Leadership through Service: All the Easy Jobs Have Been Taken

Keynote address presented by

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I am honored to have the opportunity to speak with you this afternoon. I have chosen the title of Leadership Through Service for my presentation. And I have added the sub-title: All the easy jobs have been taken…a phrase that I wish I had thought of myself. Actually, I read it on somebody’s t-shirt while I was drafting my remarks.

My goal is not to present a retrospective review of our accomplishments, as tempting as that may be. Rather, I want to talk about some of the challenges I see on the horizon. I want to suggest some actions we can pursue. And, as is expected with this group, my frame of reference is global.

Since I assumed responsibility for academic programs in our college I have been invited to quite a few club and departmental banquets (the so-called rubber chicken circuit) and have given quite a few after dinner speeches. These speeches are really very simple to give. They have three requirements: a good beginning, a good ending, and the ability to bring these two elements as close together as possible. But a keynote address such as this one is a bit more demanding. I’ve organized my talk around four questions:
1. What kind of world do we live in?
2. What is our grand challenge?
3. What kinds of leaders are needed for our grand challenge?
4. What can agricultural and extension educators do now?
What kind of world do we live in?

Since we are in the US, we’ll start with the American scene. In America today, we have red states and a few blue states. We have differing views on key issues. Some say that we are fighting a war on terrorism. Others believe that we are fighting a self-serving, short-sighted war for petroleum. And, according to Larry Summers (2005), President, Harvard University, “The evidence is overwhelming that inequality in our nation is increasing.”

Globally, a confluence of factors creates (as former UNICEF director Carol Ballamy called it) a perfect storm of human deprivation. Factors include poverty, drought, HIV/AIDS, malaria, schistosomiasis, and others. John Hennessy (2005), President of Stanford University described our world as one in which:

…countries grapple with crises and conflicts of an increasingly complex and international nature – from disease and environmental deterioration to threats against global peace and prosperity.

In a new book, The End of Poverty, Jeffrey Sachs (2005) describes the magnitude of the problem as well as some very concrete solutions. His prescriptions are both bold and controversial. He points out that 20,000 people die every day due to extreme poverty. He reminds us that we “talk” far more than we “do” in development assistance.

In the face of this maelstrom the world community has so far displayed a fair bit of hand-wringing and even some high-minded rhetoric, but precious little action.

We live in a world of rich and poor. We live in a world where injustice, misery and poverty lead to frustration and instability. The link between poverty and instability is not just based on my speculation; the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) agrees that they are critical determinants of state failure. The CIA reported a very high correlation between stability of governments and human well-being in terms of health, hunger, and economic prosperity (CIA, 1999).

We know that civil and other military conflicts derail development. If you doubt this, look at poverty levels in Afghanistan, Sudan, Rwanda, Ethiopia and Sierra Leone. And conflict is expensive. The world community spends approximately $1 trillion per year on defense spending.

Although it seems to be temporarily out of fashion in some powerful countries, there is a school of thought that individual nations can do well (for themselves) by doing good for others. Formerly, this was a more common cornerstone of successful foreign policy. This school of thought calls for investments in development in order to prevent conflicts from arising. “Preventive” development involves investments in education, economic development, and food security which are viewed as essential ingredients if instability is to be avoided. The logic lies in the assertion that such investments are cheaper than war.

But the challenges in development grow every year. My family and I moved to East Africa 25 years ago where I worked on a farmer training and extension project. At that time, average life expectancy in East Africa was about 48 years and we focused on training adult farmers. Next month I will be returning to East Africa to launch another farmer training project. In the intervening years average life expectancy in East Africa has dropped to approximately 42 years. The project we are launching will be a primary school based training project and the farmers who will be trained are children. The project isn’t training future farmers; because of HIV/AIDS these children are considered beginning farmers.

What is our grand challenge?

Grand challenges have been issued from time to time throughout history by monarchs, geographical societies, and governments. Finding out if the world is flat
was a grand challenge. Putting a human on the moon was a grand challenge. Finding a cure for cancer, unfortunately, is still a grand challenge.

