

**SERVANT LEADERSHIP FOR A SERVANT COMMUNITY:**  
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**Introduction**

I want to speak to Christian educators regarding the most decisive issue you will confront in your leadership assignment. What constitutes success in your leadership ministry? This question is crucial because the way you define success will determine your leadership style.

My thesis is that there must be a vision within the Christian community you serve regarding ministry that is shared by both the leader and the led. Without this shared vision of ministry, the community of faith will experience disillusionment, disintegration and despair. Conversely, mobilizing a Christian community for ministry hinges on a radical commitment to our identity as:

brothers and sisters in Christ,  
fellow travelers on a spiritual journey,  
members together of Christ's body,  
a fellowship of God's People,  
a microcosm of the Kingdom of God on earth,  
a community of faith,  
a sacramental community in and through which the grace of God flows.

Fundamentally, I believe, effective leadership for ministry expression is grounded in biblical perspective and not in organizational skills. Skills, of course, are needed. However, sharp skills without Christian motives easily lead to manipulation. The primary orientation and motivation of our actions as Christian leaders must be deeply theological.

How convictionally we affirm these affirmations as we lead will determine the degree to which our leadership will be judged "successful" in biblical perspective.

Let us explore more deeply this thesis.

## I. WHAT IS MINISTRY?

In its briefest and most general understanding, ministry is "diakonia" or SERVICE. Ministry is service to others in Jesus' name. Certain words help us understand the various dimensions of Christian ministry. Words like caring, sharing, growing, relating, teaching, and confronting. Ministry in New Testament perspective takes the form of holding the hand of a person engulfed in fear, listening intently to a person in trouble, crying with a person who is hurt, or embracing the individual who is grieving. It may include taking students or parishioners to the store for groceries, or confronting in love the lack of discipline or careless habits. Ministry encompasses the sharing of the Christian faith, or a verse of scripture with another in time of need.

Christian ministry is the extension of the service of Jesus in our world, incarnating the healing, guiding, sustaining, reconciling work of Jesus in the lives of those with whom we work and live. If you are a Christian, you are called to Christian ministry.

Ministry understood in this broadest sense is the context for our specific ministry. We may be specifically called and gifted for pastoral ministry, teaching ministry, evangelism ministry, music ministry, or leadership ministry. But it is futile and self-defeating to seek to function within our specific calling *while ignoring the broader calling to serve others in Jesus' name.*

Jesus defined success in Christian ministry in terms of service or self-giving to others in the name and place of God (Matthew 25:30-34). Our responsibility as leaders is caring for God's people as a shepherd does his sheep, leading and teaching them in the ways of God. Our leadership mandate is to motivate, equip, and enable the people of God to develop their gifts and give their lives in meaningful service to others in Jesus' name.

Our ministry is helping others prepare for their ministries.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer in *Life Together*, lists seven expressions of ministry by which a Christian community must be judged and characterized.

### **1. The Ministry of Holding One's Tongue**

"He who holds his tongue in check controls both mind and body," James tells us. "Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouth..." is an admonishment from the Ephesian epistle. When this passage characterizes us, we will be able to cease from constantly criticizing the other person, judging him and condemning him, putting him in his particular place. We can allow the other to exist as a completely free person.

### **2. The Ministry of Meekness**

This is "caring more for others than for self." "Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought," Paul tells us in Romans 12:3. John tells us to make no effort to obtain the praise that comes only from God. He who serves must learn to think first of others.

### **3. The Ministry of Listening**

The first service that one owes to others in the fellowship consists of listening to others. Listening can be a greater service to people than speaking.

### **4. The Ministry of Active Helpfulness**

Simply assist others within the Christian community in trifling, external matter.

### **5. The Ministry of Bearing (Supporting)**

"Carry each other's burden" is the challenge of Gal. 6:2. Bearing means forbearing and sustaining one another in love. Eph. 4:2 commands us to be humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love.

### **6. The Ministry of Proclaiming**

This is the ministry of the word of God. Bonhoeffer does not mean the message of Scripture in a formal setting such as in the worship service. He is referring to the free communication of the word of God from person to person. He is referring to that unique situation in which one person becomes a witness in human words to another, with Christian consolation.

## 7. The Ministry of Authority (Leadership)

Jesus states in Mark 10:43, "Whosoever wants to be great among you must be first your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be your slave." This is the paradox of ministry. Jesus made authority in the fellowship dependent upon brotherly service. A servant is one who gets excited about helping someone else succeed.

