Servant Leadership as Demonstrated in one 21st Century Church: A Case Study

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This single exploratory case study investigates Servant Leadership in a 21st century non-denominational Christian church. Specifically, it explores how one growing southeastern US church demonstrates 5 dimensions of Servant Leadership. Data sources include leaders' self-report and rater modified Executive Servant Leadership scales (ESLS), congregant focus groups, and archival data (documents/website) furnished by a church liaison. First, a historical background of Jesus, the Servant Leader role model Christians follow, is provided. Then the general context of the state of 21st century US churches, pastors, staff, and congregations in a post-COVID 19 environment is considered. The theoretical framework underpinning the study is delineated and current relevant servant leadership literature is surveyed. Next the research problem is explained, and the nature of the single case is defined. Research questions, methodology, and research design are outlined. Data collection and analysis are explained, research findings and plans for continuing investigation are discussed. Finally, the conceptual framework developed by the researcher during this process is briefly introduced.

Although Christianity has thrived over the centuries, the Church and religion have been recognized as controversial and enduring influential institutions on society and individuals. Central to the core beliefs of Christianity (regardless of denomination) is that Jesus is the Son of God the Father. Jesus walked the earth as a man, was tried and crucified, and overcame death through resurrection. Shortly after his resurrection he was seen by over 500 people in various instances (Steppes of Faith, 2019). Since then, over 2000 years ago, each believer or follower (also called disciple) of Jesus has become part of the Church, the Body of Christ, the temple of God, inhabited by the Holy Spirit. This belief is consistent with the Triune God – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. It is consistent with the Bible - Jesus is and was the Son of God, the Word that was in the beginning (Genesis 1:1; John 1:1) "…the Lord…our Shepherd" (Psalm 23:1). Notably, Jesus described Himself as, "…the Good Shepherd [who] …lays down his life for his sheep" … [and the sheep] "listen to [His] voice" (John 10: 11, 14, 16).

According to Greenwood, (2018), shepherds are often on call for their flocks 24 hours a day seven days a week; their work can be thankless with little financial remuneration (Greenwood, 2018). Followers of Jesus know Him as the True Shepherd and, when churched, they recognize pastors as under-shepherds, humans who serve the Good Shepherd as servants in the Lord's House (Bread for Beggars, 2019). Seasoned pastor and author, Charles Swindoll (2012) asserts that sheep inherently lack a sense of direction, are defenseless against enemies and are easily frightened in general. They can't even find food or water by themselves, and without shepherding they would literally eat until they die. Sheep even need help from someone who shears their wool periodically, indicating the 'fruits of their labors' do not really belong to the sheep, but to the Good Shepherd. Clearly, sheep need under-shepherds as much as followers of Jesus (the Good Shepherd) need salvation and contemporary disciples need to be shepherded by leaders who aspire to love others and serve the Lord. The serving is often done through pastors, staff members, and volunteers in various denominations of the Church as an institution. Indeed, Christian servant leaders' collective purpose is to lead followers of Jesus into a closer relationship with the Lord, Savior, and Son of God.

Jesus, as He walked the earth with disciples, gained many names characteristic of His qualities. Although those names are far too numerous to cover here, this study focuses on one integral characteristic; Jesus is the ultimate Servant Leader. Mathew 23:11 states, "The greatest among you will be your servant." (*New International Version Bible*, 1973/2011). Throughout history Jesus has been spoken of in this way by others who emulate him, such as Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., Gandhi, and more. His Servant's heart is depicted throughout the Bible, but perhaps most vividly in: "For God so loved the world that He gave His one and only Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish but have eternal life. [17] God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through Him." (John 3:16-17, *Tree of Life Version*). Jesus as Servant Leader was and is a gamechanger for individuals, humankind, religion, and the world. Pastors of all Christian denominations, although human works in progress, typically seek to emulate Jesus' Servant Leader example.

Historical Background: Jesus as Servant Leader

Like the Shepherd they emulate, the core motivation of a true Christ-follower is not to serve but to love. In fact, the greatest Judeo-Christian commandment is stated in Deuteronomy 6:5-7,

> And you shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength. These words, which I am commanding you today, shall be on your heart. And you shall repeat them diligently to your sons and speak of them when you sit in your house, when you walk on the road, when you lie down, and when you get up. (*New American Standard Bible,* 2023).

The commandment is also presented in all four New Testament Gospels. In Matthew, the commandment is followed by a second, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself" **40** Upon these two commandments [b]hang the whole Law and the Prophets." (Matthew 22:39b-40, NASB). Mark 12: 31b affirms, no other commandments are greater. In The Message version of the Bible, John 13:35 affirms, "This is how everyone will recognize that you are [Jesus'] disciples—when they see the love you have for each other."

For Jesus and his disciples (both then and now), love is expressed through serving. For example, when Jesus washed the feet of his disciples, He emphasized the importance of the foot-washing by saying, "…you should do as I have done for you. Very truly I tell you, no servant is greater than his master, nor is a messenger greater than the one who sent him. Now that you know these things, you will be blessed if you do them "(John 13:14-17). Indeed, the Servant Leader in any organization leads through serving the highest order priority needs of those served (Greenleaf, [1970] 1991). The distinction of servants who lead by example in the Church or other faith-based organization is they are attempting to lead and serve while exalting God only and exhorting, encouraging one another (1 Thessalonians 5:11; 1 Peter 4:8). Long time pastor and servant leader, Charles Stanley (2017) cautions, "We [Christ followers] don't serve the Lord because we are perfect – we do it because we are thankful for what He has done for us. And the work we do is greater because every time we show His everlasting love to another person it multiplies and grows" (Stanley, *NIV Life Principles* Bible, 2017, p. 1809).

