The Effect of Fasting Upon the Development of Servant Leaders

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The purpose of the study reported here is to introduce the spiritual discipline of fasting to a group of leaders in a church setting to determine if a change in spiritual practice would also change their level of servant leadership. The study was an evaluative project done in the descriptive mode utilizing an opponent process questionnaire developed by Don Page and Paul T. P. Wong to measure servant leadership. The findings of this study demonstrate that adding fasting to the spiritual disciplines practiced by an individual changes their level of servant leadership in the areas of courageous leadership, authoritarian power and pride, as well as inspiring leadership.

The connection between fasting and servant leadership seems to be an odd combination. The literature on servant leadership theory highlights both the servant leader as a person and the servant leader’s treatment of others. Servant leadership training seems to focus on the actions of the servant leader rather than on how the servant leader changes as a person in relationship towards others. The literature on fasting has much to say about how fasting changes the person and little to say about how fasting changes relationships. Stephen R. Covey, in his writing about what he calls “The 8th Habit,” has many similarities to servant leadership:

I have also come to believe in the efficacy and wisdom of occasional fasting, wherein you miss a meal or two for the purpose of providing rest to the whole digestive process and also for cleansing. From my own experience, the main benefit however has not been physical—it has been more mental and spiritual....

I strongly believe that when you properly control your appetites, your ability to control your passions and to purify your desires increases. It gives you a real feeling of humility and enables you to gain greater perspective about what is really important in life....

I do believe, however, that almost everyone can experience the tremendous
benefits of winning the private victory over the body. Such a victory also impacts our ability to produce public victories in our relationships with others and on reorienting ourselves to a life of service and contribution. (333-34)

If a correlation could be made between the practice of fasting and the behavior of servant leadership beyond simple anecdotal evidence, then a new door might be opened for those wanting to grow as servant leaders.

The wisdom expressed by Covey in a secular setting is confirmed by the words of Scripture and people through the centuries writing from the Christian faith perspective. As the research on fasting unfolded, the evidence became clear that fasting as a discipline was not considered optional among those seeking to follow Jesus through the years. It was rather an expectation that shaped and formed people in the ways of Christ. If fasting did have an impact on the formation of those desiring to live a Christ like life, then perhaps the discipline of fasting would also have an impact on how servant leadership is taught and measured.

**Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this project was to determine the effectiveness of fasting in the development of servant leaders in Saint Joseph United Methodist Church in Fort Wayne, Indiana.

**Research Questions**

To determine the effectiveness of fasting in the leadership development of servant leaders in a local church setting, the following research questions were identified.

- What level of servant leadership is currently in place among church leaders of the Saint Joseph United Methodist Church?
- When leaders fast for a three-month period of time, what changes occur in their level of servant leadership?
- Does fasting influence the development of servant leaders in comparison to a control group who do not fast?

**Servant Leadership**

Robert K. Greenleaf was the first to popularize the phrase “servant leadership.” In his essay on servant leadership, he defines a servant leader:

[One who makes] sure that other people’s highest priority needs are being served. The best test, and difficult to administer, is: Do those served grow as persons? Do they, while being served, [original emphasis] become healthier, wiser, freer, more autonomous, more likely themselves to become a servant? And, [original emphasis] what is the effect on the least privileged in society; will they benefit, or, at least, not be further deprived? (Servant Leadership 13-14)
Beginning with that pamphlet and in the many years of writing, lecturing, and teaching that followed, Greenleaf encourages leaders to consider their role not just of what was being accomplished, but also the wider impact on those who followed and on the communities they served.

Greenleaf encouraged servant leaders not only in the business world. In several essays Greenleaf focused on the role of the religious community in developing and modeling of the servant leadership example. The change in the individual leading was always seen by Greenleaf as more important than the particular actions the leader might take. Greenleaf understood servant leadership not to be a tool for change but as a way of life:

The top person of some ailing institution might try to insert servant leadership as a procedure, as a general management idea, as a means whereby the institution might do better. Such a move might have a short lived aspirin effect, but when that effect wears off, it might leave the institution more ailing than it was before and another gimmick would need to be sought. The surer way for the idea to have a long term good effect is for the top person to become a servant leader. [original emphasis] What that person is [original emphasis] and does [original emphasis] then speaks louder than what is said. It might be better if nothing is said, just be it. This, in time, might transform the institution. (Servant as Religious Leader 35)

This focus on becoming rather than simply acting as a servant leader has great potential for affecting contemporary leadership both in the Christian church as well as in the business community.

