

GROUND ZERO

INTRODUCING CHRIST-CENTRED SERVANT LEADERSHIP

‘We need a new generation of leaders. And we need it now.’ – Umair Haque²

‘For the Son of Man did not come to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.’ – Mark 10:45

In 2013, I had the kind of opportunity that doesn’t happen often in life – the opportunity of a blank page. At the time I didn’t quite see it that way, though. In fact, truth be told, I was still grieving for a vision that I thought had died.

I’d been serving in a Christian non-profit organisation for 12 years. It had been an exciting but challenging period – 12 years of leadership development right at the coal-face. Without dissecting those years (a book in its own right), I felt I was always playing catch-up. I was young when I stepped into leadership. And I was ambitious. As the founder of the first branch of the ministry in

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South Africa, I remember the excitement I felt when I first saw my name on an org chart as ‘Africa Director’– a big title, as Africa is a big place! But I loved the continent and threw myself into the task of overseeing ministry of various forms in 15 different African countries, as well as spearheading the work in South Africa. As a team, we were completely strapped for cash, naïve to the point of folly, but full of passion and zeal for the gospel.

Almost immediately, I began to realise the importance of leadership development. We were attracting young people from different countries who aspired to be leaders. I saw their potential, but was often frustrated at how little I could offer them in terms of time, resources and direct leadership input. But God clearly used this experience to develop my zeal to grow leaders. More and more I began to feel that God was calling me to serve young African leaders, to invest in them so that they could flourish in faith and life.

From 2010 to 2012, I worked with my African leadership team on a strategy that I felt would enable us to develop young leaders across the continent. But the strategy was a big departure from the vision of the organisation as a whole, and it became clear that a transition would soon be required. Although it was a very painful process for many of us involved, in hindsight I see it as part of God’s plan to draw me into something new.

By early 2013, it was clear that my time with the organisation had come to an end. I felt a bit like Elijah when he fled from Ahab and Jezebel – needing to get away from it all and hear from God again, and simply needing some rest. I resigned without a clue as to where God would lead me next. Although I had strong feelings of grief, loss and failure, I also felt a sense of relief and anticipation.

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I was at ground zero. I had a blank page. An opportunity to start over.

Daunting as it seemed, it also felt good to have the space to consider how I could proactively develop a ministry that would move forward in strength. I also took this time to complete my first book, *The Pace Setter*, which helped cement my approach to leadership development as I explored the relationship between Paul and Timothy. I began my PhD which explored the topic of leadership within the context of sports ministry in South Africa. It was exciting fuel for me as I began to get clarity on my next assignment.

And in the middle of this process, I finally felt ready to respond positively to Andy Hawthorne's invitation to join The Message and spearhead their first international hub in Cape Town. God also graciously provided continuity as two former colleagues joined me for this next adventure.

BECOMING CHRIST-CENTRED SERVANT LEADERS

Part of the blessing of finding ourselves at ground zero was a chance for our small, pioneering team to define the kind of leaders we wanted to be. This book is a consequence of that process, as it was then we decided to become 'Christ-centred servant leaders.' The eight hallmarks of Christ-centred servant leadership presented in the pages that follow are those that have come alive to us as we have embarked on the adventure of leadership within the context of The Message in South Africa, as we seek to raise a movement of leaders from the margins of society amongst the outcasts, prisoners and gang members. Clearly, they are drawn from my past

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experiences of ministry in Africa. Yet they are also fashioned from the process of becoming part of The Message global family and imbibing the DNA of this extraordinary organisation.

It's important to say these hallmarks have emerged as part of a collaborative process. Firstly, with my co-director here in Cape Town, Mark Slessenger, who helped me develop the outline and deliver training to our South African leadership team. Secondly, they've been developed through leadership mentoring groups that I've facilitated over the past few years – sharing these concepts, receiving feedback, and honing my understanding of what it means to be a Christ-centred servant leader. And thirdly, they've been tried and tested through countless interactions and discussions with good friends and co-leaders over many years.

It sometimes appears that much leadership material is written in a vacuum – but no one leads in a vacuum. This book is seeking to apply the hallmarks of Christ-centred servant leadership within the context of leading a contemporary mission organisation. We're seeking to answer the questions, 'How do we follow Jesus' example within the context of leading a 21st-century organisation?' and 'How do we become the kind of leaders that are worth following?'