Consistently, the Bible states, "Whoever says he abides in [Jesus] ought to walk in the same way in which [H]e walked" (1 John 2:6, *English Standard Version Bible,* 2023). A primary goal of the follower of Jesus Christ is to allow God, through the Holy Spirit, to lead the individual's life, first and foremost as defined in the Bible, the Word of God. Galatians 2:20 declares, "I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me." (ESV). This is because, "For those whom [the Father] foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son [Jesus], in order that he might be the firstborn among many brothers [and sisters]". (Romans 8:29, ESV). Followers who are saved through the grace of God are

transformed to the image of Jesus, and that takes time, development, and pressing in – building the most important relationship of one's life, one day, one moment at a time.

Over time the new believer's faith grows through discipleship (i. e., development of a relationship with Jesus Christ through the Holy Spirit, in community with other disciples). "[Christians], with unveiled face[s] beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory—just as from the Lord, who is the Spirit." (2 Corinthians 3:18). Each disciple recognizes individually and collectively that all believers are part of the Body of Christ, often referred to as His hands and feet. It is commonly recognized in the Christian faith that each one is forgiven of sin and being transformed into "a new creation. The old things have passed away" [and] "all things have become new." (2 Corinthians 5:17). Thus, disciples of Jesus become, both individually and collectively, the Church. In fact, Colossians 3:23 asserts, "Whatever you do, do it heartily, as to the Lord, and not unto men." However, not every disciple is called to pastor a church and not every pastor aspires to Servant Leadership. Leading Jesus' disciples is a difficult and sometimes thankless job. In addition, some people are called leaders – but cannot lead if people are not following them. This can be further exacerbated (e.g., becoming exhaustion, burnout, or general ineffectiveness) for the person attempting to be a servant leader, but moving on the wrong trajectory of growth. Singfiel (2018, p. 72) warns that leaders can unconsciously self-categorize as servants and expect this to be obvious to others. "Once that self-categorization occurs, 'the switch is flipped' and the leader believes himself to be a servant, even if his behavior is laissez-faire." This is in sharp contrast to what we are describing in this study. That is a form of leadership that empowers leaders and followers as they are accountable to one another.

Context: Characteristics of Many 21st Century Churches and Pastors

The Church has grown and changed over the centuries, a topic far beyond the scope of this paper. Instead, the paper explores how one 21st century Servant-led church manages to carry out its mission in a changing time, changing society and with consistency as disciples and contributors in the body of Christ. Clairvaux describes trained pastors as being like reservoirs releasing, "…overflow without loss to itself" as opposed to canals sharing "…what [they] receive[s]" (Karger, 2022). Indeed, Jesus said, ""If anyone is thirsty, [a]let him come to Me and drink. [38] The one who believes in Me, as the Scripture said, '[b]From his innermost being will flow rivers of living water.'" (John 7:37b-38, NASB). Pastors who have been dedicated enough to learn to serve in their capacity have taken the time to learn their craft, engage in spiritual development and soul work, and spend time staying filled with the living water Jesus promised. Karger (2022) asserts, "seminary is a means of formalizing and communicating your commitment to your craft. But more than that, it establishes the trajectory of dedication and patience of your calling as a pastor." Thus, gaining the education and experience to pastor is often part of the journey on the path of servant leadership.

However, it is important to keep being filled from the wellspring of Life, especially if one is ministering, pouring out, to others. According to Krejcir (2016), about 80% of graduates from Bible school and seminary who enter ministry as pastors leave the

vocation within the first 5 years. About 70% of pastors fight depression and about 80% say they feel unqualified in their roles. Pastoring is a tough calling, and it can be tough on one's well-being too. Krejcir (2016) reports organizational struggles, leadership, and conflict as enduring difficulties for most of the pastors surveyed in research beginning in the 1980s going through 2016. Such is the dilemma of the contemporary Servant Leader, as is most vividly depicted by Jesus, the greatest Servant Leader of all.

On the other hand, when it comes to the wellbeing of congregants, Newport (2022) reports that Americans who describe themselves as religious (measured by service attendance) "are more likely to say they are personally satisfied" than others; "…92% of those who attend church services weekly are satisfied, compared to 82% of those who attend less than monthly." In fact, 67% of individuals who attend church weekly "…are very satisfied with their life, compared with 48% among those who are infrequent attenders" and "weekly service attenders are, in fact, more likely to say they are very satisfied than those [in general] who make $100,000 or more in annual household income" (Newport, 2022).

When it came to serving as a body, "a majority of the health care workers left on the ground in the midst of the Ebola crises were missionaries. Faith was the chief motivator for those both funding and serving in some of the most difficult parts of the world." (King, 2017). In time, it will be interesting to learn if this was also true during the recent global pandemic caused by the widespread phenomenon of COVID 19 and its attending influences and impacts. Many disciples of Jesus choose their occupations based on Christian values such as those expressed throughout this paper.

