A Post-Colonial Response to Servant Leadership: Reclaiming Diakonia from Greenleaf

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Servant leadership, a popular concept in management literature coined by Robert Greenleaf in 1970, permeates many church settings. Finding resonance with popular depictions of Jesus and his teachings, the concept of servant leadership encourages Christians in positions of privilege and power to pretend as if they had none. Self-described servant leaders may easily rationalize their positions and actions as being in the service of others, without requiring critical reflection on empowerment, social justice, and healing. Church leaders, especially individuals leading the church in mission, require a more theologically grounded, justice-oriented understanding of Christian leadership.

The concept of *diakonia* provides an indigenous Christian understanding of missional leadership, rooted deeply in biblical and ecclesial traditions. *Diakonia* provides tools for unmasking the power dynamics hidden by Greenleaf's model of servant leadership and offers a powerful alternative. Written from a standpoint of decoloniality, this article critiques servant leadership and promotes *diakonia* as a liberative model for Christian leadership.

We begin this article with a reminder of Greenleaf's influence in secular and church settings before exposing the contradictions and blind spots of his servant leadership model. We proceed by examining context and power relations from a decolonial perspective. Since the problematic of Christian servanthood as a faithful response to the gospel is embedded in Christian tradition, we explore the roots of this tradition in the etymologically related *diakon-* terms in the New Testament. *Diakonia*, it turns out, is a much more complex idea than service, servanthood, or servant leadership. *Diakonia* is a peculiar kind of missional activity in response to and on behalf of God. *Diakonia* therefore offers a critique of servant leadership, particularly through its attention to relationships of power and context. The article culminates in a constructive model of leadership, in which the idea of service to self, community, humanity, and the divine is understood through five facets: sage, emissary, companion, steward, and healer. This is our new paradigm for Christian missional leadership rooted in *diakonia*.

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Greenleaf's influence

The term "servant leadership" originates with Greenleaf's 1970 essay, "The Servant as Leader."[1] Greenleaf drew inspiration from Hermann Hesse's *Journey to the East*, a story in which a travelling party falls into disarray after their servant Leo disappears. Years later, the narrator discovers that Leo is in fact the leader of the Order that sponsored the original journey. Greenleaf, who retired as director of management research after forty years at AT&T, concludes: "the great leader is seen as servant first, and that simple fact is the key to his greatness." Leadership was bestowed, but Leo's real nature was a servant, Greenleaf observes. He sees a critical distinction: "the servant-leader is servant first"—a person "sharply different from one who is leader first." Asserting, "more servants should emerge as leaders, or should follow only servant-leaders," Greenleaf launched an influential school of thought in leadership studies.

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1. Robert K. Greenleaf, "Who is the Servant-Leader?" *The International Journal of Servant-Leadership* 1, no. 1 (2005): 21–27.

Greenleaf's approach was revolutionary and counter-cultural for his time and context. In the United States during the 1970s, the upper echelons of corporate management were dominated by white men. Assertive, competitive behavior was rewarded. Greenleaf's model challenged the status quo, encouraging leaders and managers to tone down their assertiveness and take steps toward cooperativeness. It suggested that greater rewards come when a leader gives priority to the needs of others over the drive to win at business.[2] Although his development of the servant-leader model was not theologically based, the concept also resonated with church leaders.

Greenleaf's language is found in many church settings. For example, in 2023 the House of Bishops of The Episcopal Church pledged "to exercise the responsibilities of servant leadership modeled by Jesus" in a statement on accountability.[3] The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) includes "Empower Servant Leadership" as one of its "Seven Marks of Vital Congregations."[4] The Lutheran Women's Missionary League of the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod published "A Servant Leader Bible Study" in 2020.[5] The United Church of Christ repeatedly refers to called pastors as "representative servant leadership on behalf of the United Church of Christ" in its Manual on Ministry, yet without any theological elaboration.[6] Likewise, The United Methodist Church (UMC) dedicates two sections of its *Book of Discipline* to "servant leadership," stating, "The ordained ministry is defined by its faithful commitment to servant leadership following the example of Jesus Christ."[7] However, the UMC fails to connect this concept to a theology of ministry, mission, or *diakonia*.

Exposing servant leadership

The term "servant leader" is admittedly a contradiction in terms. In an autocratic context, one takes orders while the other gives orders. What can we do with this logical dissonance? Is it a window into

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profound wisdom, like a koan, a truth that cannot be contained within a logical system as in Gödel's incompleteness theorem? Or is it simply nonsense—or worse, a form of double-speak designed to mask coercive systems of control, as depicted in Orwell's *1984*? Relational power is not shared equally between servant and leader, manager and employee. Attempting to occupy both roles at the same time is either genius or folly.

