

On the Practice of Ministry Leadership: *Servanthood*

“For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.” Mark 10:45 (ESV)

I remember a seminary professor saying to our class, “What’s the fun of being in charge if you can’t do what you want?” I think he was joking. What I have come to understand is that biblical leadership is the exact opposite of what my professor was saying. It is not about doing what I want; it is about doing what is needed to further the mission. That has been a tough lesson to learn. Maybe you can relate.

In my twenty years in the church planting world, there is a particular error I have seen many times. I was guilty of it myself at a certain point. Planters often design and implement the church *they* would want to attend rather than starting with the community and planting the church that fits. That is bad missiology. If our ministry is focused on attaining and keeping our preferences, it is basically an extended act of selfishness dressed up as service to the Lord. It will probably end badly.

How many ministry leaders, paid and volunteer, have substituted the realization and maintaining of their preferences for the actual mission of the church? I don’t know the exact answer, but observation tells me it is a lot. Pastors and Sunday school teachers and age group leaders and committee members and [*insert any church leadership role here*] are all potentially guilty of operating selfishly. We see the evidence of it in churches full of conflict, pastors beaten down by complaining members, and the very high percentage of plateaued and declining churches.

In [Autopsy of a Deceased Church](#), Thom Rainer identified “members being focused on their own preferences” as one of the key causes of a church’s demise. It’s ironic, isn’t it, that an institution founded by a leader who died for his followers has become so inwardly-focused and preference-driven?

Let’s repent of that. Let’s allow the Holy Spirit to root it out of our hearts. Let’s embrace servanthood as our model for ministry. If we do, it will have a number of implications.

1. *“What do I like?” will become an irrelevant question.* Go join a country club if you want the organization to be about serving you. The church is not a “member services” organization. It is a disciple-making, kingdom advancing organization. And don’t try to dress up your preferences with spiritual sounding rationales and misapplied Bible verses. Others can see through that.

2. *“What furthers the mission?” will become the most relevant question.* The church exists to make more and better disciples. It exists to extend the gospel to as many people as possible. It exists to serve the hurting and hopeless. It exists to make a big deal over Jesus, not over which group gets to use

which room on the church campus. When we embrace servanthood, the Master's mission moves to front and center.

3. *There will be a lot fewer opinions and agendas.* Honestly, can't we use a lot less of these? We have become a nation of people who are in love with their own loudly-voiced opinions. The church should not be like that. If we embrace servanthood, there will be a lot more humility, a lot more quiet and listening, and a lot less posturing on social media.

4. *There will be more teamwork.* The church where I am currently the interim pastor has a slogan that is repeated often in church gatherings. Their former pastor taught them, "Teamwork makes the dream work." He taught them well. It is much harder to be a selfish jerk when everyone is going around saying that.

5. *You will experience a lot more joy in your leadership role.* I'm telling you, it is a lot of pressure being vigilant over your preferences. It wears you down and vexes your soul. It is a huge relief to no longer be driven by the urgent need to defend your turf. Happiness might break out in unfamiliar places.

6. *We will look a whole lot more like Jesus.* Honestly, Jesus is the strangest king ever. He does not use his power and prestige to serve his wants. Instead, he surrenders all his status to become a ransom payment for a world full of people who are spiritually captive and dead in their rebellion against...*him*. He becomes a substitute for you and me, hanging on a cross that should have been ours. That is strange behavior for a king. The world already thinks Christ-followers are strange. Let's make sure they do so for the right reason.

So here is the pledge I am asking you to take. Share this with others. Spread it around the church. Lead the change away from preferences and toward servanthood and mission.

I, a/an (insert your position or leadership role here), will no longer be concerned with what I prefer in the church. I repent of selfishness. Instead, under the influence of the Holy Spirit, I will do everything I can to further the mission of our church. I will be a cooperative and joyful team member. I will submit gladly to those the church has set in authority over me. I will use my ministry and influence to bring unity to the church and the good news of Jesus Christ into people's lives. I will follow the model of King Jesus, relying on his grace and power to accomplish what he desires through me.

Now don't you feel better?