**Servant Leadership Literature Review**

The work of Greenleaf has been expanded by contemporary writers and has been developed in a variety of ways. Though the language changes, the theme of service as the primary role of leadership continues. In highlighting some of the popular writings that focus on servant leadership, the intent is not to be exhaustive but representative.

The theme of stewardship is how Peter Block interprets the idea of servant leadership. In his book, he encourages the individual to assist others, as well as entire organizations and cultures, to become mutually successful. The need for affirming the worth and value of people as individuals, partnering with others for the common good, empowering others to succeed, and becoming accountable for the results of not just one’s own actions but also for the actions of the organizations and society of which one is a part, constitute servant leadership for Block. The role of servant leadership is placed into the context of how people will define success in the future. He ultimately labels servant leadership as the only way by which democracy will be able to survive and thrive in the coming years.

Covey provides another model of servant leadership. He encourages individuals to find their own strength or power, which he refers to as finding one’s own voice. In turn, individuals will assist and inspire others to find their own voices:
[Each leader would then] become the humble servant leader who “runs alongside,” asking,
1. How is it going?
2. What are you learning?
3. What are your goals?
4. How can I help you?
5. How am I doing as a helper? (261)

Through this approach, Covey implies that individuals will reach their full leadership potential in all situations.

Warren Bennis writes extensively on leadership. In his writings, he develops the theme of servant leadership. Becoming a leader is, in Bennis’s words, “synonymous with becoming yourself” (9). Having a guiding vision and a passion for life and possessing integrity are key attributes. These qualities are not so much taught as they are learned over the course of one’s life experiences.

Leading is not easy in an ever-changing world, according to Bennis:

[T]he challenge to leaders will be to act as compassionate coaches, dedicated to reducing stress by ensuring that the whole team has everything it needs,—from human and financial resources to emotional support and encouragement—to work together effectively and at peak performance most of the time. Recognizing, developing and celebrating the distinctive skills of each individual will become critically important to organizational survival. (214)

Therefore, the leader will learn to serve others so that the individuals and the team will be successful. Bennis parallels Greenleaf’s approach emphasizing the importance of the leader’s empowerment of those who are being led.

In identifying the characteristics of a leader, Warren G. Bennis and Robert J. Thomas suggest several common characteristics of a leader. These include “adaptive capacity, the ability to engage others in a shared vision, a distinctive voice, and integrity” (144). The characteristics seen here will be similar to those tested in servant leadership research.

Ken Blanchard, like Bennis, has also written extensively on leadership issues. Much of his writing is directed toward those in the secular workplace; however, he takes his understandings of faith and leadership and combines them in a book written with Phil Hodges. Blanchard and Hodges suggest Jesus was the ultimate servant leader as he led within his surrounding circumstances. Blanchard and Hodges characterize Jesus as a situational leader who was able to lead through directing, coaching, supporting, and delegating, depending on the needs and abilities of those around him. This example of Jesus’ leading is the prototype for today’s servant leaders.

One becomes the type of servant leader Blanchard and Hodges describe as desirable through daily practices of solitude, prayer, Bible study, acceptance of unconditional love, and accountability to
others. These ideal components of a servant leader lifestyle mirror the spiritual disciplines in classical Christianity.

The writers examined here are but a representative sampling of the various approaches to servant leadership. Some, like Blanchard and Hodges, specifically focus on Jesus and biblical principles as the primary reason that servant leadership is important. Others, like Covey, use a religious background without dwelling on it as a way of encouraging servant leadership. For the most part, those writing for the secular audience take the tactic of Bennis and Block and focus on the successful outcomes of living a servant leadership style.

