



## *Leadership Reflection*

# **A Devoted Christian's View on Development of Spiritually Formed Leadership**

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### **A Call to Spiritually Formed Leadership**

As faith-oriented leaders, we are called to a challenging and difficult responsibility to model leadership that is both relational and transactional in its formulations and applications. To succeed in this calling, we must embrace a whole person model of leadership learning, living, and serving, which, at its core, is a process of spiritual awakening and formation. At the very heart of this calling is a commitment to whole person development designed to produce spiritually formed leaders able to change their world through stretched minds, cradled hearts, and reformed hands known for their noble, effective, and sacrificial service.

I believe we must address, more intentionally, the needs and means for an integrated view of whole person leadership development anchored to the fundamental elements of spiritual formation. To that end, we need a profile for spiritually formed leadership that will serve not only our own sense of mission but contribute to the larger purposes of the Divine in and through His human creation. The foundations of my thinking are anchored to a leadership development process that began when I was an undergraduate student. The initial lessons learned in that setting continue to fuel my processes, passion, and pedagogy as I seek to be spiritually formed and reformed in every dimension of my leadership calling.

This paper describes a personal pilgrimage into the mission, message, and meaning of spiritually formed leadership. It is primarily a theological rather than methodological journey, a process of transformation more than information. It is more autobiographical than pedagogical. It is not my intent to present this model as the final answer for our important work or to suggest that my thinking fully defines all of the dimensions and implications of such a sacred task. Rather, the goal is to encourage, motivate, and inspire you to take your distinctive understandings, experiences, and applications of the call to spiritually formed leadership to their next levels. I do assert that as Christ-centered scholars of leadership formation, ours is ultimately

a calling to stretch minds, cradle hearts, and equip outstretched hands for effective, noble, and sacrificial service.

### **Stretching Minds, Cradling Hearts, and Equipping Hands**

In the fall of 1966, I began a journey of leadership formation that challenged my thinking, touched my heart, and prepared my hands for service at levels I could not have imagined. Lacking a high school diploma, but convinced that I needed an education to fulfill my sense of calling, I came to Spring Arbor College (now University) in Michigan. There I encountered a call to radical whole person leading; I confronted something called the Spring Arbor Concept.

I did not fully appreciate the concept while I was a student. I felt leadership was more a matter of doing rather than of thinking and being. Despite my resistance, an integrated profile of those who serve God's purposes as leaders in their generation began to emerge. I became convinced that I must be a leader of the tough mind and the tender heart if I was to use my hands effectively and contribute meaningfully to the work of God's Kingdom. Today, my passion for Christ, vision for service, and commitment to let the mind of Christ be in me (Php. 2:5) and the love of Christ show through me remains rooted in the images of a lamp, the cross, and a needy world that I first encountered as a student at Spring Arbor.

### **The Lamp of Learning: Stretching the Renewed Mind**

In the context of Spring Arbor University's approach to whole person education, I was challenged first to commit my life to a head first journey. Having come to faith in Jesus Christ out of a troubled and dysfunctional home, I needed to understand that it was necessary to become a mature follower of Christ through the discipline of the renewed mind. I was challenged to understand that leadership, in the context of spiritual formation, requires a head first commitment.

I learned that effective discipleship is driven by the Great Commission mandate to go and make disciples, teaching them to obey all that Jesus commanded (Mt. 28:20). The building blocks of mature leadership rest upon the foundation of divine revelation. Those who follow Christ so they can lead effectively see the world differently because they understand it through the mind of Jesus. He is the clearest revelation of all that is ultimately and eternally true. Effective leaders can only define reality when they have understood ultimate reality in the One who is the way, the truth, and the life.

The relationship with Jesus Christ begins with revelation, the divinely initiated enlightening, that we need a Savior. Isaiah 1:18 (New International Version) reads, "'Come now, let us reason together,' says the Lord. 'Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow.'" Jesus spent more time teaching than in any other single activity. The primary means He used to turn fishermen, tax collectors, harlots, and zealots into revolutionary leaders able to turn their culture upside down was the transforming of the mind guided, guarded, and enabled by the Spirit of Truth. While these disciples marveled at our Lord's miracles; they were enlisted by His message, a call to a Christian-counter culture delivered with a depth of insight and level of authority they had not experienced previously. This life of the enlightened mind shaped the thinking of leaders who influenced the intellectual, social, and cultural world for centuries after Christ's death.

The early Church Fathers believed that followers of Christ should be broadly skilled both in and beyond the teachings of Scripture and the Church in their search for truth. This head first leadership was fueled by the conviction that all that is true finds both its genesis and its sustenance in the One who is the way, the Truth, and the life (Jn. 14:6) that in Him we live and move and have our being (Ac. 17:28). As a result, leaders throughout the history of the Christian movement emphasized following Jesus with minds transformed rather than conformed to secular paradigms. Learning and serving were anchored to the conviction that all truth is God's Truth.