Some see genius. Espousing a feminist ethic of care, Kae Reynolds argues that the servant leadership model provides a path for more gender-integrative organizations.[8] She claims, "Serving has less to do with coerced subservience and more to do with humble, empowered, ethical activism. As such, servant and leader are compatible."[9] Her depiction of servant leadership requires a carefully managed balance between self-care and care for others: "The processes of servant-leading and caring, however, do not by default imply self-sacrifice or self-denial. The sacrifices a servant-leader makes in the process of leading can only be made on the basis of self-stability."[10] With confidence in the female manager's ability to achieve such self-stability, she asserts the model's positive contribution to organizations: "Servant-leadership espouses a nonhierarchical, participative approach."[11] Or does it?

Others see folly. According to management expert Mitch McCrimmon, "servant leadership is a bad idea."[12] The concept is either "interesting but false" or "true but trivial." If taken literally, it is false. Managers, unlike servants, have the power to fire their employees. To pretend otherwise is disingenuous. If taken

2. For a Christian example of white masculinity adopting this approach, see Bennett J. Sims, *Servanthood: Leadership for the Third Millenium* (Boston: Cowley, 1997). Sims, a bishop of The Episcopal Church, founded the Institute for Servant Leadership and served as its first president.

3. Office of Public Affairs, The Episcopal Church, "House of Bishops Adopts Statement on Accountability," September 25, 2023, https://www.episcopalchurch.org/publicaffairs/house-of-bishops-adopts-statement-on-accountability/.

4. Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), "Seven Marks of Vital Congregations," September 20, 2024, https://pcusa.org/resource/seven-marks-vital-congregations.

5. Mitchell Schuessler and Clarinda Iowa, "A Servant Leader Bible Study," January 2020, https://www.lwml.org/posts/short-bible-studies/a-servant-leader.

6. Ministerial Excellence, Support and Authorization Local Church Ministries, A Covenanted Ministry of the United Church of Christ, *Manual on Ministry: A Guide to Authorizing Ministry in the United Church of Christ*, 2018, https://www.ucc.org/manual-on-ministry/.

7. *The Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church 2020/2024* (Nashville: United Methodist Publishing House, 2024), para. 139, https://www.cokesbury.com/book-of-discipline-book-of-resolutions-free-versions.

8. Kae Reynolds, "Servant-Leadership as Gender-Integrative Leadership," *Journal of Leadership Education* 10, no. 2 (Summer 2011): 155–171.

9. Reynolds, "Servant-Leadership as Gender-Integrative Leadership," 164.

10. Reynolds, "Servant-Leadership as Gender-Integrative Leadership," 161.

11. Kae Reynolds, "Servant Leadership: A Feminist Perspective," *The International Journal of Servant-Leadership* 10, no. 1 (2014): 57.

12. Mitch McCrimmon. "Why Servant Leadership is a Bad Idea." August 16, 2010. http://www.management-issues.com/opinion/6015/why-servant-leadership-is-a-bad-idea/.

metaphorically, it is trivial: "the idea . . . says nothing distinctive, nothing that separates it from every other model of leadership that also attacks autocratic, heroic models of leadership." He proceeds to argue that the servant leadership model is paternalistic and just another version of the heroic leader mentality. From his vantage point in profit-oriented business, claims about servanthood go only as far as they benefit the bottom line. According to McCrimmon, the necessary risk-taking and desire to be of service that motivates many professionals "is best captured by terms like authentic leadership, integrity, selflessness or dedication" rather than the "slippery concept" of servant leadership.

The asymmetry of paternalism in Greenleaf's model lubricates this slippery double-speak. Not only does a manager's insistence about serving their employees while maintaining a position of power over them ring hollow, but the efficacy of this paradigm also depends on the manager's actual relationship to power and privilege, both of which are contextually determined. While Greenleaf seeks to address "the issues of power and authority" in "less coercive and more creatively supporting ways," he provides no tools for critical analysis.[13] In fact, his attention is restricted to legitimizing the leader's use of power.[14] The subtlety of being "servant first" is impossible for the manager who clings to power and privilege when less coercive methods fail to produce the desired effects. What happens to Greenleaf's model when power dynamics are observed and analyzed?

Examining power and context

Servant leadership inevitably operates within particular social contexts and existing power relations. According to business researcher Helena Liu, the theory of servant leadership "has primarily assumed a decontextualized view of leadership untouched by power."[15] When this model is applied to contexts in which the common leadership style is not autocratic or in which assertive, competitive behavior is not encouraged, the idea of servant leadership becomes problematic. For leaders who are naturally more cooperative or who are reluctant to assert themselves, Greenleaf's model can encourage unhealthy behavior or become counterproductive. In communities and human systems that value self-sacrifice and idolize servanthood, claiming this leadership model can perpetuate injustice, marginalization, and dysfunction. These problematic dynamics are revealed through decolonial power analysis and contextual awareness.

