

Servant Leaders, Servant Structures

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Every structure in which you work can feel the impact of your presence within it. You might want to begin questioning most of the fundamental assumptions operating within that structure. At the same time the Church of Jesus Christ ought to be creating literally countless alternative institutions of power incarnating some portion of a Kingdom vision and corporately embodying a more human ordering of life. There are very few of these radical alternative structures pointing the way to a new society, and saying this is how as a biblical people we live while waiting for the coming of Jesus Christ. . .

*-- Gordon Cosby, founder of The Church of the Savior
in Washington DC¹*

Servant Leaders, Servant Structures. In the past several months, I've asked numerous people to share their understanding of servant leadership. I don't much use the term anymore. It's a throwaway term in so many conversations – ranging on a spectrum of definitions from the politically correct to the warm and fuzzy, and sometimes condescending, “we're all about servant leadership here.”

But for the sake of claiming something that once made good sense to me and to many others, let me offer a working definition of “servant leadership.”



In the first chapter of his book [Servant Leadership](#), Robert Greenleaf shared an essay that he'd first written in 1969. After the tumult of the 1960's, Greenleaf, along with many others, was taking another look at issues of power and authority.

“The servant-leader,” he wrote, “is servant first.... It begins with the natural feeling that one wants to serve, to serve first. Then conscious choice brings one to aspire to lead. That person is sharply different from one who is leader first, perhaps because of the need to assuage an unusual power drive or to acquire material possessions. For such it will be a later choice to serve – after leadership is established. The leader-first and the servant-first are two extreme types. Between them there are shadings and blends that are part of the infinite variety of human nature.”

Greenleaf continues, “The difference manifests itself in the care taken by the servant-first to make 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, become healthier, wiser, freer, more autonomous, more likely themselves to become servants? And, what is the effect on the least privileged in society; will they benefit, or, at least, not be further deprived?”²

I turn back to Greenleaf because, after reflecting on my own experience, I believe that when I came to the Episcopal Church in 1977, his definition was primarily the one that pushed the phrase into being in the church. And all the while I'd thought it was from our understanding of the gospel! So often the church takes its lead from organizational theories and methodologies it should know better to define itself. Who should know better to define "servant leadership?" Be that as it may, Greenleaf brought us a "servant leadership" term to the midst of the latest renewal of a historic diaconate. We were creating servant leaders! We were saying that the nature of Christ and the servant nature of Christ's church were important to be held before God's people.

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But only recently, in the fourth decade of that most recent renewal of the diaconate, do I think we are coming to understand the qualities, gifts and role of those who would be asked to be servant leaders in the church. Only recently are we asking the church to live into what she has charged us to do. She asks us to interpret the needs, concerns and hopes of the world. And to invite others to do the same. To take an active part in building skills and affirming gifts in others who do that, day by day, in their homes and workplaces.

For those who take this charge seriously, they are quick to learn that one can interpret until the cows come home, but in order to make any serious difference in the life of the world, one must also ask what gets in the way of being present to those needs, concerns and hopes. They get to know that a strong grounding in the prophetic tradition is helpful in articulating an alternative vision. They get to know that asking the tough questions may get them branded as "nags," or "thorns." And when they're tired, they fight against being nags and thorns, and try hard to hold onto the fact that the church has charged them to ask those questions, just as Jesus asked those questions. Those who take the charge seriously are not just the ordained. They are those who live and work among us and who work for a just society in countless ways. Servant leaders often ask questions from the perspective of those we think we want to "serve."

To test whether we value servant leadership, we might ask ourselves if we are truly ready to assess ourselves as individuals, and our church as an institution, by whether those we serve grow as persons? "Do they, while being served, become healthier, wiser, freer, more autonomous, more likely themselves to become servants? And, what is the effect on the least privileged in society; will they benefit, or, at least, not be further deprived?"³

For this deacon, the time has come to take stock, not only of those questions, but serious questions about our institutional structures. In the last few years, my experience on a national level, has pushed me to ask, "What in God's name are we doing?" And, "What do we do when the church gets in the way?" At no time were those questions more pressing than while at General Convention 2009.

It would come as no surprise to those who know me that one of my first comments about General Convention is that, "General Convention is for people who have the time and money to attend." This year was no different. I often say that, were it not for the church, I would never have seen the inside of many hotels or restaurants. Each year, in some group or other, the question is asked, "Do we need to be at this hotel? At this resort? In this facility?" And each year the answers are,

“This is what people expect. They need to have access to transportation quickly. They need wireless access. They need phones.” As one whose Board of Directors does insist on a presence at General Convention, I know what the prices are. I know we could do better. I know we could be more creative. I know that there is little about General Convention that makes a statement about sacrifice, sacrificial giving or sacrificial living, other than the daily Eucharist.

But we can still come away telling ourselves that we continued to pledge 0.7% to the Millennium Development Goals. We tell ourselves that we have pledged money to this or that new venture in justice. In fact, we did fund a new initiative for Latino/Hispanic Strategic Initiatives for \$300,000 over the next triennium – the same amount as the increase in the Chief Operating Officer’s budget. We did fund a Domestic Poverty Initiative in the amount of \$275,000, but eliminated Women’s Ministries and Anti-Racism Offices where truth is told about some of the poorest individuals in our society. We patted ourselves on the back for having made difficult cuts in the Church Center budget.

