



# Servant Leadership and Conflict Management in the Faith-Based Organization

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The purpose of this qualitative study is to examine how servant leaders manage conflict in faith-based organizations (FBOs). Data was collected through the qualitative method of semi-structured interviews with two servant leaders who serve in executive leadership positions in their faith-based organizations located in South Texas. The interviews were conducted utilizing the video conference application, Zoom, as requested by the participants in accordance with their Covid-19 safety measures. The first cycle coding of both participants' responses revealed 60 codes with 806 frequencies, sharing 26 first cycle codes (Appendix). The second cycle of coding produced five themed clusters reflecting the participants' shared values of (a) communication; (b) biblical standards; (c) vision; (d) unity; and (e) empowerment when managing conflict in their FBOs (Table 2, Table 3). This phenomenological study places the servant leader managing group conflict within a faith-based organizational (FBO) context allowing the servant leader to connect with the FBO's biblical foundation and incorporate SL attributes (Table 1) that complement the faith foundation of the organization. Although the literature reveals that leaders exhibiting specific servant leadership qualities (Table 1) have a positive impact in both minimizing and managing conflict in the FBO, the existing research incorporating all three factors of SL, FBOs, and conflict management was limited validating the necessity for this study and its outcomes that will serve as a resource to servant leaders attempting to manage conflict in a faith-based organizational context.

Keywords: conflict, group conflict, conflict management, conflict resolution, faith-based organization, servant leadership, ecclesial leadership

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Conflict inevitably occurs when people gather for a common purpose to accomplish a common goal that can either serve as a catalyst for functional collaboration and growth or a hindrance resulting in dysfunctional relationships and failed organizational goals (Miles et al., 2020). The difference between conflict in a secular organization and a faith-based organization is the missional foundation of the faith-based organization (FBO) that is based on the biblical premise of loving your neighbor as yourself (Mk. 12:31)

which often includes feeding the poor, providing shelter to the homeless, caring for the widow and orphan, and many other outlets of service to the community; consequently, conflict naturally arises as organizational members including members from FBOs who have opposing viewpoints but must be willing to collectively come to an integrative solution despite differences if the mission of the organization is to move forward and thrive (Arrow et al., 2000; Konopaske et al., 2018; Murugavel & Somaraju, 2016).

Servant leadership (SL), although a relatively new organizational concept coined by Greenleaf in 1970, dates back to scripture as Christ led his followers by serving, showing them that the compelling qualities of a leader are not premised on power and domination but rather on qualities such as empowerment, love, selflessness, sacrifice, service, humility, and intentionally listening (Table 1) to followers not seeking personal interest (Philippians 2:4) but prioritizing followers' needs first, followed by the organization's needs second, and lastly, his own needs (Graham, 1991; Greenleaf, 1970) which distinguish SL from other forms of leadership (Ehrhart, 2004; Russell & Stone, 2002; Smith et al., 2004).

Although the phenomenon of group conflict covers a broad spectrum, it is the specific, personal servant leadership qualities (Table 1) employed by the servant leader that inform his conflict management strategies within a faith-based organizational context that will determine if and how conflict will be resolved and if and how organizational goals will continue to be achieved leading to not only empowered and fulfilled followers but overall organizational success as well. To understand the scope of conflict management employed by servant leaders in FBOs, a review of the servant leadership theory and characteristics (Table 1), the source of conflict and resolution, and the unique nature of FBOs are necessary. Despite the vast publication of scholarly articles autonomously referencing leadership, SL, conflict management, and FBOs, empirical research combining the three phenomena of servant leadership, conflict management, and faith-based organizations is severely limited validating the need for this study.

The purpose of this qualitative analysis is to explore how servant leaders manage conflict in faith-based organizations and will reference the following research questions (RQ) as a guide to this study when collecting data:

RQ1: Will you describe established norms within your organization and its faith-based mission that help you to manage or resolve group conflict?

RQ2: What faith-based principles do you incorporate while mediating between conflicting parties?

RQ3: How have you established a rapport with your followers that has promoted positive group behaviors?

RQ4: How does conflict benefit the faith-based organization?

RQ5: As a servant leader who is focused on serving and empowering followers, how have you balanced the tension between fulfilling follower needs and organizational needs?

The two participants for this study serve as executive leaders in faith-based organizations located in the South Texas region and were identified and selected as servant leaders due to their organizational missions being servant-oriented in nature as a Christian institution of higher education and a Christian foster care and adoption placement agency.

## Literature Review

### Servant Leadership

SL introduced by Greenleaf (1977) posits a radical form of leadership that is a countercultural concept (Chu, 2011) focusing its leadership style on a leader's desire to serve his followers helping them to maximize their full potential without expecting anything in return. SL entails a deeper connection and meaning with work that Autry (2004) coined as the spirit of work that transcends position, power, and money but involves incorporating one's spirituality into every facet of life including the workplace, relationships, and a leadership style that most often expresses itself through service which is the ability of a servant leader to relate to his followers in such a dignified manner causing followers to live God-glorifying lives (Elmer, 2006). As servant leaders place their followers' needs above their own by listening, nurturing, defending, learning followers' aspirations, and sharing in followers' pain, followers, in turn, feel empowered personally and professionally translating into satisfied, committed, and productive followers (Yukl, 2013). Servant leaders ensure fairness, social justice, and equality standing up for the marginalized and respecting weaker organizational members, creating an employee-oriented culture of service, and influencing others to also become servant leaders (Yukl, 2013).

