

Reflection Paper

**Leading Beyond the Classroom:
Serving Through Altruistic Love and
High Ethical Standards**

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Introduction

Pulitzer Prize Winner James MacGregor Burns wrote in his seminal work *Leadership* (1978), “The force that may be the most important in shaping most leaders: learning. Learning from experience, learning from people, learning from successes and failures, learning from leaders and followers.”

These words were printed nearly 50 years ago, and yet they feel more relevant than ever. NASA recently launched Artemis II, the first crewed mission to fly around the Moon in half a century. Apple Company celebrates its 50th anniversary. The first digital camera, a Kodak product, was unveiled around the same era. The list can go on, showcasing growth all around us. One question remains: Have we grown as well in our ways of leading, teaching, and learning?

This presentation explores that question through the lens of **spiritual leadership**, a framework that places *values*, *calling*, and *membership* at the heart of how we lead and serve others, especially in educational contexts.

The Power of School Leaders

In her best-selling book *Dare to Lead* (2018), Brené Brown contrasts two striking findings from her research on shame and self-worth within educational contexts:

“In our original research on shame, 85 percent of the people we interviewed could recall a school incident from their childhood that was so shaming, it changed how they thought of themselves as learners. [...]

The same data showed that more than 90 percent of the people we interviewed could name a teacher, coach, school administrator, or faculty member who reinforced their self-worth and helped them believe in themselves and their ability.

What do these seemingly competing findings tell us? School leaders have enormous power and influence, and how they use that power and influence changes people. For better or worse.”

These statistics surface some uncomfortable but necessary questions: What if that bad leader who shamed a student was you? What if that redeemed learner was also you? What motivated those teachers who made a positive difference? What values were driving them? What sense of calling did they feel? Were they playing in a different league?

These questions lead us to the world of leadership, and to one model in particular that may help us answer them.

Navigating the World of Leadership

Leadership has been studied, debated, and defined in so many ways that by the dawn of the new millennium, the study of leadership had reached a saturation point: researchers had identified **66** distinct types of leadership (Akpa et al., 2021; Dinh et al., 2014) and offered over **1,500** different definitions of what leadership is (Bennis and Nanus, 1997; Dent et al., 2005; Mango, 2018; Rajni et al., 2025). As Northouse (2016) concludes: “after decades of dissonance, leadership scholars agree on one thing: they can’t come up with a common definition for leadership.”

Over the years, leadership has been associated with power, position, control, domination, authority, command, vision, direction, influence, inspiration, and more.

Spiritual Leadership

One of the most compelling emerging frameworks is **spiritual leadership**, which “focuses on leadership that utilizes values and sense of calling and membership to motivate followers” (Northouse, 2016). It is not necessarily tied to a specific religious denomination, rather, it speaks to the deeper motivations that drive human beings to serve.

Spiritual leadership centres on three interconnected elements:

(1) Values — what you believe and are committed to at a deep level;

- (2) Calling — a sense that your work has meaning and makes a difference;
- (3) Membership — a culture of genuine care, appreciation, and belonging

An Illustration: The Lottery Question

Imagine winning the lottery. Most of us immediately picture a new home, travel, financial security. But here is a revealing question: “If you won the lottery, would you quit your job?”

A poll reported in *Spiritual Leadership: Moving People on God’s Agenda* (Blackaby, 2011) found the following: almost 50% said: “Definitely!” — they would quit immediately; around 20% said: “Probably” — leaning toward leaving; and only 10% said: “Definitely not.” I believe this segment of 10% represent the ones aware of their **calling**. They are not driven primarily by the pay cheque. Something deeper motivates them.

Now consider: If you won the lottery, would you still do what you do — only 10 times *better*? Would you *sponsor* poor students to attend university? Would you build a *new* school? Would you establish your *dream* education programme?

If your answer is yes to any of these, you are playing in a different league. Your membership is platinum. Your values are your currency.

