



## FAITH-BASED VOLUNTEERS IN LOCAL JAILS: THE INAUGURAL TEST OF SERVANT-LEADERSHIP

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Robert Greenleaf believed the best leadership results from a desire to serve others (Greenleaf, 1991). Servant-leaders approach others with humble spirits, seeking to serve rather than to be served. In his essay *The Servant as Leader*, Greenleaf (1991) asserted, “Not everything that is old and worn, or even corrupt, can be thrown away. Some of it has to be rebuilt and used again. So it is with the words *serve* and *lead*” (p. 1). For that reason, the message of the “leader-as-servant” (Greenleaf, 1998, p. 4) exemplifies the spirit of faith-based correctional volunteers. As advanced by John MacArthur (1994) in *Reckless Faith*, discernment, the process of testing everything, holding fast to what is good, abstaining from every form of evil, is drawn from 1 Thessalonians 5:21-22 and promoted by faith-based volunteers. Throughout jails and prisons, discerning faith-based volunteers neither tell inmates what to think nor condemn those who do not think the same as themselves. By sharing their multiplicity of faiths, these servant-leaders serve as a final refuge for lost, worn, and corrupt souls confined in county jails and prisons.

Greenleaf was a Quaker by faith and service (Frick & Spears, 1996). From Greenleaf’s various writings, it is obvious that service was the most vital idea for him. He repeatedly grounded the word in biblical references (Vaill, 1998). He believed effective leadership was dependent on faith and service to develop strong, effective, caring communities in all segments of our society (Greenleaf, 1982). Greenleaf’s conception of faith, however, was not tied to any “specific religious beliefs or practice” (Boyer, 1999, p. 19). Instead, his idea of the servant-leader was embedded in the belief that



“people have inherent worth, a dignity not only to be strived for, but beneath this striving, a dignity irrevocably connected to the reality of being human” (Ferch, 2003, p. 226).

The central origins of service can be found in the inspiration of Christianity. The Christian doctrine is known for its messages of how the great leader Jesus championed others, regularly serving their needs ahead of his own. Jesus made a myriad of attempts to empower his followers to care for others by serving them first. In Paul’s letter to the Corinthians, he said, “All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and gave us the ministry of reconciliation” (2 Corinthians 5:18). Simply stated, reconciliation means serving others by repairing a relationship that has gone wrong, attending to a world that is painfully broken (Washington, 2005).

Research has revealed that religious convictions in correctional facilities are extremely diverse and widespread (O’Connor & Perreyclear, 2002). Prisoners throughout the country attend programming that consists of an assortment of faith-based groups including Protestants, Catholics, Jews, Jehovah’s Witnesses, and Muslims. In fact, twenty-six religions are represented among the prison population at Lawtey Correctional Institution, “America’s first totally faith-based prison,” in Raiford, Florida (Goddard, 2003, para 1). Public funding for faith-based prison ministries has been made available through President Clinton’s 1996 Charitable Choice and President George W. Bush’s 2001 Faith-Based and Community Initiatives programs (McDaniel, Davis, & Neff, 2005). As a result, correctional budgets in several states, including Georgia, Kansas, Iowa, Minnesota, Tennessee, and Texas, now include public tax funds for religious programming in prisons, including programs such as: InnerChange, Prison Fellowship Ministries, Colson’s Prison Fellowship Ministries, and the Department of Chaplaincy Program (Jablecki, 2005). Quantitative evaluations of faith-based programming have confirmed a reduction in recidivism rates and evidenced that such programs play a significant role in the rehabilitation of many inmates (Faith and Corrections, 2007).

Although research revealed benefits of faith-based programming in



terms of offender transformation, the current understanding of the impact of faith-based servant-leadership in county jails is non-existent (Clear, Hardyman & Stout, 2000; O'Connor & Perreyclear, 2002). Research indicated servant-leaders act as transformational leaders (Yukl, 2002). Transformational leadership is commonly discussed in terms of the effects the leader has upon others and the existing relationship between the leader and followers (Bass, 1990; Levy & Merry, 1986). Tichy and Devanna (1986) described transformational leaders as change agents attempting to empower others by reinforcing trust, faith, and optimism in the follower's ability to change. Faith-based correctional volunteers are considered transformational leaders, who through personal values, vision, passion, and a commitment to their mission energize and transform inmates.

