# S-E-R-V-E as a Model of Sustainable Leadership

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## ABSTRACT

This article uses the S-E-R-V-E framework to explore sustainable leadership in the context of Christian education, offering a contextual, constructive theological analysis of a specific case: The Norwegian School of Leadership and Theology. Sustainable leadership is defined as stewarding something in a way that allows it to flourish and endure over time, according to its God-given purpose within the web of life. The article demonstrates that sustainable organizational leadership comprises at least five meta-categories of leadership, each aligned with different forms of sustain-ability, including overall ecological sustainability. Accordingly, the article proposes that sustainable leadership must consider a "fivefold bottom line." Although there are trade-offs and tensions among these dimensions of organizational leadership, leaders must develop the virtue of prudent (phronetic) leadership to achieve sustain-able integration. Within this framework, prudence is understood as a form of spiritual wisdom that integrates deliberation, narrative, practices, and affections to maintain a sustainable whole.

**Keywords:** sustainable leadership, S-E-R-V-E model, phronesis, Quintuple bottom line, environmental virtue ethics, fivefold bottom line, integrative stewardship

# INTRODUCTION: HORIZON AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The question of how to lead in an ecologically sustainable manner has become critical, given the environmental challenges humanity faces in the twenty-first century (Pörtner et al., 2022). The UN development goals show that these challenges are immensely complex and include different and yet interrelated social and ecological strata (United Nations, 2022). Yet, as Wayne Visser and Polly Courtice observe, sustainable leadership is not a distinct school of leadership but rather a "specific blend of leadership characteristics applied within a definitive context" (Visser & Courtice, 2011, p. 2). This article contributes to the broader challenge of understanding sustainable leadership by addressing a specific dilemma relevant to all organizations within the analysis of a specific organizational context. The dilemma may be articulated as follows: leaders who aim to promote ecological sustainability must also consider organizational sustainability. Consequently, this study focuses on two specific, interrelated questions:

1. What are the key concerns leaders must balance to integrate ecological and organizational sustainability?
2. What key virtues help leaders achieve this integration?

This study explores these questions through a specific case: the Norwegian School of Leadership and Theology (hereafter NSLT), a Christian university college. The focus on a specific case enables a manageable approach to the complex issue of sustainability. Nevertheless, the goal remains to contribute to a broader discussion of this complexity, potentially benefiting leadership in theological and educational institutions in other contexts.

# METHOD AND DIALOGUE PARTNERS

The case study is an exploratory, constructive, and practical theological analysis that employs a *phronetic* methodological approach, as outlined by Bent Flyvbjerg and Don Browning (Flyvbjerg, Landman, & Schram, 2012; see also Browning, 1991). The hermeneutical starting point is the Pentecostal-Charismatic and Baptist traditions to which the university college belongs. This account also includes some autoethnographic elements, as I, a reflective practitioner, draw on my experiences to identify key concerns and dilemmas. This approach aligns with Donald Schön's concepts of "reflection-in-action" and "reflection-on-action" in reflective practice research (Schön, 1984).

In terms of analytical perspective, this study primarily builds on the S-E-R-V-E framework of Christian leadership (Tangen, 2023). Additionally, I engage with virtue ethicists from other traditions, particularly Kristján Kristjánsson, who discusses *phronesis* as both an ecological and integrative virtue (Jordan & Kristjánsson, 2017; Kristjánsson et al., 2021). Kristjánsson's work is particularly relevant because *phronesis* also plays an integrative role in the S-E-R-V-E model. I also draw on Wayne Visser and Polly Courtice's model of sustainable leadership more eclectically as a dialogue partner. These scholars have been key researchers at the University of Cambridge Institute for Sustainability and the University of Cambridge Institute for Sustainability Leadership (CISL)

The article proceeds in three parts. First, I present the organizational case study, NSLT. Second, I present the S-E-R-V-E framework with regard to the research questions, exploring concepts of sustainability, and establishing a working definition of sustainable leadership. Finally, I examine the two questions outlined above by engaging with the specific case.

## The Case: NLST and Its Norwegian Context

The Norwegian School of Leadership and Theology (NSLT) is a private educational institution in Oslo, Norway. Established in 2008, NSLT was formed through the merger of the Norwegian Baptist Seminary and the Pentecostal Center for Leadership and Theology. Lutheran Charismatic churches, such as IMI Church, are now also partners. NSLT is a publicly approved college offering bachelor's degrees in theology, religion, leadership, and society.

Norway's educational landscape is characterized by a strong emphasis on quality assurance and inclusivity. NOKUT, the Norwegian Agency for Quality Assurance in Education, oversees the quality of higher education institutions. The country's sociocultural context therefore provides a supportive environment for institutions like NSLT. Economically, Norway's stable and prosperous economy offers a conducive setting for higher education institutions to thrive.

NSLT is a relatively small institution, with about 275 students. However, as a specialized university college, it allows for personalized education and close-knit community interactions. The institution emphasizes a combination of academic knowledge and Christian spirituality, aiming to educate individuals aiming to educate individuals with a sense of vocational calling, which includes service to the community and church ministry. As such, it functions as a tradition-based institution that nonetheless engages in trans-traditional dialogue by incorporating perspectives from other traditions, as will be demonstrated in this article. Moreover, when it comes to building sustainable organizations and public recognition, it shares the same conditions as other private and public universities. Thus, even though its epistemic starting point is theological, NSLT shares many of the same institutional dilemmas as other universities and of other small university colleges in particular.

## The S-E-R-V-E Framework: A Brief Introduction

The S-E-R-V-E framework has already been outlined in a previous article (Tangen 2023). Here, I focus on the aspects most relevant to the research questions of this article, as set out above.

### The Root Metaphor of Leadership as Service and Stewardship

As the acronym S-E-R-V-E suggests, this model views leadership through the lenses of service and stewardship, drawing on biblical models of service (*diakonia*) and stewardship (*oikonomos*) as well as reflections on the Trinitarian life as self-giving, mutual service. In other words, servant leadership is more than a set of practices and virtues; it involves participation in the character of God's life, ontologically grounded in the structure of Trinitarian relationships, revealed in the incarnation, and mediated as a transformative gift (*theosis*) to those who believe and repent. Particularly relevant here is that service in the S-E-R-V-E framework also includes stewardship, defined as the careful and responsible management of something entrusted to one's care (Tangen, 2023).

