

Servant Leadership and a Culture of Stewardship

By Dan R. Ebener

The Church desperately needs leadership. The changes in our world, and the accelerated the pace of that change, are stretching the fabric of the culture of our Church and our society. Christian values and Church teachings are in direct contrast to the modus operandi of the business world. People are drifting away from religious practices and faithful convictions, not only in the USA, but around the world. Global changes such as these are challenges crying out for solid leadership.

At the heart of leadership is influence. Leaders influence people by inspiring a change of heart, mind, spirit and action. They influence their organizations by transforming structures, policies, strategies and culture. As a result, leaders transform society. They provide a sense of direction to respond to the global changes affecting our Church and other organizations.

Over the past four centuries, it seems that societal forces have been affecting the church more than the

other way around. The influence of the Church, and with it that of the family, has decreased in recent centuries, while business and government have become the most influential institutions in society. This article suggests that a conversion to stewardship and to servant leadership is the key to restoring religion as a major force in society.

Stewardship

Stewardship embraces a sense of ownership about all of God's creation. The steward has a sense of awe about the beauty and wonder of God's creation. The steward has a spirit of generosity and a spirit of gratitude for all the incredible gifts that God has provided. The steward feels passion-



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Servant leaders build the Church, parish by parish, as St. Paul did, by establishing a stewardship culture at the ground level.

IN BRIEF

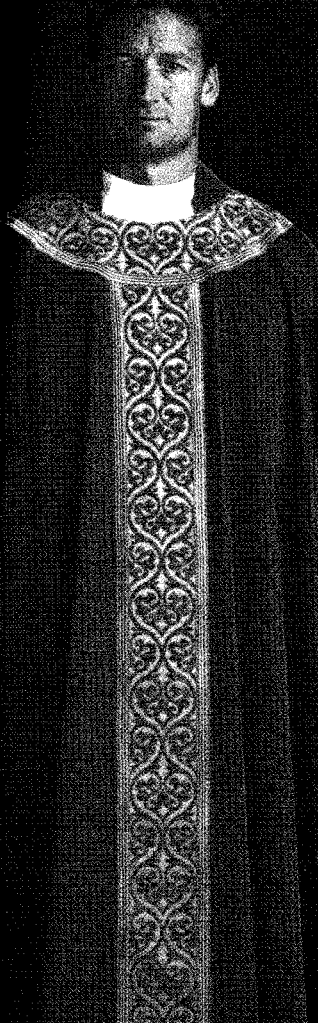
- Leadership needed
- Stewardship of God's creation
- A stewardship culture in the parish
- Parish leadership
- Servant leadership
- Three types of parish members

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ate about protecting and preserving the most precious of God's gifts to us, including our faith itself. Out of this spirit of generosity and responsibility, the steward gives freely of time, talent and resources.

The stewardship life is for both leaders and members of the Church. Generally speaking, the more that the leaders model the life of the steward, the more likely the members will be to practice stewardship as well. The first act of leadership is to transform oneself and to lead by example. Leaders are disciples too. To be a disciple means to practice stewardship. Every leadership challenge is an opportunity to practice discipleship. To lead like Jesus begins with living the stewardship life as taught in the Sermon on the Mount.

Converting a congregation to the practice of stewardship involves changing hearts, minds, spirit and actions. The leader challenges people with new ways of thinking and acting. The leader inspires them to enter into a conversion of heart and encourages them through their struggles. The leader recognizes individuals' unique talents and invites them to share these talents. And the leader equips people to participate in various ways as members of the parish by providing guidance, resources and support.

A Stewardship Culture

The leader exercises influence by transforming structures, policies, strategies and culture. Let's look at culture and consider what a parish would look like with a culture of stewardship. Culture includes customs, beliefs, norms and values of an organization or a society. It can best be described as the way we think, the things we believe and the way we do things. It can best be viewed by observing the behaviors of the people.

In a parish with a culture of stewardship, the people behave as if they are owners of the Church in the sense that the Church is a precious gift from God. People treat the Church like their home. They help each other

like a healthy family does. They greet each other in a positive manner. They welcome newcomers. They give generously. They listen, understand and respond to each other's needs and interests. They contribute to the success of others. They are actively engaged in parish activities. They take seriously their own personal development as disciples of Christ.

With a culture of stewardship in a parish, the people are abundantly satisfied with doing a good job, making others happy and doing the right thing. Like any organization, the culture of a parish reflects its leadership. Remember that leaders influence and transform people and organizations. So the question becomes: What type of leadership is most likely to enhance, support and inspire parish stewardship?

Parish Leadership

Parish leaders can be described in three ways. First, pedestal leaders command the people and control what they do. They micro-manage the details of the parish. They lack the willingness or the ability to delegate. They fail to listen attentively to the needs, interests or ideas of others. They lack the humility to understand that the leader needs the people as much as the people need the leader. Their actions suggest that they are the sole owner, the only steward, of the parish. Thus, rather than viewing parish membership as that of a steward, the people are more likely to consider themselves consumers engaging in a business transaction. The practice of stewardship is difficult to find under this parish leadership.

Second, passive leaders pay little attention to leadership and management issues. In some cases, this person is burnt out on parish administration. In other cases, the person never really aspired to lead or manage. Their motivation to work for the Church was to perform pastoral ministries, perhaps to be a sacramental priest or a religious education teacher. They were not prepared for the fact that those who work for the

Church automatically must deal with administrative issues. They lack the wisdom, skill and passion to inspire parishioners about the mission, vision and core values that come with stewardship.