The literature suggests several ways in which a transformational leader may influence a follower, including concentrating on issues of perseverance, humility, and risk (Lencioni, 1998), focusing on keeping hope alive (Kouzes & Posner, 2003), and addressing the main concerns and needs of those being served (Greenleaf, 1977). It is the last suggestion, the foundation of servant-leadership, that serves as the focus for this study.

In 1970, Robert Greenleaf charged that an effective leader helps others to "grow as persons" (1991, p. 7). He asked, "Do they, *while being served*, become healthier, wiser, freer, more autonomous, more likely themselves to become servants?" (1991, p. 7). He proposed that the true test of significance is to consider the effect of servant-leadership on the "least privileged in society; will they benefit, or at least, not be further deprived?" (1991, p. 7). Arguably, there are many groups in today's society that are deemed "least privileged." For the purpose of this study, prison and jail inmates are considered to be among those groups. An understanding of the role of servant-leadership in reaching inmates, however, will not be complete until the examination is extended to local jails and there is a comprehension of the qualitative and quantitative dimensions of servant-leadership in these jail programs.

This analysis of the data generated in this pilot study should be



appraised with reservation. The small sample size and the qualitative nature of the study discourage generalization. Ideally, the findings will encourage others to expand on the research and generate more robust efforts to understand the extent to which servant-leadership exists among faith-based correctional volunteers and to discern the impact of faith-based correctional volunteers in transmitting to inmates the ten characteristics of servant-leadership identified by Spears (1998).

#### METHODOLOGY

The information for this paper was gleaned from a larger mixed-method design case study utilizing a phenomenological approach to examine the extent and impact of faith-based correctional volunteers in transmitting characteristics of servant-leadership to county jail inmates. The county jail is located in the midwest and has an average daily inmate population of 205. Demographics in the county of study may be described as homogeneous, including a lack of access to diverse religions. The county is almost exclusively Christian. While Jewish and Muslim worship centers were evident at one time, both have since closed (Census Data Center, 2008). The county jail's faith-based correctional volunteers represent members of Protestant/evangelical churches from the local ministerial alliance and Gideons, International. These volunteers serve as an extended missionary arm of their respective churches and must have an endorsement letter from their church council before gaining entrance to the jail.

The data analysis is limited to Christian-based faith because that is the solitary type of faith-based programming available in the county of study, and the vast majority of inmates are Christian or express an interest in Christianity. It should be noted, however, that the potential for contributions extends beyond Christianity and is made available to inmates upon their requests.

The Self-Assessment of Servant Leadership (SASL) instrument, a method of identifying individuals who personify servant-leadership (Taylor, 2002), was utilized to examine the extent of servant-leadership among faith-



based correctional jail volunteers. Respondents were recruited because they had provided a faith-based volunteer service to inmates during the time of the study, October 2005 through April 2006. Quantitative data from the SASL was entered into the statistical software program through SPSS 11.5.

The study also utilized semi-structured (Merriam, 1998) interviews to examine the volunteers' perceptions of their impact. The interviews were transcribed verbatim. QSR NVivo 2 software was employed for qualitative analysis.

## FINDINGS

Fifteen participants, representing 75% of the faith-based correctional volunteer population, responded to the SASL, a twenty-four item instrument containing statements representing Spears' (1998) ten categories of servant-leadership characteristics. The basic strategy that underlies the SASL's attitude scale is to ask individuals to respond to statements of preference related to descriptors of their leadership style (Taylor, 2002). Responses to the SASL determined whether the participating respondents identify themselves as servant-leaders. Respondents who rated themselves on the SASL at 145 or higher should be identified as servant-leaders (Taylor). All fifteen respondents were identified as servant-leaders, with scores ranging from 145 to 164, and a mean of 153.89.

### *Servant-leadership Characteristics*

*Listening.* Every one of the faith-based volunteers answered positively when asked, "Are you a good listener?" A volunteer remarked:

I try to pay attention, to make eye contact with these guys, and that seems to get them to open up, to talk more. I had an inmate tell me once that no one ever looks him in the eyes and he appreciated how that made him feel more important.

The volunteers explained that they practice good listening skills by



concentrating on inmates' non-verbal communication or "body language." A volunteer explained, "I try to read the body language because . . . inmates are so reluctant to trust that they don't always want to open up."