This role aligns with the Genesis narrative, which describes humanity as being created in God's image (Gen. 1:27–31) to represent God's kingship (*rada*) within creation. As Christopher Wright notes, the image of God is "not a license for abuse rooted in supremacy but rather

a pattern that calls for humble reflection on God's character" (Wright, 2004, p. 121). Notably, the Hebrew word used to describe humanity's vocation to "work" (*avad*) in God's garden (Gen. 2:15) is the same term used to describe God's suffering servant in Isaiah 52:13–53:6. This is significant, as the 'servant songs' in Isaiah (see also Isa. 41:8–9; 42:1; 49:3) form the Old Testament background for New Testament texts (Phil. 2:5–11; Luke 22:14–32) that present Jesus as a servant leader (Clark, 2023; Clarke, 2013; Gorman, 2009). Thus, servant leadership and stewardship are more than leadership styles; they embody humanity's vocation to reflect God's goodness toward creation.

## Leadership in Five Dimensions

The S-E-R-V-E framework proposes five fundamental dimensions of leadership, developed in dialogue with Gary Yukl's taxonomy of leadership behaviors, which in an earlier version identified four meta-categories of leadership (Tangen 2023). These include effective task-oriented, relations-oriented, visionary change-oriented, and external leadership. To these, one might add moral judgment, or *phronesis*, which in the Christian tradition is practiced *coram Deo* and is therefore a form of spiritual and not only practical wisdom. These categories represent five leadership dimensions, each defined by its objective, as outlined in Table 1. I will discuss these leadership dimensions in more depth as my discussion unfolds below.

*Table 1: The S-E-R-V-E frame: Dimensions of Christian leadership.*

| |
|---|
| **Spiritual leadership – orientated towards the God (the sacred)** |
|     (1) Facilitation of worship and interaction rituals that celebrate God and common social goods<br>    (2) Balanced moral judgement in all situations. |
| **Excellent and effective leadership – orientated towards effective task execution** |
|     Stewardship in balance between core practices/internal goods and effectively organized institutional structures. |
| **Relational leadership – orientated towards relationship and inter-personal processes** |
|     Here the leader will be both virtuous role model and facilitator of human interaction and community building. |
| **Visionary leadership - orientated towards narratively defined moral purposes** |
|     Defined by a moral and/or theological purpose that is grounded in a tradition, elaborated through strategic reflection, and communicated through vision statements and stories. |
| **External relations – orientated to the organization's context** |
|     Monitoring, representing, and leading the organization in relation to its external context. |

## Integration through Self-transcendent Phronesis - Spiritual Wisdom

It is worth noting, however, that this theologically grounded understanding of service does not remove or resolve the many dilemmas and paradoxes that come with leadership. Leaders face difficult questions about how to address sin, destructive structures, and the use of different forms of power, including coercive power (Tangen, 2023; see also Tangen, 2019). Most importantly, leaders must perform integrative leadership by balancing the different concerns that belong to the various dimensions of leadership.

In the S-E-R-V-E framework, these dimensions are integrated by practical wisdom (*phronesis*). This aligns with the Aristotelian-Thomist tradition, which suggests that practical

wisdom enables leaders to organize and integrate different virtues and concerns that may conflict with one another (Kristjánsson et al., 2021, pp. 244–245; Moore, 2019, p. 129). In the Christian tradition, this is performed *coram Deo* (before God) and is therefore a form of spiritual leadership. This concept will be elaborated below and is illustrated in Figure 1.

**Figure 1**: Wisdom and organisational leadership.



Thus, even at this stage, it seems clear that one virtue—namely *phronesis*—is key to sustainable leadership. However, this requires further elaboration. In this article, I will explore the particular form *phronesis* takes with regard to the combination of ecological and organizational sustainability within a defined context. Moreover, as *phronesis* is tradition-based (MacIntyre, 2007; McClendon, 2002; Land, 2010; Tangen, 2023), I will therefore also examine how wise and ecologically sustainable leadership manifests within Baptist and Pentecostal-Charismatic traditions. Finally, *phronesis* never exists in isolation; it depends on intellectual virtues (*techne*, *episteme*) and, more importantly, on virtues of character, such as love and justice. In the words of Alasdair MacIntyre,

> Conversely, the exercise of practical intelligence requires the presence of the virtues of character; otherwise it degenerates into or remains from the outset merely a certain cunning capacity for linking means to any end rather than to those ends which are genuine goods for man. According to Aristotle, then, excellence of character and intelligence cannot be separated. (MacIntyre, 2007, p. 154)

Thus, it is also necessary to identify accompanying or partnering virtues that enable both eco-*phronesis* and wise organizational leadership.

## WHAT IS SUSTAINABILITY?: LATE MODERN MODELS

The etymological roots of the word *'sustainability'* trace back to the Latin *sustinēre*, which conveys the ideas of supporting, bearing, and enduring. The word *'sustainable'* emerged in seventeenth-century English and evolved to include the connotation of "capable of being upheld." Perhaps the most frequently cited modern definition of sustainability, particularly with regard to ecological sustainability, was provided by the World Commission on Environment and Development in 1987. The Brundtland Commission suggested that sustainability means

> Development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. (World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987).

This idea was further developed into the concept of the *Triple Bottom Line* (TBL), which proposed that sustainability is an integrative balance between profit, people, and planet (Willard & Elkington, 2002; Elkington, 2013). This concept involves living (1) environmentally sustainably, or in a way that is viable in the long term; (2) economically sustainably, in terms of maintaining a standard of living; and (3) socially sustainably, in both the present and future. Green economists, therefore, view sustainable leadership as an essential component of CSR, or Corporate Social Responsibility (Conway, 2018).

However, both the Brundtland approach and the green economist perspective are criticized by Karen Jordan and Kristján Kristjánsson. They argue that these approaches (1) are too anthropocentric, focusing primarily on the future of the human race; (2) are overly concerned with economics; and (3) primarily view nature as a resource to be exploited, though within limits. According to Jordan and Kristjánsson, the problem with these reformist approaches is that "they generally do not locate the root of the problem in the nature of present society and the way we think about the world, but in imbalances and a lack of knowledge and information" (Jordan & Kristjánsson, 2017, p. 2). Notably, in 2018, John Elkington, the originator of the Triple Bottom Line, also criticized the concept in the *Harvard Business Review*, calling for a rethinking of the approach. While he still considered it relevant, he lamented that it had been reduced to merely an accounting and reporting tool, diverging from its original transformative purpose (Elkington, 2018).

