Steward Leadership: Characteristics of the Steward Leader in Christian Nonprofit Organizations

[Thesis Notice]

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policies and practices become stained-glass ceilings which are yet to be completely smashed in both secular and religious organizations. The clergy has been known to openly reject women, and whereas a societal voice invites them to participate in organizational functions and become leaders, an invisible patriarchal force combined with a formidable religious controversial force wrestles their leadership. This study explored the lived experience of leadership for female pastors in religious organizations. Its purpose is to provide a deeper and fuller understanding of that phenomenon. A qualitative methodological approach based on Moustakas’ (1994) transcendental phenomenology guided the study. Nine Seventh-day Adventist (SDA) pastors, between the ages of 25 and 59 and holding leadership positions for 6 to 20 years, participated in the study. Data collection involved direct observation and individual interviews comprising open-ended guiding questions. The results suggest a shared experience marked by themes of Pastoral Significance, Call to Leadership, Gender, Youth Connection, Challenges and Issues, Sexism and Racism, Awareness and Acceptance, Cognitive Dissonance, and Leadership Style. Struggle and sacrifice are distinct constituents of the results. There is noted struggle with a “Divine Call” that is followed by personal sacrifice. Response to the Call precipitates movement from struggle and sacrifice to peace and joy, and to contentment and self-actualization in the face of denominational rejection, cognitive dissonance, and collective social distance that become structured impediments to leadership emergence and effectiveness. These structural impediments bear implications for leadership in the SDA denominational hierarchy as well as for female pastoral leadership. Recommendations for future research include a direct extension to the current study for a focus on the responses of single and married women to female pastoral leadership.


A recent and minimally researched model of leadership centered in the role of the steward offers potential for a focused and expedient model for leadership of Christian nonprofit organizations. The purpose of this research is to add knowledge to nonprofit leadership by defining the primary characteristics of leadership that is focused around the role of the steward. It secondarily describes the extent of awareness and implementation of steward leader characteristics among leaders of Christian nonprofit organizations. This study researches the characteristics of the steward leader through two major phases. The first phase of research involves the exegetical study of the history and characteristics of the historical steward as revealed in the ancient documents of the classical Greco-Roman and biblical steward. This study results in the development of a preliminary typology of historic steward leader characteristics. Phase Two of the research refines the characteristics of the steward leader by conducting field research using surveys and in-depth interviews with contemporary leaders of Christian nonprofit organizations. The preliminary characteristics of the steward leader derived in Phase One were presented to contemporary Christian nonprofit leaders through a quantitative survey to confirm a typology of contemporary steward leader characteristics and to pre-qualify participants for in-
depth interviews. The survey also functioned to assess the extent to which leaders formulated their leadership role through such characteristics. Ten of the survey participants who self-identified their personal leadership style as steward leadership were chosen to participate in in-depth qualitative interviews. The interviews engaged the leaders more deeply in the subject, sought to elicit their understanding, perceptions, and attitudes about steward leadership, and further refined a typology of steward leader characteristics. The research confirms that a primary typology of distinctive leadership characteristics exists among senior leaders of Christian nonprofit organizations who visualize and demonstrate their role as stewards.