Martin Luther (1530), in a sermon to the political leaders of his day ("Keeping Children in School"), established the central place of education in leadership formation, championing the renewing of the mind across multiple learning disciplines. He taught that children needed to study not only languages and history but also singing and music together with the whole of mathematics. The ancient Greeks trained their children in these disciplines and, as a result, he believed, grew up to be people of wondrous ability subsequently fit for anything.

John Milton (1644), in his "Tractate on Education" sent to Master Samuel Hartlib, emphasized the value of broad and comprehensive learning, what we know today as the Liberal Arts, when he suggested that a complete and generous education is one that fits a person to perform all the offices, both private and public, of peace and of war. He (1644) insisted in his treatise "Of Education" that the goal of learning is to repair the ruins of our first parents by knowing God and; out of that knowledge; to love Him, imitate Him, and be like Him.

T. S. Elliott picked up the theme of a discipleship that deepens when we seek to learn beyond our cultural and intellectual comfort zones. Mary Cox Garner (2004), in *The Hidden Soul of Words*, quoted Elliott's belief about stretching the mind: "No one can become truly educated without having pursued some study in which they took no interest – for it is part of education to learn to interest ourselves in subjects for which we have no aptitude" (p. 69).

C. S. Lewis (1976), in a sermon entitled "Learning in War Time" in *The Weight of Glory*, challenged the future leaders of his day to take time for a thorough education even in the midst of national turmoil.

To be ignorant now would be to throw down our weapons and betray our uneducated brethren who have, under God, no defense but us against the intellectual attacks of the heathen. Good philosophy must exist, if for no other reason, because bad philosophy needs to be answered. (p. 58)

As an emerging leader, I was challenged at Spring Arbor to know God in every expression of creation and discipline of human learning. To lay Christ as the only foundation calls us to catch God at work in every place, plan, process, and person so that we can advance His purposes in each for the glory of Jesus Christ. I discovered a new application of a favorite childhood game. With the belief that God is always up to something somewhere and with someone, I chose to greet each new leadership challenge with the prayer, "come out, come out, wherever you are." In that place I now call alma mater, I gave myself to the Christ-centered commitment of stretching my mind, reaching for the highest levels of learning, so that I might lead others into the deepest levels of revelation.

As we master the disciplines of the stretched mind, laying hold of the lamp of learning, we honor Paul's command not to be conformed to the world but transformed by the renewing of your mind (Ro. 12:2). I challenge you, fellow pilgrims and purveyors of Christ-modeled leading, to be head first disciples and lifelong learners; studying to show yourselves approved unto God, workmen that need not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the Word of Truth (2 Ti. 2:15). We are privileged as spiritually formed leaders to be called to model and encourage the life of the

renewed mind. Only as we continue to learn to lead, stretching our minds and thoughts beyond all that we currently know, can we be fit to lead with courage, conviction, and clarity.

### **The Cross: Cradling the Restored Heart**

One of the great challenges of head first leadership; however; is that left to itself, learning can lead to arrogance, isolation, and self-preoccupation. The greater the knowledge we acquire, the more critical it is that, with the learning, we nurture compassion. Knowledge is the blossom of the exercised mind. Compassion is the fruit of the circumcised heart. The cross became for me the symbol of the restored heart.

The Great Commission focuses on the head first calling of teaching them to obey all Jesus commanded. The Great Commandment is the key to employing our knowledge for the ultimate good of humanity. We must embrace Jesus' command to love the Lord our God with our total being, body and spirit as well as mind, and to love our neighbor as ourselves (Mt. 12:30-31). The Great Commission's is the method of informed leadership. The Great Commandment's call to love God, our neighbor, and ourselves is the motivation that restores and renews the hearts of spiritually formed and transformed leaders.

It became clear that while I held the lamp of learning in one hand, I must embrace the love of God demonstrated on the cross of Christ with the other. To comprehend Jesus Christ as the Truth; we must apprehend Him as the way and the life in every dimension of learning, living, and serving. Jesus becomes our supreme teacher when we embrace Him as our suffering Savior. Loving God and humanity answers the "so what" questions of learning, providing both meaning to and motivation for the pursuit of Truth. Our leadership is enlivened when it becomes the means to change both hearts and minds. To embrace the cross is to receive Christ's redeeming work accomplished on that tree; following its shadow into sacrificial, risk-taking love for others.