Consistently, the Sociology of Religion literature is replete with studies focused on the connection between religion and wellbeing (Newport, 2022). For example, people who are religious make better health choices than those who are not. Generally, physical and mental health of believers is better than those who do not describe themselves as religious. Koenig, the Director of Duke University Center for Spirituality, Theology, and Health, Professor of Psychiatry and Behavioral Sciences, and Associate Professor of Medicine, "makes several important points concerning religion and mental health. Research demonstrates largely positive associations between religiosity and well-being. Additionally, religion is a prevalent coping strategy in those experiencing adverse life events." (Dein, et al, 2010, p. 63) *Time Magazine* reported studies where "Scientists found, again and again, that those with a spiritual practice or who follow religious beliefs tend to be happier than those who don't" …" less depressed and less anxious than nonbelievers, better able to handle the vicissitudes of life than nonbelievers." (Newport, 2022).

Society often benefits from the generosity of people of faith too. King (2017) reports, "What often gets ignored, however, is the role that faith plays in people's desire to give and serve." Americans (from the US) who describe themselves as religious "volunteer more, give more, and give more often not only to religious but to secular causes as well. Among Americans who give to *any* [italics added], 55 percent claim religious values as an important motivator for giving." Sociologist Christian Smith refers

to a paradox of generosity in religion, "…in giving we receive and in grasping we lose" (King, 2017). This is reminiscent of a paradox translated by many religions, and written in the Bible as, "**7** Do not be deceived, God is not mocked; for whatever a person sows, this he will also reap." (Galatians 6:7, NASB). Jesus told His first disciples, "**45** For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His [a]life as a ransom for many." (Mark 10:45, NASB). King (2017) declares that giving is meant to empower those who receive, so they no longer need such charity; they are set free from any bondage of dependence on the giver. How one gives is vastly important in such relationships too. Consistently, the Bible is replete with examples of *how* to give – joyfully, cheerfully, unbegrudgingly, not so the believer is lauded, but so the Lord is recognized as the source rather than the human giver. This is consistent with Greenleaf's ([1970] 1991) assertion that the Servant Leader serves the highest order priority needs of those served (Greenleaf, [1970] 1991). Notably, "all women and men who are touched by the effort grow taller, and become healthier, stronger, more autonomous, and more disposed to serve" (Greenleaf, [1970] 1991, p. 37).

Theoretical Framework

Robert Greenleaf ([1970] 1991) is well known for his contributions to Servant Leadership literature. A basic premise of his many writings is that "The great leader is seen as servant first, and that simple fact is the key to his greatness" (Greenleaf, [1977] 2002, 21). Perhaps most famously, in his first pamphlet, *Servant as Leader,* Greenleaf ([1970] 1991) posited,

> The best test, and difficult to administer, is this: Do those served grow as persons? Do they, while being served, become healthier, wiser, freer, more autonomous, more likely themselves to become servants? And, what is the effect on the least privileged in society? Will they benefit or at least not be further deprived? (7).

After Greenleaf's ([1970] 1991) *Servant as Leader* pamphlet became so widely circulated, he penned several others, all of which gained wide acclaim. Among them was *Institution as Servant* wherein Greenleaf ([1972] 1976) observed that institutions have largely replaced person to person caring and institutional care, although capable of doing more than individuals, does not necessarily do care better. It is not always, "…competent, sometimes corrupt" (Greenleaf ([1972] 1976, p. 1). Making institutions and society better could occur through institutional leaders, "…*rais[ing] both the capacity to serve and the very performance of servant* of existing major institutions by new regenerative forces operating within them (Greenleaf ([1972] 1976), p.1). Greenleaf ([1972] 1976) recognized an urgent need for trust and trustworthy institutions. He astutely acknowledged that institutions can be just as motivated by 'self' as individuals.

Greenleaf's ([1977] 2002) *Servant Leadership in Churches* pamphlet began with the hopeful assertion that helping to rebind humankind to its Creator would be a huge step toward healing the alienation of humanity (231). In times of great division in society, the COVID 19 pandemic has fostered wide agreement that humans (all over the world) became increasingly alienated and isolated from one another, regardless of

religious affiliation or not. Long before Covid 19, Greenleaf ([1977] 2002) recognized the need for churches to serve large numbers of individuals, to relieve their sense of fragmentation in society, and their alienation from one another. However, Greenleaf also recognized that most churches were not adept at accomplishing those tasks. It is noted here that Greenleaf ([1982] 1996) penned a pamphlet specifically for *The Servant as Religious Leader* too. This study, in addition to expanding the scope of Servant Leadership literature, can serve church decision-makers in organizational and staff development, as well as society at large with exemplars of servant leadership for other institutions and individuals touched by them.

Servant Leadership Literature

The Servant Leadership literature is replete with studies that link the concept to organizational, individual, leader, and follower benefits, as well as benefits to society. Within recent years, Ilkhanizadeh and Karatepe (2018) found Trust in Organization (TIO), job, career, and life satisfaction were outcomes of Servant Leadership among flight attendants. Molano (2019) coined the term 'servant citizens' for individuals who consistently demonstrated servant-first behaviors and attributes, even though the individuals were not in formal leadership positions in a servant led business. In three studies Wu, et al (2020) and found (1) a positive relationship existed between follower serving behaviors with servant leader managers, even though followers ranked high in self-interest; (2) the lab study and results were replicated in a field study, and; (3) self-efficacy "mediated the transference of manager servant leader ship to follower serving behaviors". Together, all three studies found that servant leaders can bring out serving behaviors – even among followers with strong self-interest.