Even an apparently benign application of servant leadership reproduces and reinforces the hierarchies it purports to subvert. For example, Reynolds' ethic of care replicates the power-neutral assumptions critiqued by feminist scholars. In contrast, Deborah

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Eicher-Catt asserts, "it is not possible to de-gender or de-masculinize S-L [servant-leadership] as a myth."[16] Questioning whose interests this myth serves, Eicher-Catt concludes that servant leadership is a hierarchical ideology "based upon an oppressive, patriarchal system of thinking" and "steeped in a long history of religious doctrine."[17] Though Greenleaf did not derive his ideas explicitly from Christian doctrine, the influence of Christendom's history of hierarchy and power is apparent and assumed.

Cultural constructs of race and ethnicity are also part of this mythology. In a limited but persuasive case study, Liu offers "an intersectional critique of servant leadership," demonstrating "the ways servant leadership is necessarily embedded in wider power structures that shape who gets to be a 'servant leader' and who remains merely a 'servant'."[18] Specifically, she discovers "how sociopolitical meanings of race, gender, sexuality, age, and class inform the extent to which people can be accepted or rejected as a 'servant leader'" and argues that "the practice of servant leadership is necessarily co-constructed between managers and employees."[19] It is a relational dynamic between leader and follower. Thus, if one is not of the expected demographic of "leader," one's practice of servant leadership may be perceived merely as servitude rather than leadership.

A decolonial approach yields a deeper understanding of power. Kristina Lizardy-Hajbi, a theologian and professor of leadership, reveals the common conception of interpersonal influence exercised "through relationships existing on equal grounds" as a colonial construct of power.[20] A decolonial analysis finds more than power *over*. Drawing on Michel Foucault, she offers an expansive notion, recognizing power as "a dynamic presence throughout all levels of society … a force shaping society itself."[21] Her decolonial understanding of power reveals the idea of "legitimate" authority as a tool "to maintain hegemonies of power concentrated

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13. Greenleaf, "Who is the Servant-Leader?" 23.

14. Karl Inge Tangen, "Servant Leadership and Power: An Introductory Theological Analysis," *Scandinavian Journal for Leadership and Theology* 6 (2019): 8, https://doi.org/10.53311/sjlt.v6.35.

15. Helena Liu, "Just the Servant: An Intersectional Critique of Servant Leadership," *Journal of Business Ethics* 156 (2019): 1099, DOI 10.1007/s10551-017-3633-0.

16. Deborah Eicher-Catt, "The Myth of Servant Leadership: A Feminist Perspective," *Women and Language* 28, no. 1 (2005): 23.

17. Eicher-Catt, "The Myth of Servant Leadership," 22–23.

18. Liu, "Just the Servant," 1099.

19. Liu, "Just the Servant," 1108.

20. Kristina Lizardy-Hajbi, *Unraveling Religious Leadership: Power, Authority, and Decoloniality* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2024), 114.

21. Lizardy-Hajbi, *Unraveling Religious Leadership,* 107.

within particular peoples and structures."[22] Thus, when power is exercised within a society with a long history of racism, sexism, and colonialism, it will benefit the privileged and oppress the marginalized unless intentional steps to decolonize are taken.

Lizardy-Hajbi's decolonial approach reveals the danger of servant-leadership language. Echoing McCrimmon, she bluntly identifies "the fallacy perpetuated that this servant leader is truly a *servant . . .* when quite the opposite is the case."[23] *Servant leadership* masks the forms of colonial power that animate it. She asserts, "leaders with authority and to whom others are accountable—yet who also buy into the logic and practice of servant leadership—may actually be assuaging the discomfort of that very authority, thus desiring to render it invisible."[24] Invisible authority and power cannot be held accountable for the harms they cause to the vulnerable. Thus, she concludes, "servant leadership itself *reinscribes* colonial realities for institutional subalterns through its very language."[25] The concept allows those with power to pretend they are without power and upholds oppressive structures in ways that render them invisible and therefore safe from critique.

The oppressive dynamic of power and privilege enabled by servant-language is obvious to those in historically marginalized groups. Jacquelyn Grant, a womanist theologian, famously objected to servanthood as a meaningful paradigm for Christian discipleship precisely because of the way that servitude and servanthood have been conflated and imposed upon black women.[26] In the absence of material plans to address racism, classism, sexism, and other injustices, the call for servanthood is another means of oppression. She asserts, "The sin of servanthood" is the result of "the institutionalization of oppressive language" to promote an unjust status quo."[27] In a follow-up article, she explains: "Christian servanthood and sociopolitical servanthood were taught to be the same. In serving white people, blacks were being obedient to God. The critical factor is one of control. Servanthood language is designed to get and maintain that control."[28] Why, then, is servant leadership such a popular idea among black and white Christians alike?