Do AIAEE members have a grand challenge? I believe we have a good set of candidates for our grand challenge. If you weren’t totally preoccupied with Y2K computer worries, you’ll remember the historic Millennium Summit held in New York in September 2000.

As you know, the Summit adopted eight Millennium Development Goals. The first is a goal to eradicate extreme poverty and hunger to respond to people who live under these conditions. According to the UN (2004), “1.2 billion people still live on less than $1 a day and 880 million are malnourished.”

Goal 2 relates to one of the most fundamental building blocks of development: primary education. According to the UN (2004), “113 million children do not attend school.” We know that investments in this area have huge payoffs in terms of economic development, smaller family size, and related dimensions.

Goal 3 deals with empowerment of women. According to the UN (2004) approximately “two-thirds of the world’s illiterates are women, and 80% of its refugees are women and children.” At the risk of oversimplification, the prevailing world view seems to be that men currently hold the majority of the power in the world and women hold the majority of the common sense. We need to find ways to fully unleash the critical contributions of women in development.

Goal 4 is aimed at improving child survival, a very compelling goal. According to the UN (2004) 11 million young children die every year.

Goal 5 is targeted at reducing maternal mortality. “In the developing world, the risk of dying in child-birth is one in 48” (UN, 2004).

Goal 6 targets the control of two truly debilitating diseases–HIV/AIDS and malaria–as well as others. As the UN (2004) states, “killer diseases have erased a generation of development gains.”

Goal 7 challenges us to pursue goals one through six in an environmentally sustainable fashion. The UN (2004) points out that “more than one billion people still lack access to safe drinking water.”

Goal 8 was established because donors realized that they are part of the problem. Debt loads place a tremendous burden on poor countries. Countries that are mortgaged to the hilt simply cannot prosper.

How much will it cost? According to the World Bank (2005), we will need to double development aid to the level of $60 billion per year to achieve the Millennium Development Goals. This seems easily affordable. It is an amount equivalent to what the USA currently spends in Iraq in 12 months. Or, as Jeffrey Sachs (2005) points out, it’s the cost of a weekly cup of coffee for every American.

But let’s face it, AIAEE members can’t tackle all of these problems. But we can have a significant impact on several of the Millennium Development Goals. Let’s focus on the first three goals where we have a comparative advantage for our grand challenge.

Goal 1: By 2015, eradicate extreme poverty and hunger. Specifically, Target two calls for a halving of the proportion of people who suffer from hunger. Are we on track to achieve this goal? Can it be done in a decade? According to FAO Director General Jaques Diouf (2002), the short answer is: no. At the current pace we will not reach Target 2 until 2050 or 2060. Significant progress in India and China masks negative food production trends in Africa. But this is an area that is clearly in our sphere of interest.

Goal 2: By 2015, achieve universal primary education. Target three calls for children everywhere, boys and girls alike, to be able to complete a full course of primary schooling. This is doable. Tanzania, for example, eliminated school fees and
enrollment shot up from 60 to 90%. And closer to our area of interest, FAO and UNESCO are leading a global initiative called Education for Rural People and they would welcome our participation (FAO, 2003).

Goal 3: Promote gender equality and empower women. Target four directs us to “eliminate gender disparity in primary and secondary education...no later than 2015” (UN, 2004). AIAEE has a rich tradition of valuing and promoting scholarship related to gender and development. Our knowledge base can contribute to this area.

If we accept these as elements of our grand challenge then we must ask: Who will lead? And what strategies will be used?

What kinds of leaders are needed for our grand challenge?

There are many styles of leadership and a wide variety of leaders. Which variety do we need for our grand challenge? AIAEE member Bruce Lansdale (2000) in his book, Cultivating Inspired Leaders, tells us that the needs of development work are best served by what he calls the “inspiring leader-manager.” Leaders in this category are meant to exceed the leadership qualities commonly found in traditional managers and administrators.

