

Thinking of Myself as Your Servant is a Bad Idea:

Mennonite Education & the Problem of the Servant Leadership Paradigm

Malinda Elizabeth Berry, PhD

Introduction

In 1970, retired a American Telephone and Telegraph (AT&T) corporate manager and convinced Quaker published an essay intended to respond to two societal challenges. The first had been posed by the essayist's sociology professor in a 1926 lecture:

“There is a new problem in our country. We are becoming a nation that is dominated by large institutions—churches, businesses, governments, labor unions, universities—and these big institutions are not serving us well. I hope that all of you will be concerned about this. Now you can do as I do, stand outside and criticize, bring pressure if you can, write and argue about it. All of this may do some good. But nothing of substance will happen unless there are people inside these institutions who are able to (and want to) lead them into better performance for the public good. Some of you ought to make careers inside those big institutions and become a force for good—from the inside.”¹

The second came from the essayist's own reaction and response to the student movements of the 1960s as he watched “distinguished institutions show their fragility and crumble, to search for an understanding of what happened to them..., and to try to help heal their wounds.”² The essayist was Robert K. Greenleaf (1904–1990) and the term he gave his topic, servant leadership, is a buzzword on many Mennonite-affiliated school and organizational campuses.

My own introduction to servant leadership came from a presentation I heard as a student at then Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminary in the late nineties. A member of the staff of either the Oakwood Academy or the Greenleaf Center for Servant Leadership. In either case, my sense of servant leadership is linked to Robert K. Greenleaf, and I have been and remain puzzled that our references to and reliance on servant leadership in Anabaptist-Mennonite pedagogy and curricula fail to include robust engagement with either Greenleaf's theories or the thought leaders who have taken up the mantle of his work through the Robert K. Greenleaf Center for Servant Leadership. Certainly, there are notable exceptions.³ The critique I am raising here is that owing to a tendency among “internal churchly scholars” to be intellectually pragmatic, we assume stances, utilize ideas, and employ language that are best-suited to advancing our arguments.⁴ To speak metaphorically, we are more interested with the taste of a piece of fruit than we are concerned with the particular tree, orchard, or agricultural practices that produced the thing we are consuming. A strength of this pattern is that our focus

is on immediate intelligibility — we undertake analysis and synthesis with the intention of simplifying complex ideas. A weakness of this pattern is that we downplay or even dismiss how a chosen perspective fits into larger conversations that intersect with or even counter the view we are advocating. Servant leadership is a significant case in point.

Given my methodological critique of Mennonite appropriations of servant leadership, this essay outlines a corrective proposal: To have integrity, we Mennonite students, teachers, administrators, pastors, and congregants would do well to affirm and practice the pillars of servant leadership embedded in a contemporary articulation of the priesthood of all believers. Such a commitment could help us avoid the pitfalls of practicing anemic, misappropriated servant leadership, an evaluation we can make when we actually engage literature from the Robert K. Greenleaf Center for Servant Leadership. Stated another way, the problem that I am identifying and speaking to is the gap between our espoused commitment to servant leadership and the lack of evidence that we adhere to its basic principles in our denominationally-affiliated organizations and institutions. Thus, this essay brings together several strands of Mennonite educational endeavors including: the prevalence of servant leadership language in the mission statements, core values, and another identity documents of Mennonite educational and denominational organizations; leadership education in settings that range from classrooms and board rooms to congregations and area conferences; and the organizational and pedagogical cultures of Mennonite educational processes and denominational structures.

What Servant Leadership Is and Is Not

While he coined the term, Greenleaf was always clear that servant leadership was his way of drawing together two seemingly opposing roles that have been pillars of Western societies: servant and leader. As Greenleaf advocates James Sipe and Don Frick explain, while “the notion of leading by serving has been around for several millennia in the teachings of every major religious tradition,” Greenleaf’s innovation was “to describe [leading by serving] as a personal journey *and* a management strategy, for both the public realm and the private sector.”⁵ So, at the most basic level, servant leadership is a management strategy.

It does not take long, when paging through Greenleaf’s classic *Servant Leadership: A Journey into the Nature of Legitimate Power and Greatness*, to discover that servant leadership is also a philosophy that, to use his phrase above, takes adherents on a personal journey. Don Frick, Greenleaf’s biographer, argues that the journey Greenleaf found himself on involved

three interwoven identities: servant, seeker, and leader; each identity having a particular definition and function within Greenleaf's servant leadership philosophy. First, "a servant is not a 'service provider,' a martyr or a slave, but one who consciously nurtures the mature growth of self, other people, institutions, and communities. This is done in response to the deepest guidance of spirit, not for personal grandiosity. Servanthood is a function of motive, identity and right action." Second, "a true seeker is open to experience from all quarters and follows a path without always knowing the destination." Third,

an authentic leader is one who chooses to serve, and serves first, and then chooses to lead. This kind of leader—a servant-leader—employs reflection, listening, persuasion, foresight, and [political acumen] to act ethically and "go out ahead and show the way." A servant-leader may operate quietly or publicly, but his or her title—President or CEO—is not the point. The janitor of a school may be a more powerful servant-leader to students than the principal.⁶

In *Servant Leadership*, Greenleaf enumerates a variety of sites (i.e., executive leadership, boards of trustees, small businesses, liberal arts curricula, contemporary prophets/seekers, etc.) where he believes his strategy *and* philosophy can alleviate challenges to leadership in the post-1960s, "anti-leader" age. While the sites explored in Greenleaf's writings begin with the individual who serves first and leads second, he focuses his essays on three types of institutions—churches, universities, and businesses—because he believes they are the most influential in (re)building a good society. In the case of the United States, Greenleaf sees a good society that has fallen apart and holds that "if a better society is to be built, one that is more just and more loving, one that provides greater creative opportunity for its people, then the most open course is to *raise both the capacity to serve and the very performance as servant* of existing major institutions by new regenerative forces operating within them."⁷ If we listen, we can hear Greenleaf's Quakerism asserting itself in his vision of a twentieth-century peaceable kingdom.