Regarding well-being, Jit, et al (2017) confirmed the findings of previous scholars' studies and deduced that servant leaders "build not only a mentally and emotionally healthy workforce but also inculcate a sense of cohesiveness, collaboration, and sustainable relationships among the followers by understanding and addressing their feelings and emotions." Kama (2021) explored the nature of Jesus' leadership as demonstrated during His earthly ministry. The aim of the paper was to explain the leadership and governance of Jesus through spiritual, transcendental, transformational, and servant leadership styles. Searle and Barbuto (2011) propose a framework wherein servant leadership facilitates micro and macro-positive behaviors, such as hope and organizational virtuousness, that may be optimized by servant leadership. Finally, Reed (2015) examined relationships between servant leadership, organizational citizenship behaviors, and followership styles (passive and proactive) in 9-1-1 emergency communications centers. Notably, Reed (2015) also learned that servant led organizations often fostered both proactive followership and positive organizational citizenship behaviors, but servant led organizations were not plentifully represented in the study.

The Research Problem

In an interview, Robert Putnam, scholar and author of *Bowling Alone* (1995), observed, "the United States has more houses of worship per capita than any other nation on Earth. Yet religious sentiment in America seems to be becoming somewhat less tied to institutions and more self-defined." That trend has continued, according to Jones (2021) who reported that in 2020, for the first time in US history, only 47% of Americans reported belonging to a house of worship (Church, Synagogue, or Mosque), down from 70% in 1999. Putnam and research partner, Lim, noted that more than just sermons or messages from pastors, individuals gain friendships at church and those seem to make them happier and kinder, but losing friendships at church seems to do just the opposite for people (Newport, 2022). Similarly, sheep travel in flocks and, per Swindoll's (2012) description do not thrive in isolation. In fact, Jesus told a parable about the shepherd leaving 99 sheep to go after one who was heading toward seclusion and danger (see Matthew 18:10-14; Luke 15: 3-7).

We live in times of technological advances that provide individuals and groups with great autonomy, often at the cost of community and fellowship. Newport (2022) affirms the number of American adults who claim "none" as their religious identity has risen significantly over recent decades. Further, technological advancements and autonomy increase isolation when exacerbated by a global pandemic that caused, for a time, churches and other houses of worship to close their doors. While the pandemic encouraged friends and congregations to text, chat, Zoom, and attend worship online, it also forced pastors and church staff to minister without face-to-face interaction and/or such communication with their congregations, flocks, and/or community. The pandemic disrupted life as we all knew it. For churches, it "disrupted normal patterns of worship, making it difficult to interpret church attendance statistics, but such indicators are down" (Newport, 2022). Similarly, the majority in younger generations in the US "tend to prioritize things other than religion" (Zuckerman, 2020).   At the same time younger generations are less likely to engage in church fellowship, "Pandemic measures designed to manage a health crisis have, in many ways, boosted a mental health crisis: the loneliness epidemic. Survey research indicates that 36 percent of Americans often feel lonely. For older adults, the percentages tend to be even higher." (Tahmaseb-McConatha, 2022). Further, Since the end of the COVID pandemic "many individuals have been hesitant to re-emerge and re-engage in the 'real' world" They are still anxious about being around others, still more likely to stay home and hibernate out of fear for health concerns (Tahmaseb-McConatha, 2022). For the servant led church and the under shepherds of the Good Shepherd, Jesus, this creates dilemmas pertaining to how to reach the one as well as the ninety-nine.

Nature of the Case

Importantly, each church organization is as specific and unique as the talents and gifts of its leaders and congregation. With reference to the talents and gifts in the Church, Palmer (2023) posits that spiritual gifts for benefit of the body of Christ is a way we demonstrate our faithfulness as members of the church. All Christians are designed

by God with different personalities and skills according to our purposes. These are meant for us to love God, love others, and share the Gospel with His people. Servant leadership can manifest differently in each church, each case, depending upon many variables, not the least of which are the mission and vision of the church, the personalities, level of spiritual maturity of the leaders, and the willingness to receive feedback from the congregation and community the church serves.

This exploratory single case study investigates Servant Leadership in the context of a 21st century church. The church, located in southeastern US, is the unit of analysis. It was selected for a variety of reasons. First, its size is distinctive. The congregation, at the beginning of this study was approximately one thousand people. The great majority of those people are under the age of 65. Many have young families, and the church is growing. However, the congregation consists of people of various ages, races, and ethnic backgrounds. The church is large enough to conduct such a study, but not so large that the pastors and other leaders are not directly familiar with the needs and the people served by the church, both congregants and the surrounding community. The church is affiliated with a major denomination, but it operates as an entity welcoming followers who might categorize themselves as 'nondenominational'. Case studies are not typically generalizable, but they can be replicated. This study serves as a recipe for similar studies. That is important as this case is about servant leadership in a church, rather than any denomination. The study serves as one example of Servant Leadership in process in a growing church. At the start of the study, the church had fewer than ten staff members including pastors, all of whom participated in the study. During the months when the study took place and this article was completed, the church continued to experience growth of about 80% in its congregation. The leaders participating in the study remained at the church serving as under shepherds in the body of Christ through the completion of the study.

The Research Questions

The overarching research question guiding this study is:

RQ1: What does Servant Leadership look like in a 21st century non-denominational church?

Servant Leadership is measured using self-report and rater modified versions of the Executive Servant Leadership Scales (ESLS, Reed, et al, 2011) resulting in the following sub questions based on the five dimensions of Servant Leadership in ESLS:

RQ1a: What does Interpersonal Support look like in a 21st century non-denominational church?

RQ1b: What does Building Community look like in a 21st century non-denominational church?

RQ1c: What does Altruism look like in a 21st century non-denominational church?