Much of the current writing and research on servant leadership to date has been theoretical and anecdotal (e.g., Greenleaf; Bennis; Covey). Those who have done measurable research have focused on the business or education fields (e.g., Laub; Able; Wong and Page). Some initial research that has been done on servant leadership of a general nature is applicable in a variety of settings (Kathleen Patterson). Other research, such as the Doctor of Ministry projects of William R. Miller and William Lee Strawhun, Jr. has included a multitude of variables or experiences without considering the possible impact of a single variable or experience. A growing body of research focuses on the characteristics of servant leadership and the ability to measure those characteristics.

The research now being done in the area of servant leadership is establishing the unique character of those who lead. How servant leaders are shaped is still a critical question. Bennis and Thomas suggest leaders are shaped by a crucible moment; however, Robert Clinton suggests it is a lifelong process that God uses. Joyce L. Ndoria examines research studies on leadership development and proposes that servant leadership can be taught just as other leadership skills are taught. Karen S. Fenton-LeShore suggests that a servant leader is able to teach others the skills for servant leadership through a mix of modeling, reflection, and content. Two basic approaches to servant leadership formation exist. One is that what a person does and learns reflects the level of servant leadership the person will live out. The other is that people are servant leaders because of who they are and the personal transformation that happens in their lives.

**Fasting**

Fasting has been a regular part of the religious and cultural experiences of people groups around the world. The regular practice of fasting can be seen in the religions of Buddhism, Hinduism, and the Muslim faith (Tripp 147). It can be documented in aboriginal culture and new age health practices. The practice and history of fasting in these areas, however, is beyond the scope of this project. The focus of this study centers on the role of fasting within the Christian tradition and its influence on leaders in Christian faith communities today.

Jewish practice during the time of Jesus and the beginning of the early Church involved fasting on Mondays and Fridays. The early Church, according to the Didache, however, fasted on Wednesdays, in remembrance of Jesus betrayal, and Fridays, because of the crucifixion (Meloni and De Simone 319). In the Didache, fasting is suggested for one or two days before baptism. It also
states, “Your fasts must not be identical with those of the hypocrites. They fast on Mondays and Thursdays; but you should fast on Wednesdays and Fridays” (Richardson 174).

According to some (e.g., Shaw; O’Donnell), the move toward fasting is related to the diminishing of martyrdom in the early Church. As people appeared less likely to be killed for their faith, they began to look for other ways in which they could suffer a symbolic, if not literal, death. Fasting, prayer, manual labor, and self-mutilation were seen as ways of dying each day to the flesh and taking on the sufferings of Christ (O’Donnell 58).

In the early Church, some people took fasting to an extreme and incorporated it into the aesthetic lifestyle. Saint Anthony, born around the year AD 250, was one who lived by this approach: [H]e was a daily martyr to his conscience, ever fighting the battles of Faith. For he practiced a zealous and more intense ascetic life. He fasted continually, his clothing was hair on the inside while the outside was skin, and this he kept to his dying day. He never bathed his body in water to remove filth, nor did he as much as wash his feet or even allow himself to put them in water without necessity. (R. Meyer 60)

The fasting and aesthetic life was seen in many of the early desert fathers and mothers of the faith as a way of breaking the body’s attachment to physical pleasures and focusing instead upon the spiritual life (Rader 289).

The Rule of Saint Benedict became the general practice of the monastic communities of Western Christendom by AD 580, and fasting was a regular expectation of those living the religious life. This rule brought some order to the extreme asceticism practiced by some Christian communities while at the same time setting the expectations that all church members would participate in a similar lifestyle no matter their location. The focus of the Rule of Saint Benedict is on the formation of humility within the monks as they gather and live out their lives together. The first step toward humility is that of setting aside the sensual desires. Benedict says, “So unlawful desires are to be carefully avoided, because death lurks behind the door at the very entrance to pleasure: whence the Scripture forbids us to ‘pursue our lusts’” (qtd. in Chadwick 302). Fasting was an important part of living out this life of humility.