James Autry (2001) makes a compelling case for servant leaders who serve with a generosity of spirit and selflessness to advance the goals of the organization. A service mentality prevails in this paradigm. In his book, The Servant Leader, Autry says that:

True leadership, unlike management, is not just a set of skills and learned behaviors. What you do as a leader will depend on who you are.

These days it is difficult to know what exactly is meant by service. The word is used in so many different ways: service call, service station, service learning, military service, church service, community service. For some in the US, the term community service now implies a punishment...something you do when you have been bad rather than something you do because you are good!

I much prefer Justice O’Connor’s notion of public service. She describes it as “the task of building bridges for others” (O’Connor, 2004).

What kinds of leaders are needed for our grand challenge? As I prepared this talk I read several books and spent some time reflecting on leadership and service. All of the leaders I found myself admiring had a common leadership characteristic: they were quiet leaders who earned the respect of the world through significant service.

Examples of five quiet leaders who are world renowned will help me illustrate the point. On this list are three PhDs, one MD, one saint, and four Nobel peace prize recipients.

My first example, Mother Teresa, is a perfect role model for quiet leaders. Her story is well known. She went to India at age 19. Imagine what a special person it took to go to India in 1929 to spend the rest of her life trying to ease the burden of the poorest of the poor. She was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1979.

My second example, Dr. Albert Schweitzer, is the first missionary I ever heard about. His contributions were enormous…but he viewed them as just some “small and obscure deeds.”

My third example is Dr. George Washington Carver who dedicated his entire life to serving human kind through science. He said:

It is not the style of clothes one wears, neither the kind of automobile one drives, nor the amount of money one has in the bank, that counts. These mean nothing. It is simply service that measures success.

We are proud that Dr. Carver is an Iowa State University graduate and a former faculty member.
My fourth example is Professor Wangari Maathai who believed passionately in women’s rights and the environment and was able to link the two through her Greenbelt Movement. She is an academic who found that serving the poor was compatible with a distinguished academic career.

My last example is Dr. Norman Borlaug, who attended school in a one room Iowa school house. He focused his creativity and very hard work on developing and distributing High Yielding Varieties of wheat. He is still going strong even in his 90s as a passionate crusader for ending hunger.

I hope you see the pattern in these well-known leaders that caught my attention. These are people who actively sought the toughest jobs. And they are individuals who never sought publicity for themselves.

We have many such quiet leaders and heroes in our profession who became leaders through their service. Some of these members are far enough along in their careers to have been recognized. In total, AIAEE has recognized 14 members for Outstanding Service:

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So choosing a couple of members on which to focus my remarks was no easy task. But I decided to focus on two individuals that can’t be with us today: Bruce M. Lansdale and Robert H. Maxwell.

Bruce Lansdale is considered one of the senior statesmen of our profession. He has had an extraordinary career in agricultural education and rural development. He directed the American Farm School, Thessaloniki, Greece, from 1955-90. The American Farm School offers programs at the secondary, post secondary and adult levels serving learners in Greece and the Balkans. In 2004, the American Farm School celebrated its 100th anniversary.

Bruce was raised in Greece. After finishing graduate work at Cornell, he returned to Greece as a Fulbright Scholar in 1948. When Bruce started his work in Greece in 1948, Greece was struggling to emerge from a dark period that began with WWII and continued non-stop through the Greek Civil War. In post war Greece Bruce found poverty, hatred, mistrust, individualism, and isolationism.

During Bruce’s tenure the school was a leader in educational innovation, introducing co-educational programs, short courses for farmers, and leadership of community development programs. The school was also a leader in technical innovation, introducing the first milking machine, the first combine harvester, and the first fully computerized agricultural school in Greece. Bruce is also the author of several books, all of which have been extremely well received worldwide, with several having been translated into other languages.

I first volunteered at the School when I was 19 and was truly inspired by Bruce, his wife Tad, and their family. I liked the school so much I asked Bruce if I could come back and work there someday. His response: “Well, you have to know something about agriculture and that pretty much rules you out!” I immediately went back to college, changed majors and finished a degree in agriculture. Of course, I called him up just before I graduated and begged him to hire me now that I was “educated.” I went back to work at the school for three years and watched as Bruce led the school to international fame through innovative educational programs, the hosting of dignitaries, speaking engagements around the world, and through the books he wrote.