What, then, is the alternative? Some scholars, like Sohail Inayatullah, have introduced spirituality as a possible fourth dimension (Inayatullah, 2005). In popular science and business literature, one will therefore find models of the *Quadruple Bottom Line* that include spirituality, defining a fourth "p," namely *purpose*. Spirituality is also described as the "pursuit of Beauty, Goodness, and Truth" (Sawaf & Gabrielle, 2014). However, professors of public administration and economists who discuss the Quadruple Bottom Line seem to prefer governance over spirituality. Thus, there are several versions of *QBL* theory. Jordan and Kristjánsson seem to find middle ground by combining elements of these. They suggest that the key to a sustainable future is a shift in worldview that will enable wise (*phronetic*) governance and a way of life characterized by virtues that foster a deep sense of interconnectedness with nature (Jordan & Kristjánsson, 2017, pp. 2–4).

On this point, Jordan and Kristjánsson's thinking is influenced by the works of John R. Ehrenfeld and Fritjof Capra. When it comes to defining sustainability, Ehrenfeld is especially important. He argues that the root cause of unsustainability lies in humanity's failure to recognize the interrelatedness of all life. Along with Andrew Hoffman, Ehrenfeld proposes that

> sustainability takes a movement to re-examine who we are, why we are here, and how we are connected to everything around us… any change that is short of that scale will not solve the problems we face. (Ehrenfeld & Hoffman, 2013, p. 4; see also Jordan & Kristjánsson, 2017, p. 3)

This perspective inspires an ethic of care across four domains: care for oneself, care for other human beings, care for the environment, and care for the spiritual or transcendent. Ehrenfeld and Hoffman argue that various forms of spirituality may be crucial for sustainable thinking, as they help us embrace our place within the whole (Ehrenfeld & Hoffman, 2013, p. 106). They suggest that flourishing is dynamic in that it must be continually generated, yet this dynamic practice must be grounded in hope rather than despair. This leads to the following definition of sustainability:

> Sustainability is the possibility that humans and other life will flourish on the Earth forever. (Ehrenfeld & Hoffman, 2013, p. 17)

# A THEOLOGICAL RESPONSE AND DEFINITION OF SUSTAINABLE LEADERSHIP

I agree with Edmund Byrne, who suggests that much in Ehrenfeld's perception of the world may resonate with theology (Byrne, 2022, p. 133). First, the theology of creation in Genesis suggests that the world is an interconnected web of life. It is noteworthy that this community of life was flourishing even before humanity was created (Gen. 1:20–26). Second, since humans were created from "dust," they are deeply interwoven with the materiality of creation (Gen. 2:7) and profoundly dependent on the web of life (Wright, 2004, p. 117). Third, the privilege of representing God in creation entails an ethics of responsibility, a calling to care.

The four domains of ethical care in Ehrenfeld's vision, as Byrne observes, align closely with Pope Francis's encyclical, *Laudato Si'* (Byrne, 2022, p. 133). This can also be as being grounded in Christianity's Jewish roots. Jonathan Sacks suggests that

> the entire drama of the Torah flows from this point of departure. Judaism remains God's supreme call to humankind to freedom and creativity on the one hand, and, on the other, to responsibility and restraint, becoming God's partner in the work of creation. (Sacks, 2009, p. 22)

From the perspective of a theology of creation, it also makes sense to speak of a partnership for ecological flourishing. In the creation story, flourishing is associated with the growth and development of plants (Gen. 1:12), the teeming of living creatures (Gen. 1:20), and God's blessing that enables each part of the web of life to prosper: "to be fruitful and multiply" (Gen. 1:22). Overall, the idea of sustainability as holistic flourishing resonates with the Old Testament vision of *shalom*. According to William Bellinger, this is the goal of God's blessing: "wholeness of life" for the community, and for creation as a whole (Bellinger, 2022, p. 2).

One might add that the coming of *shalom*, through the coming of God, represents a transformation of worldview, not unlike the kind Ehrenfeld and Jordan and Kristjánsson are longing for. In his reflections upon *shalom*, Jürgen Moltmann provides an interesting quotation from Christof Blumhardt, who suggests that

> as yet we have no fellowship with nature. We admire her, but often trample her underfoot, using her unreasonably. Consequently, nature still confronts us with icy reserve and feels that she is alien to us. But something different must come ... we must arrive at harmony between human beings and nature. Then both will be content. And that will be the solution for the social question. (Moltmann 2004, loc. 7976).

From the longer Christian tradition, one might add that each part of nature is important. Thomas Aquinas argues that God created the universe with order and purpose, and that each creature has its own proper end or goal that contributes to the overall perfection. The *Summa Theologiae* states,

> The one, whereby one created thing is directed to another, as the parts of the whole, accident to substance, and all things whatsoever to their end; the other, whereby all created things are ordered to God. (Aquinas, 1981, p. 131).

Thus, each part of creation is positioned and designed to play its unique role for the benefit of the whole, to the glory of God.

Aquinas's statement might, however, also serve as a starting point for a theological critique of Ehrenfeld. I would suggest that Ehrenfeld's account is theologically incomplete. In Ehrenfeld's defense, it could be argued that his perspective is not explicitly theological, as it aims for a more universal audience. Nevertheless, he lacks a vision of flourishing as something that comes from God and is ordered to God. Consequently, Ehrenfeld's concept of

sustainability as hope represents a form of anthropocentric eschatology, grounded ultimately in human transformation. This is unsatisfactory from the perspective of classical Christian theology, in which Christ is the ultimate hope of salvation and the ultimate source of human and ecological transformation, brought about by the resurrection of Christ, and its ultimate fruit: the resurrection of all the dead. This kind of eschatology will also shape the ultimate common good that spiritual wisdom seeks—namely, the combination of God's glory (Doxa) and ecological and social *shalom.*

Moreover, in the present, it is the Holy Spirit who is the source of repentance and human transformation. Pentecostal scholar Frank Macchia says,

> Moltmann notes that just as the risen Christ does not evolve out from the crucified Christ, so the new creation does not simply emerge or evolve from the old creation. The path to glory is the cross, and nothing will pass through that door without first being purged and transformed by the refining fire of God's own presence. For us personally this means, "Repent and be baptized, every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit" (Acts 2: 38). (Macchia, 2006, p. 94)

Thus, in the New Testament, the eschatological hope of *shalom* appears in an "already but not yet" structure: *shalom* is partially present through the presence of the Spirit (Rom. 14:17), but its full realization awaits the *parousia* of Christ.