Benedict set the days for fasting in the monasteries for Wednesdays and Fridays on a regular basis but did not forbid fasting at other times as well. Fasting was understood to be one of the instruments of good works. Fasting is included in a listing of things that one should and should not do: To honour all men. Not to do to another what we would not have done to ourselves. To renounce oneself, in order to follow Christ. To chastise the body. Not to seek after pleasure. To love fasting. To relieve the poor.
To clothe the naked.
To visit the sick. (qtd. in Chadwick 297)

This listing was extensive, and the Rule expected the monk to follow these guidelines on a regular basis for the spiritual progress that was anticipated in all those who choose to follow Jesus.

The custom under Jewish law and early Christian practice was to abstain from food until after sundown. Gradually, in the monastic communities, the time for breaking the fast became earlier and the fast was broken following the recitation of Vespers, around 6:00 p.m., and later following None, around 3:00 p.m. By the thirteenth century, the meal was taken at noon and the fast would continue from the previous night’s meal until midday. Within the monastic community some practiced more extreme fasts; however, the taking of one meal a day was usually considered fasting no matter when the meal was taken (Callam 19). These monastic practices also became common practice among the laity during this time.

John Wesley returned to the early Church writings when he was a student at Oxford. These early patristic writings had a profound impact upon him and others who made up the early Holy Club (Whaling 1012). His desire to return to the practices of the early Church fathers and mothers led Wesley to incorporate fasting into his life. He fasted regularly two days a week and encouraged others to do so as well. When the General Rules of the United Societies was published in 1743, Wesley included fasting as an expectation:

It is expected of all who desire to continue in these societies that they should continue to evidence their desire of salvation.

Thirdly, by attending upon all the ordinances of God. Such are, the public worship of God; the ministry of the word, either read or expounded; the supper of the Lord; family and private prayer; searching the scriptures; and fasting, or abstinence. (qtd. in Whaling 110)

The expectation of fasting and abstinence on Fridays was continued in the churches influenced by Wesley for many years (Bowmer 832). Over time, it was replaced by quarterly fasts and, then later, by fasting prior to reception of new ministers.

For Wesley, fasting was a means of grace in the Christian lifestyle and was not to be seen as earning the grace of God. The means of grace as Wesley suggested “were not a means of earning grace, but they were essential for keeping one open and responsive to the initiatives of grace” (Maas 314). Fasting was to lead the person to works of love for and with others, not just for personal spiritual nourishment.

In the 1930s, Dietrich Bonhoeffer urged a return to fasting by embracing an ascetic lifestyle that included fasting. Bonhoeffer suggests that fasting is an integral part of the work necessary in forming the person who will follow Jesus in discipleship:

Strict exercise of self-control is an essential feature of the Christian’s life. Such
customs have only one purpose—to make the disciples more ready and cheerful to accomplish those things which God would have done. Fasting helps to discipline the self-indulgent and slothful will which is so reluctant to serve the Lord, and it helps to humiliate and chasten the flesh. (188)

Through fasting, one’s body and spirit becomes more content to give up the temporary pleasures of this life in favor of the serving and ministry that Jesus invites one to partake (i.e., one that has a far greater reward). Bonhoeffer’s suggestions are in line with much of the early monastic writing about the necessity in making the body submit to the spirit through ascetic practices.

The contemporary interest in, and understanding of, fasting was initiated by Richard Foster’s book, Celebration of Discipline, first published in 1978. Here Foster places fasting into the context of the classical spiritual disciplines and encourages those wanting to grow as disciples to include fasting, as well as the other disciplines, into their lives. Foster presents fasting as an invitation rather than a command from the Bible and encourages the practice. He says that “fasting reveals the things that control us” (48). His approach focuses on the spiritual formation impact of individual fasting more so than any outward signs of God’s activity.

Dallas Willard continues Foster’s work and themes in The Spirit of the Disciplines. He combines the desire for the knowledge of Jesus along with actively participating in spiritual disciplines to enhance spiritual formation. One alone would not lead to fulfillment; both need to be present.

