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Religious educators: Promoting servant leadership

Shane D. Lavery
University of Notre Dame Australia, shane.lavery@nd.edu.au

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Introduction

Much is demanded of religious educators. Like all in the teaching profession, they are required to be well versed in current pedagogical theory and have a deep understanding of their subject content (Ferrari, 2008). They must be open to the possibilities of curriculum change and ways such change is most efficiently achieved (Goldburg, 2008). They need to be aware of how faith is developed in young people, in particular, approaches that can lead young people to encounter God (D'Souza, 2008). They must have integrity to practice what they teach, authentically witnessing to their students through personal example (Hackett, 2007). Yet, difficult as it may seem, still more is required of religious educators. They must be leaders. That is, leaders with colleagues, both in their own school and beyond, leaders with the parents of their students, and leaders in the wider community. But of even greater importance, they must model the "best practice" of leadership for their students. The form of leadership religious educators exercise, and why they should model this leadership with their students, is the focus of the paper.

Leadership

Definitions of leadership are diverse. Traditionally the notion of a leader had heroic connotations and was often linked with power or authority (Stokes & James, 1996). Early studies of leadership focused on the traits of leaders as great people. It was anticipated that the general study of the life and work of recognized leaders would "isolate particular traits and characteristics, either behavioural or psychological, which might identify potential leaders in another context" (Tuohy, 1999, p. 167). Leadership was then variously characterised as situational (Arbuckle, 1993),

functional (Stokes & James,) or in terms of a leader's style (Tucker, 1997). Distinctions were highlighted between a leader and a manager (Pitcher, 1997; Johnson & Johnson, 1994). Some authors saw such distinctions as simply "different parts of the same phenomenon" (Nahavandi, 1997, p. 5). Particular theories introduced notions such as moral leadership (Sergiovanni, 1992), the charismatic leader (DuBrin, 2000), and the "principle-centred leader" (Covey, 1992). Certain commentators (Gronn, 1998; Crawford, 1997) criticised these theories because they "stress the importance of one person as leader" (Crawford, p. 2), preferring instead a definition which emphasised leadership as an integral part of the group dynamic within teams (Hunter, Bailey & Taylor, 1997; Covey, 1997; Whitehead & Whitehead, 1986). More recently, leadership has been understood in terms of the leadership model. That is, the motivation and process behind how power is exercised. Examples include transactional and transformational leadership (Beare, Caldwell & Millikan, 1997), authentic leadership (Duignan, 2006), distributed leadership (Harris, 2008) and leadership for business (Krause, 2003).

Each of these definitions tends to emphasise one particular aspect of leadership more than another does. So while such studies of leadership have yielded, and continue to yield, valuable insights about leaders and leadership *per se*, the topic of leadership can be confusing. In the face of such uncertainty, religious educators like all leaders, need to carefully discern the form of leadership appropriate to their role and mission. The author proposes that servant leadership is a fitting model for religious educators. Servant leadership is now examined from a scriptural and educational perspective. Three reasons are advanced as to its suitability for religious educators. These reasons are: servant leadership is the way Jesus exercised leadership; servant leadership

provides religious educators with an excellent set of principles and values to structure and extend their teaching style; and, servant leadership is an appropriate form of leadership to develop in young people.

Servant Leadership

At first glance the notion of servant leadership appears problematic. How can one be a servant, and at the same time, be a leader? In his seminal work, Greenleaf (1977) attempts to address this apparent contradiction by conceptualising the idea of servant leadership. He argues that servant leadership begins with the natural feeling that one wants to serve first before leading. Greenleaf stresses that at the heart of such leadership is the wish "to make sure that other people's highest priority needs are being served" (p. 13). He concludes that the best test of servant leadership is: "Do those being served grow as persons? Do they, while being served, become healthier, wiser, freer, more autonomous, more likely themselves to become servants?"(p. 13). Greenleaf also asks what effect one's leadership will have "on the least privileged in society; will they benefit, or, at least, not be further deprived?" (p. 14). Such an approach to leadership not only casts doubts on an attitude where people "shoulder their way into leadership positions, driven by upward mobility and a thirst for personal success"(Beare, 1998), it also suggests an alternative that is "selfless, large-souled, (and) expansively visioned" (Beare).