My definition of sustainable leadership will therefore include the idea of sustainability as something divinely ordained, both in the sense of a God-given purpose and divine empowerment such that the church is enabled to take part in God's sustaining and healing love for the world in the present. However, this kind of stewardship applies not only to the whole but also to each part, which in turn contributes to the whole. For this reason, *I define sustainable leadership more specifically as stewarding something in a way that allows it to flourish and endure over time, according to its God-given character and purpose within the web of life.*

From an ecological perspective, "something" certainly refers to creation. I suggest that my definition is fairly compatible with Visser and Courtice's simple definition of a sustainability leader: *"A sustainability leader is someone who inspires and supports action towards a better world"* (Visser and Courtice 201, p.2).

However, in relation to my research question, "something" may also refer to an organization. Moreover, I suggest that "something" may refer to each dimension of leadership, as each is necessary for the enduring flourishing of any given organization. In the following, I explore each dimension of the S-E-R-V-E framework in relation to this notion of flourishing, beginning with external relations, since this is particularly relevant to the ecological flourishing of the whole.

# S-E-R-V-E AND SUSTAINABLE LEADERSHIP

I will now address sustainable leadership through the lens of the S-E-R-V-E framework and the provided definition.

## Sustainable Leadership and External Relations: The Common Ecological Good

In the S-E-R-V-E framework, leadership in external relations refers to what leaders do in relation to the organization's context. Five practices are identified as critical: serving common goods, monitoring, networking, and representing, and, finally, evangelistic hospitality. These practices thus require their own set of virtues, including friendliness and hospitality, as well as critical thinking and courage. The basic position for any university college is that it exists for the common good as well as for the specific purpose of the organization. Geoff Moore suggests,

> The common good does not consist in the simple sum of the particular goods of each subject of a social entity. Belonging to everyone and to each person, it is and remains 'common' because it is indivisible and because only together is it possible to attain it, increase it, and safeguard its effectiveness, with regard also to the future. (Moore, 2019, p. 43)

The most obvious case is the enduring ecological flourishing of the web of life. In what ways, then, may NSLT serve this common good? In a sense, this begins with monitoring. The practice of monitoring includes sensitivity to ecological developments and the climate crises occurring on sociological and ecological macro-levels; local issues may also be relevant. As I suggested above, everything in the web of life is interconnected. A necessary skill of sustainable leadership in the domain of external relations is what Visser and Courtice call systems thinking:

> The ability to appreciate the interconnectedness and interdependency of the whole system, at all levels, and to recognize how changes to parts of the system affect the whole. (Visser & Courtice, 2011, p. 5)

This virtue is closely connected to *phronesis* as it appears in the Christian tradition, offering concrete solutions to local and global problems. Jordan and Kristjánsson offer an interesting perspective by suggesting that this skill needs to be paired with an emotional ingredient, moving beyond "awe and wonder" to a sense of being part of something larger than oneself. Systems thinking and this sense of connectedness are essential to what they call harmony with nature (Jordan & Kristjánsson, 2017, pp. 16–18).

I will return to this under visionary leadership. For now, it suffices to say that a Christian university college should encourage and fund research that explores common goods. This kind of wisdom may be presented and modeled through networking and representation practices. In addition to publishing research, the school can exert influence through public statements, particularly as an actor with opportunities to respond to the Ministry of Education's consultations. For instance, at NSLT, one of the teachers, as part of the Christian Council of Norway, has supported prayer, action, and reflection on climate issues since the early 2000s.

However, the Free Church tradition often emphasizes that the most significant networking and social engagement occurs between grassroots organizations at the sociological meso-level. Recently, NSLT teachers have been invited to address questions of sustainable lifestyles among Pentecostal-Charismatic and Baptist churches. Yet it is equally important to identify forms of ecologically sustainable leadership within local churches. Thus, networks

represent an opportunity for mutual learning and critical reflection, where representatives from NSLT not only teach but also learn best practices from both the Global South and North.

Paul Ede is a notable example from the North. He is a Baptist pastor and church planter who addressed environmental problems and networked with green activists while planting a church in a Glasgow area affected by industrial pollution. This led to new practices and liturgies. Ede reports,

> We have reconstructed our ecclesiology and liturgical calendar around creative new approaches to reflect our commitment to urban earthkeeping. This includes an Easter Sunday tree-planting Eucharist with a scriptural liturgy celebrating the anthropological and cosmological significance of Christ's resurrection, and an outdoor celebration of the Feast of Tabernacles in autumn. (Ede, 2014, p. 208)

Thus, Ede and his team offer evangelistic hospitality not only to people but to all of God's creation. Below, I will present how these practices are grounded in a robust theological vision of healing. In the Global South, examples like that of Marina Silva show that green politics can be promoted by politicians rooted in Pentecostal communities. However, churches must also remain cautious of becoming too closely and uncritically aligned with any particular activist group (see Tangen, 2020, p. 16; see also Rodgers & Sparks, 2014).

## Visionary Leadership and Theological Sustainability

Within this theological or tradition-based framework, churches may also use the tools provided by organizational theory and articulate vision and purpose statements. As Visser and Courtice recommend, they should challenge the status quo and inspire creative and courageous action, in line with the definition we have seen above that a sustainable leader is broadly someone who "inspires and supports action towards a better world." This vision is already present at NSLT. The latest version of the vision statement may be translated as follows:

> We envision an innovative learning center that combines academic knowledge with dynamic spirituality and creative practice—forming leaders and theologians who contribute to building a better world.

The role of NSLT should be to stimulate such visions at the level of local churches. This also represents a calling to self-critical examination and repentance, on both the levels of thinking and acting (Tangen, 2020).