Greenleaf (1970) asserted that servant leaders are servants first who have an initial desire to serve causing them to eventually aspire to lead. SL theory asserts that organizational goals will only be accomplished on a long-term basis if servant leaders are careful to facilitate the growth and development of organizational members as servant leaders' primary focus is relationships and people (Stone et al., 2004). As the servant leader promotes follower engagement by providing organizational opportunities, he has a three-pronged effect causing (a) follower growth; (b) organizational survival; and (c) community service (Jit et al., 2016; Luthans & Avolio, 2003; Reinke, 2004). Smith et al. (2004) further asserted that SL stresses the servant leader's concern for followers' well-being as reflected by the leader's receptive, non-judgmental listening ear and willingness to learn from followers stemming from a strong spiritual orientation that Sendjaya et al. (2008) claimed is a crucial source of motivation for servant leaders. Servant leaders being spiritually-oriented enables them

to authentically engage with followers in profound ways transforming followers and inspiring them to reach their full potential (Sendjaya et al., 2008).

### *Ecclesial Servant Leadership*

The focus of this study proposal places servant leaders managing conflict in the context of a faith-based organization which can include ministers or pastors leading as serving leaders in a local church context as a church is legally recognized as a 501(c)3 charitable or religious organization; furthermore, it is important to understand how servant leaders manage conflict in an ecclesial context. Biblical servant leaders are primarily concerned with the why or motives of SL rather than the what and how of SL (Chu, 2011). Although SL translates beyond scripture, Chu (2011) posited that ecclesial leaders consider their form of SL to be spiritual and reference four primary qualities in the sacred text as a basis for their motives and methods in leading congregational members:

1. The servant leader's primary goal is to follow and serve Christ (Jn. 12:20-26);
2. The servant leader acknowledges that he is first a servant and then a leader (Matt. 20:25-28);
3. The servant leader reflects humility and self-sacrifice in loving people (Jn. 13:1-34; Phil. 1:19-2:11); and
4. The servant leader strives to maintain unity with and in the body of Christ (Phil. 1:19-2:11; Jn. 17:14-24; Eph. 4:1-16; Rom. 15:5-9).

Anderson (2008) posited that the overall guiding principle of biblical servant leaders is whether God is being glorified through their daily decisions, actions, and interactions with subordinates. The servant leader constructing his leadership methods on biblical principles will also premise his conflict management strategies on those same principles as they inform every facet of his life and leadership (Anderson, 2008). Savage-Austin and Honeycutt (2011) conducted a qualitative study interviewing fifteen business leaders to understand their SL practices, experiences, impediments, organizational effectiveness, and outcomes, and concluded that servant leaders exhibiting SL qualities such as open communication had a positive effect of followers' (a) increased trust; (b) increased productivity and morale; (c) reduced turnover; and (d) increased loyalty. Jit et al. (2016) have asserted that servant leaders can impact the tone of an organization and foster a culture of forgiveness and compassion, civility and collaboration, and cohesion and commitment that will move followers through conflict as the servant leader himself exhibits virtuous behaviors (Table 1).

**Table 1**

*Servant Leadership Attributes*

Greenleaf (1977)	Patterson (2003)	Autry (2004)	Stone et al. (2004)	Jit et al. (2016)
Listening	Love	Authentic	Vision	Compassion
Empathy	Humility	Vulnerable	Honesty	Gratitude
Healing	Service	Accepting	Integrity	Benevolence
Awareness	Empowerment	Present	Trust	Forgiveness
Persuasion	Altruism	Useful	Service	
Conceptualization	Vision		Modeling	
Foresight	Trust		Pioneering	
Stewardship Building Community			Appreciation of Others	
Commitment to Growth of People			Listening	
			Empowerment	

Mahembe and Engelbrecht (2014) conducted a quantitative study to examine the role SL has on organizational citizenship behavior (OCB) and team effectiveness and found a positive relationship exists between SL, OCB, and team effectiveness and emphasized the servant leader’s unique attribute of developing followers on an individualized basis as a determining factor in followers’ positive group behaviors and outcomes.

**Conflict Management**

Conflict occurs when organizational members’ ideas or experiences appear to be incompatible when attempting to achieve organizational goals (McSwain & Treadwell, 1981). Sources of group conflict include lack of participation in decision making, poor relationships leading to lack of cohesion, low supportiveness, low trust, lack of interest in listening to and dealing with problems with other group members, and high levels of political behavior causing power struggles, competition between group members, tyrannical and autocratic culture, low tolerance for failure, low-performance feedback, constant critical feedback, downsizing, and non-work stressors such as raising children, caring for elderly, college courses, and balancing family and work life (Konopaske et al., 2018). Hermann et al. (2001) provided three models that groups can follow when attempting to resolve conflict: (a) concurrence which produces a tendency to avoid group conflict; (b) unanimity which produces a tendency to resolve group conflict; and (c) plurality that produces a tendency to accept group conflict. Based on the chosen model, one of the four outcomes is plausible for the conflicted group:

1. Deadlock refers to a stalemate as a result of group members not reaching a final decision on how to resolve their differences;
2. Prevalent solution refers to a situation in which the group chooses a particular option that has frequently been discussed, and the members agree on a particular solution rather than doing nothing;
3. Subset solution refers to a satisfactory decision that appeases a portion of group members but does not represent all of the members' preferences; and
4. Integrative solution refers to a decision that represents the preference of all members and involves some shift from their initial choice but was persuaded to compromise reflecting the groupthink concept (Hermann et al., 2001).