*Empathy.* All of the participants believed they transmit empathy. Statements such as "I try not to be sympathetic and I think I am empathetic" and "I do understand their situation" typified the responses. When questioned as to why they believe they transmit empathy, the volunteers' explanations centered around three minor themes: (a) numerous years of volunteer experience; (b) an understanding of the inmates' situation, resulting from personal experience of having been or knowing someone who was incarcerated; or (c) an understanding of the inmates' "brokenness" because of a prior addiction to alcohol or controlled substances. A volunteer explained he "became a believer later in life, after making a lot of stupid mistakes. So, I think God has used those stupid times in my life to allow me to understand better. I feel, see, and know their pain."

*Healing.* There is strong evidence that faith-based correctional volunteers promote healing. Participant comments such as, "The inmates are healthier after I've been here," "I make the inmates feel better about themselves," and "The inmates seem happier after I've been here" are evidence of healing. The volunteers believed that healing is a direct result of the volunteers' spiritual conviction. A volunteer provided an analogy to describe the healing process:

My job is somewhat like [that of] a doctor. I need to be able to reach out to them and give them the medicine to make them healthier. . . . I want to leave here knowing that they are a little bit healthier each week because of the time they spent hearing God's message.

*Awareness.* The participants believed they displayed awareness. To exemplify how they became aware of inmate concerns, the volunteers made statements such as, "The inmates keep us informed of issues that are causing them trouble." The majority of the identified concerns, however, were neither material nor based on physical needs, but focused on the inmates'



need “for comfort,” “for hope,” and “to feel loved.” Concerning comfort, a volunteer stated, “I can tell that they desperately need comfort. Many of them are in pain, feel guilt for their behavior and embarrassment.” Speaking in reference to hope, a volunteer said, “God gives us and has gifted me the gift of exultation, which has given me hope. And that’s what they need.” Finally, numerous volunteers believed they were aware of the inmates’ need to “feel loved.” One inmate remarked, “I try to be aware of what is going on in the cell block. I think I am aware of their problems, their pain, how they feel alone and not loved.”

*Persuasion.* Participants agreed that faith-based volunteers utilize persuasion to transform inmates. A clear distinction was made between coercive power and influence. The majority of participants believed that faith-based correctional volunteers effect change in inmates by means of influence. Other participants commented that volunteers influence inmates through their exemplar behavior and facilitate change by speaking judiciously with the inmates. A volunteer provided the following explanation: “I persuade them through my actions and the Word. I try to use rational explanations to explain things, so maybe they can have a reference, something that makes them understand better.”

*Conceptualization.* Nearly all of the volunteers described themselves as conceptual thinkers. Comments such as “They value and appreciate the volunteers,” “They dream about freedom,” and “They want to feel like they belong, to feel like they are not bad people” epitomize the volunteers’ perceptions of inmates’ wants, values and dreams. Specifically, one volunteer stated:

I think I can see the whole picture, even though they sometimes only tell us what they want or dream about. After listening to them for a while, I’ve been able to see through many of their tales to get a better idea of . . . what they dream about.

*Foresight.* All of the participants believe their volunteer experience



helps them transmit foresight to inmates. A seven-year volunteer conveyed the perception of most participants with the following comment:

The more I do this, the more I am able to see what problems and concerns face them. . . . I can see from their past behavior, like drinking and drugging, that they will have certain problems once they are released. It's not like I can predict what will happen, but I can share with them my experiences from volunteering for so long.

*Stewardship.* Faith-based correctional volunteers believed they transmitted stewardship. Most of the volunteers perceived themselves as “trustworthy.” A volunteer explained, “I think they trust me to show up and that’s about the best I can do.” Similarly, a three-year volunteer stated, “I think they entrust their lives to us. They have faith that we can help them be better people.” The majority of participants described themselves as good stewards because they volunteer their time to the program.

*Commitment to growth.* Ample evidence exists to believe faith-based correctional volunteers are committed to inmates’ spiritual growth and to “reforming” or “improving” the inmates. Most of the volunteers believed their efforts made the “inmates’ lives better.” For instance, a volunteer said, “I use my time and knowledge of the Bible to give them tools, to give them . . . hope that they can grow, can be better than what they were when they came in here.”

*Building community.* All of the participants believed that they have been successful in building a sense of community. The majority of volunteers perceived a sense of community when the inmates appeared to “depend on each other.” For example, one volunteer stated, “The guards tell me that they sometimes ask for permission to do their own Bible study. That shows me that they depend on each other, certainly more so than when they first came in here.” Similarly, a volunteer said, “There are times when the volunteers are not here or there are not enough volunteers for every pod. On those occasions, the inmates will actually lead the other inmates.”



