must be member initiated. A client cannot be coached without an adequate understanding of the potential benefits. Similarly, the lack of a roadmap for implementation has also provided a challenge, but is similarly quickly being overcome.

This incorporation of coaching into Vanguard Ministries has become one of the distinctives of the network. To our knowledge, no other apostolic network (or denomination, for that matter) is currently set up such that all the members must be coached as a condition of membership.