RQ1d: What does Egalitarianism look like in a 21st century non-denominational church?

RQ1e: What does Moral Integrity expressed as the Pursuit of Holiness look like in a 21st century non-denominational church?

Methodology and Research Design

This qualitative exploratory single case study is grounded in constructivist epistemological tradition wherein the researcher recognizes that often "knowledge is constructed rather than discovered" (Stake, 1995, p. 99). Consistently, "reality is constructed by individuals interacting with their social worlds" (Merriam, 1998, p. 6). A primary reason case study was the method chosen for this research was, "…the object of the study is a specific, unique, bounded system" (Stake, 1994, p. 237). Hence, the great "rationale for calling it a [single] case study (Mertens, 1998, p. 6).

The study used modified self-report and rater versions of the ESLS to compile (6) 360-degree evaluations of church leaders. In addition, data sources included (3) focus groups, statistics pertaining to church growth, and information from the church website were provided by a church liaison. All of these were analyzed and compiled to respond to each of the research questions using descriptive statistics and thematic analysis.

Instruments and Data Sources

The Modified Executive Servant Leadership Scales (ESLS) were chosen over other instruments for a variety of reasons. First, the researcher was among those who created the original scales (see Reed, et al, 2011). The ESL scales measure five dimensions under the umbrella of servant leadership: Interpersonal Support, Building Community, Altruism, Egalitarianism, and Moral Integrity (all Cronbach's alphas above 0.90 and all composite reliabilities above 0.95). The researcher continued conducting research using these scales; they have also been used in numerous other studies, including, but not limited to dissertations globally. In 2015 the researcher published an article on a national study (the first of its kind), focused on servant leadership, as pertinent to passive and proactive followership, and organizational citizenship behaviors in 9-1-1 emergency communications centers throughout North America, and primarily, in the United States. At that time, the researcher also began conversations with leaders of churches and other ministries about how the five dimensions aligned with Biblical scriptures and leaders emulating the most vivid example of Servant Leadership, Jesus. In 2014-2015 overall ESLS scale and five sub-scales modification began. Those modifications are discussed in the data analysis of each dimension analyzed here. The scales were not modified in such ways that would impact their reliability and/or validity, but so that the dimensions would be better understood in a Christian faith-based organizational context. Prior to their use in this study as part of a 360-degree leader evaluation, the scales were reviewed by an expert panel and field-tested by leaders and raters who went through the entire process that church leaders in this study would later experience. Minor adjustments to the ESLS reports were made in accordance with the expert panel's and field-test participants' suggestions for clarity. All scores are based on a 4-point Likert scale, with 0 = Don't Know, 1= Rarely, 2 = Sometimes, 3 = Usually, and 4 = Always.

Similarly, the focus group questions for this study were informed by the five dimensions of servant leadership. They were field-tested with 2 focus groups of

congregants from another church. Adjustments to the questions were made in accordance with field-test participants' suggestions (for clarity) prior to this study.

The church website was consulted, but its content is not described in detail in this study as to protect anonymity and confidentiality of the church and study participants. The website is considered in further detail in the final report delivered to the church leaders at the end of the study.

Data Collection

360-Degree Servant Leader Evaluations:

Simultaneously, (6) self-report and multiple rater (3-4 per leader) ESLS data collection links were emailed to participants through the church liaison. Within the email, the general purpose of the study, and information about the commitment of time involved, assurance of anonymity and confidentiality of individual contributions, and researcher contact information was provided. Participants were instructed to complete the evaluations online. When they clicked on the Survey Methods link, the first page provided instructions and an informed consent document which, if not acknowledged, did not allow the participant to continue with the questionnaire.

Focus Groups:

Three focus groups were conducted with church congregants over a period of one week. The groups were scheduled at scattered times (evening, daytime, and weekend morning) so schedules of various congregants might be accommodated. The church liaison recruited participants with an email formulated by the researcher. Each participant contacted the researcher directly by email and was provided with a Zoom link for the group that suited their schedule. Each group was informed at the beginning of the Zoom meeting that the conversation would be recorded, each participant had to consent to inclusion criteria (e.g.,) to continue participating. No one declined. Participants were advised their responses remain anonymous, their participation confidential, and they were asked not to discuss the conversations of the group during the data collection phase.

Other Data Sources:

The researcher examined the church website and visited the church on several occasions after data collection was completed. Additional information (such as statistics on church growth) was provided by a church liaison.

Data Analysis

Self-report and rater modified ESLS evaluations were downloaded from *Survey Methods* into Microsoft Excel spreadsheets for analysis. All identifiers were removed and data was cleaned, meaning incomplete evaluations were not included in the data analysis. Each participating leader received a report evaluating his or her 360-degree

Servant Leadership using the modified ESLS self-report and rater versions. At the beginning of each report, participants were reminded:

> This evaluation was prepared expressly for [participant] using the modified Executive Servant Leadership Scales. The scales are not intended to prescribe how to be a servant leader. Nor are they intended to be a comprehensive evaluation of servant leader characteristics. Rather, they are intended to report how one perceives 5 dimensions of his or her leadership and how others in close relationship as followers perceive the leader based on the same five dimensions. Notably, the Body of Christ is diverse in talents and gifts and we, as parts of the Body, demonstrate service and leadership in a variety of ways – much like the facets of a diamond. We are works in progress (Reed, 2022)

In addition, respondents were told, "As you read your scores (self, other and combined) please keep in mind that, "**…**we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them." (Ephesians 2:10, ESV)" (Reed, 2022)

Table 1 demonstrates aggregate results of descriptive statistics for individual reports including combined mean scores for the various dimensions, (self-report and rater) as well as combined mean and median scores for the team and overall ranking among the five dimensions. Notably, the scores (based on Likert scale of 0-4) are all above 3 denoting 'usually'.

