

**Servant Leadership at Lincoln Christian College and Seminary**  
**(An Excerpt from *Great Conversations around Great Questions* Self-study Report)**

One of the distinctive features of Lincoln Christian College and Seminary is leadership, particularly “servant leadership” as is evidenced by Lincoln’s mission: “*to nurture and equip Christians with a Biblical worldview to serve and lead in the church and the world.*” The term “servant leadership” was first coined in this country by Robert Greenleaf, a management research specialist at AT&T who later taught at Harvard, in his 1970 classic essay, *The Servant as Leader*. That essay borrows from a story by Herman Hesse, *Journey to the East*, about a person named Leo who functions as the servant for a group on a mythical journey, only to be recognized years later as the real leader of the group through all that he did for them. Greenleaf himself defines a servant leader as a “servant first ...whose conscious choice brings one to aspire to lead [to] ...make sure that other people’s highest priority needs are being served” (quoted from “What Is Servant-Leadership” on the website for the Center for Servant-Leadership, founded by Greenleaf in 1964 and renamed for him in 1985; see [www.greenleaf.org](http://www.greenleaf.org)). Greenleaf expanded his concept of servant-leadership with a second essay in 1972 *The Institution as Servant* and a third in 1972 *Trustees as Servants* (note also his 1980 revision of this work, entitled *Seminary as Servant*). The Center for Servant-Leadership has also published an online essay “On Character and Servant-Leadership: Ten Characteristics of Effective, Caring Leaders” that speaks well to what Lincoln, as a Christian higher education community, means by servant leadership. Those characteristics include such components as listening, empathy, healing (of relationships), awareness, persuasion, conceptualization, foresight, stewardship, commitment to the growth of people, and building community—all important emphases at Lincoln.

Lincoln has for many years used the term “servant leader.” Our understanding, of course, is heavily influenced by our theological identity and our commitment to Scripture. Within that understanding, which frames servant leadership within the overarching context of God’s sovereignty and Christ’s incarnational model, we believe that servant leadership entails the following Biblical principles and images.

***Biblical Principles of Servant Leadership***

We believe that many of the principles which characterize the Biblical concept of servant leadership are timeless, as applicable to our students in the 21<sup>st</sup> century as they were to Christians in the 1<sup>st</sup> century. They surface frequently and remain foundational in both the Old Testament and New Testament. In reviewing what Scripture says about leadership two especially relevant observations surface. First, *the patterns of Biblical leadership are usually different from those commonly practiced by the surrounding cultures* (e.g. 1 Samuel 8:5; Mark 10:42-44; 1 Corinthians 1:2). Second, *the qualities of Biblical leadership are often unexpected ones*. For example, God often calls leaders who lack eloquence (such as Moses in Exodus 3:9-4:16), courage (such as Gideon in Judges 6:11-12), experience (such as David in 1 Samuel 16:11), and education (such as the Apostles in Acts 4:13).

A study of Scripture also concludes that *servant leadership for Christians is primarily a gift, a calling, from God* (as argued by Leonard Sweet in his 2003 book *Summoned to Lead* by

Zondervan). It is, therefore, not something about which a leader can boast, but must instead be sought humbly and received gratefully. We certainly believe that leadership skills can be honed and that leaders can be better educated about leadership, but we also believe that a Biblical leader above all seeks to better understand God's revealed will and better respond to God's spiritual guidance. The New Testament Epistles particularly note leaders' dependence on prayer and their search for godly wisdom (see, for example, 1 Corinthians 2:1-7 and James 3:13, 17). Biblical *leaders are also noted for their ability to teach or communicate* God's will (e.g. Ezra 7:10), a principle that is especially relevant in a Christian higher education community.