## DISCUSSION AND ANALYSIS

Statements from faith-based correctional volunteers support the research on how servant-leaders transmit Spears' (1998) ten servant-leadership characteristics. The findings acknowledged that good listening skills aid in transformation (Wheatley, 2002) and create a trusting environment conducive to change (Kouzes & Posner, 2003). Welch (2005) confirmed that a trusting environment is atypical in jails. Additionally, Greenleaf believed listening serves as a building-block toward achieving empathy (Spears, 1998). Consistent with Spears, the volunteers acknowledge that their good listening skills enable them to "relate to the inmates' situations."

The findings in this study also confirm Greenleaf's (1991) and Ortberg's (2003) belief that servant-leaders possess the aptitude to make those who are deprived whole. Ortberg alleged, "Serving means that when this person leaves my leadership sphere of influence he or she will be a better person and leader because of the time spent with me" (p. 97). As evidence, a volunteer commented, "The inmates are healthier after I've been here."

Greenleaf's assertion that servant-leaders discover awareness while providing a service to others was demonstrated in the findings. Making reference to followers, Greenleaf stated, "They are seeking the same things we are: fulfillment, wholeness, a sense of belonging" (1991, p. 98). The following statement exemplifies the volunteers' acuity: "They need to feel they are important to someone, to feel their life is worth something."

Moreover, participants affirmed previous research by concluding that inmates react best to volunteers' persuasion because they do not respond well to coercive power (Frick & Spears, 1996). Volunteers believe they set "great examples" and use "the influence of the scripture" to invoke change. Correspondingly, findings indicated faith-based correctional volunteers utilize their persuasive skills to convey conceptualization. Research revealed that servant-leaders demonstrate the ability to conceptualize at a higher level because they are "out-of-the-box-thinker[s]" (Lerner, 2005, p. 5). A



volunteer explained, “I try to look at the big picture, to really listen to what all the inmates are saying, because that gives me a more accurate picture.”

Many of the findings are consistent with Greenleaf’s (1991) views on visionary servant-leadership. According to Greenleaf, leaders’ visionary confidence comes from their anticipating and having the experience to deal with the stress of real-life situations. A volunteer’s statement, “I know the road ahead of them is going to be very hard, and I know that it’s easier for them to have faith in here than in the real world” typifies how the perceptions relate to previous research.

Researchers believe leaders with foresight can be trusted to be stewards, to make sound decisions and put what is best for their followers ahead of their individual agendas (Greenleaf, 1991; Sergiovanni, 2000). The findings reveal faith-based correctional volunteers indisputably exhibit stewardship in county jails. Participants believed they were good stewards because they were “interested in the inmates’ well-being” and were willing to “volunteer their time to meet the needs of others.”

Greenleaf’s belief in the significance of servant-leaders’ commitment to the individual growth of people is also reflected in the findings. Several volunteers believed the inmates are “healthier,” “smarter,” and “feel better about themselves because of what they are learning” in jail.

Finally, Lerner’s (2005) contention that the strength of an organization is greater than the sum of its individual parts exemplifies Spears’ (1998) emphasis on building community. Findings revealed that faith-based correctional volunteers cultivate a sense of community in the county jail. Most of the participants believed they were successful in “pulling everybody together” and getting inmates “to depend on each other.”

## CONCLUSION

The present study has demonstrated growth in the extent and impact of servant-leadership in organizations. The voices of volunteers in a county jail revealed how Greenleaf’s ideas have been implemented in a challenging setting. Faith-based correctional volunteers extend service by listening to,



caring for, and empowering inmates. Moreover, the volunteers truly represent servant-leaders by treating inmates, the “weak and marginal members of society, with respect and appreciation” (Greenleaf, 2003, p. 138).

In summary, the current study represents the inaugural investigation of the relationship existing between faith-based correctional volunteers, servant-leadership, and jail inmates. The results indicate that faith-based correctional volunteers in county jails pass Robert Greenleaf’s servant-leadership test. While serving the inmates, the volunteers assured inmates were not further deprived when they helped them “become healthier, wiser, freer, more autonomous, more likely themselves to become servants” (Greenleaf, 1991, p. 7). As an exploratory study, this research has achieved its goal of providing a baseline to study faith-based programming in local jails and, more specifically, the extent of servant-leadership in those programs. The foundation has now been laid; the challenge for future students and researchers is to identify new dimensions of the topic and to explore other facets of the effects of faith-based programs in local county jails.

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