Table 1

Aggregate Scores: Dimensions of Servant Leadership

Dimension	Self	Raters	Mean	Median	Ranking
Interpersonal Support	3.12	3.35	3.36	3.50	4
Building Community	3.50	3.55	3.60	3.77	1
Altruism	3.38	3.49	3.44	3.61	3
Egalitarianism	3.21	3.44	3.33	3.62	5

Moral Integrity	3.42	3.55	3.49	3.78	2
Total All Dimensions	3.33	3.48	3.44	3.62	

Focus group recordings were loaded into Otter A-I (2023) online transcription service. Each transcript was downloaded into a Microsoft Word document and all identifiers of individual participants and/or specific people, projects, or programs of the church (such as their names) were changed to protect the anonymity and confidentiality of study participants. After the researcher became familiarized with the transcripts, manual coding began - using the prescribed codes of the five Servant Leadership dimensions and 24 other codes that emerged from preliminary data analysis. A codebook was created, and the codes were again reviewed for recurring themes pertinent to the study at hand. Contents of the Word documents were then uploaded into MAXQDA 2022 for reflexive thematic analysis consistent with rest of Braun and Clark's (2021) six-step process, some of which has already been outlined here. Table 2 below delineates the focus group participation.

Table 2

Focus Group Participants

Focus Group	Participants	Duration
1	2	55 Min. 24 Sec.
2	9	46 Min. 51 Sec.
3	5	1 Hr., 13 Min. 47 Sec.

The themes were reviewed, refined, and defined once more, focusing on frequency of words, phrases, patterns, and collation of data. They were distilled further into findings, supported by focus group participants' comments and included in the section below.

Research Findings

Throughout the Bible, and Servant Leadership literature, there is agreement that people are continually being developed (Greenleaf [1970] 1991; Ephesians 2:10). Biblically, when a disciple of Jesus receives salvation, the individual realizes he or she is one of God's children and transformation into the likeness of Jesus begins. This is guided by instruction from the Bible as applied in one's daily life. Jesus repeatedly commanded His disciples to be obedient (e.g., John 14:15-31) and to keep His commands. Jesus advised that in addition to the greatest commandments to love the Lord above all else and love each other as one is loved by God (e.g., Deuteronomy 6:5-7; Matthew 22:37-40; Mark 12:30-31; Luke 10:27; John 13-34-35), there is a Great Commission which in part says, "…go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, [20] and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you." (See Matthew 28:16-20). In addition, the Bible provides excellent information on disciples' identity in Jesus Christ (see Anderson, n.d.; Anderson, 2022), the source of strength and more.

RQ1 is the overarching research question for this study, What does Servant Leadership look like in a 21st century non-denominational church?

The servant leader leads from the fundamental drive to love others and to *serve first*; leadership follows as a natural result of this motivation. This leader subordinates his or her personal interests to those of Christ's followers, Church stakeholders, and the community at large. Such a leader can be instrumental in attaining Church organizational goals, developing others, and sustaining a service-oriented Christ-centered Church community. It is clear leaders of this church all ranked over 3.0 (a score of usually), with their raters usually rating the leaders higher than they rated themselves.

Table 3

All Dimensions of Servant Leadership

Dimension	Self	Raters	Mean	Median
Total all	3.33	3.48	3.44	3.62

As one focus group participant pointed out, "I think th[is] Zoom call is just another example of [Servant Leadership] as well, thereby indicating the church leaders were serving the congregation through listening to their feedback.

RQ1a asks, What does Interpersonal Support look like in a 21st century non-denominational church?

Interpersonal Support is exemplified as: encouraging others to develop their potential in the context of the church as a body; contributing to a service-oriented organizational culture; looking for ways to make others successful; nurturing follower and leader potential; providing decision-making control to those affected by decisions; careful listening, keeping one's ears open to hearing the needs of others, and; treating all others with dignity and respect. Although the leaders ranked themselves lowest (self-report mean of 3.12 of 4.0 or fifth place) compared to the other dimensions, raters' mean still ranked them well above "usually" at 3.35 of 4.0 and fourth of five dimensions. The combined mean score for this dimension was 3.36 and the median was 3.5.

Table 4

Interpersonal Support

Self	Raters	Mean	Median	Ranking
3.12	3.35	3.36	3.50	4

Themes that emerged in focus groups included developing leader potential, listening and encouraging individuals, treating individuals with respect and dignity and modeling how to treat others with respect and dignity. Notably, respondents discussed the importance of the support built through nurturing relationships, through support and encouragement they felt even during the pandemic. One person stated, "To me, just the sacrifice of [encouragement through online prayer time during the pandemic] just really showed love, you know, you got to know them before you even met them".

RQ1b is What does Building Community look like in a 21st century non-denominational church?

Building Community requires commitment to creating a cohesive, healthy community within and outside the Church as an organization/body. It is a critical distinction of servant leadership as compared to other models of leadership, a function of valuing diversity and individual differences as important gifts and talents. It encourages cooperation and commitment to the Church as the community/body of Christ's followers, and it is essential for unity as servant leaders and a servant organization. This was the highest dimension ranking for both servant leader self-reports mean (3.5 out of 4.0) and raters' mean (3.55) with a total mean of 3.6 and a total median score of 3.77.