The starting point for Christian wisdom is the overall vision of the kingdom of God as "already and not yet." This overarching vision, as I have shown, includes ecological *shalom* and the idea that church members are called to be agents in all of human history. The perception of the church as participating in the drama of God is beautifully developed by Pentecostal theologian Stephen Land and followed up by Pentecostal eco-theologians (Land, 2010; Swoboda, 2014; Lamp, 2020). Other important resources include the broader Baptist vision described by James McClendon Jr. and Paul Ede's vision of God as a healer of the land. Ede grounds this vision in the dedication of the Temple (2 Chron. 7:14), Elijah's healing of farmland around Jericho (2 Kings 2:19–22), and, most importantly, in Ezekiel's prophecy of the eschatological restoration of Jerusalem and Sodom in Ezekiel 47–48, which will bring justice and life to the Jordan Valley (Ede, 2014).

It is evident that organizational envisioning processes can be inspired by such stories and strengthened by the virtue of hope—and by what Land sees as the cardinal virtue of Christian *orthopathos*: passion for God's kingdom. Yet, this type of envisioning process might provoke resistance from key theological stakeholders who are wary of 'politically correct eco-theology.' I have encountered such perspectives within the denominational networks

surrounding NSLT. Such opposition should not be dismissed. Christian university colleges and the churches they represent must also guard their theological integrity. Tradition awareness, as Geoff Moore suggests, is a vital virtue—necessary for preserving organizational identity (Moore, 2019).

This imperative becomes even more critical if leaders are seen as stewards of a church that ultimately belongs to God. In 1 Corinthians, Paul suggests that the church and its leaders are stewards of God's revelation in Jesus Christ (1 Cor. 4:1–4). It follows that the church must be faithful to its doctrinal foundation. Before a given church or affiliated college develops an eco-theological vision, it must ask, What is visionary sustainability? In this case, it is identical to theological integrity. Church history shows that Christian leaders must distinguish between orthodoxy and heresy. Even though the ecumenical movement has fostered a greater understanding of diversity within Christianity, there remains a critical need to define orthodox Christian faith in contrast to alternative perspectives (Andersen & Søvik, 2021; Pannenberg, 2010; Hegstad, 2019).

At the same time, it is critical to acknowledge that theological integrity must inspire visionary narratives. It cannot be reduced to the static repetition of a theological system (Hiebert, 1999). As stewards of life, Christian leaders must ask daring questions and create bold new visions in a time that desperately needs decisive action. Simply put, if Christian traditions like Pentecostalism and the Baptist movement truly believe they are stewards of God's theology for life, then a theological vision of creation care and restoration is essential in times like these. Such a vision should not replace Jesus as the theological center but rather demonstrate that God cares about and responds to today's ecological challenges.

This need is perhaps even more pressing at the level of local churches, which NSLT aims to serve. Here, visionary theological leadership (*orthodoxy*) must inspire coordinated action *(orthopraxis)*. Below, I elaborate on how theological faithfulness must be balanced with hospitality (Bretherton, 2019) and particularly with conflict transformation below; however, doctrinal authenticity cannot be neglected. As Amos Yong suggests, "Without boundaries, there will be no system into which anyone could be invited" (Yong, 2008, p. 123). Thus, the church needs to renew its commitment to its orthodox theological foundation even as it re-articulates it to address new scenarios in the drama of God (Vanhoozer, 2005; Wright, 1992). Leaders therefore need to integrate ecological concerns with leadership for visionary theological sustainability.

The clear implication is that one cannot uncritically adopt contemporary ecological virtue ethics. It is essential to examine the implicit or explicit theologies and worldviews these perspectives promote. Some of our dialogue partners, for example, seem to advocate what might generally be called an "eco-centric or pantheistic worldview," which may be associated with "alternative spiritualities." Jordan and Kristjánsson, for instance, appear to endorse Fritjof Capra's synthesis of Eastern religions and systems thinking (Jordan & Kristjánsson, 2017, pp. 13, 14, 16, 18). This synthesis has been justifiably critiqued by Christian philosophers and evangelical theologians (Lucas, 1991; Clifton & Regehr, 1990), who point out a significant theological difference between pantheistic monism and Christian Trinitarian monotheism (see also Tangen, 2020, pp. 15–16).

NSLT and its partner churches therefore need to engage in what Timothy Keller describes as both critical and faithful contextualization as they outline their own local theological visions (Keller, 2012, loc. 229–232, 2375). However, in this process, they may also identify insights and accept valid challenges offered by those who think and believe differently. A key challenge from Jordan and Kristjánsson, and Ehrenfeld, is the need to develop a theology and spirituality that nurtures a sense of interconnectedness with nature. I will return to this issue as I discuss spiritual leadership

## Sustainable Leadership and Organizational Effectiveness

The question of sustainable everyday management practices leads to the next dimension in the S-E-R-V-E framework: effective leadership. This dimension requires a particular type of sustainability. In the domain of effective leadership, one may speak of institutional sustainability, defined by what Alasdair MacIntyre calls external goods:

> Institutions are characteristically and necessarily concerned with … external goods. They are involved in acquiring money and other material goods; they are structured in terms of power and status, and they distribute money, power, and status as rewards. Nor could they do otherwise if they are to sustain not only themselves but also the practices of which they are the bearers. (MacIntyre, 2007, p. 194)

My definition of sustainable leadership therefore also applies to the institutional aspects of a given organization. It requires stewardship of the organization's infrastructure in ways that ensure lasting and flourishing conditions, enabling the organization to sustain practices that, in turn, empower human and ecological flourishing. It is crucial to acknowledge that universities cannot educate people for a better world without sufficient funds to invest in buildings, human resources, infrastructure, and technology. Thus, even non-profit organizations like NSLT need to allocate resources to establish and renew a sustainable institutional infrastructure. Geoff Moore eloquently articulates this in commenting on MacIntyre:

> We have noted previously that such things as fame, reputation, wealth, profit, and, perhaps most generically, success are goods (not 'bads') and that, as MacIntyre pointed out, 'no one can despise them altogether without a certain hypocrisy'. (Moore, 2019, p. 120)

Moore stresses that institutional needs and moral goods need to be balanced, with the moral purposes of the organization remaining the long-term priority:

> But, as we have stressed repeatedly, it is not a good thing in and of itself. Recall that external goods are not goods which we should pursue for their own sake, but for the way in which they sustain practices and so enable the internal goods of the practice … This is why we have referred to the need for the correct ordering of these goods (internal goods should take precedence over external goods), and the balanced pursuit of both. (Moore, 2019, p. 120)