This book seeks to help you ask the right questions that will enable you to follow Jesus as you lead within your particular context. I invite you to grab a towel and join me back at ground zero, as we look afresh at the example of Christ, in order to discern how his example of servant leadership can shape and correct our approach to leadership.

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THE LOST ART OF LEADERSHIP

Umair Haque wrote, ‘We need a new generation of leaders. And we need it now ... Leadership – true leadership – is a lost art.’³

I agree! We need a new generation of leaders, and we need them to lead based on ancient principles applied within the challenges of our modern world. There’s no shortage of books and courses on leadership, but this one seeks to present how The Message Trust, as an international Christian mission organisation, seeks to follow Jesus Christ’s model of leadership among hard-to-reach urban youth in cities around the world. We seek to rediscover the ‘lost art of leadership’, not as an academic theory, but earthed in the practical realities that leaders face day by day. We trust this book can be helpful to all leaders, not because we have all the answers, but because we serve as a signpost towards the greatest and most influential leader in history – the one who spoke the words every Christian leader should emulate: ‘That is what the Son of Man has done: He came to serve, not be served – and then to give away his life in exchange for the many who are held hostage’ (Matt. 20:28, MSG).

John Maxwell once famously said, ‘Everything rises and falls on leadership’,⁴ reflecting the almost cult-like status assigned to leaders and leadership in recent years. One can understand and even adopt the sentiment of this statement, but it needs to be clarified: everything rises on *the right kind* of leadership. This book will attempt to explore what that looks like, and present conclusions that are counter-cultural amidst much of prevailing leadership theory. These hallmarks are presented as signposts for you to

**WE SERVE AS A
SIGNPOST TOWARDS
THE GREATEST AND
MOST INFLUENTIAL
LEADER IN HISTORY**

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explore further what it means to become a Christ-centred leader, within your context, and to discern how to become a servant leader on behalf of those you influence on a daily basis.

This book presents an approach to leadership development that has been birthed out of the experience of The Message Trust as an innovative and rapidly-expanding Christian mission organisation. We have seen that effective leadership is essential if we are to fulfil our vision to reach tens of thousands of young people from tough urban neighbourhoods around the world. We also believe that, in Jesus, we have the model leader to emulate and shape our approach to leadership.

Here's what Andy Hawthorne, our Founder and CEO, has to say about leadership:

A true leader is not someone with a business card that says 'Chief Executive', 'Senior Pastor' or the like, but an individual who, when they look over their shoulder, has lots of people following them. For Christians, of course, a true leader is someone who can say, like Paul, 'Don't just follow me, but follow me as I follow Christ.'

Many great leaders are true one-offs and we're naïve to think that if we simply do what they have done, we'll achieve what they have achieved. But with Jesus Christ, it's a different story. That's because we don't just get the world's greatest leadership manual in the pages of scripture, but the opportunity to actually live out and multiply ministry the way he did by the power of the Spirit within us. When Jesus breathed on the disciples and said 'As the Father

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sent me, I am sending you' he really meant it, not just for them, but for us in the 21st century, too.

People have been kind enough to say that over the last few decades, The Message has been instrumental in setting the pace for mission in words and actions. Whether that's true or not, you can't argue with the fact that we all need to step up the pace of multiplying leaders if we are going to fulfil the mission God has given us.⁵

Leading within the context of an organisation like The Message provides a useful critique, or alternative, to much of the leadership material that is currently available. Much of it seems to focus on investing in high achievers who, so it is believed, have the capacity to operate in the upper echelons of business, politics and the church, in order to bring about tangible change through a 'drip-down' approach. But we believe that leadership is not about hierarchy or job titles, or that it's purely for those with charisma or exceptional giftedness. Our understanding is that anyone who is part of The Message is serving in some leadership capacity, by exerting an influence towards our overarching goal of raising up generations of urban heroes. Our intention is to empower all our staff and volunteers to become the best leaders they can be in order to have the maximum impact for the kingdom as Christ-centred servant leaders.

We see this particularly strongly in South Africa, where our staff is made up of almost 50% former gang members or prisoners. Clearly, our leadership development pipeline is not typical of most organisations! However, it is perhaps more in line with Jesus' approach to invest in 'unschooled and ordinary men' who went on to change the world (see, for instance, Acts 4:13).⁶ For me, grabbing a towel means that I daily seek to wash the feet of people

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who have done some terrible things in their past, but in whom I see incredible potential to become transformational leaders, and impact society in ways others never could.