Willard’s emphasis is not only on the activity of prayer or fasting but on how those practices engage people in life: “It [spiritual discipline] is the effective and full enjoyment of active love of God and humankind in all the daily rounds of normal existence where we are placed” (138). Thus, fasting is not an end in itself but a door to a fuller, more enriching walk of faith with Jesus Christ.

According to Willard, for fasting to affect the level of self-control, temperance, and restraint practiced by a disciple of Jesus, it needs to be done on a regular basis:

When a person chooses fasting as a spiritual discipline, he or she must, then, practice it well enough and often enough to become experienced in it, because only the person who is well habituated to systematic fasting as a discipline can use it effectively as a part of direct service to God, as in special times of prayer or other service. (168)

This theme echoes the practices of the early monastic movement of the regular training of one’s body and mind in ways that lead to faithfulness.

Over the centuries the practice of fasting has varied in importance to those following Jesus Christ. For many it has been seen as “bending the ear of Yahveh,” as Rosemary Rader explains (289), and, at times, even seen as an almost magical act leading to God’s intervention in the way desired by the one fasting. Others more grounded in the traditional understanding of spiritual disciplines have understood that fasting does not so much change the circumstances around the person fasting but
changes the person.

In a very thorough exploration of the biblical references to fasting, Arthur Wallis writes of the different responses of the people and God to fasting. Wallis focuses upon the importance of God’s leading and his desire that fasting not become a legalistic mind-set. To avoid becoming legalistic, Wallis says God is the one who should lead the person to fast: “This principle applies even to the regular fast [original emphasis], say one day a week. We must be sure that God is leading us to do this” (34). Thus, Wallis suggests the potential of fasting leading to personal growth, as well as it becoming an avenue for God’s power to move through the Christ follower.

This distinction as to why one fasts is of major importance. Throughout this study and project, fasting was focused upon as a means God might use to change individuals who are fasting rather than persons fasting changing the world around them with both an openness and expectation that God does and will do miracles through prayer and fasting; however, the regular practice of fasting is understood as a discipline that invites God to form the one fasting into a humble servant willing to wash the feet of others as Jesus demonstrated in John 13.

The desire of a person to become more like Jesus should impact all areas of one’s life. Those who are in positions of leadership should desire to lead in the ways Jesus led. The example of Jesus humbly washing the feet of the disciples should be an example leaders who follow Jesus take seriously. This servant leadership attitude is significant in both the religious as well as secular roles in which people serve.

Servant leadership is characterized more by a person’s character than by practices. The formation of a person’s character is then as important as the knowledge that person puts into practice in leadership settings. Events and practices that impact the person’s character are ones that should be encouraged and built into training and educational events. This study was based upon the connection between servant leadership and the spiritual discipline of fasting. It was quantified for use in other settings through asking the research questions.

**Research Methods**

This was an evaluative study in the descriptive mode that utilized an opponent process questionnaire developed by Wong and Page to measure servant leadership. The primary questionnaire was self-administered and included sixty-two items. A secondary researcher-designed questionnaire was given as part of the posttest to track possible variables and outside influences.

The opponent process model tests for desired results as well as forces that would be contrary to that which is desired. In the case of testing for servant leadership, the presence of authoritarian hierarchy and egotistical pride reduce or completely eliminate the possibility of servant leadership. Wong and Page determined that without testing for these negative influences a true picture of servant leadership was not possible.

The instrument tests seven areas of servant leadership. Six of the areas are positive: developing and empowering others, authentic leadership, open and participatory leadership, inspiring leadership, visionary leadership, and courageous leadership. One area is negative in the combination
of authoritarian power and pride. Wong and Page do not define the positive areas tested except to indicate their prevalence in the literature of servant leadership studies.

The negative factors of authoritarian power and pride are the antithesis of servant leadership. The use of authoritarian power is characterized as being dictatorial and using one's power for self-protection. The area of Pride centers on an unhealthy ego and the need to be the center of attention. These two in combination, according to Wong and Page, keep an individual from being able to live out servant leadership.