Within the Gospel tradition the most distinctive aspect of Jesus' teaching on leadership is His emphasis that a leader is essentially a servant. All four Gospels clearly demonstrate Jesus' understanding of leadership as one of service. Four passages serve to highlight this point: Mk 10:42-45, Mt 23:8-12, Lk 22:24-27; and Jn

13:12-17. In Mk 10:42-45, the two ideas of rulership and service are combined, to stand in sharp contrast to each other (Seeley, 1995). James and John attempt to gain an edge in jockeying for power, and Jesus teaches the disciples on the need for service and receptivity (Maloney, 2006). Specifically, the only leadership allowed within Jesus' community is servant leadership, patterned on Jesus who came to serve and not to be served (Edwards, 1989). Calling the disciples to him, Jesus thus makes it abundantly clear the different standards of greatness in his Kingdom and in the kingdoms of the world. In the kingdoms of the world the standard of greatness is power. In the Kingdom of Jesus the standard is that of service. Jesus' teaching in this passage emphasises the fact that the group, which gathers in Jesus' name, must take seriously his example (v. 45) and must be servants of each other. True greatness, therefore, lies not in power, but in one's capacity to minister to another (Kiley, 1995).

The passage from Matthew (Mt 23:8-12) suggests reasons why leadership should be based on service. In Matthew's community no one is to be called rabbi, or father or master, because "you have only one master, and you are all brothers" (Mt 23:8). The point is that members of the Christian community "are members of the family of God (Mt 12:46-50) where distinctions emphasised by titles are inappropriate." (Boring, 1996, p. 432). Furthermore, Doyle (1996, p. 142) comments that the term "servant" (Mt 23:11) is the lowliest of Church offices and "is derived from the verb 'to serve' (*diakonein*) which expresses the self-description of his mission by Jesus (Mt 20:28)". There is also the sense that Matthew's passage stands in blunt opposition to the style and hypocrisy of contemporary rulers of the time (Adair, 2001),

In Luke's Gospel Jesus' discussion on leadership as service (Lk 22:24-27) occurs at the Last Supper, and is provoked by the disciples disputing amongst themselves as to who is the greatest. In this passage, Jesus in not discouraging those who aspire to lead, he is simply showing them what true leadership means (Adair, 2001). Byrne (2002) notes that Jesus gives a brief instruction on how the disciples are to exercise authority. They are to model their leadership on Jesus, who, although he presides at table as host, is among them as the one who serves. In such a way Jesus' words on service suggest that the commonly held leadership paradigms of the day are inadequate for those who would be his followers. Specifically, Nuzzi (2000) remarks that Jesus' advice turns the authority model around and suggests that true leadership involves serving, and not insisting on one's own way.

Chapter 13 of John's Gospel records how Jesus moved from the status position as head of the table, knelt down, and washed his disciples' feet as a sign of servant leadership (vs. 1-11). Treston (1995) argues that this dramatic gesture of Jesus the night before his death was a confirmation of his repeated lesson to his disciples that they must renounce a dominant mode of leadership and become servant leaders (cf. Mk 10; Mt 23; Lk 22). The passage, Jn 13:12-15, immediately follows the gesture of the foot washing. In this passage, the paradox of Jesus, the Lord and Master acting as a slave, is underlined and proposed as a paradigm for the Christian disciple (Fitzpatrick, 1985). On this point Nuzzi (2000) argues that Jesus words and actions in this passage reaffirm how his use of authority is diametrically opposed to the accepted style of leadership in his day. That is, Jesus connected the power of his ministry to service for others, a type of power to be used to serve others, not rule over others. Moreover, as Manz (1998) points out, the passage clearly indicates that Jesus had no

intention of being the only servant leader. Having demonstrated service, Jesus now urges his disciples to do the same.