The problem of Christian servanthood

Regardless of its oppressive history and illogical footing, the faithful disciple as servant motif is irrevocably embedded in Christian tradition. Even Grant concedes: "There is nothing more

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22. Lizardy-Hajbi, *Unraveling Religious Leadership,* 106.
23. Lizardy-Hajbi, *Unraveling Religious Leadership,* 121.
24. Lizardy-Hajbi, *Unraveling Religious Leadership*.
25. Lizardy-Hajbi, *Unraveling Religious Leadership,* 123.
26. Jacquelyn Grant, "The Sin of Servanthood and the Deliverance of Discipleship," in *A Troubling in My Soul: Womanist Perspectives on Evil and Suffering*, ed. Emilie Townes, 199–218 (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis, 1993), 208.
27. Grant, "The Sin of Servanthood," 210.
28. Jacquelyn Grant, "Servanthood Revisited: Womanist Explorations of Servanthood Theology," in *Black Faith and Public Talk: Critical Essays on James H. Cone's Black Theology and Black Power*, ed. Dwight N. Hopkins, 126–137 (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis, 1999), 135.

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basic to our understanding of Christian living than the notion that we are all called to be 'servants'."[29] That this notion seems unwise is no deterrent to Christian adherents, who may quote the Apostle Paul unashamedly: "For God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God's weakness is stronger than human strength." (1 Cor 1:25). The problem originates with the Son of God, who emptied himself and taught his disciples to follow his example of weakness.

Kenosis refers to Christ's self-emptying of divine power. According to Paul, Christ "emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, assuming human likeness. And . . . humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross" (Phil 2:7-8). As a result of this dramatic act of divine kenosis, God exalted Christ above all others (Phil 2:9), and Christians worship him and confess "Jesus Christ is Lord" (Phil 2:11). Kenosis expresses deeply Jesus' uniquely human and divine character.

A problem for Christian leadership studies—and discipleship in general—is that Paul framed his Philippians hymn with the admonition, "Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus" (Phil 2:5). The late JungHee Park, a diaconal minister in the United Church of Canada, offered a powerful testimony as she struggled with this passage. Attempting to follow Christ's example as she "work[ed] for the oppressed who were different from myself," she experienced an epiphany:

> At that moment I realized that I had been living the false dream of an "arrogant servant" who thought she could give up her privilege and pay the price to help less fortunate people and who thought that, according to the Bible, that was the way to follow Jesus' servant ministry. It was a moment of awakening to realize that the Scripture passage reflects both Paul's privileged perspective and ours and that our Christology is directly related to our privilege.[30]

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29. Grant, "Servanthood Revisited," 134.
30. JungHee Park, "A Different Tenor: Glimpses and Critical Reflections," *Toronto Journal of Theology* 25, no. 2 (2009): 258, DOI: 10.3138/tjt.25.2.257.

Privilege is a conundrum for Christians adopting a servant-leadership mentality. It is one thing for the savior of the cosmos to humble himself to the point of death; it is quite another thing for a diaconal minister or middle manager to attempt to renounce all self-interest and become a slave to her congregants or employees, even to the detriment of herself and the people she intends to serve.

But is self-renunciation not what Christ taught? Ever a parabolic preacher, Jesus shocked his listeners with seeming contradictions to reveal deeper truths. For example, "whoever wishes to be great among you must be your servant [*diakonos*]" (Matt 20:26; cf. Matt 23:11). The phrase *servant leader* nestles into this Matthean rhetoric nicely—as if encapsulating a divinely inspired solution to the human condition. Jesus emphasized his own role as servant: "the Son of Man came not to be served [*diakonēthēnai*] but to serve [*diakonēsai*] and to give his life a ransom for many." (Matt 20:28; cf. Mark 10:45). Thus, the idea of servanthood in Christian tradition is communicated through the Greek *diakon-*, the root of *diakonia*.