The research was designed to test the hypothesis that forming the spiritual character of leaders might have as much to do with their level of servant leadership as traditional models of education and religious participation. The introduction of fasting into the lives of leaders was an avenue to introduce a specific spiritual discipline into the lives of leaders while testing to see what impact fasting might have upon the level of servant leadership practiced by the individual.

In order to establish the existing level of servant leadership present within the leadership of the local setting, leaders were invited to take the Revised Servant Leadership Profile (RSLP) developed by Wong and Page. At the same time the leadership took the RSLP, they were also invited to participate in a study that involved fasting for one day a week for thirteen weeks. At the end of the thirteen weeks, the leadership was again invited to take the RSLP and answer a general questionnaire about behavior that might have changed during the study period. Those who chose to fast were also invited to share a more detailed account of how their experience impacted them personally.

For the purpose of this study fasting is defined as the spiritual discipline of intentionally going without food for a specific period of time for the purpose of spiritual and personal growth. Participants who fasted went without food from sundown of one day until sundown of the following day.

Invitations to participate in the study were made to forty-one people. These individuals included both paid and unpaid leadership of the Saint Joseph United Methodist Church. Of the forty-one people invited to participate, thirty-eight individuals chose to participate through taking the initial RSLP. There were 13 individuals who choose to fast and 25 who choose not to fast. The subjects ranged from 31 to 79 years of age. The average age of the subjects was 53 years and the median age was 55.

Results

The results of the two RSLP’s taken thirteen weeks apart were analyzed, and the two sets of subjects were compared to one another. Those who chose not to fast became the control participants and those fasting were included as the fasting participants. The results were subjected to a number of tests including p-value and chi-squared analyses (See Table 1). Following the analyses a number of conclusions became evident. Fasting led to a positive change in two levels of servant leadership. The change in the subjects between those who fasted and those who did not fast in the factors of
authoritarian power and pride and courageous leadership was statistically significant. A change occurred in inspiring leadership, but to a less verifiable level.

**Table 1 Chi-Square and P-Value Test Results (N=38)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Factor</th>
<th>Chi-square</th>
<th>P-value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Factor 1: Developing and empowering others</td>
<td>0.560</td>
<td>.575</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Factor 2: Power and pride</td>
<td>4.312</td>
<td>.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Factor 3: Authentic leadership</td>
<td>0.500</td>
<td>.617</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Factor 4: Open, participatory leadership</td>
<td>0.270</td>
<td>.787</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Factor 5: Inspiring leadership</td>
<td>1.330</td>
<td>.184</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Factor 6: Visionary leadership</td>
<td>0.666</td>
<td>.505</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Factor 7: Courageous leadership</td>
<td>2.104</td>
<td>.035</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Those who fasted in the study indicated they participated in several spiritual disciplines to a greater degree. In comparing the two sets of subjects those who fasted prayed significantly more and talked about their faith with others more than those who did not fast. (Through the narrative questionnaire those fasting indicated that the fasting led them to change their behavior in these areas.) Several unexpected variables might have influenced the level of participation in the activities of the participants. However, the narrative responses by participants indicated that the fasting led to more activity in the areas of prayer and faith discussions.

Intervening variables that might have impacted the change in servant leadership were also considered. Participants were asked if they participated; more often, about the same, or less often in the activities of: worship, attending Sunday school or a small group gathering, prayer, reading the Bible, reading other religious material, talking about their faith, or participating in acts of service. The increase in prayer activity showed the possibility of influencing servant leadership to some degree, especially in the area of being open and participatory in leading. The intervening variable of reading other religious material also showed a change in this area nevertheless the analysis was inconclusive as to whether prayer or other reading was the cause of the change in this area.

**Implications**

The results of this study show that the level of servant leadership can be increased by individuals practicing the spiritual discipline of fasting. A significant difference was present in specific areas of servant leadership within an individual when they incorporated fasting into their life one day a
week. The levels of authoritarian power and pride as well as courageous leadership show a positive
change when fasting is introduced into the life of a servant leader.