For Bonhoeffer, these practical expressions of Christian ministry provide the *context* within which our specific ministries must function. This is particularly true as it relates to the specific ministry of leadership.

Robert Greenleaf, in his outstanding book, *Servant Leadership*, suggests a thesis that those who are leaders must serve those whom they lead. Only those who serve, he believes, are fit for leadership. Though written for the secular audience, the book contains many thoughts on servant leadership similar to the words of Jesus.

Christian leadership is, I believe, humble service to others in the community of faith whose head is Christ for the purpose of enabling them, through modeling and teaching, to fulfill their ministry to each other and their mission in the world.

The question is, how can our ministry of Christian leadership enable *others* to fulfill *their* ministry to each other and *their* mission in the world? Leadership, for ministers of Christ, is known by the personalities it enriches, not by those it dominates or captivates. Are the people being served growing as Christians? Are they themselves becoming servants? These are crucial concerns for leadership in the community of God's people.

Dr. Harold Reed, president of the Reed Institute for the Advanced Study of Leadership, and author of the book, *The Dynamics of Leadership*, reminds us that the quality of our leadership is largely based on our philosophy of life. If our philosophy of life is based on a biblical theology of church and ministry, then our style of leadership will convictionally focus on the qualitative growth of the led as ministers of Jesus Christ, called to serve others in His name.

Understood this way, the Christian ministry is a *shared ministry* with every believer serving and supporting one another, using Holy Spirit given gifts to stimulate personal and corporate growth and reconciliation in both the church and the world. Ministry, like missions, is a function and expression of the whole church. It is not something that only a few persons are called, trained and ordained to do, but a function of the people of God.

Perhaps the outline of my model of ministry will summarize this discussion on ministry, and will conceptualize the relationship of the leadership ministry of the pastor-teacher to the ministry of the church whom he/she serves (see Appendix "A").

Again, our ministry of leadership is to prepare others for their ministries.

## **II. WHAT IS MEANT BY THE PHRASE "SHARED VISION" OF MINISTRY?**

Vision has to do with seeing things clearly and at a great distance. It is seeing what others do not see. A vision is a consuming, passionate, compelling inner picture. All leaders are supposed to have "vision." Fundamental for the Christian leader is not so much organization "vision," but theological "vision."

What do we "see" in the people with whom we work? Do we see problems or possibilities? The present situation or the future potential? Some leaders focus only on the past. Some see only the present and say, "Why?" Others dream of things that never were, and say, "Why not?"

Our challenge is to see beyond the past, or even the present with its problems, to "dream" or "see" redeemed individuals - all of whom are called to live as an extension of Jesus in their world, incarnating the healing, sustaining, reconciling work of Jesus in the lives of those with whom they work and live.

As leaders, we need - we must have - a consuming, passionate, compelling inner picture of:

1. *who* we are as the people of God.
2. *how* we may live together as the family of God, and

3. *what* we are called to do with our lives in the work of God. And leadership is the *transference* of this vision!

Our desperate need is to transfer our vision of ministry to those for whom we have Christian care and responsibility who will in turn transfer their vision to others! To believe that all Christians - yes, even those with whom we work who sometimes make life so difficult - are *called* and gifted for the ministry of Christ. More and more, we need to see ourselves as *equippers* of ministers. Unfortunately, most of us have been educated to be ministers, not to be enablers of ministers.

Shared ministry demands deep "seeing" and deep "visioning." Only the person who can see the invisible can do the impossible. Questions such as "what if..." and "why not..." ought to permeate our mind set regarding the Christians with whom we work. What if...they were all called to the Christian ministry? Why not...assume it is true and proceed accordingly!

Eldon Trueblood states it most clearly,

Unless the layman is given solid teaching, his ministry, after an initial burst of freshness, will tend to degenerate into little more than a string of trite phrases linked to commonplace ideas and buttressed by a few sloppily quoted biblical passages. We must take the education of the laity with utter seriousness. Lay persons are not assistants to the pastor, to help him do his work. Rather, the pastor is to be their assistant; he is to help equip them for the ministry to which God has called them. The difference is as revolutionary as it is total. Half measures are worse than nothing. Our hope lies in making big plans, in undertaking to produce a radical change, in aiming high. Adult education is the big thing in the church. It is not a decoration, it is the centerpiece.