The Biblical *leader's lifestyle provides an example appropriate for others to emulate*, as Jesus tells his "learner disciples" in John 13:15 or as Paul says of himself in 1 Corinthians 11:1. We also believe, though, that we live in a "fallen world" where leaders can and do make moral mistakes, as King David's life in the Old Testament clearly attests. Still, Scripture makes clear that the qualities of servant leaders are repeatedly framed in terms of moral character (compare qualifications for church leaders in 1 Timothy 3:1-13). Chief among these moral qualities is humble service, as Jesus instructs his "learner disciples" in Luke 22:26-27. Of course, *the supreme Biblical model of servant leadership is Jesus Christ Himself*, illustrated in the incident at the Last Supper when Jesus washed his followers' feet (John 13:1-17). Such *humble service for leaders is not to be confused with weakness or lack of appropriate authority*, since Jesus balances humility with authority, as the postscript to his most well-known teachings, the Sermon on the Mount, makes clear (Matthew 7:28-29).

### ***Biblical Images of Leadership***

Many of the categories of leadership (e.g. prophet, judge, king, priest) found in the Old Testament are transformed in the New Testament. The various titles assigned to leaders in the New Covenant (e.g. apostle, prophet, pastor, teacher, deacon, elder, steward, etc.) are actually used to denote function, not form nor even especially formal office. Essentially the focus is on service rather than status. Commonly used words of service include *nurture* and *equip* (I Thessalonians 2:7 and Ephesians 4:11-13; compare our mission statement's "nurture and equip") and *mobilizing others for service* (Ephesians 4:12) a key leadership characteristic cited by Greenleaf above. Such tasks as commanding or demanding, often associated with leadership, are not stressed in the New Testament. Instead, two of the most common metaphors or images used in the New Testament to describe leadership—images also used commonly of Christ Himself—are servant and shepherd.

The first metaphor, *the image of a servant*, is what gives Lincoln's understanding of leadership its particular focus, i.e. the image of servant leader. Jesus' teaching on leadership in Matthew 20:20-28, for example, makes it clear that leaders are first servants, not the reverse, a point made prominent in Greenleaf's definition of servant leaders. The three marks of a servant leader, according to Jesus in the Gospels, are *service*, *submission*, and *sacrifice* (note again the understandable similarities with Greenleaf). Service invites such acts as "giving cups of cold water to the least of these" (Matthew 10:42). Submission encourages a spirit of mutual concern and interdependence, characteristic of community. Sacrifice enables a leader even to "lay down his life for the flock," sometimes daily, as the life of the late Mother

Theresa illustrates. The servant imagery is fundamental to Lincoln's ethos and its emphasis upon service learning. It also speaks to the "equip" part of our mission statement.

The second metaphor is that of *the image of a shepherd*. In the Old Testament, we find both God as shepherd (note the popular Psalm 23:1) and also individuals like Moses (in Exodus 3:1) and David (in 1 Samuel 16:11). In the New Testament, Jesus is frequently called the chief shepherd of the sheep (from John 10:1-18 to Revelation 7:17). Accordingly, God calls leaders to be shepherds who will watch over, care for, feed, and protect the sheep (see, for example, Jeremiah 3:15 and John 21:15-17). The shepherd imagery, though sometimes difficult to understand or communicate in our contemporary culture, speaks particularly well to Lincoln's missional focus on "nurture." That nurturer role ranges from the College's desire to be *in loco parentis* to the Seminary's desire to form seminarians on a very personal, spiritual level for a life of servant leadership.

### ***The Meaning and Mystery of Servant Leadership***

Perhaps no more dramatic depiction of servant leadership is found in Scripture than Jesus' own example of servanthood, revealed in his act of washing the feet of his disciples (John 13:1-15). Bearing witness to this important model of servant leadership for the Lincoln community is a statue dedicated in May 2004 (on Founders' Day) outside the Hargrove chapel. The statue is a life-sized bronze composition entitled "The Divine Servant," donated by a very grateful alumnus in honor of a long-time faculty member. It was sculpted by Max Greiner, Jr. of Kerrville, Texas, and reveals the humble example of Christ washing the feet of Peter. The faces used on the sculpture are based on ancient catacomb drawings of Peter and Jesus. The foot washing bowl is patterned after a ceramic basin found in Jerusalem dating back to the time of Christ. The sculpture hints at both the meaning—and mystery—of servant leadership for us at Lincoln. We use both terms—meaning and mystery—because, though one may arrive at a definitional meaning, it will always be a bit clouded by intentional ambiguity and even awe.