Most conflict theories propose a cyclical pattern where organizations experience extreme high or low levels of group conflict whether conflict is avoided, not allowed, or in a groupthink context (Janis, 1972) that could potentially lead to group dissemination (Arrow et al., 2000). Worchel's (1994) group development theory suggests that conflict occurs in an increasing and decreasing cyclical pattern that once resolved either leads to the conflicting group drifting apart or coming to a consensus of conformity and affirmed identity that will eventually lead the group back to a heightened state of conflict. Worchel (1994) defined this cyclic dynamic as oscillation that nudges groups into a conflict cycle that keeps the organization and its members from becoming frozen and unadaptive.

Wong et al. (2018) conducted a survey using Ehrhart's (2004) scale to measure SL behavior and to determine how servant leaders managed organizational conflict and group cooperativeness and concluded that teams are able to directly discuss their disagreements, frustrations, and difficulties and work toward solutions for the benefit of the team and customers. Wong et al. (2018) also asserted that servant leaders who display SL qualities such as (a) service to others, (b) team consensus, and (c) personal member development will attempt to resolve conflict cooperatively by gathering all conflicting members and allowing each to express individual concern and provide their own solutions that ultimately enhance the conflict resolution, coordinated teamwork, and satisfactory customer service. Effective servant leaders are able to foster group collaboration and strengthen group cohesiveness by highlighting each member's independent efforts and integrating individual strengths for the benefit of the group and organization (Pearsall & Ellis, 2006).

Discovering and resolving conflict is central to the task at hand and is just as important as the task itself (Jehn, 1995). Autry (2004) proposed that conflict is often a result of personality and style differences rather than a result of the process or product outputs and further posited that constructive disagreement often breeds new innovation. Unresolved conflict, however, often poisons the work atmosphere and environment and will eventually affect teamwork, morale, and organizational success. Autry (2004) asserted that the servant leader is not responsible for employees liking each other and being friends; however, it is the servant leader's responsibility to ensure

members get along in the context of the work they perform together considering they are mutually interdependent on one another. The servant leader is faced with the task of preventing disagreement regarding a product or process that could morph into personal conflict. The servant leader can work with conflicting members in helping them find their own solution which would require each member to produce a plan of action requiring change on the member's own part rather than expecting change from the conflicting member and utilize that plan of action as a performance measure (Autry, 2004). If conflict does indeed occur, Autry (2004) suggested that the leader attempt to quickly resolve the conflict; however, if a resolution cannot be reached, the leader must manage the conflict so that it does not interfere with organizational output and overall success and possibly consider termination if a group member refuses to work toward a resolution.

### *Ecclesial Conflict Management*

Although all faith-based organizations are not churches, all churches are faith-based organizations. Examining the ecclesial leader's management of conflict in the faith-based ecclesial setting contributes to understanding the phenomena of conflict resolution in the FBO as a whole as the church and FBO share a similar biblical foundation in fulfilling their mission. Chu (2011) asserted that while conflict can cause harm to a church body, not all conflict is negative and can serve as a catalyst for spiritual growth. Conflict can occur between person to person, person to God, or person to oneself (Works, 2008) when social pressure or change is combined with vulnerability and power struggles that expose man's sinful nature leading to conflict within the church (Halverstadt, 1991). No matter the cause, conflict must be handled appropriately to minimize its destructive potential as conflict not only involves disagreeing parties but could also hinder the ministry in and of the church (Halverstadt, 1991).

Christians are called to resolve conflict when it involves sin with restoration as the outcome (Matt. 18:15-20; Lk. 17:3-4; Acts 20:31; Gal. 6:1-3); however, when the conflict does not involve sin, Chu (2011) has asserted that Christians are to deal with the conflict appropriately, ensuring conflicting members are edified, and the church body is unified (Col. 3:16; Eph. 4; Phil. 2).

### **Faith-Based Organizations**

As religion is a core source of identity for billions of people around the world, religious organizations such as FBOs are carriers of religious principles and have a pivotal role in resolving conflict and promoting peace (Haynes, 2020). FBOs play a vital role in service to the community founded on spiritual principles where faith informs an organization's motivation, role, and daily operations incorporating members who agree on basic faith-based principles such as (a) forgiveness; (b) truth; (c) personal accountability; (d) love; (e) patience; (f) justice; (g) compassion; and (h) mercy (Bercovitch & Kadayifci-Orellana, 2009).

As the FBO reflects its mission founded on biblical principles, the FBO naturally fosters positive organizational citizenship behavior (OCB) dynamically impacting team coordination, communication, cohesion, task completion, and effectiveness within the FBO (Ren-Tao & Heung-Gil, 2009). Organ (1988) proposed five dimensions of OCB (a) altruism; (b) conscientiousness; (c) sportsmanship; (d) courtesy; and (e) civic virtue that are highly desirable in organizations as the dimensions promote best practices amongst leaders as well as followers.