Diakonia as a peculiar kind of servanthood

Diakonia is commonly understood as Christian motivated social service. Inspiration comes from Acts 6:1-4, when the apostles selected Stephen and six others for the service [*diakonia*] of the physical needs of widows so that the apostles could focus on the service [*diakonia*] of the word [of God]. Stephen is considered the first deacon, even though Paul used *diakonos* to describe Phoebe, indicating that she was a recognized leader and held office in the church of Cenchreae (Rom 16:1). Within Protestantism, John Calvin reaffirmed the ministry of deacon as centered on acts of mercy by the privileged for the unprivileged: deacons are "those whom the church has appointed to distribute alms and take care of the poor, and serve as stewards of the common chest of the poor."[31] Deaconesses reinvigorated this Christian vocation of service among Lutherans in Germany in the 1830s. The modern deaconess movement then propagated within Lutheran, Anglican, Methodist, and other communions. Institutions such as the Chicago Training School, established in 1885, promoted diaconal service through vocations of nursing, social work, and teaching. The notion of *diakonia* as lowly, humble service, however, is incomplete—and without correction, distorts the meaning of Christian servanthood.

Christian servanthood, as understood through the root *diakon-* in Greek, implies a more complex relationship to power. According to New Testament scholar John N. Collins, *diakonia* is the work of an emissary, a messenger or mediator sent by a person in a position of power.[32] Thus, to serve through *diakonia* is to represent an authority, such as a bishop. With this revised understanding of *diakonia*, Benjamin L. Hartley argues that "a

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more apostolic understanding of a minister's vocation may guard against an unhealthy victim complex."[33] Understood as emissary, *diakonia* is not a powerless or power-neutral role.[34] Serving as an intermediary—even when performing menial tasks for others—emphasizes a relational status to the church. Christian servanthood, as expressed in *diakonia*, is therefore a missional activity on behalf of God.

Christian attempts to adopt Greenleaf's servant leadership paradigm often obfuscate power dynamics, hiding problematic tendencies toward "arrogant servant" or "unhealthy victim" mentalities. On the one hand, leaders who believe that they are the ones privileged to serve operate with the arrogance of privilege, reifying a social hierarchy in which they perceive themselves above those they serve. Calvin's description of the deacon illustrates this dynamic, ignoring or denying the agency of individuals on the receiving end of "service." On the other hand, leaders who believe they should always be the ones giving and never receiving service sometimes misperceive their chosen victimhood and consequent suffering as redemptive. Not only is this victim complex bad theology, but it is also materially harmful when applied to oppressed people who suffer unwillingly.

The idea of servant leadership must be decolonized. Such colonial thinking with its harms led Grant to declare the concept of servanthood a sin. Elizabeth Soto Albrecht, a womanist and *mujerista* Mennonite theologian, recognizes suffering as not only a theological problem but also a political problem, drawing on the

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31. John Calvin, *Calvin: Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960), 4.3.9.

32. John N. Collins, *Diakonia Studies: Critical Issues in Ministry* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 3–36.

33. Benjamin L. Hartley, "The Problem and Promise of the Diaconate," in *Diaconal Studies: Lived Theology for the Church in North America*, eds. Nessan and Stephens, 51–62 (Oxford: Regnum Books International, 2024), 58.

34. Neither is Hesse's character a powerless servant: despite Greenleaf's imagining otherwise, Leo is first a leader of a wealthy Order and only secondarily a servant to the traveling group—a subservient role chosen, not imposed.

work of Dorothee Sölle, M. Shawn Copeland, and Musa Dube, among others. Resisting the suffering imposed upon her, Soto Albrecht claims the power of the cross to say that suffering and death do not have the last word. Working with victim-survivors of sexual abuse, she proclaims, "*Dios no desea sufrimiento para tu vida* (God does not desire suffering for your life)."[35] Absent power analysis, servant leadership becomes a validation for imposed suffering within oppressive systems.

This is not to say that power analysis cannot be combined with Greenleaf's model to empower women and others in marginalized social locations. For example, Faith Wambura Ngunjiri's study of women leaders in Africa combined Greenleaf's servant leadership model with an appreciation for African spirituality and a theory of "tempered radicals."[36] Such strategic melding of models, according to Choi Hee An, is necessary for women's leadership within colonized contexts.[37] Nothing in our critique of Greenleaf should prevent decolonizing efforts from leveraging servant leadership to their own empowerment and liberation.

In general, however, a liberative and empowering model of Christian leadership does not need Greenleaf and is, in fact, unnecessarily encumbered by servant leadership language. Beatrice Juma observes two themes of effective leadership in the diaconal church in Kenya: 1) asset mapping and mobilization and 2) empowerment.[38] Her research case studies are compelling, and the connection to *diakonia* strong. However, she concludes her analysis by connecting her study to Greenleaf's management model before correcting it with the idea of "biblical servant leadership," the "essence [of which] is to follow Jesus Christ" (drawing on Vhumazi Magenzi).[39] In other words, Juma seems compelled to affirm the popular servant leadership language before claiming discipleship as the more accurate paradigm of Christian empowerment. Likewise, Olehile. A. Buffel argues for empowering indigenous leadership in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Southern Africa, referencing Greenleaf before quickly pivoting to Jesus as the exemplar.[40] Such eisegesis distorts the life and teachings of Jesus. Christians do not

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Diakonia as a critique of servant leadership

The concept of *diakonia* provides a corrective, both critical and constructive, to servant leadership studies. Two theologians of *diakonia*, Man-Hei Yip and JungHee Park, are particularly helpful for deconstructing servant leadership and providing liberating alternatives.