In practice, leaders who seek sustainable leadership should look for synergies between moral values, such as environmental sustainability, and institutional effectiveness, although compromises may be unavoidable. For this reason, concepts like the Quadruple or Triple Bottom Line can be useful in organizations like NSLT. Economics cannot simply be disregarded by a transformation of worldview. Any new perspective will therefore need to integrate organizational sustainability. At the same time, it is crucial that leaders exercise *phronesis* to keep the primary mission as the priority. As Ron Beadle and Geoff Moore rightly suggest,

> Getting the balance right – pursuing sufficient external goods but not prioritizing them – is clearly a challenging assignment and one in which the virtues of phrone-sis (practical judgment), together with the courage to resist those institutions, parti-cularly those in the external environment which may seek to enforce a single-minded concentration on external goods, will be particularly necessary. (Moore, 2008, p. 501)

A key issue is how operational goals can be integrated into NSLT's routines and policies. Visser and Courtice suggest that sustainable leadership include strategic decision making,

management incentives, performance accountability, embedding learning and innovation, and empowerment of co-workers (Visser and Courtice 2011, p.11). This kind of strategic reflection should involve administrative staff. At NSLT, this is primarily done through a yearly conference on quality assessment and organizational learning (called The Learning Laboratory). In my view, the school should consider making ecological sustainability an even more explicit criteria of quality in its Quality Assurance system. This would also be an adequate response to the new sector objectives set by the Ministry of Education and Research (Ministry of Education and Research,2022).  However, I would maintain that Leaders and staff should first seek win-win solutions that secure both environmental gains and organizational sustainability.

Sometimes it is possible to create synergy between the ecological common good and the institutional bottom line. For example, the COVID-19 crisis revealed that many business meetings can be replaced by online meetings, reducing both expenses and carbon emissions. In a Deloitte survey, half of the responding companies are now optimizing their travel policies to decrease their environmental impact: 76% of these companies are transitioning to more online internal meetings, and 67% are optimizing meeting agendas to reduce the need for air travel (Caputo et al., 2021, p. 11).

However, the fact that these companies still engage in business travel shows that compromises remain. Some environmentalists still fly to conferences to spread their message, and organizations transitioning to green technology must unavoidably use resources from sectors like mining (for quartz, copper, bauxite etc., see Church & Crawford, 2018). The same applies to other aspects of institutional infrastructure. University colleges should therefore teach both win-win solutions and transparent compromises when the latter are unavoidable. Some compromises may be difficult and require *phronesis* for emotional regulation. As Yvonne Bradley suggests,

> To be involved in leadership may have outcomes that many Christians have difficulty accepting – compromise, uncertainty, and, even more threatening, an uneasy conscience. (Bradley, 1994, p. 34)

Sustainable decision-making must, however, go beyond emotional regulation. Visser and Courtice stress that it requires scientific knowledge, which should be incorporated into management practices (Visser and Courtice 2011, pp. 9–10).


## Sustainability and Relational Leadership

Based on my definition, sustainable relational leadership at an organizational level means cultivating a morally grounded community that flourishes over time through lively and well-coordinated interactions among members. This last point is important because it implies that the classroom should also be 'flipped'. In my experience, students have an important voice in raising environmental concerns and questioning compromises. My own interest in sustainability was partly ignited by conversations with students at NSLT and its networks, who passionately care for creation. Young people, inspired by visions from the Spirit, can guide an organization when older leaders are stuck in outdated compromises.

Based on the analyses above, it seems clear that stewardship of relationships may be holistically envisioned through the Old Testament image of *shalom,* as already introduced in the opening sections of this article (A Theological Response and Definition of Sustainable Leadership). Sociologists David Fraser and Tony Campolo describe *shalom* in more communal terms:

> All relationships—with God, fellow humans, and nature—are harmonious and right … Normally translated by the word peace, shalom is not so much the opposite of war as of anything that disturbs the well-being of communal human existence. (Campolo & Fraser, 1992, p. 257).

From the image of the day of Pentecost (Acts 2), one might add that relational sustainability at a meso-level must also be seen as maintaining "unity in reconciled diversity" in terms of languages, cultures, and different personalities (see also Meyer, 2021). Sustainable relational leadership in one-to-one relationships can be understood as the stewardship of one's coworkers in a way that enables them to flourish and endure over time, contributing uniquely to the web of life. Caring for individuals, not only the whole, is an important ideal in the Christian tradition, most clearly seen in the shepherd parables where Jesus is portrayed as the one who knows his sheep by name (John 10:3), lays down his life for them (John 10:11), and leaves the ninety-nine to rescue the one (Matt. 18:12).

At this level, there seems to be a high degree of correspondence between the moral virtues that enable good relationships with people and the virtues that sustain relationships with nature, including animals. Louke van Wensveen, for instance, identifies virtues like attentiveness, benevolence, and love as moral qualities that enable humans to cultivate friendships with the natural world (van Wensveen, 1999; 2005). These virtues can certainly be grounded in the Christian tradition, which emphasizes that agapeic love is a virtue given by the Holy Spirit (Aquinas, 1981; Steven Land, 2010; Stump, 2011). In this framework, agapeic love extends beyond devotion to God and care for one's neighbor (Matt. 22:37–40) to include attentiveness to and care for creation (Swoboda, 2014; Tangen, 2020).

Thus, at a basic level of interpersonal leadership, there seems to be less tension between environmental sustainability and organizational leadership. Yet, one should not underestimate the diversity present in late-modern churches (Tangen, 2012)—including on environmental issues. Conversations about the sustainable life may, however, also lead to conflicts. Christian leaders, therefore, need to practice some form of hospitality toward those who do not fully, or not yet share their vision, including individuals who find eco-friendly theology irrelevant. Leaders with a vision for sustainability will encounter classic dilemmas of visionary change leadership, such as deciding whether to move quickly and risk division or to move slowly and seek broad participation. In either case, they should avoid breaking agreements or communicating in ways that foster misunderstandings. Instead, they should use resistance to refine their approach (Ford, Ford, & D'Amelio, 2008).

