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# SERVANT LEADERSHIP AND CHURCH HEALTH AND GROWTH

## Introduction

Much has been written about Robert K. Greenleaf (1904-1990) and his theory known as "servant leadership." In 1964, Greenleaf took early retirement from his role as Director of Management Development with AT&T and began a second career as a writer, consultant, and teacher (Frick, 2016). His 1970 essay, *The Servant as Leader*, followed by his 1977 book, *Servant Leadership*, were to propel Greenleaf's ideas on leadership into the forefront of leadership theory.

Servant leadership lacks a broadly accepted definition, but an oft-quoted passage by Greenleaf reads in part, "The servant-leader is servant first. . . . It begins with the natural feeling that one wants to serve, to serve first. Then conscious choice brings one to aspire to lead" (Greenleaf, 1977). Greenleaf and many others have tried their hand at extending or refining the definition. A summary of the three central elements of servant leadership from the recent work of Eva, Robin, Sendjaya, van Dierendonck, and Liden serves as an example of how researchers are grappling with defining the theory.

> Servant leadership is an (1) other-oriented approach to leadership (2) manifested through one-on-one prioritizing of follower individual needs and interests, (3) and outward reorienting of their concern for self towards concern for others within the organization and the larger community. (Eva et al., 2019)

Green, Rodriguez, Wheeler, and Baggerly-Hinojosa point out that "interest in servant leadership has multiplied since the year 2000" (Green, Rodriguez, Wheeler, & Baggerly-Hinojosa, 2015). In the thirty years before 2000, there

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were a total of eighty dissertations and peer-reviewed articles on the topic. From 2000 to 2014, there were 294 dissertations and 136 peer-reviewed articles for a combined total of 530 publications on this topic. Book publications on servant leadership also saw steady growth as well, beginning with fifteen books in the 1970s, thirty-four in the 1980s, swelling to 100 in the 1990s. The 2000s saw 265 books on servant leadership published.

Yet, despite the widespread interest in servant leadership in scholarly circles, there is still "no widely agreed upon model of servant leadership" (Green et al., 2015), and one might wonder what impact this concept has on practitioners. This article looks at practical implications of "serving" as a leadership style, as well as the impact the servant leadership concept has in the health and growth of churches in North America, by exploring the data from the Natural Church Development (NCD) Congregational Survey.

## Challenge Behind the Definition

Before we look at the data, we need to set the stage by looking at the meaning of servant leadership. One of the challenges–even among academicians–is defining what constitutes "servant leadership." As stated above, at first Greenleaf's definition was vague. Because of this, he and others worked to develop the ideas behind servant leadership; this resulted in various definitions of servant leadership surfacing over time. Consequently, servant leadership suffers from a lack of widely agreed upon definition and model.

Although Greenleaf has expressed his ideas on servant leadership in different ways, this excerpt from the description of servant leadership on the website of Greenleaf's Center for Servant Leadership is helpful in situating his ideas within the broader framework of leadership.

A servant-leader focuses primarily on the growth and well-being of people and the communities to which they belong. While traditional leadership generally involves the accumulation and exercise of power by one at the "top of the pyramid," servant leadership is different. The servant-leader shares power, puts the needs of others first and helps people develop and perform as highly as possible. (Robert K. Greenleaf Center for Servant Leadership, 2016)

We could devote this article to identifying definitions of servant leadership by Greenleaf or other authors only; however, we want to reflect on the practical aspects of the claim that there is essentially "no consensus on the definition of servant leadership" (Parris & Peachey, 2013). Although it is not always

clear for leaders what exactly it means to be a servant leader, this concept is perceived as an ideal.

Pastors and other Christian leaders may think of the story found in Matthew 20:26, 27 where the mother of James and John approached Jesus, attempting to secure her sons a place of honor in Jesus' coming kingdom. Yet the other disciples were indignant. They were also close followers of Jesus! It's no wonder they wanted a place of honor in His kingdom, too.

Jesus used the opportunity to teach one of the most important lessons a disciple can learn; He taught them how to be good leaders, not only humanly speaking, but also from God's perspective. I imagine Jesus gently saying, "So you want to be the center of attention? Do you want to get all of the honor for yourself? Do you want to rule above others? If you indeed strive for honor, here is the secret: true honor comes through shame–the shame of being the last one, the shame of the cross."