Yip de-subjugates the servant image in the Philippians Christ hymn by interpreting *diakonia* as "a call to remember" truthfully, drawing on the work of Emilie Townes.[42] Resisting the romanticization of servanthood and service, she interprets "Jesus' salvific work as both an intervention to disrupt (imperial) domination/subjugation and an act of solidarity with the poor and oppressed."[43] To counter "the sacrificial language justifying servitude and the oppression of people," she affirms the agency and subjectivity of the marginalized by valuing their story telling.[44] Sites of memory thus serve as an intervention by and for the oppressed: "the *diakonia* of Jesus provides a counter narrative" to colonizing histories, "giving agency to the people for resisting systemic oppression and dehumanization."[45] Insofar as church leaders are shaped by the *diakonia* of Jesus rather than the romanticization of servant language, they become agents and partners of liberation. "Deacons are among the cloud of rememberers, not sitting still but participating in the life of others, including the poor and oppressed."[46] A de-subjugated image of Jesus empowers counter-narratives and promotes justice and hope, healing and reconciliation.

What could go wrong with such a practice of solidarity? Park, inspired by the missiology and diaconal practice of Katharine B. Hockin, offers an explanation. She expresses concern about healing and reconciliation as the focus of mission as exemplified in the

35. Elizabeth Soto Albrecht, "The Politics of Suffering and JustPraxis," in *Liberating the Politics of Jesus: Renewing Peace Theology Through the Wisdom of Women*, eds. Elizabeth Soto Albrecht and Darryl W. Stephens (New York: T&T Clark, 2020), 66.

36. Faith Wambura Ngunjiri, *Women's Spiritual Leadership in Africa: Tempered Radicals and Critical Servant Leaders* (Albany: State University of New York, 2010), 10–12.

37. Choi Hee An, *A Postcolonial Leadership: Asian Immigrant Christian Leadership and Its Challenges* (Albany: State University of New York, 2020), 189.

38. Beatrice Juma, "New Paradigms of Leadership in the Church: Leadership as Empowerment?" in *The Diaconal Church*, ed. Dietrich et al. (London: Regnum, 2019), 214.

39. Juma, "New Paradigms of Leadership in the Church," 220–221.

40. Olehile A. Buffel, "A Critical Reflection on the Indigenous Church Leadership that Behaves Like Modern-Day Pharaohs: The Lutheran Church as a Case Study as We Search for Servant Leadership that is Liberating and Transformative," *Missionalia: Southern African Journal of Mission Studies* 47, no. 3 (2019), 298, https://missionalia.journals.ac.za/pub/article/view/334.

41. In fact, in the passage Buffel (298) cites to establish Jesus as a servant leader (Matt 20:25–28), *servant/served/serve* are all translations of the Greek *diakon-*.

42. Man-Hei Yip, "De-Subjugating the Servant Image as a Theo-Diaconal Intervention," in *Diaconal Studies: Lived Theology for the Church in North America*, eds. Nessan and Stephens, 123–132 (Oxford: Regnum Books International, 2024), 130.

43. Yip, "De-Subjugating the Servant Image," 126–127.

44. Yip, "De-Subjugating the Servant Image," 127.

45. Yip, "De-Subjugating the Servant Image," 130.

46. Yip, "De-Subjugating the Servant Image.

work of Robert J. Schreiter.[47] According to Park, Schreiter proposes "shifting the paradigm of mission from liberation to healing and reconciliation," achieved through "healing memories" and truth-telling.[48] Hearing echoes of past foreign missionaries motivated by a sense of Manifest Destiny, Park questions whose healing Schreiter, a white male professor, addressed: "Do his 'memories' apply both to the victims and the wrongdoers?"[49] She concludes that his subject is the privileged actor and that his theology of reconciliation does not account for the healing of oppressors and perpetrators.[50] The "arrogant servant" in this case appears as one who does not know his own need for being served and healed.