THREE KEYS FOR LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT

As I have worked with emerging leaders, I have discerned three principles foundational to the approach to positive leadership development. These will form the basis of the *Grab A Towel* interaction materials on our dedicated website, www.grabatowel.site.

THE LEADERS' TABLE: GROWTH THROUGH MUTUAL LEARNING AND SUPPORT

The first principle is based on a concept I call 'The Leaders' Table.' Leaders don't emerge or grow simply by having a leadership 'expert' provide teaching and instruction to a group of students. Rather, growth in leadership comes through 'doing life together'—literally, sitting round a table (preferably over a meal) and engaging deeply, holding one another accountable, and encouraging one another to become more proficient leaders. The table is a place of mutual submission and respect, where each person can grow to become a better leader within their sphere of influence. The Leaders' Table takes development seriously – recognising there is no simple formula for success, but instead requiring a commitment from each person to seek to learn from others and willingly share their experiences to enable and empower them to grow.

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The inspiration for the concept of The Leaders' Table derives from a leadership hero of mine in the Old Testament: Nehemiah. The first five chapters of the book of Nehemiah show how God moved in his heart to accept a massive leadership challenge – to rebuild the ruins of Jerusalem. Against all odds and in the face of severe opposition, Nehemiah mobilises the Jews to accomplish a superhuman feat – rebuilding the walls in just 52 days. There are undoubtedly many ingredients to Nehemiah's success, but one key factor is highlighted in Nehemiah 5:14-19. Nehemiah, as governor of Judah, makes a conscious decision not to lead as previous governors who use their leadership position for personal gain by placing heavy financial burdens on the people. Rather, he uses his position to serve and empower the officials and leaders by gathering them together and providing a meal for them every day. This daily *braai* (South African for 'barbecue') brings together not only the Judean leaders, but also leaders from surrounding nations.

Here Nehemiah's leadership philosophy is laid bare. Unlike his predecessors in Jerusalem, or contemporary leaders in other nations of his day, he isn't interested in what he could receive. He doesn't abuse his position of power, or 'lord over people,' to line his pockets. There is no nepotism or narcissism. Instead, he goes completely against the culture of leadership in his day and lays a table from which other leaders can eat, fellowship, collaborate, learn, and be encouraged. Furthermore, he provides for this daily event from his own pocket. In other words, he provides a platform – literally, lays a table of provision – for other leaders to succeed. Nehemiah's leaders' table was a daily event for 150 Jews, officials and those from other nations. I like to imagine what it must have been like to be at that daily meal as leaders gathered, shared,

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celebrated, wept and encouraged one another in the daily challenges that they faced.

Leaders in the 21st century face the same challenges that Nehemiah did 2,500 years ago. There is clearly a lack of godly leadership in the world as many seek to attain positions of influence for personal gain. I believe that there is an emerging generation of leaders who will not settle for the status quo. But they cannot stand in isolation. I want to encourage you as you read this book to gather around a table with other leaders and begin to share together on the tragedies and triumphs that you are facing in leadership. Follow Nehemiah's example and take the initiative! Use the discussion questions in the *Interaction* section on our website, grabatowel.site, for more ideas.

This book has emerged as a result of Leaders' Table groups that I have personally led over the past four years (always around a meal). We have discussed the concepts presented in this book and the contribution of my fellow leaders has indelibly shaped my approach to leadership – and the book you are now reading.

BECOMING DEEP WELLS OF RESOURCE

The second principle I have discovered is that of 'The Deep Well.' The challenge in the world today is that many leaders resemble shallow wells – they offer short-term solutions but their impact soon runs dry, with their sphere of influence regressing to a state of spiritual drought. The Deep Wells principle is all about long-term, community-based, sustained ministry – going deep before going broad.

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When I was at ground zero, God spoke to me very specifically about this principle. I was reading about Isaac's experience in Genesis 26:19-22. Isaac, Abraham's son, had been living in the land of the Philistines during a time of famine. Having prospered, King Abimelech asks him to move on from there – so Isaac travels into the Valley of Gerar and starts re-opening wells that his father had dug in that area. As he goes from place to place, Isaac experiences opposition from local herders. Each time he moves on, until he finally comes to a place where he opens up a well and no one opposes him. The Bible says that he named it Rehoboth, saying, 'Now the Lord has given us room and we will flourish in the land.'