## Methodology

### Interviews

A popular method of conducting qualitative research are interviews that allow for a straightforward and direct approach to collecting rich data for qualitative research and are particularly beneficial as they can be tailored to fit a research question as well as be adjusted to accommodate participants' personality or certain traits that will benefit the research study (Barrett & Twycross, 2018). To overcome geographic barriers (Lira et al., 2008), some interviews can be held over the telephone, email, or video conferencing applications such as Zoom, Google Hangouts Meet, or GoToMeeting; however, traditional face-to-face interviews are often preferred when geography barriers are not an issue (Lira et al., 2008). Another benefit of conducting interviews is that they can be recorded leaving no room for error, misinterpretation, or skewed results.

For this phenomenological study, data was collected through the qualitative method of semi-structured interviews by one student-researcher for approximately 30 minutes per participant that both transpired utilizing the video conferencing application, Zoom. Two participants who serve in similar forms of executive leadership in faith-based organizations located in the South Texas region were identified as servant leaders and were selected due to their organizational mission being servant-oriented. Each participant was asked the following set of research questions developed from the literature review in the same order as listed.

RQ1: Will you describe established norms within your organization and its faith-based mission that help you to manage or resolve group conflict?

RQ2: What faith-based principles do you incorporate while mediating between conflicting parties?

RQ3: How have you established a rapport with your followers that has promoted positive group behaviors?

RQ4: How does conflict benefit the faith-based organization?

RQ5: As a servant leader who is focused on serving and empowering followers, how have you balanced the tension between fulfilling follower needs and organizational needs when attempting to manage or resolve conflict?

## Data Collection

Initially, three organizational executive leaders were contacted via email; however, two of the three leaders responded and agreed to participate in the study. Each interview was conducted and recorded utilizing the Zoom virtual meeting application and Macintosh's Voice Typing tool with the participants' consent to record the interview. Participants were also informed that their personal name, organizational name, and location would remain confidential, and all recorded documentation would be discarded after the course is completed. Participant 1 (P1) is an Asian-American female with a master's degree aged between 35 to 45 and is the founder of her faith-based foster care and adoptive services organization in the South Texas region serving as its president since its inception six years ago. Participant 2 (P2) is an Anglo male with a doctoral degree aged between 45-55 and has served as the president of a faith-based Christian college located in the South Texas region for seventeen years. Participants were also informed prior to the interview that I would not interact or respond verbally to their responses so as to not influence their responses (Doody & Noonan, 2013). Upon agreeing to participate in the research study, both participants requested the list of interview questions to sufficiently prepare for the interview. Although I hesitated to provide the interview questions prior to conducting the interview for concern that the participants would cater their responses to fit the questions (Doody & Noonan, 2013), Mellon (1998) asserted that people want to tell their stories, and we as qualitative researchers have the ability and almost responsibility to nurture this human impulse of storytelling as it can bring out surprising and fulfilling results. To encourage the participants to tell their stories of conflicting occurrences in their faith-based organizations and the manner in which they as servant leaders handle the conflict (Mellon, 1998), I provided the participants with the list of interview questions. Participants should be fully informed of recording devices, the proposed time frame needed for the interview, and prepared for the interview which occasionally includes being provided the interview questions ahead of time (Doody & Noonan, 2013; Smith et al., 2009).

Prior to the start of the interview, I established a rapport with the participants (Doody & Noonan, 2013; Jacob & Furgerson, 2012; Smith et al., 2009) by discussing my fifteen-year certification and licensure as a foster parent with P1 as it is relevant to her type of organization and also discussed my progress thus far as a Ph.D. student with P2 as I sought his academic and professional advice prior to beginning the Ph.D. program at Regent University. Both participants' demeanor appeared pleasant and comfortable during the interview and happy to share their recent experiences and strategies in managing their organizational conflict as it relates to their faith and the faith base of

their organizations. The interview as a qualitative method was particularly beneficial for this study as it allowed the participants to openly tell their experiences as leaders with their followers in managing conflict as informed by their faith providing detailed insight into the servant leader characteristics and faith-based methods being utilized during conflict (Bryman, 2004).

## Analysis

### Coding

Coding assists qualitative researchers in organizing the collected data providing for deeper analysis (Miles et al., 2020). Coding can be conducted using computer-assisted software (CAQDAS) such as InVivo, Atlas.ti, or Quirkos that can assist researchers in recording, storing, indexing, sorting, and coding qualitative data providing efficiency in comparing categories and codes in a short amount of time (Bazeley, 2006; Leech & Onwuegbuzie, 2011; Morse & Richards, 2002); on the other hand, researcher-generated codes provide symbolic meaning to the data that are categorized by similarities and clustered into condensed units for the final analysis of common themes or values (Miles et al., 2020; Vogt et al., 2014). Coding is conducted in two cycles where the first cycle categorizes the raw data into assigned codes. The second cycle coding process organizes the first cycle codes into groups with a common thread often divided into four pattern codes of (a) categories or themes; (b) causes or explanations; (c) relationships among people; and (d) concepts or rhetorical constructs (Miles et al., 2020; Saldana, 2015).