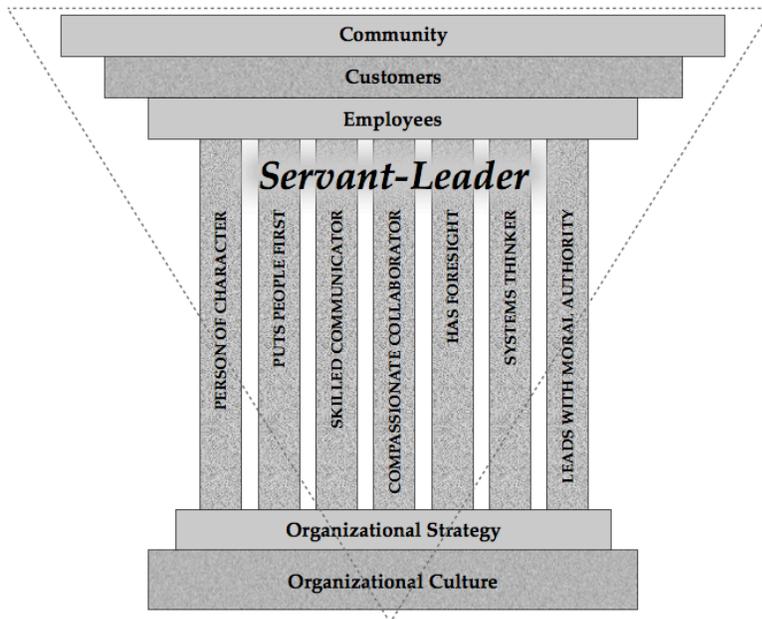
But what is the substantive content and "how-to" of this vision where a society's institutions are serving the people, and these institutions are being led by being people who are servants? Admittedly, Sipe and Frick write, "Greenleaf did not provide a universal checklist or a formula for becoming a Servant-Leader. He wanted each person and organization to apply the principles and values in ways that made sense to them."⁸ At the same time, he did describe three concerns that the servant leadership paradigm's content is meant to directly address:

1. for people who focus their attention on social problems by analyzing them as products of systems, ideologies, and movements, servant leadership offers a reframing of these dynamics to help us discover the power individuals can have as change-agents within these systems
2. for everyday people who gravitate toward serving and tend to “deny wholeness and creative fulfillment,” servant leadership calls them to risk their own significance by stepping into more formal roles of leadership
3. for cultures that believe leaders are born not made, servant leadership challenges the two-part assumption that a) leadership educational is only for those natural-born leaders and b) the best leaders are those who have received the “right” education

From this conceptual location, Sipe and Frick have sought to “operationalize” Greenleaf’s basic teachings beginning with his belief that servant leadership is a teachable and measurable skill set.

In its operationalized form that is based on Greenleaf’s writings and teachings, servant leadership has seven pillars that are embedded in Sipe and Frick’s definition of servant-leaders: “a Servant-Leader is a *person of character who puts people first. He or she is a skilled communicator, a compassionate collaborator who has foresight, is a systems thinker, and leads with moral authority*” (Fig. 1).⁹ Sipe and Frick note the resonance between Divine Wisdom who has built her house with seven hewn pillars (Proverbs 9:1) with the seven “qualities of character” that make a leader a servant-leader; this resonance suggests to me that wisdom is the primary virtue of Greenleaf’s paradigm. “The Seven Pillars are mounted on a solid foundation of organizational culture and strategy. Together, they support and sustain the organization’s employees, its customers, clients and stakeholders, and ultimately, the larger community,” Sipe and Frick explain. Furthermore, servant leadership views these components (the organization, its culture, strategy, servant-leaders, employees, customers, and community) as an inverted pyramid of sorts, “honoring Greenleaf’s notion that the authoritarian, top-down model of organizational leadership is upended with a Servant-Leader at the helm” because “Greenleaf believed that the designated leaders in an organization—who are smaller in number—should support and serve the greater numbers—those who are ‘doing the work.’”¹⁰ Each of servant leadership’s pillars is comprised of three leadership traits or competencies (Fig. 2). The collection of skills serve two purposes. First they create the profile of effective servant-leaders because “whenever any traits

are present in adequate measure, and as they accumulate, they serve to enrich and fortify the Servant-Leader and those who surround him or her.” And second, the skills can make up the evaluation rubric to assess servant-leaders’ performance in their roles.¹¹ These pillars



incorporate Larry Spears’ ten characteristics of servant-leaders (Spears is another, prominent Greenleaf student and servant leadership advocate):

- 4. *listening* deeply to what is said and unsaid by one’s self and others
- 5. practicing *empathy* as the act of accepting and recognizing what is unique in others
- 6. *healing* as an expression of transformation and integration

Figure 1. The Seven Pillars of Servant Leadership leading to wholeness

- 7. fostering self- and other-*awareness*
- 8. using authority to *persuade* and build consensus rather than coerce and manipulate
- 9. nurturing capacity for *conceptualization* along with monitoring day-to-day activities
- 10. working from a place of *foresight* (being able to learn from the past, apply those lessons to the present, and anticipate possible consequences of decisions made in the present for the future)
- 11. *stewardship* (holding something in trust for others) practiced through one’s leadership role namely by serving others both inside and outside and organization or institution
- 12. *commitment to the growth of people* through personal and professional development programs, involving employees in decision-making processes, and assisting employees with finding other work when they will lose their jobs
- 13. *building community* in the workplace to challenge the trend of large institutions and corporations enslaving us rather than serving our needs¹²

| Pillar | Leadership Traits/Competencies |
|--------|--------------------------------|
|--------|--------------------------------|

| | |
|-------------------------------|--|
| 1. Person of Character | Makes insightful, ethical, and principle-centered decisions. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • maintains integrity • demonstrates humility • serves a higher purpose |
| 2. Puts People First | Helps others meet their highest priority development needs. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • displays a servant's heart • is mentor-minded • shows care and concern |
| 3. Skilled Communicator | Listens earnestly and speaks effectively. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • demonstrates empathy • invites feedback • communicates persuasively |
| 4. Compassionate Collaborator | Strengthens relationships, supports diversity, and creates a sense of belonging. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • expresses appreciation • builds teams and communities • negotiates conflict |
| 5. Has Foresight | Imagines possibilities, anticipates the future, and proceeds with clarity of purpose. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • visionary • displays creativity • takes courageous and decisive action |
| 6. Systems Thinker | Thinks and acts strategically, leads change effectively, and balances the whole with the sum of its parts. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • comfortable with complexity • demonstrates adaptability • considers the "greater good" |
| 7. Leads with Moral Authority | Worthy of respect, inspires trust and confidence, and establishes quality standards for performance. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • accepts and delegates responsibility • shares power and control • creates a culture of accountability |

Figure 2. Leadership Traits and Competencies of Servant-Leaders

To summarize the discussion so far, when we look to the body of literature about servant leadership developed by Greenleaf and carried on through the work of people affiliated with the Greenleaf Center, we see that it is, first and foremost, a Quaker-influenced utilitarian management strategy that considers the most effective leaders to be those who serve first and lead second. In its indigenous societal context of the United States, Servant leadership is also an existentialist-oriented philosophical stance toward the 1960s' anti-establishment politics that left many people cynical about legitimate power. Because servant leadership rejects the maxim

“leaders are born, not made,” it is also an approach to leadership education and organizational ethics that stands in stark contrast to corporate and organizational cultures “that practice a modern form of Darwinian capitalism...[populated by] adrenaline-driven workers who must stay wired to challenges of the global economy...[and] disciples of the latest theories of leadership that use war, sports, and machines as their underlying metaphors.”¹³ Thus, we can also see that servant leadership is a strategy and philosophy oriented toward the social good holding that our society is healthier when we focus on human growth and development in communal terms rather than hierarchical ones.