**DEEP WELL LEADERS
ENABLE OTHERS
TO FLOURISH –
THEY PROVIDE A
SUSTAINED SOURCE
OF SPIRITUAL WATER**

God spoke to me from this text as we embarked upon launching The Message in South Africa. Just as Isaac reopened a well that became a spacious place of resource and enabled him to flourish in the land, so we believe God has called The Message to be a deep well of resource to enable our team, our leaders, to flourish in the land. Our task is to provide leaders with the space to thrive and the opportunities to grow in order that they themselves can become deep wells of resource and effectively serve Christ in this generation.

Deep Well leaders enable others to flourish – they provide a sustained source of spiritual water that can enable fruitful and productive living for generations of people. I believe this is the kind of leader that God wants all of us to become.

My prayer is that this book might become a deep well of resource that will enable you to grow, too. As you go deeper, so

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you will become a spring of life that can resource others. Deep Well leaders continue to grow as lifelong learners which is why, in the *Interaction* section on our website, grabatowel.site, I've also highlighted additional resources for further reading.

EVERYONE IS A LEADER, EVERYONE IS A FOLLOWER

The third principle is that followership is as important as leadership. To be a great leader, you firstly need to be a great follower. This principle permeates all the material in this book and could be summed up by the Apostle Paul's words, 'Follow my example as I follow the example of Christ' (1 Cor. 11:1). Paul became arguably the greatest Christian leader in history because he was firstly the greatest *follower* in Christian history. Paul took Christ's own words seriously: 'If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me' (Luke 9:23 ESV).

Our effectiveness in leadership will be directly proportional to our commitment to followership. This begins by counting the cost of submitting daily to Christ, which is the very essence of servant leadership. We can only lead others because we are serving Christ, and in serving Christ we learn that the only true form of leadership is servanthood. As Jesus said, 'Whoever wants to be great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be slave of all. For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many' (Mark 10:44-45).

An important part of serving others is recognising that we also need to follow others. Later in the book we will discuss the concept of 'rotational functional leadership.' This is essentially

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the willingness to forgo a position of leadership in order to follow someone who is better suited to leading in a particular situation. Again, followership is not about hierarchy, rank, or titles – it is a matter of the heart and a matter of humility. It is also an acknowledgement that God gifts individuals with unique experiences that he intends to use in his kingdom when those experiences can provide leadership and benefit to others.

This is counter-cultural, and it is often costly. But as we saw in the example of Nehemiah, we need to become leaders who are willing to make the necessary sacrifices in order to get the job done. We need leaders who are not motivated by material gain or earthly power but have a deep, intrinsic desire to serve others. I trust that this book will inspire you to grow as a Christ-centred servant leader as you yourself draw closer to Christ.

Because followership is so critical for great leadership, the *Interaction* section on our website, *grabatowel.site*, will provide you with some practical ways that you can apply the hallmarks of servant leadership to becoming a better follower.

THE *GRAB A TOWEL* LEADERSHIP COMMITMENT

This book flows from the experiences I have gained at The Message, seeking to develop a leadership philosophy which we trust will be integral to the DNA of our organisation. This will be expressed in the *Grab A Towel* commitment at the end of this book. It is my hope that each person who reads this book will develop their own leadership philosophy that applies and adapts what is presented in these pages to their own lives, calling and context. We trust that this process will catalyse imaginative and

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prayerful engagement that opens up new horizons for leaders in the 21st century.

Becoming a Christ-centred servant leader is a lifelong process that needs to be constantly nurtured – it's a destination we continually move towards as we become more like Jesus. I hope that the material in this book aids you in your journey and that the leadership charter after the last chapter provides aspirations that will encourage you to keep growing as a Christ-centred servant leader.

Practically, this book focuses on eight hallmarks of servant leadership which we seek to grow in throughout our lives. The individual chapters in this book correspond to each of these areas.

1. Focus on character (Chapter 1)
2. Develop a prophetic vision (Chapter 2)
3. Maintain faithful stewardship (Chapter 3)
4. Become deep wells (Chapter 4)
5. Put people first (Chapter 5)
6. Give power away (Chapter 6)
7. Lead with compassion (Chapter 7)
8. Have steel in your spine (Chapter 8)