This study shows that changes in servant leadership can be influenced over time by changes
in the person’s actions and not just through the addition of knowledge or personal awareness. The
formation of what a person does in order to draw closer to God impacts the way they relate to the area
of servant leadership. As the discipline is incorporated into the life of the individual, the tendency is to
become more of a servant leader in very specific areas as measured by Wong and Page’s RSLP.

Relation to Previous Studies

The area of servant leadership is still in the early stages of statistical analysis. There are a
number of surveys that have been developed to test for the presence of servant leadership, such as
the RSLP developed by Wong and Page that was used in this study. The various surveys look for the
characteristics of people practicing servant leadership in accordance with the definition of servant
leadership developed by the researchers.

Some work has been done in the area of teaching the characteristics of servant leadership in
different settings. Any research tracking the change in servant leadership in an individual or specific
set of subjects has not been published at this time. Some initial tracking of changes brought about by
fasting has been done in limited ways within the context of several spiritual disciplines introduced to a
given set of subjects. These studies were limited by their nature and the amount of time the
participants fasted.

The research reported within this study is the first longitudinal research published in the area
of fasting and servant leadership. This study moves the research from the characteristics of people
practicing servant leadership to the possibility of forming the person into a servant leader through
specific practices of spiritual disciplines.

The literature on fasting indicates the importance of fasting in the life of the Christian
community. The Rule of Saint Benedict focused upon practices such as fasting that formed the life of
a follower of Jesus to be one of humility. As the study showed, those who fasted showed significant
changes in their use of authoritarian hierarchy and levels of power and pride. The presence of these
characteristics would be the antithesis of humility.

John Wesley and Dietrich Bonhoeffer recognized the importance of fasting in the
development of leaders. The changes in levels of courageous leadership indicates that those who
fasted were more willing, after thirteen months, to lead in areas where conflict might be present. Both
Wesley and Bonhoeffer gained strength from their own personal discipline of fasting, and it remains a
discipline current servant leaders could greatly benefit from in times of conflict.

The focus of Foster and others on the role of fasting as a discipline benefiting the participant
in their spiritual growth was shown in this study to be correct. Those who fasted did turn to other forms
of spiritual disciplines along with their fasting at a rate higher than those not fasting. A return to
regular fasting among followers of Jesus might raise the overall level of spiritual discipline as Wallis
suggested.
The change in levels of servant leadership over the course of this study showed that Bennis and others are on the right track when they indicate that leadership qualities are not so much taught as they are learned over the course of a person’s life experiences. The changes in the scores of those who fasted during a time when there was not an active education process under way indicate that servant leadership can be learned outside of the formal educational setting.

When Blanchard and Hodges make the suggestion that a leader will become more servant-like through the practices of the spiritual disciplines they were doing so through anecdotal evidence. This study begins to show that there may indeed be a deeper connection between the disciplines and the development of servant leadership.

If Wong and Page are correct that the presence of authoritarian hierarchy and egotistic pride make leaders anything but servants, fasting may have a significant role to play in the development of servant leaders. This study indicated that there was a direct correlation between fasting and reductions in those areas tested by Wong and Page. How fasting might impact other servant leadership indicators created by other researchers is yet to be determined.

Limitations

The study is limited in its generalizability by the size and characteristics of the subjects tested. The subjects consisted of mainly middle class North American Christians from a predominantly white suburban church. The subjects, while representative of the context where the study was completed, is not representative of all Christians and does not represent all those who aspire to be servant leaders.

The study is also limited by the length of time individuals fasted. The thirteen weeks provided enough time for those fasting to make it a regular part of their lives. Questions still remain as to how fasting for an even longer period of time might affect servant leadership levels. Another limiting factor in the length of time studied is the inability to do a follow-up study after the initial testing and fasting. The limitations of this study provide the opportunity for further research.

Unexpected Conclusions

The study of fasting’s effect on the development of servant leaders showed a positive correlation between fasting and the overall level of servant leadership. The surprise came in the examination of the specific areas of servant leadership. I anticipated that fasting would impact all areas of servant leadership, and the overall level of servant leadership did show a positive change for those who fasted.