We can also begin to describe servant leadership in negative terms; that is, to say what it is not. Here are three negative observations. First, service and servanthood, as defined within the servant leadership paradigm, are not borne of self-abnegating self-sacrifice which are the hallmarks of most definitions of Christian service. Greenleaf paints a picture of service as a description of work that involves helping others accomplish a task while simultaneously being enriched and transformed by that interaction and relationship. Second, the Greenleaf tradition of servant leadership is neither hierarchical nor egalitarian, and point that I will return to in more detail below. Third, servant leadership is also not, strictly speaking, a religious-based concept. For example, where most types of Christian ethics begin by making Jesus Christ normative for ethics, servant leadership makes the servant-leader normative for organizational ethics. This makes it possible to combine the two types of ethics so that Jesus Christ becomes the normative and prototypical Servant-Leader, but it is also possible to practice the ethics of servant leadership without any normative theological principle. These three, negative summary statements are critical because this is where I believe there is greatest slippage in Mennonite appropriations of servant leadership.

Mennonite Misappropriations of Servant Leadership

In this next section of this essay I will draw upon personal, critical reflections about the Mennonite educational system operated by Mennonite Church USA. My most direct experience is with Bethany Christian Schools (high school diploma, past board member), Goshen College (Bachelor of Arts, former visiting scholar), and Anabaptist Mennonite Biblical Seminary (MA: Peace Studies, current assistant professor) where I received eleven years of schooling and have completed a combined five years of teaching. Through my personal relationships, professional collaborations, and denominational leadership, I have broad exposure to and working

knowledge of this system that includes Mennonite Education Agency, Mennonite Early Childhood Network, Mennonite Schools Council (includes early childhood through grade twelve), Hispanic Pastoral Leadership Education (undergraduate- and graduate-level theological education), colleges and universities (Bethel College, Bluffton University, Goshen College, Eastern Mennonite University, and Hesston College), and seminaries (Anabaptist Mennonite Biblical Seminary and Eastern Mennonite Seminary).¹⁴ I offer these “credentials” to both locate myself within the system and be transparent about the fact that I am an insider offering internal critique. That is, I hope you read my criticisms as constructive and interested in bringing greater integrity to how we Mennonites use servant leadership. My vision is for us—as individuals and organizations—to move from misappropriation of servant leadership to an authentic interpretation, embrace, and implementation of its tenets because I believe that in addition to offering improved organizational coherence its authenticity offers fertile grounding for a healthy articulation of the priesthood of all believers allowing us to integrate our faith in God with our hope that the things we do and the way we do them make a meaningful contribution to God’s Great *Shalom*.¹⁵

While servant leadership is not invested in advancing particular set of religious norms, Greenleaf did operate and develop servant leadership within a set of theological and ethical commitments based in the Historical Peace Church tradition. Sipe writes, “A book could be written on the influence of Quaker thought and practice on Robert Greenleaf’s corporate work and servant writings,” and it is curious that one has not yet been penned.¹⁶ As a convinced Quaker, Greenleaf, found a great deal of inspiration in the lives of early Quakers (sometimes called “Seekers”) like George Fox and John Woolman. As their ideas developed into contemporary Meetings, especially of the unprogrammed type, Greenleaf found important spiritual ideas and theological commitments that served as practices that he could translate into meaningful managerial strategies:

In the Quaker practice of consensus, Greenleaf found a proven way of making decisions that honored all voices and used some of his favorite strategies: silence, listening, and a reliance on spirit as expressed through individual insight. He also learned about the critical role of the [congregational] chair—called the Clerk [of the Meeting] by Quakers—who makes consensus work. A Clerk is a situational leader, no better or worse than anyone else. He or she is a *primus inter pares*—a first among equals—not a final arbiter.¹⁷

So, it is also curious that servant leadership's roots in a theological tradition that shares kinship with Anabaptism has not been a significant part of the rationale used by Mennonites to advocate for its place in our organizational and leadership culture. In this background, what begins to come to the foreground are the connections between the neither-hierarchical-nor-egalitarian and quality of servant leadership and Greenleaf's particular Christian commitments that helped him conceive of the servant-leader.

It is difficult to identify the precise moment in which language of servant leadership entered Mennonite organizational consciousness.¹⁸ I suspect that we became aware of this philosophy through managerial/administrative channels rather than scholarly ones. In his essay titled "Tracing the Past, Present, and Future of Servant-Leadership" Larry Spears describes the growing impact of servant leadership across organizational and institutional sectors in six different ways. Several of these sectors intersect directly with values and educational practices in Mennonite schools deepening my suspicion that it has been through administrative channels that servant leadership has found its primary champions. First is the institutional model observable where organizations move from hierarchical patterns to servant leadership with the best examples coming from industry when a company decides that profit is no longer the primary reason for being in business. Second is trustee education, particularly in the not-for-profit sector, that focuses the board work on questions like "Whom do you serve?" and "For what purpose?" in order to orient trustees' consciousness toward that of the servant-leader. Third, community leadership programs, already philosophically oriented toward a notion of the common good, have found servant leadership a useful model for cultivating a *sense of community* within organizations that want to *serve their communities*. Fourth are service-learning programs, a type of experiential learning that seeks to integrate servant leadership with kinesthetic learning. Many of these programs are affiliated with the National Society for Experiential Education. Fifth, leadership education, in its many and varied types has made servant leadership a buzz phrase from college courses to corporate training programs. Spears explains many leadership consultants have become advocates of servant leadership as a complimentary framework that can enhance their models. Sixth, similar to leadership education, the work of personal transformation refers to many different things; in this case, when servant leadership's focus is turned to the internal life of the servant-leader, its content

can provide “seekers” with wisdom and insight about how we might expand human potential and improve our collective quality of life.¹⁹

Being pragmatic, we Mennonites, having been introduced to servant leadership as a leadership strategy and because of our well-documented commitment to service, have taken Greenleaf’s terminology and combined it with our communal narratives about faithful discipleship to the community to produce a pattern of misappropriation of servant leadership. There are two ways our misappropriation takes shape, and I believe both ways impoverish and distort Greenleaf’s philosophy and can set us up for organizational failures that make servant leadership look like the problem. I hope that my descriptions of misappropriation patterns are recognizable and read as political/editorial cartoons, not ridiculing caricatures.