My experiences in Spring Arbor's community of learners were punctuated often by the convicting and conforming presence of our Lord's love in our midst. During my days as a student, and in the years following on the administration and faculty, my life encountered what I see now as divine appointments that forced me to confront the Lord's redeeming love of Calvary. Often, these occurred in chapel, awakening me to a need for forgiveness or the hunger for a deeper commitment. At other times, it was a sustained knocking, disrupting my academic and social calendar for days until His work was completed. I realize now that He was present in the curricular, cocurricular, and extracurricular activities; lovingly reminding me that in Him, my intellectual, social, and professional life has its ultimate meaning.

Embracing the saving and transforming work of the cross sets us free to pick up the love lessons of that cross, challenging us to invest and spend ourselves for others. In light of the Jesus model of effective leadership, I believe that good leadership is anchored to good teaching. Good teaching is as much a factor of the heart of the teacher as it is the head. One of the most important resources for me in this quest to embrace the cross in my calling to lead by teaching has been Parker J. Palmer's (1998) *The Courage to Teach*. Palmer laid out the following premise, "good teaching cannot be reduced to technique; good teaching comes from the identity and integrity of the teacher" (p. 10). He continued,

In every class I teach, my ability to connect with my students and to connect them with the subject, depends less on the methods I use than on the degree to which I know and trust my selfhood – and am willing to make it available and vulnerable in the service of learning. (p. 10)

In one of my teaching assignments, a student gave me a plaque whose saying sums up the challenge to embrace the cross perspective in our leadership formation pedagogy: “To learn and never be satisfied is wisdom, to teach and never be weary is love.” I saw the crucified Jesus so often at Spring Arbor in the lives of faculty, staff, and fellow students who became His encouragers for embracing the love of the cross. Theirs was a journey of a long obedience in the same direction, willing to embrace at any cost and consequence God’s call to love unreservedly and lead sacrificially. A few of those living epistles continue teaching and mentoring today’s students in the “most excellent way” (1 Co. 12:31). So many others, now held by the nail-scarred hands of Jesus, live for me as models of what philosopher Elton Trueblood (1996) called disciples of both the tough mind and the tender heart.

This restored heart is the value added expected by the vast majority of those who follow us. They not only want to know what we think but also long to know who we are and what we feel. For those of us who believe that the call to the life of leadership is a means to invest deeply in the lives as well as the minds of those our leadership influences, the principle of self-sacrificing love rings true. In the conviction that God so loved us that he gave His Son (Jn 3:16) and that the Son so loved that he gave His life; we find the courage to learn, teach, love, and lead like Jesus.

### **The Waiting World: Reformed Hands**

With the lamp of learning in one hand and the cross of the Christ in the other, Spring Arbor’s Concept called me to a life of leadership that produces tangible, life-changing, and world-shaping results. Throughout the centuries, mature followers of Jesus not only thought clearly and loved deeply; they served nobly, effectively, and sacrificially. Transformed minds and purified hearts are manifested in and validated by the exceptional work they perform and the sacrificial service they render. Spiritually formed leadership; as Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1937/1995) eloquently communicated by both pen and life; is usually a costly one, focused on the needs and opportunities of a waiting world.

To and for what end are we enlightened by learning and enlivened for loving? It is so that we can do the Father’s business as revealed in the life of Christ. Spiritually formed leadership is that which extends capable hands for noble, tangible, and measurable purposes. Like the Master; we are called to serve the poor, bind up the broken hearted, proclaim release to captives, recover sight to the blind, liberate the oppressed, and declare that now is the time of the Lord’s acceptance (Lk. 4:18-19). It is a call to demonstrate the breadth of our learning and the depth of our loving by stretching out competent, compassionate, reforming hands to serve a needy world.

I believe that enlightened and enlivened leaders develop a compelling sense of social justice and global responsibility that calls them to touch the least, the left, and the lost. It was on a mission trip to Spanish Harlem in the inner city of New York my junior year of college that I touched the heart and was challenged to extend the hands of Christ. Subsequent opportunities to serve and teach abroad in Europe, the Middle East, and Far East deepened my understanding that wholeness requires a commitment to serve the purposes of God in our generation for every tongue, tribe, and nation. It is in the conflicts and contexts of cross-cultural and multicultural engagement that our ideas are challenged and hearts stretched to serve global leadership causes larger than ourselves.

Reforming hands, however, not only serve compassionately but also competently. Too often, committed Christians appear to sacrifice competence on the altar of compassion. We must

do what we do with all of our might for the glory of God. The need for discipline, diligence, and the commitment to achieve our fullest potential in the work at hand must guide our whole person understanding. This is a call to professional excellence if our loving acts are to be both credible and effective. Christ taught with an authority and clarity that exceeded even the most skilled and learned of His day (Mt. 7:29, Mk. 1:22). He achieved His fullest potential through diligence and courage; we who lead in His name must do no less if the results of our leadership are to reflect the nobility of our King and Lord. He completed His task with a sacrifice of full surrender, doing what no other was able to accomplish. This cup-of-cold-water service is, as the early Church understood in James 2:14-26, the tangible evidence that true wisdom is comprehended and perfect love embraced.

