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## Beyond the Barriers of Discipline and Culture

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## EDITORIAL

# BEYOND THE BARRIERS OF DISCIPLINES AND CULTURE

I travel a lot. This has given me many opportunities for surprises. It is amazing to see the many different ways in which humans have invented living and communicating. Languages seem to have their own hum and rhyme, accompanied by body language used to underscore meaning. The first time I experienced an African welcome gesture I was very unprepared. There was the wonderful welcoming smile, handshake, and embrace. But when my welcoming host, who was a few years older than I, insisted on carrying my heavy suitcase up the steps to my room, I have to admit that I was embarrassed. It did not feel right to let an older gentleman do the heavy lifting for me. It took me awhile before I could truly experience this act of servant leadership and gracefully accept the local protocol of hospitality. It reminded me of the tension in the Upper Room when Jesus took off his clothes to wash his disciples' feet and thus seriously disrupted Peter's sense of appropriateness in the face of the difference between master and disciple.

Culture sometimes prevents us from appreciating the very gifts offered to us, at least at first. In one place I learned a dimension of friendship that my culture does not allow me to experience easily. It happened when I was teaching Leadership Development to teachers and administrators of religious organizations in India. The first thing I noticed was their eagerness to learn in the classroom and their desire to share the beauty of their city and cultural sites with me. I enjoyed both, the classroom and the time outside the classroom. But I was unprepared for a gesture of friendship which men do not commonly practice in my country: men holding hands with men. Every time I walked with my students on campus, one of them would reach for my hand. I had to learn that this was perfectly acceptable in their context, even though it wasn't in mine.

If you have traveled to other countries and cultures, you probably have

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your own well of stories to tell of amazing encounters and gifts received through gestures of grace not always recognized easily. Unfortunately, culture not only connects us, it also divides us in ways that can be more profound than we care to admit. This is also true of the culture of academic disciplines.

I still remember when one of the most exciting books about servant leadership hit the market in 2014. That amazing tome, edited by Skip Bell, carried the simple title *Servants and Friends: A Biblical Theology of Leadership*. Apart from the paradox of the title, which connects the idea of servant with friend, the book also contained an interesting divide that illustrated why it has been difficult for many years to start a meaningful conversation about spiritual leadership outside the seminary classroom. On the one hand, this edited volume assembled some of the most insightful collections of Old and New Testament thinking about servant leadership. In addition, it also contained solid contributions from scholars of ministry. But as I started to analyze the different chapters, I made a discovery which surprised me. Both groups of scholars quoted the Scriptures liberally. However, the theologians quoted predominantly other theologians with little input from leadership scholars, and the ministry and leadership experts often cited social science scholars with very little input from theologians. In other words, with few exceptions, each scholar stuck to their own guild. While they had plenty to say about the leadership texts of the Bible, it was almost as if the protocol of their own discipline prevented real dialogue with the “other side” of the scholarly universe.

This reality is of course nothing new. In fact, many would argue that this is the way it should be, until they discover that leadership scholars have now reinvented spiritual leadership—and without the benefit of genuine interdisciplinary dialogue. In fact, after a slow start in the 1990s, servant leadership theory has become one of the latest social science attempts to conceptualize leadership for organizational contexts (Fairholm, 1996; Fry, 2003, 2008; Fry, L., & Cohen, M., 2009; Fry, L., Hannah, S., Noel, M., & Walumbwa, F., 2011). What this means is that we now have a theory of spiritual leadership that was not born in the seminary, but in the halls of secular leadership thinking concerned about the well-being of ordinary people in ordinary organizations. And it seems to have a similar trajectory as servant leadership theory which was also born in the mind of a non-theologian, Robert Greenleaf, a leadership philosopher at AT&T.

The *Journal of Applied Christian Leadership* lives in this tension between theological and secular thinking about leadership. It seeks to create a conversation beyond the barriers of disciplines and culture in order to enable Christian leaders to become more effective servant leaders. Spiritual

leadership is a perfect example of the need for dialogue between disciplines in order to address the growing restlessness among leaders regarding the inability of leadership thinking to help develop better leadership in our organizations, communities, and in our society. We present this issue in the spirit of dialogue and exploration.

To get us started, Alex Sosler, a Baptist pastor, reflects about the way Jesus used the ordinary context of life to grow the ability for extraordinary sacrifice. Then Petr Cincala, Director of the Institute of Church Ministry, interviews Jon Dybdahl, the President Emeritus of Walla Walla University and author of the book, *Hunger: Satisfying the Longing Longing of Your Soul*, focusing on the spiritual life of Christian leaders. Students at Andrews remember his seminars on Christian spirituality as “islands of peace” in the midst of the pressures of seminary life.

Sigve Tonstad’s article on “Transparency in Leadership” is one example of theological thinking at its best that deserves a deeper dialogue with leadership scholars. In his article, Tonstad makes the startling observation that the apocalypse is not a book meant to confuse, conceal, or frighten us—as in the popular understanding of the word—but a book to make God’s system of governance transparent as He deals with the politics of deception in a cosmic war. This article was originally published as a chapter in the above-mentioned book, *Servants & Friends: A Biblical Theology of Leadership* (Bell, 2014).

Leadership is always a dynamic phenomenon often involving the need to fit into multiple roles. Nowhere is this more evident than in the lifecycle of a new church plant which is the focus of the case study, “Creating a Spiritual Learning Space.” In this article Erich Baumgartner, Senior Editor of *JACL*, and Andres Flores, founding Pastor of Epic Church in Chicago, take a look at the changing leadership roles experienced by a church planter over the lifespan of a church plant. Their insights should prove helpful to regional leaders of denominations with connectional systems and regional church governments.

Spiritual leadership and organizational knowledge processes may not strike you as obvious cousins until you read Lorena Martinez Soto’s research report of WHOLEGRAIN, a Columbian food factory run by a Christian organization. Next, Morris Thompson, a professor at Washington Adventist University, explores the role of accountable relationships for the development of spiritual leaders in “The Need for Spiritual Leadership.”

Finally, Boubakar Sanou, a Professor of Mission at Andrews University, enters the dialogue about a problem which can no longer be ignored: the relationship between spiritual giftedness and God’s calling to ministry beyond gender stereotypes.

This issue brings together contributions from social scientists, theologians,

and leadership practitioners who wrestle with how to live out the implications of our Christian commitments in our roles as leaders. We hope that this issue will find its way not only into your library but also into your learning space, where you allow God to challenge you to turn new thinking into new practice.

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