I think of the first type of misappropriation as a problem of Mennonite conventional wisdom. Here I am describing a view that regards terms like servant-leader and servant leadership simply as descriptions of cultural norms that have guided Mennonite leaders’ sometimes quiet, sometimes charismatic approaches to building organizations and institutions. About a dozen years ago, while I was a graduate student, I had a conversation with a faculty member at a Mennonite college/university who, like me had been born into a family committed to Mennonite organizations and institutions. We were talking about the qualities of a good leader and my conversant was an advocate for Mennonite conventional wisdom: when someone wants to be in charge, we should be suspicious because the best leaders are those who are most reluctant. This was neither the first nor the last time I have heard this sentiment voiced; it encapsulates what some take to be the essence of servant leadership. Whatever theorizing or philosophizing might be underneath these terms is irrelevant because the immediate judgment of the terminology’s usefulness as a label for something we think, know, and/or do is what matters. The distortion here is the idea that servant-leaders would rather be serving than leading, and this reluctance becomes a sign of trustworthiness.²⁰ Another kind of distortion comes from our habit of recognizing servant-leaders in retrospect rather than intentionally training people to be servant-leaders according to servant leadership’s pillars and characteristics.

The second type of misappropriation I refer to as a problem of hermeneutics. Instead of making ourselves students of Greenleaf to gain a critical and technical understanding of servant leadership we assume that knowledge of Jesus through the New Testament is the basis of

servant leadership. (This hermeneutical misstep operates within our tradition of biblicism and discipleship, but it is poor intellectual reasoning.) Having made this misstep, our use of servant leadership slips further as we look to biblical and other religious role models to make observations about the qualities of servant-leaders that conform to the classic Mennonite definition of service without referencing leadership: “living for others rather than self.”²¹ While these icons may indeed be examples of servant-leaders in the Greenleaf sense, our hermeneutics focus on their Christ-likeness and the way their lives manifest virtues like self-sacrifice, humility, kindness, faithfulness, and the peaceable pursuit God’s justice. Within this hermeneutical framework, we do not hail Jesus as a servant-leader (let alone leader), we hail him as a servant, period. This second misstep reifies our anti-leader, conflict avoidant biases and mistakenly regards the Christ-like servant as a servant-leader. Here the distortions include not only a truncated understanding of servant leadership, but of a safe, comfortable, and romanticized portrait of Jesus because the Christ-like servant image holds at bay christological questions such as: Where is the angry Jesus? The Jesus who is confronting the powers? The revolutionary Jesus who is turning the world upside-down?

Along with these misappropriations, and perhaps because of them, I have noticed (and participated in) a cynical backlash against servant leadership because it keeps legitimate leaders from leading by telling them that need to be humble, low-key servants, not strong, visible, decisive, public figures. Indeed, my original intention with this paper had been, in all of my intellectual snobbery, to eviscerate servant leadership. Like others, I have watched as people in our denomination have struggled to live into and up to the vision of institutions and leaders as servants.

However, the more I read and researched, the more I realized that Greenleaf’s ideas were and are not the problem. Servant leadership is, as the subtitle of Greenleaf’s book puts it, is “a journey into the nature of legitimate power and greatness.” He argues that servant-leading institutions are not run by a “single chief” but have an optimal balance of people with “operating talent” (administrators who focus on day-to-day tasks) and those with “conceptual talent” (leaders who go out ahead and show the way). Noting that these talents are not mutually exclusive, Greenleaf writes,

Both of these talents, in balance and rightly placed, are required for sustained high level performance in any large institution. By *optimal balance between the two* is meant a

relationship in which both conceptualized and operator understand, respect, and depend on one another, and in which neither dominates the other. In a large institution the council of equals with a *primus inter pares* serves best when it is predominately conceptual. *Whoever in the council has the greatest team-building ability should be primus, even though someone else may have a higher-sounding formal title.*²²

Greenleaf was, in many ways, trying to speak directly to our (collective and individual) ambivalence about exercising power and enacting authority both nonviolently and without undermining our ourselves. To have integrity, we must acknowledge that we do not practice servant leadership to this degree.

While I no longer want to get rid of servant-leader language, I *do* want to separate it from the toxic, ethnocentrism Mennonite educational and organizational patterns often and unintentionally replicate. We have ideas, spoken and unspoken, about what we expect Mennonite organizations to be like, to do or not do. When those expectations go unmet, we begin to judge leaders and/or organizations as “not real Mennonites.” While such patterns are part of denominational boundary maintenance, they tend to create organizational culture that reward passive-aggression behaviors and habits. By giving in to repressed anger around all of our judging, which leads to sideways aggression in our organizational systems, we create a climate where we are unable to hold together “servant” and “leader,” trapping ourselves in the pit of self-abnegating servanthood (loving neighbor more than self, giving and helping out of resentful obligation rather than commitment to *shalom*, etc.).

Together these patterns contribute to an ethos where many Mennonites agree: we need good leaders. But there is very little agreement about how we find, nurture, and benefit from quality leadership. We may say we value servant leadership, but if our working definitions of the term are not shaped by Greenleaf and his students, then we will remain confounded about leadership.

Good Ethics Make Good Organizations

If servant leadership is something so specific and we Mennonites have been rather negligent in our way of talking about it, why bother with it? I have already suggested that one reason to bother with servant leadership is because of Greenleaf’s and Quakerism’s theological kinship with Anabaptists; all share a radical interpretation of the priesthood of all believers. To make my case, I want to introduce a set of practices from the fields of organizational communication and organizational ethics that establish norms that correspond to servant

leadership and process practices that I believe aid us in “re-gospeling” and reconstructing the priesthood of all believers so that this idea comes alive and resounds with good news in our time and place as Anabaptist Mennonites.