The first cycle of coding for P1’s responses revealed 32 codes with 437 frequencies (Appendix). The first cycle of coding for P2’s responses revealed 48 codes with 369 frequencies with both sharing 26 of the same first cycle codes (Appendix). The second cycle of coding for both participant responses produced five themed clusters reflecting the participants’ shared values of (a) communication; (b) biblical standards; (c) vision; (d) unity; and (e) empowerment when managing conflict in their FBOs (Table 2, Table 3).

**Table 2**

Coded and Clustered Themes for Participant 1 (P1) Interview

Cluster	First-Cycle Code	Freq.	Second-Cycle Code	Final Theme/Value
1	Communication	24	Relationship	Communication
	Confront	3		

Cluster	First-Cycle Code	Freq.	Second-Cycle Code	Final Theme/Value
	Listening	11		
	Objective	15		
	Empathy	27		
	Understanding	31		
	Insecurity	3		
2	Biblical Standard	24	Fruit of the Spirit	Biblical Standard
	Christian Duty	3		
	Humility	6		
	Nonjudgmental	7		
	Service	12		
	Courage	1		
	Strength	5		
	Content	2		
	Pride	3		
3	Vision	39	Clear Expectations	Vision
	Shared Vision	5		
	Boundaries	5		
	Manage Expectations	12		
4	Unity	43	Teamwork	Unity
	Collaborate	15		

Cluster	First-Cycle Code	Freq.	Second-Cycle Code	Final Theme/Value
	Teamwork	29		
	Differences	7		
	Reconcile	20		
	Recreation	5		
	Mediate	15		
	Oppositional	13		
5	Empowerment	30	Mutual Trust	Empowerment
	Autonomy	12		
	Validate	16		
	Respect	4		

**Table 3**

*Coded and Clustered Themes for Participant 2 (P2) Interview*

Cluster	First Cycle Code	P2 Frequency	Second Cycle Code	Final Theme/ Value
1	Communication	28	Relationship	Communication
	Confront	15		
	Listening	13		
	Objective	6		
	Empathy	13		
	Normalize Conflict	7		

Cluster	First Cycle Code	P2 Frequency	Second Cycle Code	Final Theme/ Value
	Define Conflict	5		
	Transparency	3		
	Honesty	1		
2	Biblical Standard	20	Fruit of the Spirit	Biblical Standard
	Christian Duty	6		
	Humility	9		
	Nonjudgmental	1		
	Service	6		
	Pride	1		
	Peace	2		
	Love	20		
	Teachable	1		
	Holy Spirit	4		
	Justice	1		
	Sacrifice	8		
	Patience	1		
3	Vision	10	Clear Expectations	Vision
	Manage Expectations			
4	Unity	16	Teamwork	Unity

Cluster	First Cycle Code	P2 Frequency	Second Cycle Code	Final Theme/ Value
	Collaborate	13		
	TeamWork	23		
	Encourage	1		
	Differences	7		
	Reconcile	5		
	Mediate	3		
	Oppositional	2		
	Fatigue	2		
	Accountability	5		
	Equality	1		
	Inclusive	1		
5	Empowerment	25	Mutual Trust	Empowerment
	Autonomy	16		
	Validate	7		
	Trust	22		
	Respect	9		
	Honesty	13		
	Personal Growth/ Grow	4		
	Flourish	5		

Cluster	First Cycle Code	P2 Frequency	Second Cycle Code	Final Theme/ Value
	Inspire	1		

## Results

Although the participants’ interviews revealed 60 codes (Appendix), the second cycle coding clustered the 60 first cycle codes into five clusters revealing the shared values of (a) communication; (b) biblical standard; (c) unity; (d) vision; and (e) empowerment (Table 2, Table 3) that serve as the basis for the servant leaders’ management of conflict in their respective faith-based organizations.

### Communication

Galtung (1996) posited that an essential component of conflict resolution is communication. The leader will often serve as a mediator helping to keep the lines of communication open as conflict entails debate, discussion, and therapy to move forward (Galtung, 1996; Jit et al., 2016). P2 described a situation where an employee assumed he was going to be terminated and developed a false narrative that was not clarified until he called P2 to discuss his concerns. P2 asserted that when conflict arises “you will either talk it out, or you will act it out” (personal communication, November 19, 2020) further explaining the need for crucial conversations to communicate differences rather than allow the conflict to inform negative behaviors. P1 also explained how “when we feel the conflict happening, we really get defensive” which often comes from a place of past hurt. She tells herself, “I need to hear their hurt and not so much their words,” and “you just have to kind of shift through that as a leader” (personal communication, November 18, 2020) to find the core of the hurtful words and communicate with the hurt person out of love and genuine concern rather than defensiveness. Rather than approaching conflict from a top-down, remedial structure, servant leaders encourage mutual diagnosis of the conflict and promote a participatory approach to resolution through communication (Jit et al., 2016).