Various commentators (Jolley, 1997; McLaughlin, 1997; Grace, 1996) have argued that service is also a key facet of the vision of leadership within Catholic schools. Jolley, for instance, identifies a "theology of leadership" (p. 137) exemplified in the gospel text which sees Jesus wash the feet of his disciples at the Last Supper (Jn 13: 1-15). Such leadership, he argues, is based on service, empowerment and inclusiveness. It presents a model where leaders in Catholic schools are invited "to enter into a relationship with Jesus, and others, that is motivated by love and grounded in compassion and a desire to serve," (Jolley, p. 137). Similarly, McLaughlin points out that "humility, suffering and service were the integral dynamic of Christ's leadership" (p. 22). As such he argued that service forms the basis of genuine and authentic leadership in Catholic schools. He stresses, moreover, "anything less might well be a charade and reflect a distortion of the vision that lends legitimacy to Catholic education" (p. 22). McLaughlin warns, however, that such a perspective does not deliver "a rationale for subservience, indecision or perennial surrender" (p. 22). In addition, Grace, when investigating the responses of Catholic "headteachers" to the changing culture of English schooling, found that "many of the participants saw a social ethic of 'serving others' as central to the mission of the Catholic school" (p. 74).

Servant Leadership and the Religious Educator

Why should religious educators choose to exercise, and hence model, servant leadership for their students? I believe there are three reasons. First, servant

leadership is the leadership approach that Jesus so clearly exercised in the Gospel tradition. Religious educators are in a unique position to explore this form of leadership with students. Second, servant leadership provides religious educators (all educators) with an excellent set of principles and values to structure and develop their teaching style. Third, leadership based on service is the most authentic way humanity can address the range of environmental, political, and economic crises currently facing the planet. This last point is especially relevant as it highlights the critical role of religious educators in preparing future generations for leadership.

The vocation to be a religious educator demands that religious educators not only teach Jesus risen, they model Jesus risen. One extremely effective way of doing this is to lead as Jesus led. The servant leadership that Jesus exemplified is not a leadership of power and control. Rather, as Nouwen (1989) indicates, it is a leadership of powerlessness and humility "in which the suffering servant of God, Jesus Christ, is made manifest" (p. 63). This is not a psychologically weak leadership where the Christian leader is merely the passive victim of the manipulations of the situation. Nor is it a leadership in which the leader is trying to please everyone (Blanchard & Hughes, 2003). Quite the contrary, as a leader Jesus was proactive in the way he showed compassion for people in need – the Gospels are replete with examples of such compassion. He was a man willing to openly associate with those on the margins of Jewish society: women (Lk 7:36-50), tax collectors (Lk 19:1-10), lepers (Mt 8:1-4). Jesus was not afraid to challenge those in authority, such as the Pharisees (Mt 23:13-32), Pilate (Jn 19:33-38), or the self-righteous accusers of the woman taken in adultery (Jn 8:1-11). It was he who, in the Beatitudes (Mt 5:1-12), created a vision of the future that spoke of a new world "where pain and suffering are

acknowledged and integrated into people's lives as a means of achieving wholeness and union with God" (Sofield & Kuhn, 1995, p. 35). These are not the words, deeds and actions of a spineless, insipid, ingratiating leader incapable of action. Rather, as Nuzzi (2000) proposes, the understanding of power that Jesus exhibits is a power "for others, to help others, to meet others' needs, and never as power over others to command" (p. 264).