Thus, Jesus set the foundation for "servant leadership," at least for Christians. Greenleaf confirmed that "he was informed by the Judeo-Christian ethic" (Frick, 2016), although his ideas about servant leadership were "not directly connected to a solid understanding of Christianity or the Bible as a source" (Anderson, 2008). Nevertheless, servant leadership has a clear biblical application for pastors and Christian leaders. Although Greenleaf did not have a robust servant-leader theology, others have gladly filled in the gap. A notable example of biblical theology of leadership is a 21-chapter book edited by Skip Bell involving twenty authors (2014).[*]

The fact that the concept of servant leadership has received a lot of attention in both the secular world and the Christian world only adds weight to the notion that to be a good (successful) leader, I should be a servant leader. But one must pause at this juncture and ask some pointed questions. Jesus is frequently held up as the ultimate example of servant-leader. Although "servanthood" certainly figures into Christ's persona, does it sufficiently define Jesus' leadership, or is it only one component of who He was as a leader? Even if "servanthood" is central to who Christ was on the earth, how does this translate to us today? We examine this more closely in view of the findings presented in the next section.

## NCD Study on "Serving" as a Component of Leadership Style

Natural Church Development (NCD) focuses on eight factors (quality characteristics of growing churches). Although NCD is not primarily focused on

[*]Editor's note: One chapter from this book is republished in this issue, entitled "Leadership in the Creation Narrative."

the leadership of the church, researchers interested in the leadership component of church life have begun to take notice of this church assessment tool as a resource for their research. "A chief characteristic of the NCD paradigm is that all resources are developed on the background of extensive international research that is conducted according to strict standards in terms of objectivity, validity, and reliability" (Schwarz & Schalk, 1998, p. 229-234). NCD International reports having collected data from more than 70,000 churches in 84 countries (NCD International, 2016).

Early on, NCD has had its critics: John Ellas, Flavil Yeakeley, and W. M. Carroll, to name a few (Stetzer, 2008, p. 14). Later criticisms seem to relate more to the theology than the methodology (Ramunddal, 2014). Schalk identified several weaknesses in the tests themselves (Schwarz & Schalk, 1998).

> Since that time the Natural Church Development has gone through five stages of development and has drafted the new questionnaire which is used today. According to Schwarz (2006), Schalk's new questionnaire had rigorous standards for "objectivity, reliability, and validity, and used approved methods from social science for the analysis of the data." (Rumley, 2011, p. 88)

Today NCD is considered to be a robust tool and is used widely by congregations worldwide to measure their health and vitality.

Our findings come from the data to which the NCDAmerica.org office has access; this data was collected across a 10-year period, from 2007 to 2017. This dataset comprised 258,099 surveys, representing 9,529 congregations. The instrument was designed to help congregations assess the health of their local church body. The surveys are scored in such a way that the national average score is 50 with 65 being high and 35 being low (i.e. 15 is a standard deviation). NCD leadership styles were then compared to the eight congregational factors. The correlation between the self-identified leadership styles of the pastor was compared to the resulting scores for the eight congregational factors was computed.

We tested the relationship between the leadership style of the pastor and annual growth rates, growth trajectories, as well as measures of congregational health. Here we focus primarily on the measures of congregational health with a summary of some other findings.

Each congregational survey includes what is called a "Pastor's Form," to be filled out by the senior pastor or, in the absence of a pastor, by the facilitator

of the survey such as a member of the church leadership. The information on this form isn't part of the NCD score of the eight factors but pertains more to contact and demographic information. Of particular interest to us were the nine self-reported leadership styles of the senior pastor that include: authoritarian, goal-oriented, partnership, serving, democratic, relationship-oriented, task-oriented, team-oriented, and people-oriented. We took these leadership styles as a way to examine the impact of serving as part of leadership style.

Each respondent to the pastor's form is asked to select one or more styles from the list that they felt represented their leadership style. Of those nine leadership styles, we found that four styles correlated more with health and vitality as well as the growth of the congregations than others. Those four styles are: goal-oriented, team-oriented, people-oriented, and relational. Since respondents have been able to select multiple leadership styles, the data was tabulated in several ways.