In the past fifteen to twenty years, we have seen a good deal of organizational crisis, scandal, and ingenuity. Whether it is the rise of powerful social media companies, the emergence of people’s movements calling for racial justice or an end to fossil fuel dependence, the mismanagement leading to the global financial crisis, or the intractable conflicts splintering Christian denominations, there is a great deal for us to reflect on when we consider the many ethical dilemmas and leadership challenges that confront us both directly and indirectly. What makes leadership trustworthy? How do small groups of people become so powerful? Do the choices I make in my everyday living make a difference? When patterns of systemic injustices become undeniably clear, how does an entire society change? One way to make such big questions more manageable is to create criteria, expectations, or other lists of what we hope for; determine how to measure or assess the gap between institutional behavior and what we hope for; and then analyze the nature of the gap. To that end, Steve May has identified a list of six practices of ethical organizations to help students of organizational communications and organizational ethics—which I would argue that Mennonite leaders should be!—develop their “ethical agility.” Such agility can help us identify trends in ethical reasoning so that we might intervene as trends emerge, develop, and shape the organizations we participate in.²³

May’s list of six practices of ethical organizations takes into consideration the fact that “all organizations and their members must balance a variety of competing demands and conflicting values in determining how to negotiate a range of common ethical dilemmas such as justice versus mercy, individual versus community, cost versus quality, competition versus collaboration, flexibility versus structure, and long term versus short term, among others.”²⁴ While his list is both deductive and descriptive, I also present the practices as a vision for how Mennonite organizations and individuals can think about the difference servant leadership should make in how business is done. Ethical organizations, according to May, are places that foster and practice:

14. *alignment* of policies and procedures to ensure that what is said is what is done, keeping conversations about ethics alive and engaging

15. *dialogical communication* that creates a sense of “collective mindfulness” and both values and seeks out the perspective of all employees through active, interdependent dialogue
16. *participation* from both inside (through delegation of responsibility) and outside the organization (through responsive feedback) that creates organizational loyalty
17. *transparency* through governance, policies and procedures, and a mission that is both clear and visible that engender things like trust, respect, and fairness among all employees
18. *accountability* that manifests as a preferential option for action that inspires involvement, learning, taking responsibility, and embracing ethical dilemmas through problem-solving
19. *courage* exhibited when the organization has made mistakes, needs to respond to injustice, practice nonconformity when industry standards/laws/practices are unethical

When we take both Greenleaf and servant leadership seriously, we simultaneously create opportunities to move our organizational ethics beyond biblicism, narrow christological emphases, passive-aggression, and ethnocentric hierarchies that privilege/empower some and deprive/disempower others (based on things like family names, alma maters, congregational affiliation, and race) toward an organizationally savvy priesthood of all believers. My vision is for an environment that will purge us of toxic patterns. I see servant leadership—embedded in organizational design, actively taught, and routinely assessed—coupled with ethnorelativized process practices grounded in Anabaptist theological commitments as a radical way to meet this goal of purging the toxins from our system.²⁵

Priesthood of All Believers: A Servant-Leader in Every Chair

Too Many Cooks, Not Enough Priests

I remember sitting in Church History class at Bethany Christian High School and learning about the distinctive theological commitments of the sixteenth-century Anabaptists. Adult baptism and a refusal to take up the sword topped the list along with the priesthood of all believers or universal priesthood. What these It was not until I was my doctoral program that I realized that the priesthood of all believers was not a uniquely Anabaptist innovation of the Protestant Reformation. I do not say this to knock my teachers and professors, but to admit to a lack of ecumenical awareness. That is, in thinking that we Mennonites were the only Christians to talk about the priesthood of all believers, I failed to consider that there might be a variety of ways to understand the basic concept based on 1 Peter 2:9 and found throughout the Christian Church that all believers have some share in priestly duties. Indeed, I was quite surprised to

learn, as Marlin Miller argues, “Anabaptist writers in the sixteenth century rarely refer to the priesthood of all believers, although they have much to say in opposition to clericalism.”²⁶

For the Protestant reformers, ranging from Martin Luther and Menno Simons to John Wesley and John Calvin, this idea that all Christians, through baptism and Jesus Christ’s invitation, have some share in priestly work rejects the separation of the Christian community into the ordained, priestly class and the laity. Depending on the theological accent we place, the idea of a universal priesthood can lead to the elevation of all Christians to lives of holiness, the embrace of everyone’s ordinariness (including ordained leaders), or a combination of the two so that there is still particular authority afforded to ordained leaders to celebrate rituals, sacraments, and/or ordinances that laypeople do not have. Mennonite historical, biblical, and theological reflection on these issues has been all over the map, as Marlin Miller explains:

In the twentieth century some Mennonites and non-Mennonites have made passing references to “the priesthood of all believers” to characterize some aspect of an Anabaptist (or presumably Anabaptist) view of the church or Christian life. For some, it means that every Christian is a minister ([J. Howard] Kauffman/[Leland] Harder, [John Howard] Yoder). For some, it signifies a process of making decisions in the church ([Franklin] Littell, Yoder). For one, it refers to the believer’s access to God without the mediation of a priest and to being a channel of grace for other Christians ([Harold] Bender). For another, it represents the Radical Reformation’s rejection of dividing the church into clergy and laity ([George] Williams). So far, Mennonites have neither developed a common understanding nor elaborated a particular view of “the priesthood of all believers.”²⁷

In using the priesthood of all believers pragmatically, we have an easy way of explaining why we do what we do whether we are talking about ecclesiology, denominational organization, spirituality, or leadership education.

When I have heard the priesthood of all believers invoked among Mennonites, it is generally in reference to congregational leadership models that utilize some combination of decentralized authority, no formal pastor(s) or a part-time solo pastor, and heavy reliance on non-ordained/lay leadership, sometimes by design, sometimes by happenstance. (When the situation is one of happenstance, this seems to be an example of a pragmatic moment; when a congregation finds itself unable to pay a pastor full-time or experiences a protracted pastoral search process and laypeople must assume greater leadership responsibilities, the congregation says, “Hey, look at that—we’re practicing the priesthood of all believers!”) But again, from a servant leadership point of view, there is an uncomfortable amount of anemia in this

understanding of a universal priesthood. Consider Bender's description of this shared priesthood: "It means not only that no priest is necessary as a mediator between the human individual and God, so that every [person] has free access to God by repentance and faith in Christ, but also that all believers have a priestly office to perform for each other in that, in Christ, each can be a channel of God's grace to [the other] and indeed has a responsibility to be such."²⁸

When we read Bender with a robust understanding of servant leadership, we start to see in the priesthood of all believers what Greenleaf sees in his late twentieth-century take on a sixteenth-century idea. As he considers the role of the church in our society in both his original essay and in subsequent essay almost thirty years later, Greenleaf describes what he calls "the growing-edge church." This vision of church sees in itself a renewed institution that has "become a significant nurturing force, conceptualizer of a serving mission, value shaper, and moral sustainer of leaders everywhere."²⁹ As he laments the absence of any actual growing-edge churches, Greenleaf wonders: is the criteria unrealistic? Is there a lack of desire to be part of this kind of theological renewal? Or is it a case of needing to move obstacles? Answering the last question with a "yes," Greenleaf chides denominations and congregations for their readiness to hire consultants and fall prey to gimmicks that ultimately do not assist faith communities promote healing in the face of alienation. More than that, he continues, institutions, especially religious ones, rather than bowing to trends, need to accept the difficult task of "nurturing seekers" and serve humanity by helping us rebind ourselves to the cosmos.³⁰ How can this happen? By learning from what did not work for Luther and Fox as they rejected clericalism. In Greenleaf's reckoning, Luther failed to reconcile a sense of radical equality with ordained pastors; Quakers succeeded in achieving equality by becoming pastorless but, early on, had difficulty keeping their movement vibrant.