In “retirement” Bruce and Tad Lansdale have not slowed down. They took
their message on the road to share their experience. They have worked in Albania and the Balkans, Nepal and other Asian countries, Nigeria, Tanzania, Honduras, and many other countries. Bruce and Tad joined us at many AIAEE meetings.

Two weeks ago, fellow AIAEE member John Crunkilton and I were in Greece for the launching of the Greek translation of Bruce’s book, *Cultivating Inspired Leaders*. While there we learned of the establishment of a new award named in his honor, funded by friends and alumni of the American Farm School.

As many of you know, Bruce loved to share stories of Hodja, also known by many different names throughout the world: Mulla Nasredin, Goha, Joha, Nasredin Hodja, Hoja, Hoca. Bruce sent this one to share with participants in the AIAEE conference:

Hodja was once seen in the village seated backwards on his donkey. When asked what was going on, Hodja said: “My friend here wanted to go one way and I wanted to go the other ……so we are compromising!” (Lansdale, 1986, pg. 80)

Bruce provided a lifetime of service and a lifetime of leadership for others.

Robert Maxwell is the other quiet leader I wanted to spotlight. Robert H. Maxwell was so capable that he was asked to take on more and more leadership responsibility. Throughout his career he held many titles: Volunteer, Professor, Department Chair, Director of International Programs, Director of Extension, Dean of Agriculture, Associate Provost. But everyone new him as Bob; lovable, approachable, and hilariously funny, Bob.

Bob was raised on a farm in Iowa. He earned three degrees from two top institutions: Iowa State University and Cornell University. He could have pursued any number of distinguished academic career paths. But Bob took the road less traveled. He began his career in Africa in 1960 when he, his wife Betty, and their children moved to Kenya. This was before the time of business class travel, before the time of air-conditioned Landrovers, and before the advent of frequent flier programs.

Bob applied the love and passion he felt for his own family to the challenges experienced by children and families in East Africa. And Bob was West Virginia University (WVU) in East Africa. And WVU was as well known in Dar es Salaam as it was in the West Virginia towns of Huntington or Parkersburg.

Bob was one of our AIAEE pioneers and he served AIAEE with distinction. Bob helped to launch AIAEE and was an active member throughout his career. He was elected by his peers and served as AIAEE president in 1995.

I had the privilege of working for Bob in Tanzania for four years. He set an example for the US and Tanzanian project staff in the respect he showed to everyone from the Minister of Agriculture to farmers and everyone in between.

Bob died in Africa doing what he loved: helping to improve the livelihoods of the poorest of the poor.

When I remember Bob, I remember him as someone who could make anyone laugh no matter what culture they represented, no matter how miserable they might feel. Sometimes it was his colorful vocabulary in Swahili. Sometimes it was a hilarious personal story. But Bob inspired far more than laughter. Recognizing the power of his inspirational character, Iowa State University established the R.H. Maxwell International Service Learning Scholarship in his honor to encourage undergraduate students to carry on Bob’s tradition of service in developing countries. West Virginia University established a very similar fund called the R.H. Maxwell Fund for International Development in Agriculture. This fund provides seed grants for people and programs in support of international development in agriculture.
Bob Maxwell and Bruce Lansdale both provided extraordinary leadership through service. And they couldn’t have cared less that all the easy jobs had been taken; they really weren’t looking for them anyway.

**What can agricultural and extension educators do now?**

The short answer is: “PLENTY!”

Is there a role for AIAEE members in helping to improve food security, primary education and empowerment of women? I believe we can contribute critical ingredients to this quest. If the CIA is correct, advances in these three areas are linked to sociopolitical stability. We can contribute in the area of human resource development as a key foundation to improvements in these challenging areas. Both individuals and institutions can play a role.