These four leadership styles were compared to one another and to serving. It is important to note that none of the styles on the survey were defined. Thus, the correlation measured leadership style without reference to a theoretical definition of each leadership style. The respondents were asked to select styles that they believed applied to themselves, ostensibly, based on their own subjective view of what those styles mean. Therefore, the tabulation of the serving style of leadership doesn't purport to be equivalent to the whole construct of servant leadership. However, what is indicated in this tabulation is the relationship between leaders who see themselves as having serving as one or more of their leadership styles.

## "Serving" and NCD Eight Factors of Church Health

The first table presents a tabulation of the top four leadership styles alone without serving.

The first table demonstrates the positive cumulative effect of the top four leadership styles. The scores for the eight factors increased for congregations led by pastors who select two or more of the top four leadership styles.

The second table contrasts congregations led by pastors who chose serving without the top four, versus congregations led by pastors who chose all top four leadership styles without serving.

The contrast in the two scores is striking. First, we note the spread in the average score of all eight NCD congregational factors. The serving leadership style is 11.2 points lower than the top four leadership styles without serving. Furthermore, the serving leadership style also had a greater spread between

| Congregation Pastor Leadership Style | Minimum Factor Score | Maximum Factor Score | Average of All Eight Factors | Sample Size |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| One of the Top Four Leadership Styles without Serving Leadership Style | 51.2 (Loving Relationships) | 53.0 (Passionate Spirituality) | 52.1 | 1,324 |
| Two of the Top Four Leadership Styles without Serving Leadership Style | 51.3 (Loving Relationships) | 53.2 (Gift-based Ministry) | 52.3 | 1,456 |
| Three of the Top Four Leadership Styles without Serving Leadership Style | 53.1 (Need-oriented Evangelism) | 55.7 (Gift-based Ministry) | 54.5 | 1,127 |
| Four of the Top Four Leadership Styles without Serving Leadership Style | 55.9 (Loving Relationships) | 57.9 (Gift-based Ministry) | 57.0 | 372 |

*Table 1.* Top four leadership styles alone without serving

| Congregation Pastor Leadership Style | Minimum Factor Score | Maximum Factor Score | Average of All Eight Factors | Sample Size |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Serving Leadership Style without the Four Top Leadership Styles | 44.2 (Holistic Small Groups) | 48.4 (Passionate Spirituality) | 45.8 | 198 |

*Table 2.* Serving alone compared to the top four leadership styles without serving

the minimum factor score and its maximum factor score indicating more variability between the health and vitality of the eight factors.

In comparing Tables 1 and 2, we note that serving leadership alone, shown in the first table, is 6.3 points lower than one of the top four leadership styles without serving leadership style in the second table. The next table will make explicit what together these two tables are suggesting.

Table 3 combines the scores of congregations with pastors who selected the serving leadership style with one, two, three, and finally, all four top leadership styles.

What was suggested in Table 2 is confirmed in Table 3. The identification of the pastor as having the serving leadership style in combination with one or more of the top four leadership styles had a deleterious effect on the congregation factor scores. The congregation's average of all eight factors was lowered in each case. What was true for the average was also true for all eight factors

| Congregation Pastor Leadership Style | Minimum Factor Score | Maximum Factor Score | Average of All Eight Factors | Sample Size |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Serving Leadership Style with One of the Top Four Leadership Styles | 47.0 (Effective Structures) | 49.6 (Passionate Spirituality) | 47.9 | 650 |
| Serving Leadership Style with Two of the Top Four Leadership Styles | 49.1 (Effective Structures) | 51.7 (Passionate Spirituality) | 50.3 | 1,114 |
| Serving Leadership Style with Three of the Top Four Leadership Styles | 51.4 (Effective Structures) | 53.3 (Passionate Spirituality) | 52.2 | 1,215 |
| Serving Leadership Style with all Top Four Leadership Styles | 53.8 (Holistic Small Groups) | 57.2 (Gift-based Ministry) | 55.4 | 1,086 |

*Table 3.* Serving with top four leadership styles

individually: the scores for all the factors were lower when the pastor selected serving in combination with one or more of the four top leadership styles.

Each tabulation includes the score for some of the most significant survey questions. In examining the accompanying tabulations connected to Table 3, there is one interesting reversal in scores. For the question 28, "Our pastor(s) have too much work to do," serving with one of the top four leadership styles had the top score, although it was still below a score of 50 (the average score). With each addition of a top four leadership style, the score drops. So, in the case of serving with all top four leadership styles, the score plunges to 46, over 15 points below its average.