Table 5

Building Community

Self	Raters	Mean	Median	Ranking
3.50	3.55	3.60	3.77	1

As with the ESLS evaluations, this is an area in which focus group participants perceived the church to be strong and intentional. The word community was mentioned 61 times in the three groups, often in conjunction with adjectives such as healthy (3), cohesive (2), building community (5), church community (3), and community events (2). Respondents were eager to discuss their collaborations and events focused on outreach, and even more specifically, on diverse families of all shapes, sizes, and socio-economic strata. Consistently, the church has a welcoming focus on hospitality. They host a variety of annual, seasonal, and other events wherein they collaborate with other churches, non-profits, and other organizations for benefit of the greater community. In addition, the church website lists various missions, activities and events that encourage those perusing the site to contribute, engage, or otherwise become involved in the community that is the Church and its outreach.

RQ1c asks What does Altruism look like in a 21st century non-denominational church?

Altruism is expressed as sacrificing personal benefit to meet others' needs. It is shown as service to followers, the Church, and the greater community. It entails a preference for serving others over being served, and it can significantly impact motivation and the Church community/body. The leaders ranked third on this dimension. Their self-score mean was 3.38 of 4.0, still lower than the rater score of 3.49 and the combined mean of 3.44.

Table 6

Altruism

Self	Raters	Mean	Median	Ranking
3.38	3.49	3.44	3.61	3

The word altruism was briefly touched on in all three groups. It was mentioned six times in the thematic analysis, often in conjunction with other codes, such as outreach (aligning with community) and serving others in general. Perhaps most notably, one

respondent said, "[the service-oriented culture of the church] definitely inspired me to try to figure out something that I'm good at, that I could give back to the community". This is reminiscent of the Servant Leader's desire to serve, rather than lead, and the scripture, "Everyone to whom much was given, of him much will be required, and from him to whom they entrusted much, they will demand the more" (Luke 12:48b, ESV).

RQ1d is What does Egalitarianism look like in a 21ˢᵗ century non-denominational church?

Egalitarianism rejects the notion that leaders are superior to others in the Church organization/body. This dimension is characterized by the realization that learning and influence are multidirectional processes and willingness to learn from any individual at any organizational level. It requires sensitivity to critical thinking from all stakeholders, inviting constructive criticism, and encouraging the debate of ideas.

Table 7

Egalitarianism

Self	Raters	Mean	Median	Ranking
3.21	3.44	3.33	3.62	5

The term equal or egalitarianism was not used frequently, but it was clear pastors and staff are perceived as approachable. For example, one person described, "pastors out there camping with everybody in the dirt and playing with the kids and right alongside everyone else. Yeah. So right in the thick of it". Several other respondents spoke about "Pastor [name changed] opens up his house, and lets people come over for dinner once a month". Indeed, monthly potluck dinners are hosted at various locations for nurturing community, fellowship, and unlikely dialogues among pastors, staff, and congregants. Perhaps this quality is most eloquently described by one focus group participant who stated: "…from the very first service [I was reminded the Pastor] was…a dad…a husband…he just spoke so openly and honestly, about so many things…I have always felt like, I can go to him for anything, anything and everything". It was clear in the focus groups that participants found their pastors and staff to be approachable, teachable, and eager to exchange ideas.

RQ1e asks What does Moral Integrity expressed as the Pursuit of Holiness look like in a 21ˢᵗ century non-denominational church?

John 7:18 says, "He who speaks from himself seeks his own glory; but He who is seeking the glory of the One who sent Him, He is true, and there is no unrighteousness in Him". Sanctification, or the position and process of being made holy, is ongoing for the disciple of Jesus. It begins with the gift of the grace of salvation (positioning one as

a saint in a royal priesthood), progresses throughout the individual's lifetime through walking with the Lord. It culminates in perfection that is achieved through the coming of Jesus which, for most disciples, is after the disciple's physical death and resurrection (Stanley, 2023). Moral Integrity as the Pursuit of Holiness is expressed in a variety of ways including, but not limited to… continuous development (unfolding or blossoming, not striving) of the moral person contributing to the moral organization and moral society through his/her growing relationship with Jesus Christ. A person who is high in this dimension Inspires trust while promoting honesty and transparency in the body, refuses to use deceit or manipulation for their personal goals, and values holiness over profit or personal gain. In practical application, it might be evidenced in how one handles adversity, as well as growth. According to Lutzer (2023), "…the word *holy* means 'separated unto God', which is actually wholeness...". It entails a focus and intentionality toward fulfillment "…of the purpose for which we were created" (p. 28-29). Both the raters and the leaders who completed self-reports ranked this as the second highest dimension of the church team. The combined mean score was 3.49 of a possible 4.0. The combined median score was 3.78 of 4.

Table 8

Moral Integrity Expressed as Pursuit of Holiness

Self	Raters	Mean	Median	Ranking
3.42	3.55	3.49	3.78	2

Perhaps the most intriguing themes for this question that emerged from the focus groups include development of talents, gifts, and skills in, with, for and through the Body of Christ. For example, the word gifts was mentioned 15 times in the focus groups, in conjunction with spiritual (3), diversity of (10), and development of (2). Christmas gift, such as one might give or receive, was mentioned only one time. When speaking of discipleship, and specifically, becoming more like Jesus, one participant said:

> I've never been made to feel less than because I didn't grow up this way. It's okay that, you know, I had a connection with God, but I've never read the Bible, or I can't quote Scripture. It's like, we have different ways of pouring into people and showing that love and that being the church body without just being able to quote scripture, you know.