Ernest Boyer (1990) called for a renewed commitment to service by universities. The bottom line is that society can ill afford to invest in universities without some return in the form of service to society.

At no time in our history has the need been greater for connecting the work of the academy to the social and environmental challenges beyond the campus. It seems clear that while research is crucial, we need a renewed commitment to service, too.

So, if you wanted to renew your commitment to service in order to change the world, where would you start? What specifically would you do when you wake up tomorrow? You might decide to start at the highest levels such as the World Bank. Unfortunately, at this level, the issues tend to be macro-policy issues that can appear only tangentially related to the realities of rural development.

I believe change begins at a more personal level. Change begins with a change in mindset as Norman Cousins so nicely articulated: “Progress begins with the belief that what is necessary is possible.”

Change also begins with a personal commitment as Jeffrey Sachs states:

It all comes back to us. Individuals, working in unison, form and shape societies...Great social forces are the mere accumulation of individual actions. Let the future say of our generation that we sent forth mighty currents of hope, and that we worked together to heal the world.

If you need some inspiration, consider our AIAEE role models. What would Bruce Lansdale and Bob Maxwell do if they could start again?

And if we are hesitant we should review two questions presented by Badaracco (2002) in his book entitled *Leading Quietly*:

Did Mother Teresa tote up the costs, benefits, and probabilities before she left a comfortable convent for the streets of Calcutta?

Did Nelson Mandela calculate the odds of bringing down Apartheid?

They both looked beyond what could be done to find what ought to be done.

Let me share with you my top ten list of things we can (and perhaps should) do starting right now.

# 10: Work on the tough problems:

I am personally guilty of conducting a study or two that measured what could be counted as opposed to what really counted. The tough problems are seldom solved by a single discipline. We should focus our research on the really difficult problems of development. Inevitably, this will bring us into research collaboration with other disciplines such as health, child development, management, and engineering. Of course, things get messy when we work interdisciplinarily...so let’s figure out how to do it better.
# 9: Partnerships:
Pick a partner institution abroad and focus all of your efforts in cultivating that relationship. Focus resources and grant writing on that partnership and you will get results. We are trying that with Uganda. In the past 18 months we have attracted funding for five projects involving over 10 faculty, grad students and undergrads. Long-term partnerships yield results not available to shorter term unions.

# 8: Embrace change:
Education is relatively change proof. Let’s not get stuck in the past. We need to make change a part of our institutional culture. Richard Bawden says that we have to learn our way forward. And we should never stop changing, because, as Benjamin Franklin said: “when we are finished changing, we’re finished.”

# 7: Harness technology to learning:
Yesterday, the transistor revolutionized mass communication. Today, microprocessors in handheld devices are now commonplace throughout the world. Tomorrow, nanotechnology of some form will revolutionize our learning processes. Imagine sub-microscopic components that are so small that 60,000 could fit in the space occupied by an eraser on top of a pencil. With the rate of technological change we are going to have to adapt much more quickly in order to take advantage of learning enhancements that will arise from technological change.

# 6: Brain swap:
We need greater cross fertilization of ideas and better understanding of and tolerance for differences between humans and cultures. Sabbatics and student exchanges can help. We can provide incentives for industrialized country faculty to spend sabbatics in developing countries and vice versa.

# 5: Food grant universities:
Building on the land-grant university concept, Stanley Johnson suggested that we establish food-grant universities in developing countries utilizing the proceeds of food aid sales. Food grant universities can be established in developing countries to focus sharply on food security problems. They could easily be funded through mechanisms such as the proceeds of food aid sales.

# 4: At a distance:
Establish distance education programs between developed and developing countries using the proceeds of a 1 cent tax on each e-mail we send. Would you mind paying a penny for every email you send? Why couldn’t the proceeds of such an arrangement be used to fund an innovative development project. This is an idea that has been around for a while but seems to have stalled out.

# 3: Get political:
Are we interested in becoming more involved politically? Do we have a position on key issues? Do we communicate these positions? AIAEE should develop an advocacy arm and develop and communicate it’s agreed upon positions to governments and NGO leaders worldwide.