### Biblical Standard

While the secular organization relies on man-made, moral, or ethical points of reference, the faith-based organization relies on the sacred text to inform every aspect of the organization including conflict resolution (Bassous, 2015). While secular employees are motivated by extrinsic rewards of personal development, accolades, or monetary reward, faith-based employees are motivated intrinsically by their faith and fulfillment of their duty as Christians (Matthew 28:16-20; Bassous, 2015; Netting et al., 2006; Schepers, et al., 2005). P1 referred to Matthew 18: 15-20 and read the passage saying, “That’s the conflict resolution that you’re constantly seeking out. Looking for that heart

that is willing to do conflict resolution versus somebody who will dig in their heels harder when conflict arises, they're almost scared of it and refuse to face it" (personal communication, November 18, 2020). Because that employee was not willing to discuss the conflict with the leader but continued to cause division within the organization, the employee was terminated as a result of not adhering to the organizational standard of reconciliation and her unwillingness to practice conflict resolution according to scripture. The Christian leader who depends on scriptural wisdom through the decision-making process benefits the organization as a whole as he attains higher levels of growth, personal reflection, and self-awareness allowing the sacred text to inform his personal life as well as his professional life and leadership style (Phipps, 2012).

## Unity

The servant leader strives to maintain unity (Chu, 2011) as the apostle Paul admonishes believers to maintain unity through the bond of peace (Eph. 4:3, 4). As servant leaders are others-focused rather than self-focused, they have a high sense of community with others motivated by love and service that calls them to promote peace in their organizations (Linuesa-Langreo et al., 2018; Van Dierendonck, 2011). P1 explained how two of her employees have different personalities and work strategies and described the efforts she makes in "trying to get them to work together" and "understand each other" (personal communication, November 18, 2020) and the effect that the current Covid-19 pandemic has had in "building team camaraderie and morale together and doing fun stuff together" because "that's how we get to know each other and that makes it easier to work together" (personal communication, November 18, 2020). Unity is fostered by leaders encouraging strong interpersonal relationships leading followers to have a strong bond and sense of responsibility to one another as well as to the organizational mission and its success (Van Dierendonck, 2011).

## Vision

Organizational performance and effectiveness are influenced by the servant leader's ability to effectively communicate the organization's vision as well as his own vision for his followers (Barbuto & Wheeler, 2016). During my interview with P1, she consistently expressed the need for managing expectations that aligned with her organization's vision admitting not clearly defining the vision was a mistake in her organization's early years. She said, "Having a clear vision for the organization is imperative because if the whole team knows this is the direction we're going, then the whole fulfilling of the needs has to go in this direction, and they know that" (personal communication, November 18, 2020); therefore, every project or goal her followers manage must be aligned with the organization's vision. P2 described an employee conflict where an employee refused to assist other staff in providing janitorial services at the organization claiming his doctoral degree and employment as faculty did not include maintenance services. P2 stated that the organization's mission and vision are the "driving force of the organization," (personal communication, November 19, 2020) and as the employee

was not willing to align himself with the organization's missional vision of service, he explained to the employee that he was "no longer a good fit" (personal communication, November 19, 2020) for the organization. Through a shared vision, leaders are able to cultivate a culture of shared perspectives and understanding that leads to followers' willingness to work together to enact and accomplish a set of common goals that contributes to the organization's overall success (Leana & Van Buren, 1999).

## **Empowerment**

As servant leaders display trust to followers allowing them to work autonomously and include followers in organizational decision-making, the SL fosters a sense of empowerment causing followers to thrive and reach toward growth and personal development (Chinomona et al., 2013). Servant leaders should see themselves as stewards who have been entrusted to empower followers to reach their full potential (Barbuto & Wheeler, 2016). P1 admitted that she gives her followers "the space to be themselves" (personal communication, November 18, 2020) while P2 said that his organization provides growth and self-development opportunities for employees by not only encouraging them to continue their education but the organization also pays for staff tuition to empower them personally and professionally (personal communication, November 18, 2020). Chinomona et al. (2013) have posited that servant leaders have an influential role in empowering followers that solidifies their commitment to the organization.

## **Discussion**

The servant leadership (SL) framework provided by Greenleaf (1977) calls for a paradigm shift from traditional leadership models that have solely focused on leading for organizational success; whereas, servant leaders focus on leading by serving their followers first (Chu, 2011) as they are motivated by serving, developing, and empowering followers to reach their full potential and placing followers' needs above their own without expecting a personal gain, power, or notoriety (Greenleaf, 1977). The servant leader's call to service informs every facet of his leadership style including how he manages conflict in the workplace. The unique aspect of this study is that it places the servant leaders managing conflict within a faith-based context allowing him or her to manage or resolve conflict by incorporating biblical principles. Faith-based organizational members seek to mediate conflict founded on unique morals and a spiritual leverage (Kadayifci-Orellana, 2008) and are credible as they have a positive reputation for inciting change founded on a respected set of spiritual principles earning FBO members a well-established influence in their organization and community (Johnston & Cox, 2003). The data collected answered each research question with participants' real-life experiences providing a robust assortment of servant leader methods in resolving conflict in their faith-based organizations based on the overarching SL values yielded from the data such as (a) communication; (b) unity; (c)

vision; (d) biblical standard; and (e) empowerment that provided insight into how servant leaders manage conflict in a faith-based organizational context.

RQ1: Will you describe established norms within your organization and its faith-based mission that help you to manage or resolve group conflict?

P1 and P2 expressed common organizational norms (Table 4) informed by their organizations’ faith-based principles that have created a collaborative culture of mutual respect and open communication where conflict is addressed with understanding, empathy, and validation allowing each conflicting member to express themselves without fear of reprisal.