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were made which placed us among all the other businesses and organizations that have been driven by a bottom line in the last year or more. We distinguished ourselves by that. We asked others to – not least the Church Center staff – to sacrifice for us. And we asked them to do so without knowing their names or the depth of their sacrifice. We asked them to sacrifice when some of them were individuals with disabilities; African American and Caribbean American; Hispanic/Latino. We did not ask how many single parents there were among them. We did not ask what their corporate wisdom might be in these circumstances. And we certainly did not ask others, those who are highest paid and most protected, to share in that financial sacrifice.

But these budget cuts and the process of making them reflect simply one part of what I fear is a broken system.

As I considered one of the major initiatives in which I’d had a part over the last triennium, I asked how our structures had become so unwieldy as to lose the ability to integrate and communicate. Here is one small example.

As a member of a task force called PEALL (Proclaiming Education for All), I was a part of a small group to pull together a history of theological education and Christian formation since 1968 in order to inform the church about where we’ve been, where we are, and where we might be headed. Our task force was not prescriptive, but we did ask numerous questions, some of which had to do with whether our triennial funding structure and the way in which we set priorities is effective in any area of church programming. Some of what we observed indicated that changing priorities every three years often hampers meaningful development in areas the church has previously deemed important. Likewise when funding shifts every three years, continuity and quality are invariably lost, or previous priorities are never implemented. Such was the case many times in the areas of theological education and Christian formation during the 40 years we surveyed.

The Episcopal Church’s Executive Council approved nearly a

quarter of a million dollars to fund this task force. By the time the work of the group had come to a close and the report had been made, all of the offices to which the task force had related had been, not just reorganized, but in some cases, reconfigured in a way that work which had been ongoing had no place for follow up. That was before General Convention. Now with the cuts made at General Convention, some of the program areas have been totally eliminated. The irony? One of the messages of that report was that countless networks had sprung up over the years because the church was not providing, on a national level, what was needed. New curricula have been developed by dioceses. New partnerships have been initiated between dioceses because support has not been available elsewhere. New pedagogies and venues for preparing for both lay and ordained ministries have been established outside seminaries and without the help of national staff or General Convention actions.

During General Convention there was much talk about “subsidiarity.” Briefly stated, that means that things which can be done better on a local level should not be done on a national level. While in many ways the aforementioned study demonstrated that things can be and often are done on a local level, the fruits of the work, the recommendations, affirmations and challenges on which the church had spent that nearly quarter-of-a-million dollars, was not integrated effectively into any of the major structures on a national level: not the Church Center; not Executive Council; not General Convention. It was not used to inform budget priorities. While some of my colleagues on the task force might see things quite differently, I have begun to wonder whether this effort was one more exercise in futility, not because we didn’t work hard, but because I wonder if our work, and precious dollars were wasted.

During the course of our work, we watched the effects of the reorganization at the Church Center. We watched deteriorating morale and deteriorating trust. The dynamics went far beyond the anxiety in a system that is undergoing change. The dynamics included the mistrust that comes when individuals who have given some of the best years of their lives to a job discover in an e-mail that the job no longer exists. The dynamics included the broken-heartedness and low morale that comes with a lack of affirmation for what has been done and the grief that accompanies change as well as the hope that may lie ahead. And we dealt with the effects of discontinuity as increasingly less experienced staff took on responsibilities for which they had no working history. Gifts, yes. Skills, yes. Context, no.

A servant structure? I think not. What kind of witness is made by institutional entities in which accountability is measured by new paper work, and where staff are afraid to speak openly to those whom they “serve?” What kind of witness is made beyond the local level? How many millions of dollars will we continue to spend on General Conventions and litigation? While we heard that the Convention in 2012 will be shortened and less money spent, the budget line in 2012 for General Convention Site and Facilities is \$1,821,942 for that year alone.

Domestic Poverty?

\$275,000 over three years?

As Gordon Cosby challenged those around him, “Every structure in which you work can feel the impact of your presence within it. You might want to begin questioning most of the fundamental assumptions operating within that structure. At the same time the Church of Jesus Christ ought to be creating literally countless alternative institutions of power incarnating some portion of a Kingdom vision and corporately embodying a more human ordering of life. There are very few of these radical alternative structures pointing the way to a new society, and saying this is how as a biblical people we live while waiting for the coming of Jesus Christ...”⁴

What priorities do we need beyond the gospel imperatives before us? What evaluation and accountability beyond asking whether and how we reflect the servant nature of Christ, as individual Christians and as a church? What mission statements and goals and objectives do we need when we have the Baptismal Covenant? And as for those people of color, and those who have disabilities, those who are single parents, and those who have given the best years of their lives to jobs working for our church – I wonder, did we ask them in an exit interview about the kind of witness we are making? Did we ask them what kind of servant leaders we are?

(Endnotes)

¹ Elizabeth O'Connor, *Servant Leaders, Servant Structures*. Washington, D.C., The Servant Leadership School, 1991. pp. 85-86

² Robert Greenleaf, *Servant Leadership*. New York, Paulist Press, 1977. © Robert Greenleaf. pp. 113-14.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ See note no. i