

# Kelvin Redd: Columbus a leader in servant leaders

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The first time I heard the words “servant leadership,” I was an employee at Synovus Financial Corp. We had gathered at the Columbus Convention and Trade Center for an employee meeting. Bill Turner, the contemporary father of the Synovus family of companies, was on the stage espousing the virtues of this new age but ancient philosophy. He said servant leadership would one day change the world.

Mr. Turner is not the only person to sing the virtues of servant leadership, but in the Columbus, Ga., area, no single person has done more to spread awareness of this countercultural way of thinking.

When I’m out and about meeting with clients or in casual settings with friends and business acquaintances, I’m asked, “What is servant leadership?”

For starters, there are several definitions of the world’s greatest leadership philosophy. The Pastoral Institute’s definition says:

“Servant leadership is a lifelong journey that includes the discovery of one’s self, a desire to serve others and a commitment to lead.” Robert Greenleaf, the man credited with coining the term, wrote, “The servant-leader is servant first ... Becoming a servant-leader begins with the natural feeling that one wants to serve, to serve first. Then conscious choice brings one to aspire to lead.”

My own personal definition, based on the previous two, is “Love others, help them develop their God-given talents and move out of their way.”

These servant leadership definitions are noble and ideal, but do they have relevance in today’s society? I believe they do, in spite of the desperate and troubling times in which we currently live, and so does Kent Keith, bestselling author and CEO of the Greenleaf Center for Servant Leadership. In the very first chapter of his book “The Case for Servant Leadership,” he writes, “The case for servant leadership is about creating a better world. There does not have to be so much pain and suffering, so much war and violence, so much starvation and disease, so many crushed dreams and untapped talents, so many problems unresolved and so many opportunities ignored. The world does not have to be like this.”

On June 16-18, the Greenleaf Center for Servant Leadership’s International Conference will be held in Atlanta. However, the pre-conference is taking place in Columbus on June 16. On that day Columbus will be named a Servant Leader City. No other municipality in the world has this moniker. This is a testament to its leadership and another honor for a city which ranks as one of the best places to raise a family, according to Best Life magazine.

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Columbus is also the home of traditional mainstays on Fortune's Best Places To Work, Aflac and Synvovs, and Georgia Trend's Best Places To Work company, Hughston Hospital.

I feel very fortunate to work for the Pastoral Institute's Center for Servant Leadership, where we enjoy a unique partnership with the servant leadership programs at Columbus State University and Brookstone School, the premier educational programs of this kind anywhere in the world.

I am not naïve enough to think that Columbus is perfect, because there are what I call pockets in every organization. Pockets are domains where, no matter how well-intentioned the city or the institution may be, no one would care to live or work there. I am quite sure that there are areas in our city where one could walk the neighborhood streets and speak to people who don't feel the love, and it is precisely those people, the least of these, whom we must reach out to. So we do have a lot of work to do. What the Servant Leader City award says more than anything else is that our leadership is committed to embarking on the journey.

I've learned several things from Bill Turner and others over the past five years. Servant leadership is about love, forgiveness, a keen understanding of self; most of all, it's a journey.

Yes, we will make mistakes along the way, but as I used to hear the grown folks say when I was a little boy, "I'm not where I want to be, but I thank God I'm not where I used to be."