Conflicts may also arise on an operational level in terms of priorities and compromises. Idealists may criticize compromises as moral hypocrisy, while institutional realists may view them as ineffective. Cultural and social diversity can also lead to conflicts. NSLT has many students from the Global South, where the effects of climate change are more dramatically felt (see Funk & Kennedy, 2020; Smith, 2018; Lamp, 2020, p. 358). Thus, the question of sustainability can potentially be a divisive issue for NSLT and churches. John Paul Lederach recommends approaching conflicts through the lens of conflict transformation:

> Conflict is normal in human relationships, and conflict is a motor of change. Transformation provides a clear and important vision because it brings into focus the horizon toward which we journey—the building of healthy relationships and communities. (Lederach, 2003, pp. 4–5)

Conflicts are positive because they bring urgent issues to our attention. Yet, they can become destructive when people act in ways that undermine or distort cooperation. For this reason, conflicts must be actively managed (Lederach, 2003). Managing conflicts requires practical wisdom (*phronesis*), courage, and consideration, as well as a willingness to seek creative win-win

solutions or compromises when necessary. Conflict transformation also benefits from peacefulness and patience, virtues associated with love (Gal. 5:22). Leaders who care must respectfully engage objections and differing views and invite people into a range of dialogues about lifestyle and organizational strategies (Tangen, 2020).

## Spiritual Leadership, Hope, and Sustainable Leadership

Spiritual leadership is the way in which leaders relate to, and lead toward, the sacred. In the Christian tradition, the sacred is the living God, who has created the world and revealed himself in Christ (John 1:14). This has consequences for how one thinks about sustainability in all categories of leadership. God is the creator and sustainer of the world (Heb. 13; John 1:1–14). He is also the one who, by grace, upholds the church in a saving relationship with him (John 17:3–15; Phil. 4:7). Thus, from a Christian perspective, sustainability is primarily about being sustained by God.

Yet, the church can participate in this activity as it is empowered by the Spirit (Acts 1:8; John 14–16; Gal. 5:6; Rom. 8:12–17; 14:3; Eph. 4:3). We have seen that the Holy Spirit can inspire organizational visions that promote ecological good. However, sustainable leadership also requires balancing visionary change with theological sustainability and relational care, which, in turn, must be balanced with effective leadership and a concern for institutional sustainability. Consequently, this kind of leadership requires integrating moral judgment, empowered by the virtue of prudence (*phronesis*). Visser and Courtice add another virtue (or trait): that of open-mindedness (Visser & Courtice, 2011, p. 6), which allows leaders to manage this kind of complexity and exercise judgment through the kind of systems thinking described above. Open-mindedness and an awareness of tradition might therefore be seen as balancing virtues in the act of *phronetic* performance.

In the Christian tradition, *phronesis* also implies spiritual discernment, as all things relate to God. This kind of serving practical wisdom, which was modeled by Christ, can also be seen as a spiritual gift (Phil. 2:1–11; 3:3–11; 1 Cor. 12:8; see also Tangen, 2018b). Within Pentecostal-Charismatic and Baptist traditions, this relatedness is embodied through practices. Despite theological differences, they may agree with the orthodox theologian Alfred Alexander Schmemann, who suggests that

> secularism, I submit, is above all a negation of worship. I stress – not of God's existence, not of some kind of transcendence and therefore of some kind of religion. (Schmemann, 2012, p. 1449)

This means that authentic Christian theology and proper *phronesis* must be grounded in adoration and communal participation in the Lord's Supper and other practices in the Spirit. Steven Land stresses that spiritual discernment must take place within the worshiping community:

> Theology requires not only discursive reasoning but also the engagement of the whole person within the communion of charisms. The community of the Spirit and Word functions as a worshiping, witnessing, forming, reflective whole; but at the heart of all this is the liturgical life of the community. (Land, 2010, p. 23)

Integrative leadership therefore requires ongoing participation in communal worship to remain spiritually sustainable. As I suggested above, it also requires awareness of tradition and knowledge of Scripture. Land describes it this way:

> Spirituality involves the integration of beliefs, practices, and affections. Christian spirituality as embodied by Pentecostals calls for discerning reflection in light of the vision of the kingdom of God. (Land, 2010, p. 118)

Thus, spiritual leadership as practical wisdom operates *coram Deo*—before God's face—and includes prayer for spiritual guidance and ecological hope through charismatic gifts like faith, wisdom, knowledge, and prophecy (1 Cor. 12:4–11).

The most important implication for sustainable leadership can be articulated as follows: to remain caring stewards and faithful partners in creation, the church must remain theocentric rather than anthropocentric or eco-centric. It is God—and not creation—that should be worshiped and conceived as the center of the cosmos (Rom. 1:18–21) and the hope of creation (Rom. 8:18–28). I also hold that this is the classic Christian ecumenical position, even though modern theologians may disagree on whether they ascribe to classical theism or some form of panentheism.

With this position as a starting point, I return to the challenge posed by Karen Jordan and Kristján Kristjánsson, framing the question as follows: Can charismatic-liturgical leadership at NSLT offer spiritual practices that provide awe and wonder, respect for the created order, and a sense of deep connectedness with nature—without worshiping it?

I would suggest that testimonies to these virtues are already present in the college's tradition. First, there are biblical testimonies, such as Psalm 8, which express awe and wonder at creation and lead to praise and worship of God as the maker of heaven and earth. Second, there are Pentecostal testimonies of similar encounters with God in nature, which lead to experiences of God's Spirit. One of the most iconic accounts is Lewi Pethrus's testimony of how he was baptized with the Holy Spirit as he watched the sunrise over Oslo fjord one early morning:

> As I stood by the railing and prayed, the sun rose out of the sea. I have always been moved by nature's majesty and beauty, but this time I experienced something entirely new. What I had encountered during the night—my contact with God in prayer and the beautiful scenery before me—overwhelmed me. Tears streamed down my cheeks as I rejoiced. A flow of power and bliss went through my whole being, and I spoke foreign words that greatly surprised me. (Pethrus, 1991, p. 128, my translation).

Although the beautiful scenery overwhelmed Pethrus, it is reasonable to suggest that it is the communion with God that fills his "whole being" with something transcendent that is mediated through the immanent. Most importantly, this sense of being connected to nature while being in communion with something beyond it is also evident in Paul's dual description of groaning with the Spirit and suffering with creation as it awaits liberation from death (Rom. 8:18–28). In this text, it is clear that God's redemptive ability transcends creation's ability to heal itself, grounding hope ultimately in God. Frank Macchia suggests that different forms of groans in the Spirit, including speaking in tongues, articulate solidarity with creation's longing to be set free from the bondage of sin and death (Macchia, 2006, p. 41).