Healing and reconciliation, as such, are not the problem but rather Schretier's inattention to power and privilege in the missional relationship. Alternatively, Park lifts up Marilyn J. Legge's decolonizing work to develop an understanding of mission that addresses the necessary healing and transformation of colonizers, including the church.[51] Legge reframes "mission as practices of solidarity that enhance justice/love or right relation."[52] In Park's telling, Hockin validates this reframing experientially as she moved from a stance of partnership to one of companionship.[53] According to Park, "[Hockin] became more and more aware of a tendency to manage our partners, even in the concept of the partnership model."[54] Through the image of companionship, Hockin de-centers the roles of church and missionary, ceding the space taken from others in the partnership model. Park explains Hockin's resulting missional stance: "her main focus is not on the other who appears to need help and healing as a victim, the poor and sick and the oppressed, but on herself and her Church and faith community."[55] In other words, Hockin's self-emptying requires attention to self—but for the purpose of recognizing her own brokenness and need of healing. Park concludes: "Thus, rather than a missiology of healing directed towards others, I suggest a missiology of companionship which embodies the healing of ourselves as an appropriate paradigm for the mission of diaconal ministry today."[56] We agree. The image of a companion is an essential facet of a *diakonia* model of leadership.

Informed by liberation theology and missional theology, ecumenical *diakonia* provides a more faithful foundation for leadership than Greenleaf's servant model.

Constructing a leadership model rooted in *diakonia*

Given the problematic nature of Greenleaf's servant leadership model and subsequent issues that arise from applying it to Christian contexts, what might a better model look like? The following provides the contours of a new leadership model rooted in *diakonia*, in which the orientation toward service is understood through multiple facets, including *companion*. Where servant leadership is overly focused on serving the needs of others to the neglect of power dynamics and contextual factors, leadership informed by *diakonia* has the potential to present a more holistic model that makes space for empowerment, social justice, and healing.

Some initial inspiration comes from the work of Mary T. Lederleitner in developing a polycentric leadership model rooted in the global missions movement.[57] Polycentric Mission came into use by missiologists at the start of the twenty-first century as a way of explaining highly dynamic cultural relationships and interactions, replacing the older missional paradigm of sending and receiving cultures.[58] Drawing on the experiences of leaders in global mission operating "from everywhere to everyone,"[59] Lederleitner derives shared theological convictions, tension points, and practical realities that must inform a polycentric leadership model. The result is a complex paradigm that "sets a high bar" and may be challenging to practice on a variety of levels.[60]

In the face of such challenge, some leaders may be inclined to fall back on more familiar models such as servant leadership. This is where *diakonia* can provide some helpful framing for constructing a new leadership model. For example, the emerging ecumenical consensus on *diakonia* identifies a more justice-oriented role than *servanthood* connotes. According to the World Council of Churches (WCC), "We cannot understand or practice *diakonia* apart from justice and peace. Service cannot be separated from prophetic witness or the ministry of reconciliation. Mission must include transformative *diakonia*."[61] Informed by liberation

47. Park, "A Different Tenor," 264–266, discussing Robert J. Schreiter, "Reconciliation and Healing as a Paradigm for Mission," *International Review of Mission* 94, no. 372 (January 2005): 74–85.

48. Park, "A Different Tenor," 264, citing Schreiter, 82.

49. Park, "A Different Tenor," 265–266.

50. Park, "A Different Tenor," 266.

51. Park, "A Different Tenor," 267.

52. Marilyn J. Legge, "Negotiating Mission: A Canadian Stance," *International Review of Mission* 93, no. 368 (January 2004): 120.

53. Park, "A Different Tenor," 268.

54. Park, "A Different Tenor," 268.

55. Park, "A Different Tenor," 268.

56. Park, "A Different Tenor," 271. Park died in 2016 (https://www.ducc.ca/in-memorium/2016/01/31/junghee-park/), and her husband has co-authored a posthumous work based on her doctoral research, which promises to develop this approach in detail: Hyuk Cho and Junghee Park, *Decolonizing Diakonia: From Servanthood to Companionship* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, forthcoming 2025).

57. Mary T. Lederleitner, "Navigating Leadership Challenges in a Polycentric World," *Transformation* 38, no. 3 (2021): 240–253.

58. Lederleitner, "Navigating Leadership Challenges," 242.

59. Lederleitner, "Navigating Leadership Challenges," 241, citing Samuel Escobar, *The New Global Mission: The Gospel from Everywhere to Everyone* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 2003).

60. Lederleitner, "Navigating Leadership Challenges," 251.

61. World Council of Churches and ACT Alliance, *Called to Transformation: Ecumenical Diakonia* (Geneva: WCC, 2022), 33,

theology and missional theology, ecumenical *diakonia* provides a more faithful foundation for leadership than Greenleaf's servant model.