In essence, everyone has something to contribute to the whole and everyone's gifts are welcome. Other themes that emerged in this category were transparency, often associated with promotion of transparency and honesty. Notably, group participants did not perceive the pastors and staff as celebrities, but as approachable Godly people serving and honoring God with transparency and honesty.

Plans for Continuing Investigation

Plans for continuing investigation include replicating the study with other churches and faith-based organizations, including relationships between dimensions of the ESLS with trust, organizational commitment, burnout, self-care, and other variables that are already abundant in the literature. In addition, investigation of the servant led church or other Christian faith-based organization and perceptions of shared spiritual giftings (e.g., exhortation, encouragement, etc.) evidenced in healthy communities are possible. Plans for continuing investigation with churches experiencing great change and/or other adversity are being considered, as studies may assist them and, if published, others in sustaining alignment and trajectory of purpose, mission, and vision as they minister to diverse congregations and communities. Plans are under way for mining this data to assist the church studied, as appropriate.

Finally, continuing development of the conceptual framework that emerged from this study is under way. The framework depicts a wellspring of 'living water' drops (small fountains) in a reservoir. Each fountain represents an individual in a true Christian servant led organization. In this study that organization is a church. At the center of each fountain, spreading out through concentric circles is a fountainhead or wellspring of 'living water'. Jesus said, "…whoever drinks of the water that I will give him shall never thirst; but the water that I will give him will become in him a well of water springing up to eternal life." (John 4:14). In a Christian servant led organization, fountains dwell in the reservoir of group identity and organizational culture. As concentric circles emanate outward from each one (individual servant identity in Jesus) they intersect through the wellspring of life, and connect, spilling outward - just as individuals' relationships spill over into other areas of their own lives and into various relationships with stakeholders in church, community, and society at large. The spillover can have both beneficial and consequential effects, depending on the water source and other factors.

Conclusion

It takes courage and faith for church leaders and staff to engage in a study such as this one. All Christians are works in progress, no one has 'arrived' at the full transformation of the sinless Servant Leader exemplified in Jesus Christ. And, although many Christian organizations have servant leadership listed in their mission and/or vision statements, leaders can be "hijacked by group identity and self-categorization processes, whereby the leader assumes he conforms to the group prototype without developing the requisite behaviors, skills, and attributes to *be* a true servant leader" (Singfiel, 2018, p. 65). Spiritual pride, rather than humility, can be a pitfall for Christian servant leaders. After all, it was pride that separated Lucifer (also referred to as Satan or the devil) from God the Father, even though Lucifer was once "an anointed cherub of God" (All About God.com, 2023). Pride is referred to as the deadliest of all sins (e.g., Proverbs 18:12; Proverbs 29:23; 1 Corinthians 13:4-5; Philippians 2:3). Its symptoms can be subtle, difficult to self-detect (Hartford, 2023). This is why disciples were sent out two-by-two (e.g., Matthew 10:2-4; Mark 6:7; Acts 1:13) and accountable to one another. "Iron sharpens iron" (Proverbs 27:17). It is one of many reasons why it is good to get feedback from those being served, and from those one serves alongside.

Importantly, the Bible and Servant Leadership literature agree that each servant has a greater purpose than any one group or organization. For followers of Jesus, the greatest purpose is to glorify God (e.g., 1 Corinthians 10:31; Matthew 5:16; Psalm 19:1; Psalm 99:9; Isaiah 25:1; John 17:5). That is done in part by developing other disciples. It means, "all women and men who are touched by the effort grow taller, and become healthier, stronger, more autonomous, and more disposed to serve" (Greenleaf, [1970] 1991, p. 37). Not all the information gleaned from this study is included in this paper as much to be shared with church leaders is beyond the scope of the paper. However, one can see alignment between servant leadership revealed in the literature, in the case studied (e.g., the church), and in the example provided by Jesus in Scripture. Perhaps one of the leaders put it best in a recent talk given at the church studied. The topic was the well-known Parable of the Talents (see Matthew 25:14-30) and the researcher was visiting the church.

In the Parable of the Talents three servants were entrusted with 'talents' – one was given one, one was given five, and one was given ten. Respectfully, the ones with five and ten invested, but the servant with only talent was afraid to take a risk. That servant buried the talent for fear the Master would not approve if the investment didn't pay off. The two servants who invested were entrusted with more when the Master approved of their efforts. The third servant was not so blessed. To say the Master was disappointed in his mediocre burying of the talent is an understatement. At the end of the talk, the speaker at the church asked, *What are you going to do with the talents God gave you?* For the Christian servant leader, this is an important question. This study is offered to provide tools, a few answers, and to lead to more ways for Christian servant leaders to better serve the Kingdom of God as under shepherds and disciple developers in the Church at large.

About the Author

Lora Reed, PhD has served as both an organizational consultant and a faculty member in higher education for over 30 years. She was among the first three *Greenleaf Servant Leadership Scholars* (2009). She currently serves as the co-founder and CEO of *Peace Offerings, Inc.* with her husband, Dana Reed. Lora also serves as a senior faculty associate and dissertation chair in the College of Doctoral Studies at Grand Canyon University. She is the author of numerous articles, books and book chapters. Lora can be reached by email (Lreed409@hotmail.com), or by phone/text at (1.941.705.0042 Eastern US).

Expression of Gratitude

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