Only from this perspective will ministry be mutually understood and shared. Without this shared vision, ministry in and through the local church or theological institution is as impossible as a triangle with two sides. Ministry happens when the leader and the congregation, administrator and students have a vision of Christian ministry and pursue it together. The more consuming the vision, the greater commitment to ministry.

We must be captured by this vision which transcends ministry *to* the people, and ministry *for* the people, to ministry *with* the people and ministry *by* the people.

The shared vision of ministry of which I speak demands a *passionate conviction* regarding ministry that sets out to do something about the insight. Our leadership ministry is helping others understand and develop their ministry. When those with similar vision are drawn together, something extraordinary occurs.

### **III. HOW, THEN, CAN WE COMMUNICATE A VISION OF MINISTRY THAT WILL BECOME A SHARED VISION?**

Jesus challenges us in Luke 6:40, "When a student is fully trained he will become like his teacher." (Or his school president!) Ministry is always incarnated and enfleshed. Ministry must be lived out!

But what is it about ourselves that we want our students, staff, or parishioners to catch from us? We want our people to catch from us a servant spirit, committed to *motivating, equipping* and *enabling them to serve others in Jesus' name*. This is success for the Christian leader! This is what it means to be a servant leader!

What we are confronted with is a need to communicate a lifestyle that is distinctly Christian - and self-giving at the core. But how do you communicate a lifestyle? How do you teach commitments, priorities, values, and spiritual disciplines? How do you teach a lifestyle?

Whatever else it means, it demands taking seriously the principle of imitation. Herbert Mayer, in his book, *Pastoral Care, Its Roots and Renewal*, reminds us that this principle was a key in Christian leadership for eighteen centuries. We must recapture this principle if we take seriously the biblical mandate to be an example to believers. "Follow me as I follow Christ." "You ought to follow my example." "Put into practice what you have learned, received or heard from me or seen in me." "We did this in order to make ourselves a model for you to follow." Paul gave these words to the Christians under his care with humility, we must do the same for those for whom we are responsible.

Read the writings of Justin Martyr, Tertullian, John Chrysostom, Martin Luther, Richard Baxter and John Wesley, to name only a few, who were not hesitant to claim their responsibility to be an example to their believers. Chrysostom, identified the following as qualities for leaders:

1. Love for God and the People
2. Know the People
3. Be a person of the Spirit
4. Maintain rigorous self-discipline
5. Patience.

With these qualities, the leader can strive, according to Chrysostom, toward the following goals and objectives:

1. To bring the people of God safely to their heavenly home
2. To keep them away from the sin of the world
3. To win as many souls to Christ as possible
4. To make people aware of the poor and needy. Interestingly, one of the key ways for Chrysostom to reach these goals was through personal example!

More specifically, what leadership qualities must others see in us as institutional leaders, teachers, or pastors, if we are to effectively transfer our vision of ministry to them? Eph. 4:25-32 provides for a servant leadership lifestyle (see Appendix "B").

Ephesians, chapter four, begins with the challenge to walk worthy of our calling as Christians, The characteristics of the person "walking worthy" follows the challenge. We are instructed to be gentle, humble, patient, and supportive of each other. In so living, we will "maintain the unity of the spirit in the bond of peace."

But, as Christian *leaders*, how do we express gentleness, humbleness, patience, and supportiveness? The key principle is found in Ephesians 4:15 - "speaking the truth in love." They key concept is fleshed out in the following verses (4:25-32). We speak the truth in love:

- 1 Because as Christians *we are God's Family*. Therefore, we should speak truthfully, and not lie to one another (4:25).
- 2 Because, when we do not, *Satan gets a foothold in our lives*. Therefore, we should not postpone dealing with our anger, and should deal with our differences in a Christian way (4:26-27).
- 3 Because of the *power of words to heal and affirm*. Therefore, be supportive and uplifting, and avoid negative talking (4:29).
- 4 Because *we have been forgiven in Christ*. Therefore, be forgiving, and do not hold grudges and become resentful (4:31-32). Paul is not so much talking about administrative techniques but Christian

attitudes underlying our actions and activities. We are co-laborers together in the body of Christ (4:25). We function with others out of an "I-Thou" frame of reference. The people with whom we work are God's own creation.