# 2: Invest in grad students:
Universities in industrialized countries should set aside at least one additional graduate assistantships for promising leaders from developing countries. I can’t think of a better investment than in the academic promise of tomorrow.

# 1: Invest in student leadership:
Students are the embodiment of hope. We should never underestimate the ability of students to develop and lead their own significant development activities. They are activists who develop leadership skills through service. I’ve listed just three
examples of student-led efforts that have made a difference:

- Engineers for a Sustainable World
- Students adopting a village in Guatemala
- Students against Hunger and for Ending Famine

In the words of Gunter Pauli we should be “Super Ambitious!” (Sustainable Development Issues Network, 2005). I honestly believe we could implement many of these with some extra effort and a modest amount of additional money.

Well, now that we’ve solved the most pressing problems confronting our planet let me offer another story from Bruce. This one is called “It’s in your hands”

Two small boys decided to play a trick on Hodja. With a tiny bird cupped in their hands they would ask him whether it was alive or dead. If Hodja said it was alive, they would crush the bird to show he was wrong. If he said it was dead they would let it fly away and still fool him.

When they found the wise old man they said: “Hodja, that which we are holding, is it alive or dead?” Hodja thought for a moment and then replied: “Ah, my young friends, that is in your hands.”

(Lansdale, 2000, pg 48)

Our grand challenge is in our hands. I know that seems like a pretty heavy responsibility. But let me offer a couple of words of encouragement as well as a word of caution.

One of my favorite Lansdale quotes: “There is no limit to what you can accomplish if you don’t care who gets the credit” (Lansdale, 2000, pg. 144).

Anthropologist Margaret Mead captured my imagination when she came to speak at my high school. And I have always been inspired by one of her most famous quotes:

Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has.

The quotes from Lansdale and Meade are particularly inspiring. But let me insert a cautionary note. The constant flow of media stories about human misery makes it almost impossible to avoid apathy as a psychological survival mechanism. Over time, I have found myself becoming desensitized by the constant barrage of news about the problems of the world. Let me illustrate my point by using a well known story of the boiled frog. I will call these frogs Kostas and Kristina. Throw Kostas into boiling water and he will immediately feel extreme heat. He will realize it’s a crisis and will take drastic action. Kostas will jump out of the hot water to save his life.

Put Kristina into cool water and slowly raise the temperature. Kristina will never notice the gradual rise in temperature. She won’t realize there is a crisis…until it’s too late.

When we are shocked, we react quickly. When the devastating tsunami hit on December 26, 2004, the world community reacted immediately and generously. When the horror of the event became evident the world community immediately rallied and sent aid and technical assistance. But hunger and poverty are with us everyday. Year after year we get reports on the growing number of hungry people living in poverty. Sadly, when our sensitivities are eroded over time we can begin to accept almost anything. We must be vigilant so that we don’t end up like Kristina.

OK, let’s wrap up with one last Hodja story from Bruce. This one is called: “Darkness.”

One day Hodja was sitting in front of his hut searching in the dust when a neighbor came by and asked him what he was looking for. When Hodja told him he had lost his gold coin, the neighbor kneeled down and started sifting through the dirt. After a while, the neighbor asked Hodja exactly where he had lost the coin. Hodja told him that it had disappeared inside his hut. The neighbor asked: “Then why are you
searching for it outside?” Hodja replied: “It is much too dark in the hut to look for it inside.” (Lansdale, 1986, pg. 4)

Will we have the wisdom to look for solutions to our grand challenge in the right places? Will we ask and answer the important research questions? Will we confront or avoid the “darkness” of difficult tasks?

AIAEE has 21 years of experience and a rich tradition of service. We can use these assets to make significant progress on our grand challenge. All the easy jobs have been taken but we can draw strength from the examples of Bruce and Bob and provide leadership through service. Bruce and Bob would be proud to see the number of you who are demonstrating leadership through service.

Thank you to all of you who put agricultural and extension education to work in service of humankind. Keep up the good work. We have a lot to do.

References


