

Alumni Spotlight: Debra Brown (MDiv '07, DMin '16)



Current title: President & CEO, Governance Solutions Inc.

Family: Spouse: David, my partner in life and business; 2 children, 6 grandchildren

Favorite professors: Dr. Tim Laniak, Dr. Rod Cooper

Favorite class: DMin Residency

Favorite memory: I thoroughly enjoyed all of it. A favorite memory was starting off the 1st day of my DMin with my cohort at a cemetery and being asked to choose a single tombstone to contemplate. It began with me thinking, what can I possibly learn

staring at this single headstone and its one line of text, written about someone I never knew or met? Turns out you can understand not only a lot about one's life journey, but how it might apply to your own, too.

What have you been doing since you left Gordon-Conwell and what are you doing now?

Today I continue to lead a family of businesses in the marketplace focused on leadership and governance. Our focus is on Corporate Governance where we train and certify board members and C-Suite Executives and help organizations across the world make order out of chaos in the boardroom.

What do you love about your work?

Good leadership and governance matter. The better a ministry or company is led and governed, the more impactful and successful it is across a variety of indicators. The better led and governed our organizations are, the more impactful and successful our communities are. Likewise, the stronger our communities are, so too goes the world. Poor leadership and governance have the opposite effect. If I can contribute even a little bit creatively, formatively, and redemptively by teaching and encouraging executives and board members who cross my path, I will have fulfilled my purpose. So, what do I love about my work? All of it! I love the people we work with and serve, the purpose of the work we do, and enjoying the fruit of our labor at the end of the day.

What are the joys and challenges of serving in the business/for-profit world in general and in your specific context?

I have touched on the joys already, but the biggest joy is witnessing the changes in people's lives as we come alongside them and help them to understand and enhance their leadership and governance. To watch them learn, grow, change, and add value to His world is my greatest joy and makes any challenge pale in comparison. One

challenge working in the business world is that you cannot always be transparent about the source of the underlying principles behind our systems and tools. It takes care and wisdom in how to communicate issues of faith while remaining true and authentic in your beliefs.

How has God woven together your Gordon-Conwell education with other life events to bring you to where you are now? How did you come to be doing your current work?

I am reminded of the verse in Psalm 139, “Your eyes saw my unformed body; all my days were written in Your book and ordained for me before one of them came to be.” My life, like everyone’s, is a journey, one that unfolds moment by moment, day by day, year by year. In the moment we may not fully understand why or where it all fits, but in retrospect we see more clearly. Over the years God led me through a series of circumstances and events. From my childhood days growing up on the farm, to early education and training, a litany of jobs and positions, opportunities I stepped into, experiences in different churches and denominations, and people who came along my path, each experience helped to carry me along the way, including meeting people connected with Gordon-Conwell.

I started thinking about going to seminary later in life. My children were grown, my business was doing well, and I felt like I needed to do something new to learn more, grow more, and get a doctorate that could expand my capacity as well as add credibility for the books and articles that I aspired to write. But even though business was my field, I didn’t want to study more about business. I wanted to study more about what the Bible says about the principles of business, leadership, and governance. Being grounded on the biblical principles of my craft seemed wise to me. My pastor suggested I consider Gordon-Conwell, his alma mater. Then I took on a project for the Billy Graham Association, and it was then that I became further convinced by my colleagues there that I explore next steps at the Charlotte campus of GCTS. It helped that at the time, the Charlotte campus was the only seminary I could find that made it possible for me to continue running my business back in Canada full-time while taking a combination of week-long intensives or SemLink courses and flying in on weekends for other programs. It took me sixteen years and countless flights from Toronto to Charlotte to finish my DMin in Christian Leadership. First, I had to complete an MDiv, which as you know, included learning both Greek and Hebrew, something I was originally not too enamored about. A lot happened in those sixteen years. To answer your question, how did you come to be doing your current work, I suppose it is as we read in 1 Corinthians 13, “For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I have been fully known.”

How has your Gordon-Conwell education served you in your past and current work?

My Gordon-Conwell education keeps me grounded. From every course I took regardless of the subject—yes even Greek and Hebrew—I easily found principles, frameworks, and tools that I was immediately able to apply in our businesses. Perhaps

the foremost example was developing the boardroom culture assessment tool based on research conducted for my thesis *Using Governance as a Tool to Transform Organizational Culture*. During the research for my thesis, I piloted and tested this culture assessment tool in an international faith-based organization. The research was successful: the case study organization transformed its culture and continues to apply a whole range of governance system tools that we developed through my studies at GCTS. The thesis research and other course studies were major contributors to our signature book published in 2019, *Governance Solutions: The Ultimate Guide to Confidence and Competence in the Boardroom*.

What piece of advice would you give to young alumni who are considering serving in the business world?

Try not to think about the business world as somehow being separate from the ministry world. Don't think about it as sacred or secular. I tend to think of myself as a "both/and" kind of girl, more so than one who is "either/or." Many individuals sense God's call to ministry and only consider traditional pastoral ministry as their vocation, while significant ministry opportunities abound in the business world. Some even leave careers with great potential to change lives for God without considering that they may already be on the right path. The Charlotte model is the perfect solution for people like that, as it was for me. Much of the world and the opportunities it holds are "both/and." Both the secular business and the sacred ministry serve His purposes. They are both ripe ministry fields, ready to be harvested for Him.

Do you have any publications or links to share?

Learn more about [Governance Solutions](#), [Professional Director](#), and [BoardConnex](#).

Books:

- [*Governance Solutions: The Ultimate Guide to Competence and Confidence in the Boardroom*](#) (Author Academy Elite, 2020)
- [*ESG Matters: How to Save the Planet, Empower People and Outperform the Competition*](#) (Ethos Collective, 2021)
- [*Virtually There: Dos and Don'ts for Planning, Chairing, and Holding Virtual Board and Annual General Meetings*](#) (Ethos Collective, 2021)
- [*Governing in Scary Times: The Board's Roadmap for Governance Through and Beyond and Emergency*](#) (Author Academy Elite, 2021)