Spiritual Leadership: Two Foundational Frameworks

Gilbert Fairholm (1998) was among the first to define spiritual leadership. He writes that, “the heart or spirit of leadership has to do with what individual leaders believe, value, dream: what they are focused on, and committed to, at an intimate level. It is about the leader’s personal and institutional vision for the team and what each follower’s place in it is. The leader’s role in focusing team energy and commitment is more critical to group success than managerial control.”

For Fairholm, leaders are first servants, then teachers, that is, sources of information, knowledge, and standards rather than mere directors or disciplinarians. He explained that “spirituality stretches the leader’s mind toward vision, toward reality, toward courage, toward ethics.”

Louis W. Fry (2003) developed the theory suggesting what became the canonical definition of spiritual leadership, as comprising “the values, attitudes, and behaviours that are necessary to intrinsically motivate one’s self and others so that they have a sense of spiritual survival through calling and membership.”

This entails two dimensions:

1. Creating a vision wherein organisation members experience a sense of calling — that their life has meaning and makes a difference.
2. Establishing a social/organisational culture based on altruistic love, whereby leaders and followers have genuine care, concern, and appreciation for both self and others — producing a sense of membership and being understood.

Application and Reflection

We return to where we began: the 85% and the 90%.

Some 85% of people could recall a school incident from their childhood that was so shaming, it changed how they thought of themselves as learners. And 90% could name a teacher, coach, school administrator, or faculty member who reinforced their self-worth and helped them believe in themselves and their ability.

What made the difference?

It may be that those 90% of inspiring teachers were themselves once part of the 85%. They knew what shame felt like. And they chose to lead differently. That is, leading by

values, from a moral power, being aware of a special calling and extending it to a larger membership where others feel appreciated and understood.

Some 50 years ago (1968), Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. — known as both a civil rights activist and a pastor — preached a sermon called “The Drum Major Instinct.” It was a rebuke of the human drive to be first, to be in command, to be the one who knows all the answers.

In it, he offered a striking counter-vision of leadership:

“You don’t have to have a college degree to serve.
You don’t have to make your subject and your verb agree to serve.
You don’t have to know about Plato and Aristotle to serve.
You don’t have to know Einstein’s theory of relativity to serve.
You don’t have to know the second law of thermodynamics in physics to serve.

You only need a heart full of grace,
a soul generated by love,
and you can be that servant.”

This is the heart of spiritual and servant leadership. It is not about credentials, authority, or control. It is about what you carry inside — your values, your sense of calling, and your genuine care for others.

But does it work?

Voices from the Field: Albanian Teachers

Over the past year, alongside Christiane E. Theiss, PhD we delivered a series of five presentations on spiritual leadership to an audience of teachers from Albania (www.himresearch.org/portfolio). These were not Seventh-day Adventist teachers (as we are), and most were not affiliated with any particular Christian denomination; some were coming from a Muslim background or not religious at all. The content was presented using concepts such as values, calling, and membership — a human and professional approach, not

a doctrinal one. At the end of the presentations, we asked them to write a one-page essay, focusing on their take aways and plans to implement the learning.

I will share three such passages as a recent and authentic feedback, thus making the case for the impact of spiritual leadership:

Lindita L. (Albanian Teacher): “These sessions offered me a renewed perspective. Helping me to understand that leadership isn't confined to teaching alone, but extends *to every aspect of the community in which I serve.*”

Adela T. (Albanian Teacher): “This series was a journey that helped me deeply understand that leadership is not tied only to a position or authority, but to the impact we build every day with purpose and values. It has inspired me to see myself not just as a teacher who imparts knowledge, but as *a leader who shapes human beings.*”

Monika S. (Albanian Teacher): “I've been a history teacher for 26 years, and this was *the first time* I heard servant leadership addressed *in this way.* It's not about power or authority — it's about something greater: the heart and dedication towards others. I must put others first. I never thought of myself as a servant leader when I stayed after school for a child who just needed to vent, or when I called a parent to talk about life instead of grades. Truthfully, I didn't always enjoy those late-night parent conversations or the extra hours just to make sure a child felt seen. I simply thought I was acting human. But now I understand — this is true leadership. Thank you for prompting this *reflection on all my years of education, and on what I'll continue to do in the years ahead.*”

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