In comparing the change in areas of servant leadership the changes were not witnessed in all areas of servant leadership. The majority of the areas tested did not show any greater likelihood of change over the testing period between the fasting and non-fasting subjects. The fact that fasting had an impact upon specific areas of servant leadership and not every area of servant leadership was unexpected.

Applications

The ways in which leadership education is done needs to be reexamined as a result of this study. Rather than focusing most of the time and energy upon training leaders through education
about leadership issues, the focus needs to include a significant time centered on disciplines that form the person who is to become the servant leader. A concerted effort to teach the spiritual disciplines and the encouragement of implementing these disciplines into people’s daily lives shows the possibility of reaping great rewards in the level of servant leadership provided within the local setting.

In the larger context outside the study’s setting, the results of this survey show several possible applications. First, the results indicate that the practices people implement in their daily lives can and do have an impact upon their level of servant leadership. Those encouraging servant leadership will benefit from the introduction of personal disciplines into the lives of leaders that are not directly associated with the job or the responsibility of a specific person. The formation of the person as a leader is a significant avenue toward the implementation of servant leadership ideals.

Second, fasting is a legitimate avenue for bringing change in the area of servant leadership. For those teaching and leading in the area of servant leadership, fasting should be included as leading to more effective servant leadership. The invitation to give something up or go without food for a specific period of time will benefit the individual who does so as well as the institutions and organizations with which the person is associated.

Third, fasting is a discipline that needs to be brought back into the regular practice and teaching of the religious community. Fasting shows the possibility of reducing the need for power and the presence of pride, as well as increasing the tendency toward taking a courageous stand. The findings suggest that for the North American Christian population fasting could be a discipline that would have a major impact upon the way the individuals interact with the existing society and culture.

**Further Study**

This study raises a number of possibilities for further study. The implication that the specific discipline of fasting brings changes in areas of servant leadership raises some questions about the role of fasting. Would an even longer period of fasting tracked over a year or even five years show a greater degree in growth in the specific areas of servant leadership? If the individual continued to fast would other areas of servant leadership be impacted besides the areas of authoritarian power and pride and courageous leadership? If the participant stopped fasting, would the levels of Authoritarian power and pride return to a level associated with their pre-fasting experience?

Since fasting had a significant impact upon the level of authoritarian power and pride, some questions could be asked about the connection between fasting and humility. Through the testing instrument that was used, the original designers indicated that the presence of power and pride negated other areas of servant leadership. The antitheses of power and pride would be humility. Would fasting over a period of time show a similar change in subjects tested for levels of humility in their lives outside of the areas of servant leadership?

The positive impact of fasting on the areas of servant leadership also opens the door to further study on the possible impact of other spiritual disciplines on the area of servant leadership. Would the specific introduction of a discipline such as serving others on a weekly basis raise the level
of servant leadership in the same or different areas as that of fasting? How would the area of servant leadership be impacted over a significant period of time by the regular practice of multiple spiritual disciplines?

These questions arise as a result of this study because of the positive results fasting was shown to have on the level of servant leadership. If fasting was joined with a period of education about the characteristics of servant leadership, could that increase the changes to a greater degree? If fasting and education were joined with a greater level of self-awareness in leadership styles, would the individual grow significantly more as a servant leader?

The opportunities for further study exist in both the secular and religious realms. Wherever servant leadership is the desired outcome, the reality of how people become servant leaders will be important. The tracking of changes in levels of servant leadership will help indicate the amount of time and energy that should be spent on shaping the person as a leader. The mix between educating the person about servant leadership, the analysis of how the person is behaving as a servant leader and the formation of the person as a servant who leads will assist organizations and institutions in their allocation of time, money, and personal resources.

The impact of this study in the area of servant leadership will take time to understand fully. It will depend, in large part, on the research others might do in testing for changes brought on by incorporating other spiritual disciplines in the lives of servant leaders. If the study can be replicated in other contexts or with other spiritual disciplines, it will raise the validity of the conclusions drawn here. This study opens the opportunity for further study on the effect personal changes have in the area of servant leadership both within religious settings and the secular studies of servant leadership.
References