The first task of the growing edge church is to learn what neither [Martin] Luther nor [George] Fox knew: how to build a society of equals in which there is strong lay leadership in a trustee board with a [chairperson] functioning as *primus inter pares*, and with the pastor functioning as *primus inter pares* for the many who do the work of the church. Having accomplished this, the second task is to make of the church a powerful force to build leadership strength in those persons who have the opportunity to lead in other institutions, and give them constant support.³¹

In other words, the radicality of Greenleaf's philosophy is not only inspired by the priesthood of all believers, it requires one—congregational and denominational organization so deeply

owned and taken responsibility for by church folk that our bureaucratic politics originate from our leaders serving us rather than either being internal to the “higher ups” and the structures they work in or intractable conflict caused by confusion about who is serving whom.

Furthermore, accountability is multivalent so a college president, for example, is responsible to her administrative cabinet and her board of directors are responsible to her and she to them, but her pastor is also accountable to her—in the servant leadership priest of all believers, accountability is circular, not triangular.

To play on a well-known phrase, while there can be too many cooks in the kitchen, there can never be too many priests in the Church. When we say that all Christians are called to think of themselves as priests, that means that we expect each other to a) seek holiness, b) tend to our emotional and psychological health, c) strive toward spiritual maturity, d) nurture the life of the mind, e) act with compassion, and f) wrestle with God. There are other tasks, postures, and attitudes I could add to the list, but the point would be the same: the Church, indeed the world, can never have too many people doing this kind of work. Jesus’ parable about the Good Samaritan can be interpreted in many ways; in the context of this essay, I invoke this story to notice that the Samaritan man acted as a priest to the injured man. When we love ourselves we are able to set our egos aside and come to the aid of a stranger and thereby love that person as we love ourselves. By showing compassion to the other, the Samaritan demonstrated that he loved himself. This is part of the journey toward legitimate power and greatness.

Leaders in Every Chair: The Circle Way

The primary process practice that I advocate for here is a particular form of circle process known as PeerSpirit Circling and the circle way. Circle process (also referred to simply as “circle”) is a genre of process that has a variety of applications. Kay Pranis’s description of circle process is a useful one because it gives some cultural framing that helps explain circle’s appeal as a tool for seeking *shalom*. She writes, “Our ancestors gathered around a fire in a circle. Families gather around the kitchen table in a circle. Now, we are learning to gather in a circle as community to solve problems, support one another, and connect to one another.” Pranis’s expertise is in leading and training others to lead Peacemaking Circles designed for neighborhoods interested in restorative justice, schools wanting to address behavioral problems in non-retributive ways, workplaces where employees want to transform conflicts, and social service organizations that share a vision for creating organic support systems.³² Diversity circles

are another application of circle process to bring racially and ethnically diverse groups of people together to reflect on the systemic impact of racism in interpersonal ways. What circles have in common is basic posture that some issues are best addressed by gathering a community in the shape of a circle to invite participation that assumes a) there is wisdom available to the group that we cannot access on our own and b) the quality of our speaking and listening are deepened when we have structure and agreements in place.

PeerSpirit's approach to circle process employs features common to most circles (groups sit in the shape of a circle and utilize a talking piece) with some innovations that make the circle way particularly appealing to me as a Mennonite peace theologian. These innovations include understanding circle process as a blended process archetype, forming circles around a center, rotating leadership, and the principle that there is "a leader in every chair."

Christina Baldwin and Ann Linnea, the theorists and practitioners who developed the circle way, introduce two shapes that symbolize contrasting paradigms or archetypes of group process: the circle is collaboration and the triangle is hierarchy. They write, "To understand the power of circle as a collaborative conversation model and the kinds of insights that can pour into this group process, it is helpful to understand that when we circle up in a ring of chairs, we are activating an archetype." Circle's egalitarian archetypal energy is part of its draw, they maintain.³³ Triangle, with its hierarchical archetypal energy, "is useful for passing on information, giving directions, establishing chains of command, developing armies, developing workforces, organizing data, programming computer software, and mass-producing goods." However, the linear virtues of the triangle fail to connect us to the reality of interdependence. This is why Baldwin and Linnea suggest that "one way to look at the world today is to think about the triangle . . . as having overtaken its partnership with the circle."³⁴

Unlike most forms of circle process, the circle way is structured to keep the circle and the triangle together: "In symbolism, the circle and triangle are often found together. . . . The partnership of archetypes is the willingness to combine the best attributes of both social structures and to know when to call on each of their strengths and to experience their balance."³⁵ What the circle way seeks is a rebalanced partnership (Fig. 3). Baldwin and Linnea explain:

The circle way is a practice of reestablishing social partnerships and creating a world in which the best of collaboration informs and inspires the best of hierarchical leadership.

The chief needs a council that brings the voices of the village to his or her ear. The president needs a cabinet. The coach needs a team. The teacher needs students. The elders need children. And the meetings need to change.³⁶

The circle way's partnership of circular and triangular forms is precisely the same move servant leadership makes. In both modes, there is a commitment to make sure that no one is powerless.³⁷

One of the metaphors for PeerSpirit-type circles is the bicycle wheel. The components of a bicycle wheel include the rim, the hub, and spokes. The tire may be inflated, but if the spokes come loose or even fall out, then is it only a matter of time until the rim warps and the wheel collapses. How is circle process like a bike wheel? When we form ourselves into circle, we are also forming the circle's rim. The rim takes shape around a "center" which is like the hub of the bike wheel with each of us responsible for tending our spoke which is the connection we have to a) others on the rim, b) the reason for calling the circle together (called "intention"), and c) the center. If we are not able to sustain a strong connections to the circle's center Roq Gareau, who originally offered this metaphor, offers this vivid description of being in a circle:

"In circle, you activate your spoke. There's no hiding. The wheel depends on each spoke, each person, being energetically present. If I am saying one thing and being another, others can tell. When there is an energetic wobble in me, there is an energetic wobble in the circle—a wheel with a loose spoke cannot turn true. When there is strength in me, there is strength in the circle. I hold my place on the wheel, with the center as the source of strength, and offer myself as the source of balance."³⁸

Baldwin and Linnea characterize the circle's center—a visual focal point in the middle of the circle created by a candle, a vase of flowers, objects representing each person on the rim, etc.—as transpersonal space. Because it is "a place that belongs to everyone and to no one," the center helps us unlearn habits of conversation that can treat circles as spaces waiting to be filled with interpersonal stuff.