An approach to leadership, that has as its essence the desire to serve others compassionately as Jesus did, gives religious educators an excellent framework upon which to develop their teaching style. Relational by nature, servant leadership places the needs of people first. All good teaching is relational, and all good teachers place the needs of their students at the centre of every activity. Moreover, by his deeds of service Jesus also personified a transformational approach to leadership. The transforming leader is one who develops processes, which "encourage the responsible exercise of authority, both individually and collectively, so that people become generative of ideas and the agents of their own growth and that of the group," (Arbuckle, 1993, p. 106). This was the style of leadership preferred by Jesus. It was an approach made evident in the visionary, compassionate, empowering, inclusive and forgiving way he interacted with people (Sofield and Kuhn, 1995). The leadership of Jesus "was not just an expression of his own ministry but also a leadership which served others by supporting them to take on their own mastery of situations and events" (Sultmann & McLaughlin, 2000, p. 95). It was a leadership which, Sultmann and McLaughlin notes, provided people "with personal skills to become active and meaningful contributors to their own welfare and that of others" (p. 95). In this sense, Carey (1991) argues that Jesus'

method of "making the kingdom of God present" (p. 30) was "to transform his followers into leaders who themselves serve as agents of moral growth and development for others" (p. 30). A teaching approach which aims to develop students into leaders, who, in turn will then serve compassionately as moral agents, must be a commendable thing. In fact, such leadership development in students is both a critical consideration and a vital responsibility for religious educators.

Religious educators have a duty to develop a servant leadership mindset in the present generation of young people. This is not a glib statement. The issue is: what type of leadership is needed if humanity is to have any hope of a viable future? It is certainly not a model of leadership that is self-serving, manipulative, short-sighted or power-oriented. Acts of fraud by former Enron Corporation bosses (Hayes, 2006), the intransigence of the Bush administration over repudiating the Kyoto Protocol (McDonagh, 2006), and human rights abuse in Zimbabwe (Clayton, 2008), are all diverse examples of adversarial leadership motivated by personal gain, dominance and reputation. It is this form of leadership that now has humanity facing the current financial and business crisis, continued political instability in various regions of the world, and the human made environmental disaster of global warming. The servant leadership of Jesus, based on love (Nouwen, 1989), stands in stark contrast. Religious educators must have the courage to compassionately serve and lead as Jesus did, to live and model this form of leadership, and most importantly, to develop in the young leadership motivated by underlying principles of service.

How religious educators develop servant leadership in students is a moot point. Certainly, they must exercise this form of leadership with their students. Students

may not necessarily believe what teachers tell them, but they will believe what teachers do. However, I propose that Jesus' example of servant leadership also needs to be explicitly taught, preferably as part of a unit on Christian Leadership. Scholars such as Adair (2001), Sofield and Kuhn (1995) and Edwards (1989) have developed various models of leadership based on the life and work of Jesus. All emphasise the importance of service. The example of particular Christian leaders might well be used to further highlight the value and importance of servant leadership. Examples include: Mary MacKillop, Frederick Ozanam, Martin Luther King, Nelson Mandela, Desmond Tutu, Mother Theresa, Fred Hollows and Oscar Romero. Further, there are excellent illustrations of people from other religious denominations who have impressively exercised leadership based on service: Mahatma Gandhi, Yitzhak Rabin and Aung San Suu Kyi. When one would teach such a unit is open to question, although I believe the unit would have greater effect with senior classes. Irrespective of timing, it is no longer an option to ignore the significance of servant leadership.

Conclusion

Religious educators play an integral role in Catholic education. Through the use of theology, scripture, church history and catechesis they relay the Christian message of God's intervention into human history. By exemplifying leadership based on Gospel service, and by explicitly incorporating servant leadership as part of the teaching curriculum, religious educators can underline the precise way Jesus interacted with people. His was a leadership characterised by an ability to listen to people, to respond to what he heard, to create and communicate a vision, to include all in his community, and to empower people and communities to implement this vision (Sofield & Kuhn, 1995). Moreover, by his words and actions Jesus made it clear that true leadership

was grounded in love embodied as service (Engstrom, 1976). As we draw to the end of the first decade of the twenty-first century, leadership based on selfless service may very well be the only means by which humanity can effectively address the range of pandemic crises facing the planet. How essential it is, then, for religious educators to comprehensively present this model of leadership to the coming generations!

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