### **A World-Changer's Profile: Christ-Centered Leadership that Serves the Present Age and Beyond**

As I return, after three University Presidencies, to my first love of preparing and investing in the next generation of global leaders, I feel the need to develop a series of affirmations that integrate the foregoing elements of spiritually formed leadership into a functional whole. Ultimately, I contend, spiritually formed leadership must be centered more in a person (Jesus Christ) than in a philosophy, theory, technique, or process.

It was through the 2004 conference of the International Council for Higher Education that I found the context that informs this next chapter of my calling. Using the framework of the Conference's purpose statement (Cole & Ganaken, 2004), I have developed a series of affirmations designed to tie the elements of spiritually formed leadership to the hub of Christ-centered learning, loving, and serving. These are summarized as follows:

- Affirmation 1. Christ-centered leaders are connected intimately to the purposes of God in relation to creation and particularly humanity. Recognizing that we are created in the image of God and given the responsibility of caring for His creation, we lead with a sense of divine calling to be good stewards of creation in general and humanity in particular.
- Affirmation 2. Christ-centered leaders are holistic; striving to achieve their full potential in body, mind, and spirit. As such, their opportunities for both personal and societal transformation are unlimited.
- Affirmation 3. Christ-centered leaders embrace the Christian perspective as reflected in God's Word. They are empowered to appropriate those perspectives by the Holy Spirit's gifts and graces to initiate a positive, practical, and respectful dialogue with the world about the implications of such perspectives. Unfortunately, the stridency of much of our dialogue as intentional and serious minded Christians often limits the impact of our ideas.
- Affirmation 4. Christ-centered leaders move beyond cognitive learning and skill acquisition to intentional discipleship as their ultimate objective. Through the conscious integration of faith, learning, and living; Christ-centered leaders examine their professional missions and motivations, asking how the fruit of their labor relates to the purposes of God. Christ-centered leaders not only analyze the outcomes of their efforts but also explore their implied morality.

- Affirmation 5. Christ-centered leaders embrace a Great Commandment motivation that compels them to address poverty, illness, exploitation, discrimination, and oppression in the world. They possess a burden for those who; for reasons of culture, social position, political oppression, economic condition, race, gender, and ethnicity; are denied the basics of life's opportunities. Spiritually formed leaders are driven by the mission and motivation of Christ: to address and resolve human meaninglessness and suffering by understanding; going; teaching; serving; loving; and, if necessary, dying.
- Affirmation 6. Christ-centered leaders' learning and serving reflect the major biblical themes of justice, mercy, and humility (Mic. 6:8). All three of these are evidence of the transformation that comes when the mind is challenged to see and serve the world like the Christ.
- Affirmation 7. Christ-centered leaders think clearly and love deeply; providing noble service distinguished by its excellence, innovation, humility, and self-sacrifice. Spiritually formed leadership serves the present age and changes the world's future.

### **A Final Exhortation**

With Jesus Christ as the hub, the basic elements of spiritually formed leadership become a creative force in both precept and application. I am experiencing new energy for and deeper understanding of my calling as I examine these in the context of the teachings and actions of the Christ. As you take up your leadership calling, I encourage you to develop such an integrated approach that stretches minds, cradles hearts, and equips future generations of leaders to serve nobly a waiting world with both compassion and excellence.

We who are called to spiritually formed leadership have a unique, privileged, and providential opportunity to influence the holistic development of future generations. Ours is a sacred calling. Let us appropriate that calling by extending our competent and compassionate hands to a world that longs for our well-trained touch and caring embrace. Let us commit ourselves to this journey of lifelong leading, laying Jesus Christ as the only sure foundation. May we have a "new-every-morning" revelation of God in every place, plan, process, and person. Let us be fit for anything because the mind, heart, and outstretched hands of Jesus have become our everything. Together, let us lift up our lamps of learning and embrace the cross; a watching world awaits the touch of our outstretched hands!

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### **About the Author**

David Gyertson holds a Ph.D. in administration and management from Michigan State University. He has been the president of three accredited universities and two charitable foundations. Dr. Gyertson serves as an executive coach and transition consultant to CEOs in a variety of educational, non-profit, and Christian ministry settings. Currently, he serves as a distinguished professor of leadership formation in the School of Global Leadership & Entrepreneurship at Regent University.

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