In the exchanges of interpersonal space, two or more speakers are perceived as playing verbal tennis: one speaks and serves the ball to the other; the other speaks and serves it back. The goal is to keep the exchange in play until someone wins the point or the volley is complete. We know how to engage in rewarding dialogues. We may need to reimagine how the center and circle allow conversation to go even deeper: we lay the tennis ball down gently in the center.³⁹

To aid groups in staying oriented to the structures of circle process, the circle way begins with some basic agreements for circles to adapt and build consensus around as well as a triangle of leadership points on the circle's rim (Fig. 3). Baldwin and Linnea argue that "the use of

agreements allows all members to have a free and profound exchange, to respect a diversity of views, and to share responsibility for the well-being and direction of the group.”⁴⁰ The four basic agreements PeerSpirit offers circles are as follows:

- 20. personal material shared in the circle is confidential
- 21. we listen to each other with compassion and curiosity, withholding judgment whether positive or negative
- 22. we ask for what we need and offer what we can
- 23. from time to time, we use the sound of a bell to pause and regather our thoughts or focus⁴¹

By identifying a trio of leaders, the circle way creates an expectation of collaboration from the planning process through to the time spent in the circle where every participant shares in the purpose for gathering. In PeerSpirit parlance, these leaders are the host, guardian, and scribe; a word about each is in order:

- 24. The *host* is the member of a circle who takes responsibility to prepare the physical space for a conversation, helps determine the conversation’s scope or intention, and participates as a peer leader.⁴²
- 25. The *guardian* is the member of a circle who give special attention to keeping the group aware of its shared intention by using a bell to signal a pause and then explain their reason for pausing the conversation; anyone may ask the guardian to ring the bell as per the basic circle agreements.⁴³
- 26. The *scribe* is the member of a circle who records the group’s process (i.e., insights, decisions, unresolved questions, etc.).⁴⁴ This is not a minute-taking task but a harvesting and gleaning task.

The triangle of leadership always takes shape to serve the circle by helping the group uphold the circle’s agreements. If a circle is called regularly (i.e., a small group, a department or staff meeting, a leadership council), then the leadership roles rotate. Without this rotation, the circular risks capitulating to the triangular—there is a difference between the triangle *within* the circle and the triangle *outside* the circle. The circle get stuck inside the triangle when the agenda for department meetings is always set by the department chair and usually with only last-minute consultation despite the fact that the group of colleagues sits in a circle taking turns sharing about what they did over the weekend. The circle encompasses the triangle when a) the department chair invites a junior colleague to lead the discussion about the upcoming

curriculum revision, b) the two of them work together to identify one or two questions central to the discussion, c) all members of the department take time to prepare for the meeting because the questions both activate their individual interests in their shared work *and* ask for input about how to move the task ahead in light of past disagreements. When the circle and the triangle work in harmony, meetings become an opportunity for conversations that actually matter both because they are significant to those who show up and because they help us move our work forward. This mattering requires what Baldwin and Linnea describe as the presence of a leader in every chair, accomplished when we each choose to start doing things differently.

Conclusion

Both servant leadership and the circle as philosophies and methodologies for getting meaningful work done that serves, renews, and strengthens both our immediate communities and our broader society. And I find it simple to translate both approaches into broadly Christian and particularly Anabaptist frameworks. The circle way helps us think about the various levels and forms of denominational organization, from congregation to school to delegate assembly, as circles, whether they are concentric or overlapping, that share the same center: the trinitarian life of God that is actively guiding the cosmos toward the Great Shalom of salvation, justice, well-being, and reconciliation.

Our greatest challenge is to come clean about the opacity of our organizational ethics and norms. In our reluctance to develop a thorough-going *teaching and practice* of the priesthood of all believers we are hindering our spiritual maturation, individually and collectively. That is why I think it is a bad idea for me to think of myself as your servant. As long as “servant-leader” means things like regarding my needs as secondary to yours, conceiving of purpose as the preservation of church institutions, doing other people’s (emotional) work for them, failing to make difficult decisions all because I lead by serving, then we Mennonites need to stop talking about servant leadership, period.

However, if and when we intentionally orient ourselves as baptized members of a congregational community toward being in the world in ways that build capacity for self-empathy, vulnerability, compassion, boldness, and creativity, then I think we might be ready to talk about servant leadership again. Just think about what could happen if we began to harness the truth and power in seemingly divergent christological moments ranging from Jesus’ birth in a barn to the pain of Simon-Peter’s denial, from raising Lazarus to withstanding grueling

temptation, from challenging lax temple practices to tenderly playing with children. . . . All of these moments are part of defining how Jesus navigated his reality. I believe that he invites us to take our own lives as seriously and consider what might happen in our part of the church and through our participation in society if we reimagine and radically connect service and leadership in circles upon circles upon circles, claiming and sharing moral authority in God's beloved community.

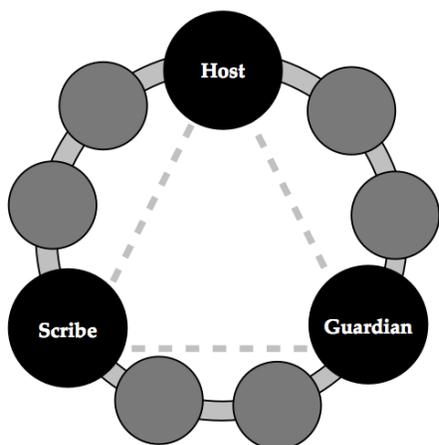


Figure 3. The PeerSpirit Circle's Three Points of Leadership.