Servant Leadership

Our third category is servant leadership. As Robert Greenleaf wrote in his essay *The Servant as Leader*, the servant leader is motivated first to serve and then to lead. The motivation to serve originates out of the spirit of gratitude that is characteristic of stewardship. The motivation to lead develops out of a passion for the people and the mission of the Church. The servant leader directs the power of leadership to the service of the people and the goals of the parish. Power becomes a means to serving others, not an end unto the leader. As stewards, servant leaders are more interested in giving than re-

ceiving. Power is freely given instead of taken and, it grows exponentially. People are thus empowered to do their jobs more successfully.

A culture of stewardship thrives in a parish led by a servant leader. Servant leaders are more interested in giving than receiving, in listening rather than dictating and in serving rather than ruling. Like Jesus, they realize that they were appointed to serve rather than to be served. Service is the outward sign that characterizes the parish led by a servant. The giving nature of the servant leader inspires others to give freely and to serve each other. This is precisely the type of leadership taught by Jesus and the type of culture that depicted the early Christian believers. The servant leader is the steward who wants to give back.

The servant nature of the leader influences others to give back. By modeling stewardship, the servant

leader inspires others to act as stewards. By modeling servant leadership, they inspire others to become servant leaders themselves. Servant leadership is not dependent upon a position. It can emerge from anyone, anywhere.

The servant leader is more concerned with how many leaders they develop than how many followers they lead. With leaders and members practicing stewardship and servant leadership, stewardship becomes embedded in the culture of the parish. Leaders and members of the parish serve as stewards of the parish.

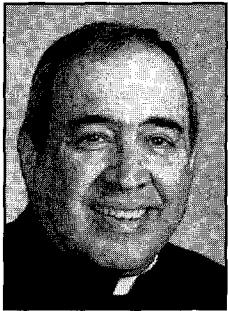
Church Membership

Parishioners can also be described in three similar categories. First, we have the takers who want to get something out of parish experiences but are less willing to put something into it. They approach the parish as a consumer rather than as a steward. They are likely to have a sense of entitlement, thinking that they are owed something instead of owing something. They want to get something out of Mass but are unwilling to put anything into it. The takers may already have left the Church except to attend for weddings, funerals, holidays or other times when they need the Church.

Second, we have parishioners who are passive members. They are attending some church functions but they have lost their passion for Christ. Perhaps they never developed a passion for their faith. Perhaps they got involved but ran into pedestal leaders who would not allow them to act like owners and stewards, so they acted like consumers and recipients of parish life. Stewardship was not practiced or preached in a way that stirred their hearts. Servant leadership was not practiced in a way that could reach them or draw them into a lively and engaged practice of their faith.

Third, we have the stewards. They are living a faithful life of Christian discipleship. They feel grateful for whatever gifts and talents they have

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been given. Out of this sense of gratitude, these stewards have a strong desire to give back. They have a sense of ownership about parish life. From a generous heart, the steward gives back to family, friends and colleagues, as well as to those who are met randomly throughout the day.

When large numbers of parishioners are in category one or two, it suggests a failure of leadership. In a static parish, the people are more interested in taking than in giving. The people are concerned about what they can get out of going to church instead of focusing on what they are putting into it. They are looking out for themselves and not for each other. The static parish is likely to have been led by a pedestal or passive leader. What the leader says and does has a lot to do with creating the culture of an organization.

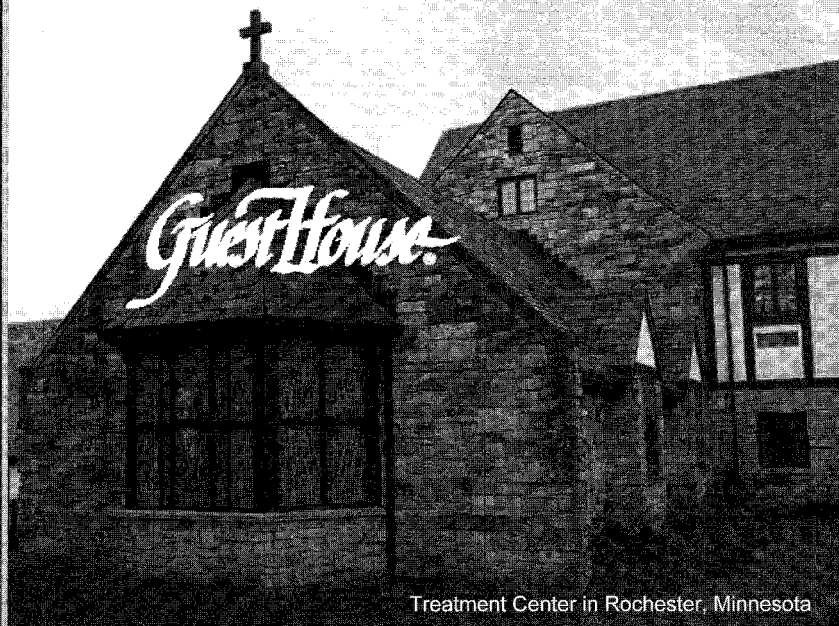
Conclusion

The Church needs new leadership to reclaim its critical role in society. It needs servant leaders who are stewards who live and lead like Jesus. The servant leader builds the Church as St. Paul did, by establishing a stewardship culture at the ground level. The culture of the parish led by a servant leader can best be described as a stewardship parish. Servant leaders are stewards who want to give and to serve. The followers of servant leaders are inspired to be stewards who also want to give and to serve.

If stewardship is the standard for Christian discipleship, then servant leadership is the standard for Christian leadership. If the leaders of a parish want the people to practice stewardship, then the leaders need to practice servant leadership. The servant leader is precisely the one who will inspire the people of God to act as stewards. **P**

DR. EBENER, DBA, teaches leadership at St. Ambrose University, Davenport, Iowa, is director of stewardship for the Diocese of Davenport and is author of *Servant Leadership Models for Your Parish*.

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