We have come to understand that there is no easy answer to the question: "What do we mean by servant leadership?" The vast research literature and popular books on leadership are ample evidence that many, legitimate answers exist. For us, the meaning and mystery of leadership (and its corollary, follower-ship) goes on all around us and within us. We believe that all Christians are in some measure leaders *and* followers. Because contexts between leaders and followers are constantly changing, the quest for defining who a leader or follower *is* and what a leader or follower *does* must be part of an ongoing conversation. Integration of our leading and our led selves is rooted for us in Biblical principles and images, but we need to continually apply that, interpret that, for our changing contexts.

We find useful J. Robert Clinton's definition in his book, *The Making of a Leader* (NavPress, 1988, page 14): "Leadership is a dynamic process in which a man or woman with God-given capacity influences a specific group of God's people toward His purposes for the group." Aubrey Malphurs offers a helpful modification of this definition in his book *Being Leaders* (Baker Books, 2003, page 10): "A Christian leader is a Christ-following servant of character, credibility, and capabilities, who is able to influence people in a particular context to pursue

their God-given direction.” In a greater sense, however, we believe servant leadership is as much about the projection of certain images that will appeal to followers. This is the approach we think complements the definitions offered by Clinton and Malphurs. We submit the following definition and images that we believe model the teachings of Scripture and embody what we mean by servant leadership at Lincoln. We understand that the concept of servant leader is not unique to Christianity, nor are we alone in emphasizing it. To help clarify our usage of this concept in our context, we insert the word “Christian” in the definition and images provided in the box below, which describes what we mean by servant leadership.

### ***Servant Leadership at Lincoln***

Christian servant leaders are those who humbly follow the call of God, the life of Christ, and the leading of the Holy Spirit to serve others, using their own gifts to meet others’ needs and empower others to serve both God and people. Servant leaders are characterized by the following seven images:

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| <i>Shepherd</i>   | Christian servant leaders <i>care for people sacrificially</i> , guiding them and nurturing them as needed out of love and concern.                         |
| <i>Shaper</i>     | Christian servant leaders <i>influence others appropriately</i> through example and exhortation so that God is honored.                                     |
| <i>Steward</i>    | Christian servant leaders <i>exercise their gifts responsibly</i> in order to help others exercise their God-given gifts.                                   |
| <i>Strategist</i> | Christian servant leaders <i>mobilize others strategically</i> in ways that help achieve shared vision, values, and goals.                                  |
| <i>Seer</i>       | Christian servant leaders <i>watch the world perceptively</i> to help others make appropriate application of God's will in changing cultural circumstances. |
| <i>Synergist</i>  | Christian servant leaders <i>work together creatively</i> to energize people to work toward a common goal.  |
| <i>Sage</i>       | Christian servant leaders <i>live wisely and share well God's wisdom</i> so that others will also live wisely and share well God's wisdom.                  |

We believe that the definition and images offered above will aid us as educators and our students as learners in our mutual quest to offer a dynamic, not static, view of servant leadership. Together, Lincoln’s staff and students are on a pilgrimage that emphasizes the exhilarating partnership that exists between Christian leaders and followers. Furthermore, both the right followers and the right goal must be right for each leader and for the contextual moment. Servant leaders know that servant leadership must differ from situation to situation; it is not a single thing. Servant leaders are shaped by the very circumstances in which they must shape others’ actions, so that God’s will is done. No one, after all, can be a leader without followers, and no one can be a leader if the times are not interpreted correctly. Only the vital interplay of wills between leaders and followers and an awareness of the times can direct them both toward a goal.