When we ignore our "family" relationship with Christ and treat those with whom we work as "means to an end," persons to be manipulated for our purposes, Satan gets a "foothold" into the Christian community. The enemy of our soul laughs at unresolved conflict within the fellowship of the faithful.

Our words are to be channels of God's grace to others (Eph. 4:30). Dialogue, for Paul, is a sacrament. And God's forgiveness frees us to take the initiative in forgiving those who hurt us.

When we do not live together by these guidelines as a Christian community, the Spirit of God is grieved (Eph. 4:30a).

We can now see more clearly how we, as leaders, can "maintain the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace," and, in so doing, walk (lead) worthy of our calling as leaders.

Again, because of these fundamental Christian attitudes, we can *be honest...*with the believers; *immediate...*in dealing with conflict among us; *upbuilding...*in our words, frequently expressing thoughts that communicate:

I love you,

I accept you,

I respect you,

I need you,

I trust you,

I serve you; and I *forgive* you...so that words and deeds done by others to us will not create bitterness within us.

Can Christian leaders really "lead" out of the leadership lifestyle paradigm outlined above? I believe so, even in conflict situations. Because relationships are so important to us, we "care enough to confront" our brother or sister in Christ when words or deeds are perceived by us to be detrimental to their growth or to the growth of the fellowship. We care too much about the relationship to ignore destructive behavior. We care enough to confront.

The fundamental question, always before the Christian leader is "How can we live together as Christians so that our relationships are redemptive and a witness to unbelievers of the reconciling word of God in Christ?"

These principles and concepts are not psychological in nature; they are deeply theological. The Spirit of God is deeply concerned with the speech of His people (Eph. 4:30a).

These convictional principles and concepts may not be found in the latest secular textbook on leadership; but they are foundational for the leaders who want their people to catch from them a servant spirit, committed to motivating, equipping and enabling them to serve others in Jesus' name.

## Conclusion

Our assignment, then, as church leaders is greater and more demanding than communicating facts, dates, persons, places and events. Our responsibility includes a servant Christian lifestyle which motivates, equips, and enables those whom we lead to *serve others in Jesus' name*.

If this is our vision of ministry, and our leadership lifestyle is characterized by Eph. 4:25-32, those whom we serve and for whom we are responsible will increasingly adopt it as their vision of ministry. They will not see in us a finished product. Rather, they will discover in us an on-going process of transformation into Christlikeness.

It is not easy. I must continually ask "what does it mean to be a servant to my students and staff where I must function in my role as seminary president?" What does it mean to be a servant in the midst of *all* the expectations, roles, and functions?

And what about the risks? Misunderstandings? Abuses? Betrayals? Pain? Hurts? Is it worth the risks? Is it really worth the risk of being a servant leader?

I am growing in my understanding of the profoundness of my questions and their answers. slowly, but with inner confidence, I am developing a deep conviction theologically grounded - that I must accept the risks and serve my people with integrity if I am to be a Christian leader.

And you, too, will be challenged to find such responses in the situations you face.

But my challenge to you is to lead...with a *vision to serve*, and with a commitment to equip servant leaders! If you are captured by this vision of ministry formation and are characterized by a servant leadership lifestyle, then your group - regardless of its size - will be life-giving, growth-producing, and *distinctly Christian*.

Renate Becker Lohmer gave me a poem several years ago when I served on the faculty of European Nazarene Bible College. The poem by Leonard Nimoy reads:

What mark will I leave behind?  
How will anyone ever know that I have been here?  
What sign will tell the future traveler that I've existed?  
Shall I carve it on the door?

"I am here! Today...I exist." I believe the deepest impression is made in those moments when I can say, "I care, I love." What mark will you leave behind when you depart your present leadership assignment? How will anyone ever know that you have been there? What sign will tell the future traveler that you have existed? I believe the deepest impressions will be made in those moments when you say I love you, I care for you, I am your brother or sister. I will serve you in Jesus' name regardless the costs, ignoring the risks, and acknowledging the conflicting roles, functions, expectations, and misunderstandings. Find a way to serve your people. And this spirit, attitude, and conviction, will empower them to reach out and serve others in Jesus' name! *This* is servant leadership! To *this* ministry we are called. Measure your success in ministry by *this* standard! Whatever else our assignment involves, our responsibility demands from us a servant lifestyle of Christian living which motivates, equips, and enables those whom we lead to serve others in Jesus' name.