Arrow et al. (2000) have suggested that as groups engage in productive conflict, manage destructive conflict, and reach a group consensus about unifying issues, members must agree on organizational norms such as (a) how members express their views or claims whether privately or openly to management; (b) how the member’s view will be addressed or weighted amongst other team members’ differing views; (c) how those differing views will be handled and by whom; and (d) how the group will come to a consensus despite differences where group members eventually become well-coordinated in avoiding conflict by perceiving and timing each others’ tasks and preferences in accomplishing shared organizational goals.

**Table 4**

*P1 and P2 Established Norms that Help to Resolve Conflict*

P1 Established Norm	P2 Established Norm
Communication	Autonomy
Managing Expectations	Normalize and Define Conflict
Clear Vision	Clear Vision and Mission
Teamwork	Objectivity
Unity	Unity
Understand and Celebrate Differences	Understand Differences
Humility	Confront
Empathy	Empowerment

P1 Established Norm	P2 Established Norm
Validation	Validation

Arrow et al. (2000) have further suggested that groups have a collective norm (Table 4) that serves as a framework for managing and resolving conflict (Jehn, 1995); however, if the group lacks a collective norm, conflict and friction tend to escalate as differences are merely handled by trial and error leaving conflict unresolved that often translates into conflict presenting itself in another form either with the same group or will emerge in a different group (Arrow et al., 2000; Jehn, 1995).

RQ2: What faith-based principles do you incorporate while mediating between conflicting parties?

Both participants expressed scriptural references (Table 5) that inform their strategy for managing conflict and both acknowledged their role in helping followers find a resolution that often requires their own self-reflection through the mediating process. Conflict can be handled in a biblical manner leading to restoration and peace as members’ differences are valued, and members are able to express their differences without fear of judgment or bias (Chu, 2011; Gangel, 2000). Both participants acknowledged the need to remain objective and neutral during conflict as well as nonjudgmental; however, P2 asserted that he remains objective during conflict and will attempt to offer a choice to accommodate a follower who is in conflict with the organization itself rather than a fellow team member but admitted that he will always err on the side of the organizational mission and its vision.

**Table 5**

*P1 and P2 Faith-Based Principles*

P1 Faith Based Principle	P2 Faith Based Principle
Humility	Love
Communication	Communication
Matthew 18 “Forgive your brother”	Mark 12:31 “Love your neighbor”
Reconciliation	Reconciliation
Empathy	Empathy

Non-Judgment

Respect

RQ3: How have you established a rapport with your followers that has promoted positive group behaviors?

Many of the methods used to build a positive rapport with followers (Table 6) mirror many of Greenleaf’s (1970) servant leadership qualities (Table 1) that make the SL unique when compared to other traditional leadership styles. Not only does the type of organization make a difference in conflict resolution, but the type of leader also plays a significant role in determining not necessarily if conflict will be resolved but how it will be resolved according to the SL methods incorporated by the leader attempting to manage or resolve the conflict. A leader’s behavior as well as his traits (Table 1) are vital to effectively lead as both his character and conduct will determine if his influence will have a positive and lasting impact on followers and the organization (Northouse, 2007).

**Table 6**

*P1 and P2 Rapport Building Methods*

P1 Rapport Building Method	P2 Rapport Building Method
Communication	Communication
Autonomy	Accountability
Unity	Honesty
Empowerment	Humility
Non-work Related Recreation	Love
Teamwork	Teamwork
Trust	Trust

When the servant leader exhibits Christ-like leadership qualities coupled with the biblical foundation of the FBO, a more intimate relationship exists between the servant leader and his followers where trust has been established allowing for conflicting situations to be significantly minimized and quickly resolved between organizational members.

RQ4: How does conflict benefit the faith-based organization?

FBOs attempting to positively impact the community should be incorporating faith-based principles from scripture into their mission and everyday practices as the FBO exists not only to provide quality services to stakeholders but also meaningful work to its employees (Greenleaf, 1996). FBOs must progress forward from where they are to where they want to be while still functioning and remaining intact and maintaining a heavy emphasis on production as well as a heavy emphasis on growing people which is the overall goal of both the servant leader and the FBO (Greenleaf, 1977). Conflict benefits the organization in both spiritual and practical ways as it causes the servant leader to depend on the Holy Spirit for discernment and guidance in making difficult decisions as expressed by P2 (Table 7). Conflict also causes followers to appreciate each other’s differences and perpetuates team unity and collaboration as admitted by P1 (Table 7). P1 also admitted that in the event that an employee is not willing to work together to resolve an issue, the employee would more than likely have to be terminated which seems a detriment to the organization due to the loss of a team member; however, their termination benefits the organization in that it no longer employs a person who “who's not willing to talk through it, that doesn't benefit the organization” (personal communication, November 18, 2020).

**Table 7**

*Ways Conflict Benefits the Faith-Based Organization*

P1 Conflict Benefit	P2 Conflict Benefit
“At some point, you do have to make a mess to create something beautiful.”	“We need conflict in our lives to train and teach us.”
“[Conflict] made their relationship stronger, and it made their working relationship much stronger because they understand each other so much better now.”	“I believe conflict makes us more dependent on the leading of the Holy Spirit.”
“But they celebrate the fact that God made them differently.”	We don't get blindsided by conflict, and we make those tough decisions. Better decisions.”

RQ5: As a servant leader who is focused on serving and empowering followers, how have you balanced the tension between fulfilling follower needs and organizational needs when attempting to manage or resolve conflict?