A *diakonia* leadership model (figure 1) may be mapped onto two dimensions represented by the intersecting axes. One dimension runs horizontally with the self on one end and community on the other end. This dimension represents the span of our relations: we need to maintain both an inner life (relation to self) and an outer life (relation to community). The second dimension runs vertically with the human on one end and the divine on the other end. This dimension represents the nature of our relationships, inclusive of humanity and human-created systems as well as divinity and divine creation. These two intersecting axes create space for four leadership facets: sage, emissary, companion, and steward. A fifth facet, healer, encircles the model, representing the attention and commitment to healing throughout the span and nature of our relations to self, each other, community, and God.

Describing the five facets of diakonia leadership along these two relational dimensions shows how one may integrate a theology of *diakonia* with a practice of leadership.

Sage: Positioned in the model between relation to self and human systems, the Sage facet captures the need for wisdom and self-awareness as a leader. The *diakonia* leader must be able to recognize and reflect on their intersectionality—all the aspects of their identity that make them who they are. This includes gender identity, culture, race, economic background, educational level, geographic location, and more. These facets of identity have bearing on relationships and dynamics such as privilege and power. Before a *diakonia* leader can engage in the life-giving service and social justice that mark diaconal ministry, they must be able to sustain healthy self-awareness and self-reflection to nourish and grow into the Sage facet.

Emissary: Positioned in the model between relation to self and the Divine, the Emissary facet reinforces the relationship of a *diakonia* leader as being sent by God to carry out a call. There is a responsibility here to discern and maintain a relationship to God and the church. It requires commitment to listen for and interpret God's call, in relation not just to the leader but also to those with whom the leader relates.

Companion: Positioned in the model between relation to community and human systems, the Companion facet highlights the distinct way in which a *diakonia* leader accompanies the communities they serve. As noted in Park's work, companionship is deeper than servanthood and partnership.[62] It conveys a connection with communities and other individuals, supporting solidarity and advocacy. It is a commitment to leading by walking alongside those who are disadvantaged and vulnerable, empowering their

A Diakonia Leadership Model

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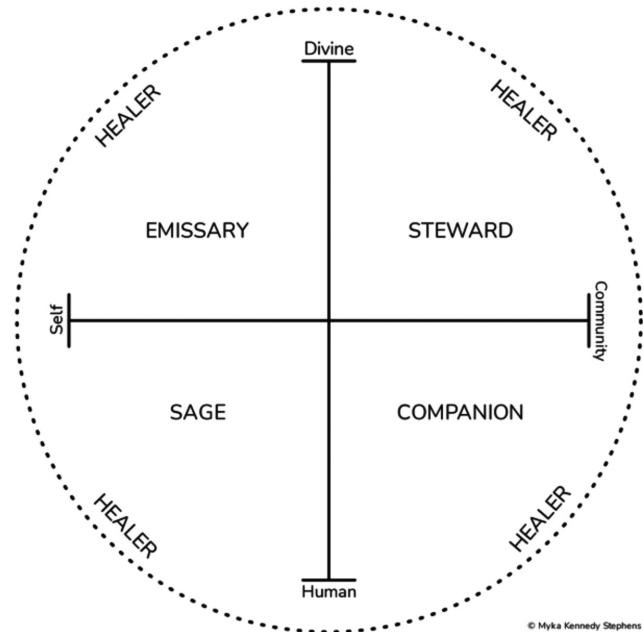
voice and choice rather than maintaining systems of patronage and relations of dependency.

Steward: Positioned in the model between relation to community and the Divine, the Steward facet connects and uplifts the vital commitment to care for humanity within the larger context of God's creation. In watching over the natural world as well as human society's impact on creation, the *diakonia* leader can identify harms and call out injustices. By exercising care, they can help conserve creation and advocate for systemic change to bring about a more just and loving world, human society included.

Healer: Encircling the model, the Healer facet permeates and complements the other four facets in a unique way. While each of the other four facets connect a pair of poles from the model's dimensions, Healer emphasizes the need for restoration, reconciliation, and reparation in all our relationships: to self, to each other, to community, and to God. (See, for example, 2 Corinthians 5:18, "All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and has given us the ministry [*diakonian*] of reconciliation.") The Healer facet represents the way in which a *diakonia* leader attends to healing trauma that resides in the self, to healing relationship to God through grace and forgiveness, to healing harm we do to one another in community, and to healing creation through acts of care, conservation, and advocacy.

Conclusion

This article critiques Greenleaf's servant leadership model from a decolonial perspective and offers an alternative model. *Diakonia* provides a more empowering and liberative model of leadership, attentive to power and contextual factors and rooted in Christian scripture and theology. This indigenously Christian paradigm of missional leadership is ripe for further development.

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https://www.oikoumene.org/resources/publications/ecumenical-diakonia.

62. Park, "A Different Tenor."