

# SERVANT LEADERSHIP in Greek Orthodox Parishes

“Whoever desires to become great among you shall be your servant ... For the Son of Man came not to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as ransom for many. (Mark 10:43, 45)”

## Michael H. Missios

The central role of the priest's leadership in the effectiveness of the parish and the quality of its life has been widely accepted by ministry and organizational scholars and researchers. Undoubtedly, leadership is the most important ingredient contributing to and affecting the growth of the Church. As Fr. George Papademetriou wrote in an article in the *Greek Orthodox Theological Review*: “Parish leadership is of enormous importance to the growth and welfare of the Church, especially in the context of today's complex social and technological changes.”

There are many definitions and theoretical models of leadership. One model that has been shown to be effective in both for-profit and nonprofit organizations is servant leadership. This model that puts the emphasis not on the leader but on the followers: organizational growth and excellence is achieved when the leader focuses the needs and interests of his or her followers and helps them to become leaders themselves.

### SERVANT LEADERSHIP

First described by Robert Greenleaf in 1970, servant leadership is a model based on participative decision-making, teamwork and ethical and caring behavior. The highest priority of a servant leader is service—that is, serving others and helping them achieve personal growth, autonomy and excellence, so that they, in turn, can help other members grow, resulting in a thriving and effective organization.

Based on Greenleaf's writings, in his paper “Practicing Servant Leadership,” Larry Spears defined a set of characteristics central to the servant leadership model that include listening, empathy, healing, awareness, persuasion, conceptualization, foresight, stewardship, commitment to the growth of people and building community—in addition to the traditional leadership skills of communication and decision-making. To elaborate on some of these characteristics:

- Servant leaders are great listeners and receptive of others' views and opinions.

- A servant leader accepts people for who they are and respects their points of view, even if they are contrary to the leader's own.
- Servant leaders strive to convince and persuade followers instead of trying to pressure and coerce them.
- Servant leaders are visionary; they are dreamers.
- They have foresight, establishing a strategic vision for their organizations, looking ahead and analyzing potential consequences of decisions.
- They are pioneers, unafraid of clearing new paths.
- Central to servant leadership is the commitment to the growth of everyone in the organization, and servant leaders take mentoring and teaching responsibilities very seriously.
- Lastly, fostering stewardship involves openness, trust and empowerment. According to authors Russell and Stone, stewardship is empowering in the sense that everyone in the organization, not just the leaders, must be stewards.

### SERVANT LEADERSHIP IN PRACTICE

For my doctoral dissertation (with the blessings of Archbishop Demetrios, Metropolitan Alexios and Metropolitan Evangelos), I recently conducted a study of the leadership style and practices of priests in thriving Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America parishes. I found that these servant leaders are influencing the development and the quality of life of their parishes in the following ways:

### LEAD BY EXAMPLE, NOT BY THE HAMMER

“Nowhere in the scripture,” one study participant commented, “do you hear Christ saying, ‘You guys are going to do this and this is how you are going to do it.’ He showed them by example.” Following Christ's example, the priests in thriving parishes are authoritative, but not authoritarian, leaders. They establish an environment of shared and distributive decision-making. They carefully select or influence the selection of the various ministry leaders, inspire them, mentor them, trust them, empower them and advise them. Empowered people take ownership of the various ministries and engage other parishioners in the process, thus creating functional, decentralized organizations that are coordinated by the parish council and that involve parishioners of all age groups.

### TO BE A PRIEST IS TO SERVE

“There is a difference between a priest who is called into the ministry by God and a priest who views it as a profession. Our priest was called by God ... He is in the ministry, heart and soul.” This statement by one parishioner characterizes all of the priests in the study. They became priests to serve. “To be a servant,” one priest said, “is to sacrifice.” As one priest put it, “I did not become a priest for a job, because it is a lousy job, but because it is a great thing to do.”

### THE CHURCH IS THE MEANS, NOT THE END — — — — —

“Other priests may be looking at numbers. ‘How many people do I have? How many people does [another priest] have?’ He does not do that. He says what is best for us as a faith.” This is how a parishioner described his priest’s attitude toward helping a new parish nearby get established—something to which some parishioners initially objected in fear of losing some members. What this message implies is that, to this priest, what is important is not what the parish is but what the parish does. The parish, thus, is not the end; rather, it is the means to end, which is helping people, all people, to Christ and salvation.

### PRIESTS ARE HUMAN — — — — —

Speaking of her parish’s priest, one woman commented, “He is a good role model. He tries to achieve a good balance between his [pastoral] responsibilities, his family life, and his own sanity. He has his hobbies that he likes.” This statement characterizes the priests of the parishes in the study. To be a servant and the father of the parish does not make the human needs of the priest any less important. These priests are effective because they maintain a balance between pastoral life and personal life. They participate in social functions, they play with the children, they get in the pool with them. They hang siding, they dig holes to plant shrubs at the church, and they go to baseball games. They know how to maintain balance.

### INSPIRING THE FLOCK — — — — —

To a large extent, the parishes are thriving because the priests inspire and motivate their parishioners’ commitment to the Church. They reach out to people and inspire them to want to take ownership of the parish and participate in its ministries, to be involved because they want to, not because they need to or ought to. The priests do that by teaching, by caring for them, by showing them the way, by connecting with them on a personal level, and by setting an example.

### THE YOUTH AND CONVERTS ARE THE FUTURE OF THE CHURCH — —

Regardless of their personal leadership style, their approach to inspiring and motivating their parishioners, or their style of Orthodoxy, priests in thriving parishes share another common characteristic: a laser-sharp focus on the youth and the converts as the future of the Church. Thriving parishes have extensive programs for the children and young adults and

constantly invest in ways to keep them involved. Whether it is through altar boy ministry, girls’ choirs, field trips to Holy Cross Greek Orthodox School of Theology, summer Bible camps, athletic competitions, or outreach, one function that is thriving in thriving parishes is youth programming.

The priests recognize that the parish makeup is changing, largely because of interfaith marriages and population demographics. They recognize that the Greek Orthodox parishes are no longer exclusively parishes of immigrants. Rather, they are parishes of people of many ethnic backgrounds, who are, for the most part, born and raised in the United States. Converting people to Orthodoxy and keeping Orthodox people in the Church is a fundamental ministry led by the priest.

The priests welcome the non-Orthodox to the church and take them under their wings. They encourage them to non-sacramental leadership positions. They plan programs for them. “We don’t think that they are not Orthodox,” one priest said. “They know they can’t receive communion, but we don’t treat them [differently] in any other way.” The priests create an environment in which converts and non-converts feel welcome.

### CONGRUENCE OF PERCEPTIONS — — — — —

Priests in thriving parishes understand their parishioners well. They share their views, share their concerns, share their successes, and share their value systems. They live in the same world, they “speak the same language,” and they are in sync.

### CONCLUSION — — — — —

Although there may be many spiritual, social, economic and cultural factors contributing to the development and quality of life of the Greek Orthodox parish in the United States, the leadership style of the parish priest emerges as

the common denominator in the parish development challenges. Servant leadership has been shown as an effective model for building organizations to greatness by focusing on the needs and interests of the followers and empowering them to be leaders themselves.



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