While P1 made it a point to repeatedly express the need for a laser-sharp vision that helps to keep her employees focused on the organizational mission that helps to reduce her personal tension as a leader (Table 8), P2 emphasized his loyalty to the organization’s mission that informs every decision made as followers often oppose the mission and expect an exception to be made on their behalf (Table 8). As people often vacillate from one season or emotion to the next, an organization’s mission is consistent. Despite P2 attempting to resolve a follower’s conflict by sacrificing himself on behalf of the conflicted employee, the conflict was more of a pride issue of the heart that no type of accommodation would have solved which resulted in termination.

**Table 8**

*Ways to Balance Tension Between Follower and Organizational Needs*

P1 Balancing Tension	P2 Balancing Tension
“Having a clear vision for the organization is imperative because if the whole team knows this is a direction we're going.”	“We just made it a huge point to encourage our people to be flourishing and growing and whether that's in their education or I mean in their personal growth.”
“Really the empowerment comes from ‘you can do whatever you want as long as you go this direction.’”	“I'm going to say the organizational goals are the real life and driving force of the organization.”
“They come up with some pretty amazing things. I would never want to stifle their creativity.”	“I put the mission above any individual follower, but I submitted myself to the same mission. I didn't exempt myself from that mission”
“Managing expectations helps with resolving that conflict because they understand where they are and what they're supposed to do.”	We always put the mission above our own our own needs, our own wants. It helps people self-select out.”

Although the servant leader is motivated by the need to serve his followers more than his need for power (Luthans & Avolio, 2003), he is challenged with the task of maintaining a balance between serving his followers and reaching organizational goals; furthermore, if the leader is a Christian, he understands how important this balance is as a leader and steward of the organization’s goals and interests while simultaneously understanding the value of human freedom and independence for followers as derived from the image of God at creation (Cafferky, 2011). Cafferky (2011) further asserted that organizational leadership must humbly steward over the organization as well as over

the individual while simultaneously being sensitive and aware of the environment he or she creates as both participants iterated through their responses (Table 8).

These findings have implications from both a practical and spiritual leadership perspective as the servant leader relies not only on his SL qualities to inform his conflict management methods, but the servant leader also relies on the faith-based organization’s biblical principles as well as the Holy Spirit to inform conflict situations. First, leaders can utilize the findings from this research to further develop themselves as genuine servant leaders exhibiting SL qualities (Table 1) that will assist him or her in balancing their motivation to serve followers while simultaneously fulfilling organizational goals. Second, leaders can refer to the findings from this study to ensure his or her faith-based organization’s vision and mission are truly biblically based and are being reinforced through followers’ work ethic as well as in interpersonal relationships and team unity. Third, leaders can refer to the findings from this study to learn how to manage conflict in their organizations while incorporating SL qualities (Table 1), empowering followers, and fulfilling organizational goals.

## **Conclusion**

The servant leader’s goal is to genuinely care for and serve the people he leads as opposed to the corporate bottom line of the mighty dollar, being mindful of his own character depth and development as well as his level of authenticity needed to manage conflict and initiate peace between group members and in the organization as a whole. Conflict is inevitable whether in a FBO or in a secular organization, but the FBO premised on biblical principles such as love, forgiveness, reconciliation, accountability, and service to others is an ideal combination for followers employed at an FBO with leaders who act as servants. Successful conflict management and resolution are possible when FBOs adhere to their faith-based biblical standard of operating allowing servant leaders to incorporate specific SL attributes (Table 1) as well as the five core values of (a) communication; (b) unity; (c) vision; (d) empowerment; and (e) biblical standards into his everyday life that will naturally carry over into his leadership practices and conflict management strategies.

## **Limitations and Future Research**

A limitation of this study is that all participants were located in the South Texas region that is entrenched in its own culture and would require a varied participant demographic to determine how servant leaders across different regions of the United States manage conflict in their faith-based organizations. Future research is needed to determine how servant leaders manage conflict in faith-based organizations from different regions in the country as well as globally. Another limitation of this study is that the participants were given the list of research questions prior to the scheduled interview at their request possibly skewing the results as the participants could have altered their answers to produce a more favorable outcome (Glaser, 2016). Considering

the limited amount of empirical research found combining the three factors of SL, FBOs, and organizational conflict, further research is needed in determining how FBOs ensure biblically, faith-based principles are being enforced or implemented in the organization overall as well as through times of conflict.

### About the Author

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Michelle Gonzalez Segundo is a third-year Ph.D. student at Regent University, School of Business and Leadership, majoring in Organizational Leadership with a concentration in Ecclesial Leadership. Michelle's passion is people. Whether she's discipling others to realize their calling, leadership potential, identity in Christ, or serving the marginalized, she takes a hands-on, "boots-on-the-ground" approach to leading teams in engaging the community and connecting resources for sharing the gospel, particularly with the poor and homeless, disaster relief victims, families in need, at-risk youth, and foster children. Michelle currently serves as an intern with the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) providing research for the Combating Trafficking in Persons (CTIP) division for the Eastern Southern Caribbean (ESC) region to safeguard children, empower women, engage stakeholders, governmental, and NGOs, and develop sustainable policies that will help to eliminate human trafficking in the ESC.

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