

**Servant Leadership**  
**Matthew 20:17-28; Romans 12:3, 14-16**

**Hyattstown Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)**  
**November 5, 2017**

Among the gifts that I treasure from my parents is an oversized Hallmark card displaying the words of Albert Schweitzer, the German medical missionary of the first half of the last century, whose work in central Africa earned him the Nobel Peace Prize:

*“I don’t know what your destiny will be, but one thing I know: the only ones among you who will be really happy are those who have sought and found how to serve.”* (Albert Schweitzer)

Possibly inspired by Albert Schweitzer’s insight, author Robert Greenleaf produced what has been for the last half century the definitive treatise on what we now call “best practices” for non-profit organizations, including churches. He entitled his book *Servant Leadership*.

I scoured my personal library for the copy of *Servant Leadership* that I once owned, finally to remember that I gave it to a friend beginning her studies in seminary a few years ago. After inquiring unsuccessfully of a number of clergy colleagues, I turned to Wesley Seminary, next door to American University. There, for the modest investment of a permanent library card, I found a well worn copy of Greenleaf’s iconic volume awaiting me on a secluded basement shelf.

Of course, Jesus preached continually on the subject of “servant leadership”, and could have published such a book, which under his authorship would likely have been outdone in sales over the last 2000 years only by the Bible itself. In fact, countless books have been written about Jesus’ servant leadership, including four Gospels from which we read and study on Sundays.

Greenleaf would perhaps admit to being at least partially influenced by the selfless service embodied in Jesus, as never in any other human being. Jesus's incomparable brand of compassionate altruism grew by leaps and bounds with every family and village he visited on his 3-year journey to Jerusalem. When disgruntled disciples seemed not to have gotten the message, he told them directly and clearly that if they wanted to be considered special, then they had better learn to serve others, rather than to expect to be served BY others. Then he demonstrated that message by washing their dusty, calloused feet. The Apostle Paul becomes a rather confident and faithful promoter of the idea, even among those in the congregation in Rome: *"Do not be proud, but accept humble duties; do not think of yourselves as wise!"*

Robert Greenleaf claims that: *"Caring for persons, the more able and the less able serving each other, is the rock upon which a good society is built—a society that is more just and more loving. The servant leader is servant first...it begins with the natural feeling that one wants to serve."*

Note: "the more able and the less able serving each other"! Each one of us is MORE able in some regard, and each one of us is LESS able in some other regard. I begin to imagine a company of Christians who might build such a legacy over 175 years in their village!

Greenleaf goes on: *"The best test of a servant leader is: Do those served grow as persons? Do they, while being served, become healthier, wiser, freer, 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 harmed?"*

Note: "Do those served grow as persons? Do the least privileged benefit, or at least not be further harmed?" I begin to imagine a company of Christians who might build such a legacy over 175 years in their village!!

I'm thinking that you are going to want to know, as I do, what would be the characteristics of a servant leader—to see how we might compare, if we want to try it. Well, according to Robert Greenleaf, there are six characteristics of a servant leader:

**The servant leader expresses unlimited liability to others:** listens...empathizes...does not reject.

**The servant leader knows self well:** an active learner...immersed in the surrounding world.

**The servant leader holds liberating visions:** has dreams...can see a way and point to it.

**The servant leader uses persuasion:** gently...reinforces hope in others...helps them attain.

**The servant leader builds community within:** enables teams to produce desired results.

**The servant leader uses power ethically:** no one is banned from the team's production.

*Empathy for others...liberating visions...gentle persuasion...inspiring hope...productive teamwork...shared power: **The Servant Leader!***

How does Jesus compare? How do you and I compare? How does Hyattstown Christian Church compare?

According to Robert Greenleaf, a church distinguished by servant leadership is *“a gathering of persons who have accepted a common purpose, and a common discipline to guide the pursuit of that purpose, to the end that each involved person reaches higher fulfillment as a person, through **servicing and being served** by the common venture, than would be achieved alone or in a less committed relationship.”*

After nearly two centuries at a country crossroads, how does Hyattstown Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) compare?

You don't know Ajit and Pushpa Singh, but I do—dedicated doctors serving Christian, Hindi, and Muslim poor alike at the Evangelical Hospital of Khariar, India. I asked them on my visit to the hospital some years ago why they did not set up a practice in America like so many of their U. S. educated colleagues. The response was quick, sure: We belong here with our people! Servant leaders!

You did not know John and Virginia Smith, but I did—the dedicated missionary directors of Ryder Memorial Hospital in Humacao, Puerto Rico. They built Ryder from a regional clinic to become perhaps the premier medical institution on the island, which to this day cares for the poor, teaches nutrition, trains nurses, makes house calls to the infirmed—and I'm sure leads recovery efforts after a devastating hurricane. Servant leaders!

You and I did not know her, but we have known of her: Born in Macedonia in 1910...deciding at the age of 12 to become a missionary spreading the love of Christ among the poorest of the poor...growing a school for slum children into a ministry to the homeless, refugees, substance abusers, aids patients, disaster victims, society's neglected—in 40 countries, and along the way receiving the Nobel Peace Prize. Mother Teresa, like another missionary and Nobel winner named Albert Schweitzer, was truly a servant leader! What a tradition we claim as ours!

A servant leader listens and empathizes with others...knows herself or himself well...has dreams and points to them...persuades gently and gives hope to others...builds teams for results...uses power ethically...rejects no one.

An Amish farmer was asked what “community” meant to him. He relayed that whenever he and his son are finished with spring plowing, they let their horses rest at the highest point on their farm, where they can see 13 other teams of horses working the neighborhood fields. The farmer said: “I know that if I get sick or debilitated or die, those 13 teams will be at work on my farm”.

I begin to imagine a company of Christians who staked their claim nearly 200 years ago at a county crossroads just north of the nation’s capital.

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