1. Robert K. Greenleaf, *Servant Leadership: A Journey into the Nature of Legitimate Power and Greatness* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1977), 1–2. A style note is in order. In his writing, Greenleaf would hyphenate “servant-leader” to keep in tension the opposing connotations of the two words as if they form a koan. He did not hyphenate “servant leadership,” however, perhaps because servant leadership assumes the presence of servant-leaders. Some sources capitalize the terms (Servant-Leader and Servant Leadership). For the sake of consistency with my sources, I have preserved this pattern, and I have preserved the capitalization when it appears in direct quotations.

2. *Ibid.*, 3.

3. David R. Brubaker, MBA, PhD, MBA program director at Eastern Mennonite University, Harrisonburg, Virginia is a clear example of a scholar who roots his organizational theories and models in the Greenleaf tradition. John Stahl-Wert, PhD, of the Newton Institute and the Center for Serving Leadership also works in this tradition. Goshen College’s president Jim Brenneman, PhD, also has a record of making clear connections between their servant leadership core value and Greenleaf (see <https://www.goshen.edu/news/2011/08/31/culture-for-service-leadership-a-paradox-worth-living/>).

4. The term “internal churchly scholars” is my attempt to describe the subset of Mennonite scholars and academics who labor in broadly Anabaptist- or specifically Mennonite-affiliated schools as well as those who direct works toward (Mennonite Church USA or Mennonite Church Canada) denominational audiences. In other words, this critique is intended to invite reflection on the ways we who produce scholarship for ecclesial contexts make arguments in churchly settings compared to the more rigorous expectations of our disciplinary training.

5. James W. Sipe and Don M. Frick, *Seven Pillars of Servant Leadership: Practicing the Wisdom of Leading by Serving* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2009), xiv (emphasis in the original).

6. Don M. Frick, *Robert K. Greenleaf: A Life of Servant Leadership* (San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 2004), 5–6, accessed June 2016, ProQuest Ebrary.

7 Sipe and Frick., 49 (emphasis in the original).

8. *Ibid.*, xvi.

9. *Ibid.*, 4.

10. *Ibid.*, 5.

11. *Ibid.*, 6.

12. Larry C. Spears, “Tracing the Past, Present, and Future of Servant-Leadership” in *Focus on Leadership: Servant-Leadership for the 21st Century*, 3rd ed, eds. Larry C. Spears and Michele Lawrence (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 2002), 5–8.

13. Frick, 4.

14. Like others, I am part of an extended family that includes four generations of young adults educated in Mennonite colleges and universities; . My parents (EMU and Goshen College graduates) made our family home in Goshen, Indiana because of their affiliation with, including decades of employment at, Goshen College. I also served on the Mennonite Education Agency’s Board of Directors from 2010–2013.

15. God's Great *Shalom* is my alternative wording for the Kingdom of God or the Reign of God. My language signals the presence and culmination God's love and justice and Creation teeming with well-being, peace, and compassion with the absence/end of hierarchy, oppression, and violence.

16. Sipe, 126.

17. Sipe, 130.

18. One quick example is Harold Bauman's handbook intended to help Mennonite Church (MC) congregations fulfill the Delegate Assembly's 1981 statement titled "Leadership and Authority in the Life of the Church." While "servant leaders" appears in the title of the book, there are zero references to Robert Greenleaf. See Harold E. Bauman, *Congregations and Their Servant Leaders: Some Aids for Faithful Congregational Relationships* (Scottsdale, PA: Mennonite Publishing House, 1982).

19. Spears, 9–13.

20. This conversation reminded me of a moment in (Mennonite) high school when I volunteered for a leadership role for a small group project in tenth grade English class. Our task was to act out a scene from a *The Diary of Anne Frank*. Because I did not have aptitude for memorizing and was uncomfortable being a character who was clearly a white European, but I knew that I could manage the props and direct the group with efficiency. By the end of the day, one of my classmates informed my twelfth-grade brother that I was dominating the group because I had volunteered to be the director. My brother did what older brothers do well, and gave me a hard time about my volunteerism. This was my first experience of violating a cultural norm among some Mennonites: it is unseemly to nominate yourself for a leadership role even if you are the obvious choice.

21. Peter J. Dyck, "Service," Global Anabaptist Mennonite Encyclopedia Online, 1989, accessed June 27, 2016, <http://gameo.org/index.php?title=Service&oldid=104389>.

22. Greenleaf, 67.

23. Steve May, ed., *Case Studies in Organizational Communication: Ethical Perspectives and Practices*, 2nd ed. (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, 2013), xviii–xix.

24. May, 21.

25. I am using the terms ethnocentric and ethnorelative as defined in the developmental model of intercultural sensitivity (DMIS). Ethnocentric means "one's own culture is experienced as central to reality in some way" in contrast to ethnorelative which means "one's own culture is experienced in the context of other cultures." See Janet M. Bennett and Milton J. Bennett, "Developing Intercultural Sensitivity: An Integrative Approach to Global and Domestic Diversity" in *Handbook of Intercultural Training*, 3rd ed., eds. Dan Landis, Janet M. Bennett, and Milton J. Bennett (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, 2004), 147–148.

26. Harold S. Bender and Marlin E. Miller, "Priesthood of All Believers," Global Anabaptist Mennonite Encyclopedia Online, 1989, accessed July 13, 2016, http://gameo.org/index.php?title=Priesthood_of_All_Believers.

27. Ibid.

28. Ibid.

29. Robert K. Greenleaf, *The Power of Servant-Leadership: Essays by Robert K. Greenleaf*, 1st ed., ed. Larry C. Spears (San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 1998), 148.

30. *Ibid.*, 148–149. Greenleaf, *Servant Leadership*, 80.

31. Greenleaf, 81–82.

32. Kay Pranis, *The Little Book of Circle Processes: A New/Old Approach to Peacemaking* (Intercourse, PA: Good Books, 2005), 3–4.

33. Christina Baldwin and Ann Linnea, *The Circle Way: A Leader in Every Chair* (Oakland: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 2010), 7.

34. *Ibid.*, 10.

35. *Ibid.*, 14. Baldwin and Linnea define hierarchy as “a system of organization that follows well-defined patterns of priority that allows the carrying out of clearly delineated tasks with little or no debate” (200).

36. *Ibid.*, 11.

37. Sipe, 285.

38. *Ibid.*, 113.

39. *Ibid.*, 114.

40. Christina Baldwin and Ann Linnea, “Basic Circle Guidelines (English)” / “The Circle Way: Basic Guidelines for Calling a Circle,” *The Circle Way*, 2016, accessed July 15, 2016, <http://www.thecircleway.net/resources-1/>.

41. Baldwin and Linnea, *The Circle Way*, 67–69.

42. *Ibid.*, 200.

43. *Ibid.*

44. *Ibid.*, 201.