One reason why a pastor with fewer predominant leadership styles might be less likely to be perceived as having "too much work to do" is because they might be active in fewer leadership arenas. The significance of this particular item, however, isn't that serving in combination with one or more of the top four leadership styles brought the score up, but that the addition of serving brought all combinations down. In the accompanying tabulation that goes with Table 1 (top four leadership styles alone without serving) all categories dip at this question, but they are all higher than they are in the third tabulation with serving.

## Summary of Other Findings

The space of this paper doesn't allow for a more detailed exploration of all the other areas included on the NCD survey, but a summary is in order. The Five-year Average Annual Growth Rate (AAGR) for congregations led by pastors reporting all other leadership styles other than serving was 1.6 percent, whereas for pastors reporting serving as their leadership style it was 0.7 percent.

| Congregation Pastor Leadership Style | 5-year Average AGR | Sample Size | Average Number of Adults Attending | Sample Size |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Serving Leadership Style | 0.7% | 3,388 | 161 | 4,215 |
| Other Leadership Styles | 1.6% | 3,724 | 217 | 4,567 |
| Serving Leadership Style without the Four Top Leadership Styles | -2.0% | 159 | 119 | 196 |
| Serving Leadership Style with the Four Top Leadership Styles | 2.4% | 843 | 180 | 1070 |

*Table 4.* Serving and other leadership styles

The average number of adults attending in congregations led by pastors reporting other styles was 217 and 161 for serving. Consistent with this finding, the percentage of small, medium, and large congregations associated with each category favored other versus serving leadership style.

Finally, lest it be thought that serving "poisons every pot," we conclude with one more finding that brings us back to the categories considered in the three tables examined in the previous section. Although congregations led by pastors with the four top leadership styles without serving had a higher average NCD score, congregations led by pastors with the four top leadership styles with serving had a higher Five-year Average Annual Growth Rate of 2.4 percent, versus 1.9 percent of the top four without serving. It is also worth noting that the combination of serving with the top four leadership styles represents the largest population. So, for at least some of the pastors, the idea of serving may capture a beneficial component of leadership.

The congregations that were led by pastors who perceived themselves as having a serving leadership style without the four top leadership characteristics faired much worse in all categories than the other two. They exhibited a

Five-year AAGR of -2%, an average lower NCD score by 10 points, and the pastors led considerably smaller congregations.

These findings beg for future research on what leaders perceive to be the nature of serving in their leadership style. The data seems to indicate that those leaders who subjectively claim serving as a leadership style by itself have a less developed concept of leadership. Could it be that their formulation of serving is more akin to pleasing without regard to the consequences?

Although the analysis reviewed here doesn't cast direct light on this question, some important characteristics of leadership do come out in examining the results from individual questions. Almost without exception, the survey questions where there was the sharpest contrast between serving and the top four leadership styles highlight the lack of the following characteristics: lack of training, lack of teamwork, lack of trust, and lack of support for ministry.

## Conclusion

Despite the overwhelming popularity of servant leadership in both the academic and professional community, it is clear that there still remains practical challenges. The NCD study confirmed the critics' concerns over what leadership practitioners subjectively make of the notion of servant leadership and how they put it into practice.

Bradley's concluding observations on servant leadership seem as apropos today as when they were first published.

> The concept of serving others is a fine attitude for all humans to adopt, in whatever role that they might be cast. If that is all we mean by the term 'servant-leadership' then it is a useful reminder to leaders, as it is to followers. But when the benefit of the concept is considered for leadership theory and practice, it offers at best not much more than the warm inner glow of a good bed-time story. At worst, it may confuse and deflect us from the development of more useful models. (Bradley, 1999)

The evidence examined in this paper would suggest caution at the very least, if not outright doubt on the applicability and desirability of the servant leadership model for pastors of local parishes. A stark takeaway from this study is the great responsibility that leaders of leaders–those who educate, mentor, and supervise others–have to pass on healthy and holistic views of leadership. Acceptance and propagation of popular ideas and jargon without proper evidence and context risks bringing negative outcomes to the organizations and the people we seek to serve.

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