

Servant Leadership - Visby - June 2008 - Ian Parsons

What is 'servant leadership' in a world that needs a moral dynamic to answer the challenges of global climate change?

What is 'servant leadership' in a world of powerful vested interests that have given us global terrorism, a world that needs to find freedom and peace?

What is 'servant leadership' in a world that wants more and more economic growth, but must change direction, so that all people across the planet have the chance to live in a just way?

I never met Frank Buchman or heard him speak. But, as Ecumenical chaplain at the new La Trobe university in Melbourne, Australia, I found his way of working with students – first at Penn State College in the US and later in Oxford UK – fascinating. My university was a hotbed of extreme politics, the most politicized in Australia at that time. IofC had just come on the horizon at a confusing time in my own personal life. Through experimenting with the absolute values and the daily 'quiet time', my faith had been renewed and a new direction for my work was emerging. It was a matter of "giving as much of myself as I knew to as much of God as I knew" and asking to be shown what to do.

Frank Buchman's way of working was to look for the new person with new motives that he expected to grow like a swan out of an 'ugly duckling', if given daily help and inspiration from "the Great Spirit". He was interested in everyone and in what interested them. He was appreciative of people, but objective about the things that stopped them functioning at their best. He wanted them to realize their full potential and find both a faith and a true independence that allowed for teamwork, according to the model of a "body" with all its parts contributing to the whole. "Everyone has a part". "Change starts with me!" He fought against human control and human dependence, after he had discovered his own capacity for control and surrendered it in Keswick. Control and dependence are poison in any team. We all need our own independent contact with "that power greater than ourselves". Together, we are more likely to find the best way to do things.

At Visby in 1938, Buchman announced the direction and programme of his new movement that he had named "Moral Re-Armament", at a time of great turmoil in a world on the brink of war. He continued with the organization of that work after the war was well under way. Then, at age 64, in November 1942, he suffered a massive stroke and was so close to death, that his friends set the date of the funeral. They prayed with him and left him to sleep. That night, he had a dream or vision of the "beyond" that he later recounted to his closest colleagues. He had seen the 'outstretched arms' in welcome. Then he was told, "The time is not yet. Your work is not finished. You have other things to do". He said later, "I saw Jesus. He showed me where I was going wrong. I have been organizing a movement. But a movement should be the outcome of changed lives, not the means of changing them. From now on I am going to ask God to make me into a great life-changer".

Seven years later, one can sense the result of this request in the response of the Marxist, atheist Paul Kurowski. "I had given up Christian faith, because I had known too many Christians. Then I got to know Buchman. The atmosphere that surrounded him was something completely new. There was a peace, a love, a caring and a great humility. I had not met someone like this before. He listened very patiently to my ideas. He never tried to convert me or to answer my anti-religious point of view. He just had faith in the best in me."

It was Buchman the life-changer who interested me as a university chaplain. His aim was to get the gifts people possessed out into the flowing stream of history. We did many things that he inspired, but the most important was the use of the “quiet time”. That was true for ourselves as a small team and for those who came from other places to help. But most of all it was for anyone at all! People would come to talk, to unburden their hearts and minds of problems, fears, hopes or general confusion about life. Many were wondering about the direction of their lives or what they would do when they left university. We made many friends from different countries, different political persuasions, from different faiths or no faith at all. We tried always to have a quiet time, if possible, with each person.

Often, I would start with a question like “Do you believe in God? In conscience? In an ‘inner voice’?” What sort of values do you believe in? Honesty, for example?

(People almost invariably believed in honesty, respect, selflessness and love, especially for everyone else!) “These are guidelines, if you take them at 100% honesty, total purity etc., as a test for what you are looking for. Things may look difficult at the moment, but major on the positive side of things!!”

“Would you be willing to make an experiment now, and listen for the deepest thing inside you, to see what light there is there? Here is paper. Here is a pencil. Let’s be quiet and write our thoughts down. Yes, I’ll do it too!”

People, both staff and students, would almost always find a suggestion for their own problem. Sometimes it would come to me as a question or thought to share. If they followed the idea, they might come back and thank, but very often not at all. If they did not take it seriously, it might be another month or so and they would be back with a further depth of further complications to their already complicated lives!

It might not have been a great “mass movement” in reaching the whole university, but it was a work in progress.

Towards the end of my chaplaincy time, the University Medical Officer asked me into the Medical Advisory Centre to explain to a group in Advisory services the way we had been working. He had noticed that students were finding something helpful for their lives. After that talk, he said, “Publish it!” So a carefully prepared account of the “Quiet time” inspiration, together with the four absolute standards (carefully restated) appeared in the Australian Medical Review/Journal, 1978.

Soon after arriving at La Trobe and discovering its political ferment, I happened to meet the new Minister for Education in the Commonwealth government in Canberra, The Hon. K.E. Beazley. As education minister, he was interested in what was going on in my university. As a chaplain, I was interested in what he wanted to do in education.

He had known IofC since he was in his thirties, many years before this, when he had paid a visit to Caux, stayed for weeks and made many deep and lasting changes to his life. These affected his political contribution as well as the way he lived. Someone in Caux said to him, “Nothing to prove, nothing to justify and nothing to gain for yourself” is the way a politician to become a statesman – an enormous ‘ask’ of any politician. Beazley was recognized as the most brilliant and gifted of his generation in his political party. His commitment to moral values and the inspiration of the Almighty did not commend him to many of his colleagues who were less principled. He should have been Prime Minister. He never was chosen for that post. But his contribution is one of the best examples from contemporary politics of ‘servant leadership’. He had decided always to tell the truth in the parliament, and that sometimes meant commending the government for doing the right thing. In the end, his approach

commanded great respect in the political corridors as well as the country. His work for the indigenous Australian Aboriginal people and his removal of sectarian barriers in education are well documented.

Some of his thoughts are worth repeating here:

“What is MRA/IofC to me? I do not believe in hitting people over the head with the ‘four standards’. They are a discipline which I accept for myself, to know what is right. I value the wisdom of the ‘quiet time’. In the party room, I do not argue from a point of morality or faith. I argue for what is right in a completely utilitarian way, to achieve the best comprehensive result. But, what is morally right is always politically right. And what is morally wrong is never politically right.”

After his 32 years in Federal Parliament, he said, “I have learned that the key to social advance is not power but conscience. All social advance depends on making the conscience more sensitive.”

“Absolute love helps one not to be lethal.”

“The true function of a parliamentary opposition is to out-think the government at the point of its successes. Only then can social advance take place.”

“The thoughts of God, given first place in someone’s life bring to the innermost motives the virtue of mercy and a cure for hatred that can turn the tide of history. This is the essence of intelligent statesmanship.”

Kim E. Beazley understood what shared responsibility and shared leadership with greatest flexibility were. He knew what it meant to lead ‘from the back seat as well as the front seat’. Above all, that is ‘servant leadership’!