

# **Empowering Servant Leadership**

**by Dr. Ray S. Anderson**

When we received a call to Christian ministry most of us thought that in becoming pastors we were assuming the role of being a shepherd of the sheep. After all, the shepherd's crook is one of the most common symbols of pastoral ministry. What we had not counted on was that instead of feeding docile sheep we often ended up fighting wolves, sometimes in sheep's clothing! Very quickly we also discovered that serving as a pastor of a church was more like managing a small business whose employees were unpaid volunteers and a board of directors who each had their own agenda.

Looking back on my own seminary training, I was prepared to be a minister, but not really prepared for ministry. Our professor of pastoral theology not only taught us about officiating at funerals and weddings, but had us practice with each other doing baptisms with real water—including immersion for those so inclined! However, we were never instructed in principles of church leadership nor were there any 'practice' sessions of conducting congregational and church board meetings. Apparently it was assumed that these skills came about through on-the-job training: for better or for worse which, as it turned out, was most often for the worse! I was warned against using my role as pastor to gain authority over the people. After all, we were told, Jesus set the model for ministry when he said, "The Son of Man came not to be served, but to serve" (Matt 29:28). Leading by serving makes a nice spiritual slogan but it is not so easily done in practice.

"I don't believe in the concept of servant leadership," a pastor once told me. "I am not the paid servant of my congregation, but their spiritual leader." I could tell from his tone of voice that this pastor was protesting as much as he was proclaiming. When pressed, he admitted that he

felt like he spent more time serving the needs of the congregation than leading it. There was an angry edge to his emotions and a bit of defiance in his eyes.

More than one pastor has ended up feeling this way. Seminary graduates often enter pastoral ministry with idealistic visions of a spiritual ministry devoted largely to preparing rich and edifying sermons, giving wise counsel to lay leaders, and offering pastoral care and comfort to needy souls. After all, the call is to ‘full-time ministry.’ Sooner or later, these same pastors begin to realize that the congregation is reading from a different version of the original vision. ‘Full time’ is the name of the horse hitched to the cart with a dozen wheels with one or more dropping off at the most inopportune times, and ‘minister’ is the code word for the driver who also doubles as the mechanic.

The fundamental misconception with servant leadership, as reflected by the pastor cited above, is that one ends up being the servant of the people or the organization. This leads to the ‘doormat’ concept of leadership, where one lays down whatever dreams and plans one has and invites people to walk over them. "I am only the coach," one pastor said, "my people are the players." Or, to put it in more ecclesiastical terms, "I am only the pastor, my people are the ministers." This concept of servant leadership is really the abandonment of leadership. It leads to failure on the part of the leader and frustration among the members of the church.

Robert Greenleaf, who wrote the seminal work on servant leadership, made it clear that the leader is not subservient to the desires and goals of the organization, but is a servant of the mission of the organization. It is the vision of the specific mission or goal of the organization, says Greenleaf, that marks the effective leader. "Foresight is the 'lead' that the leader has. When

he loses this lead and events start to force his hand, he is leader in name only. He is not leading; he is reacting to immediate events and he probably will not long be a leader."<sup>1</sup>

The congregation that called me to be their pastor when I graduated from seminary had been meeting in a temporary building for six months and looking to buy property. While preaching twice on Sunday (morning and evening) I assumed leadership of the church board and found myself negotiating for the purchase of the property, arranging for the financing, securing an architect and building contractor and then working alongside of the small crew of about a dozen men in our congregation every Saturday for almost a year putting up the first building. Hundreds of decisions had to be made, processed through the lay leadership, while avoiding the landmines of petty prejudices, passionately held opinions, and the power dynamics typical of strong egos!

I quickly realized that the major transition in my role as pastor was one of relinquishing the built-in power of the office of pastor in order to gain the authority of a pastoral leader. The temptation was to use a power-play when my authority was questioned. Transitioning into effective leadership meant letting go of power in order to define the vision in such a way that others were empowered to lead the way forward. This meant personal vulnerability (nothing to defend at the expense of another's feelings) coupled with a persistent challenge to make the vision so compelling that it belongs to everyone (nothing to gain at the expense of another's loss). I learned that effective leadership involves discipline that corrects disorder and direction that overcomes disorganization and confusion. Effective servant leadership means directing and

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<sup>1</sup> Robert Greenleaf. *Servant Leadership* (New York: Paulist Press, 1977), p. 18. See also his book, *The Servant as Religious Leader* (Windy Row Press, 1982). On the vision of leadership see, Ray Anderson, *Minding God's Business* (Eerdmans, 1986) pp. 66-68, and *The Soul of Ministry: Forming Leaders for God's People* (Westminster, 1997), pp. 197-204.

coordinating the energies and resources of the people of God; this is being a 'faithful steward' of God's vision.

When we lose the vision for God's Kingdom we may be close to losing sight of the mission that transforms routine work into redemptive ministry. The gifts of the Spirit were as much for the edification of the minister as for the work of the ministry (Eph 4:1-16). Christ's ministry was not first of all to meet the needs of the world, but to do the will of the Father. Jesus did not have to love the world more than the Father who sent him into the world (John 3:16). No task is merely routine, no position is merely administrative, no calling is merely an occupation when it is Christ's on-going ministry to the Father for the sake of the world through the power of the Holy Spirit.

An effective servant leader must possess three things: a creative vision that inspires, a delegated power that enables, and a spiritual gift for ministry. Pastors are servant leaders of the people of God. They are not accountable by virtue of always having the right vision, but to submit their vision to the wisdom of God and be willing to abandon their own in favor of God's. They are not accountable for every strategic plan, but that the plans are worked so as to lead to the will of God. They are not responsible to succeed at every point, but at every point to be accountable to the gift of the Spirit and the character of Christ in exercising that gift.

The final test of the servant leader is that the 'little ones' who belong to Christ are not despised and abused, for "in heaven, their angels continually see the face of my father" (Matt 18:10). The effective servant leader is not one who 'works the angles,' but who sees the angels. God's servant leader does not stand between the people and God, but stands with the people as the faithful steward, to provide discipline and correction, and to prepare the way for the coming of the Lord.

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