Thus, what Karen Jordan and Kristján Kristjánsson call harmony with nature can also take the form of painful solidarity and intense prayer for redemption. This may be seen as a form of realism that enhances the *phronesis* exercised in the Spirit. Moreover, the Christian tradition suggests that practices like prayer may provide the strength that enables leaders to live within the emotional unrest that accompanies truth, conflicts, compromises, and difficult decisions (Phil. 4:4–7). I suggest, therefore, that authentic engagement with the environment may emerge through a series of existential encounters involving God, humans, and the rest of

creation. In the context of a Christian university college, this calls for an existential pedagogy (Koerrenz, 2017; Johns, 1993) that transcends epistemic rationalism and postmodern criticism.

Such a pedagogy might include the following spiritual practices, which are formative not only for students but also for leaders in need of *phronesis*:

- Regular worship
- Addressing the theme of sustainability in research, teaching, and preaching
- Celebrating ecological restorative practices, for instance, on Easter or Earth Day
- Facilitating dialogues on sustainable lifestyles
- Cooperating with local organizations that promote sustainable leadership and restorative ecological practices
- Sending and praying for students who may lead sustainably in various social spheres
- Supporting, connecting with, or sending missionaries who do this work worldwide (See also Tangen, 2020, pp. 18–19.)

At NSLT, this could take the form of a dialogue or an embodied argument between the theological traditions present at the school. However, it should also extend to other dimensions, including balancing the need for a sustainable infrastructure with ecological well-being, as practices rooted in spirituality.

# CONCLUSION

Sustainable leadership has been defined as stewarding something in a way that allows it to flourish and endure over time, according to its God-given character and purpose within the web of life. This article demonstrates that Christian leaders, whether in church settings or educational institutions like NSLT, should cultivate virtues and practices that promote ecological sustainability. Yet, it has also demonstrated that this must be balanced against at least four other forms of stewardship. Sustainable leadership, as outlined in the S-E-R-V-E model, includes five essential dimensions: spiritual, effective, relational, visionary, and external leadership. Each dimension has its own unique sustainability requirements, necessitating a form of balanced, flexible, and ethically grounded leadership. This kind of leadership demands both creative, synergistic solutions and, at times, unavoidable compromises.

The cardinal virtue that provides this kind of integrative and balancing leadership is *phronesis*, which, in the Christian tradition, is a form of spiritual, practical wisdom. Yet, this study has shown that *phronesis* thrives on other virtues, including a sense of harmony and solidarity with nature, faith, love, hope, passion, attentive care, courage, awareness of tradition, and conflict-transforming hospitality. For sustainable leadership to flourish, a range of virtues is required, as summarized in Table 2. While this study highlights several key virtues, further research could provide a more comprehensive catalogue.

*Table 2: S-E-R-V-E, Virtues and sustainability.*

| The S-E-R-V-E model of Christian leadership | Virtues and competences for sustainability | Type of sustainability and tensions |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Spiritual leadership** Worship and moral/ spiritual judgement. | Faith, loving care, hope, passion, solidarity with creation – and spiritual wisdom – Christlike phronesis. | God as the sustainer – spiritual leadership is the integrating dimension of all other dimensions (and tensions). |

| **Excellent and effective leadership.** Stewardship in balance between core practices and institution building | Managerial capabilities, phronesis. | Sustaining infrastructure and flourishing of resources. Tension between organizational resource allocation and more important moral goods. |
|---|---|---|
| **Relational leadership** Empowering and leading co-workers, building community. | Love, attentiveness, benevolence, peacefulness; *phronesis*, courage and consideration, conflict transformation. | Relational sustainability – stewardship of people and process – in way that make the community and individuals flourish (s*halom)* in tension with a diversity and conflicts, including those provoked by questions about ecological sustainability. |
| **Visionary leadership** Theological story telling. Strategic and (self-) critical reflection rooted in tradition. | Envisioning, courage, and tradition- awareness. | Visionary theological sustainability and doctrinal inspire constructive-critical deliberations in relation to other ecological models. |
| **External relations.** Context sensitive missional hospitality, service for the common good. | Systems thinking, friendliness, hospitality, critical thinking, attentiveness, and courage. | Environmental stainability as common good – tension with other concerns in the framework. |

Finally, this fivefold taxonomy of sustainable leadership represents an expanded intra-organizational model of the triple and quadruple bottom line. The goals of ecological and social (relational) sustainability are fairly compatible with earlier models, whereas 'profit' in the S-E-R-V-E framework is interpreted more holistically as organizational sustainability. The importance of purpose is also maintained, though it is viewed through the lens of visionary leadership and theological sustainability. Here, the term 'spiritual' is defined as relating to and participating in God, with the understanding that, in the final analysis, this dimension is more about being sustained than sustaining. Although the church engages in spiritual practices and must exercise *phronesis* to promote sustainability, this virtue is ultimately a gift from God, the sustainer of life.

Practical wisdom is a kind of partnership with God that may be associated with both governance and spiritual and moral discernment. Yet, it is also action and execution. It is worth noting that S-E-R-V-E, as a model of integration, does not promote the status quo. As stewards of life, Christian leaders should use the framework not to defend the status quo but to ask daring questions and create bold new visions in a time that desperately needs decisive action."

## AN AFTERWORD — NSLT AND OTHER UNIVERSITY COLLEGES

What, then, about other institutions? Finally, I will offer a brief reflection on the extent to which these findings are applicable to other universities, although a full comparison with another case must be conducted elsewhere. The most evident similarities among such institutions lie in the challenges and dilemmas of effective organizing and the tensions—and potential synergies—between institutional sustainability and ecological sustainability. I will also suggest that other institutions will face similar dilemmas regarding the link between relational leadership and ecological sustainability. A Christian tradition may address this dilemma in a particular way due to its theological resources, but the fundamental tension between human and ecological concerns remains the same.

A more significant difference between NSLT and other universities may arise in how they understand ultimate or sacred concerns and the necessity of sustaining a visionary narrative, which in NSLT's case is theologically grounded. However, other universities also maintain some form of foundational philosophical narrative, which may prioritize different bottom lines. Thus, even business schools or medical universities may need to reflect on the tension between their specific mission and their conception of the common ecological good. Consequently, this study may have relevance beyond NSLT.

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