



How do I maintain a servant mentality every day?

“How do I have a servant mentality every day?” – especially amidst the holidays, the continuing pandemic, and an upcoming transition to a new year, perhaps?

This is what those who attended the Tuesday, December 14th session at BELIEVES came to learn about and discuss, as they listened to remarks from a panel of leaders featuring Tina Williford, Founder and Director of The Table on Delk; Vanessa Russell, CEO of Catholic Charities Atlanta; and Lisa Regan, Executive Director of Pregnancy Aid Clinic.



Russell, who said she was the youngest radio DJ in her hometown growing up, grew up in a military family. She has been with Catholic Charities of Atlanta for a long time – though it was not intentional.

“I had been on the Board, then stepped into the CEO role on an interim basis when the prior CEO left,” she said. “I was doing that for three months, and then was chosen to move into the role on a permanent basis. I’ve now been there for five years.”

When asked what the hallmarks of a servant mentality are, Russell said for her it is all about perspective.

“I’m a problem solver and every situation is one I could solve,” Russell explained. “Servant leadership is a matter of perspective and seeing things from the other person’s perspective – not yours – for greater understanding. Mine is generally about getting something done.”

Regan, who had been in the ad agency world earlier in her career but then found she was drawn to the mission elements of the organizations she served, added to Russell’s remarks about perspective.

“It’s orienting to the mission, and doing so with humility,” said Regan, who also added that it is totally a God thing for her to be at Pregnancy Aid Clinic. “Literally, we have our mission statement in the conference room and sometimes I have to go look at it. We need prayer every day to keep our ‘self’s’ out of it.”

Williford, who moved to Atlanta in 1986 and had a professional background in marketing before shifting to be a stay-at-home mom for 30 years, spoke next.

She said The Table at Delk, which serves women and children who are at-risk and living out of the extended stay motels by Delk Road and I75, is not something she jumped into right away.

“A mission trip to Guatemala City is what first opened my eyes to serve at-risk women like those on Delk Road.”

Women she saw there were addicted to drugs and forced into prostitution, she explained.

“I sat with what I saw (in Guatemala City) for six years, and then began helping women in need. Then in 2017, we started The Table.”

Adding to Regan and Russell's remarks about the hallmarks of a servant mentality, Williford explained she considers herself to be a fixer and that a servant mentality is not one she really strives for.

"I focus on God first," she shared. "Love Him first, and then love others. Two prayers I pray throughout the day are, 'Let everything I do be to glorify You,' and 'Give me mercy and grace for every situation and conversation.'"

All three panelists were then asked how they keep the perspective they spoke of throughout the day.

"When I am tempted to take on problems that aren't mine, I get a sense of feeling heavy and crash and burn," replied Williford. "I'm reminded many times in these moments of a dream God gave me. When 'friends' from The Table come and they bring their 'sandbags' I offload them to God. This is something He's brought to me many years ago that has helped."

Russell then commented, "I'm not a social worker, but those who are at our organization taught me early on that sometimes you can't fix all people's problems, but what is always helpful is just to be 'present.'"

She went on to say how challenging being 'present' is – especially coming from the corporate world.

"I once told my mom, 'This has been the hardest job I've ever had,'" Russell recalled. "My mom said, 'Helping people is messy.' Sometimes it's enough to be 'present.'"

Most recently, Russell spoke of a situation that brought this to the forefront for her.

"One recent situation I encountered is when we had a homeless man who took up residence in our parking lot. I thought, 'I can be agitated by this, or embrace it.'"

For the two weeks the man was there, Russell said she brought him breakfast.

In Regan's world leading Pregnancy Aid Clinic, she told everyone God is in charge.

"It's not about us, and thank goodness we're not in charge," she said. "In the three years I've been here, we've had success with many women choosing life, but it's not perfect. When they don't choose life, it's hard to understand, and we have to hand it over to God. It's about the mission and God's work."

With what Regan, Russell, and Williford, shared, do they face moments where they are faced with "they got themselves in the situation" thoughts or comments related to those they are serving?

"I think it's about seeing the face of God in everyone you see," Regan remarked. "We're made in His image. If we can practice that daily, it will help. If we see the face of Christ in others, we can engage in a non-judgmental way."

Russell spoke after Regan commenting that the work of the organizations she, Regan, and Williford lead is our faith in action.

"What I didn't realize in the beginning is the parsing out of our faith," she said from her reflection. "Our faith leads us to have compassion. Just last week, I had a conversation about why we are helping illegal people. I said, 'It's not illegal to help people.' We encounter people who struggle with what the breadth of our faith means. We try to help where we can and those that come to our door. I thought living your faith would be easier than it is."

For Williford, she said at The Table, there are a couple of things done intentionally focused on dignity and addressing this very question.

"At The Table, we say Ephesians 6:10-18 aloud before the day begins – with all the volunteers – to recognize Satan is our enemy and he's feeding them lies. When we invite our 'friends' in, we use real things like real plates and silverware, and remind them they have value and choice."

All that was being shared brought the memory of a family Russell had helped in the past back to mind.

“We had a client one time living in a car with his wife and five kids,” she recalled. “He thanked us for not judging him and helping him. It was eye opening for me that people can feel judgment. I love the ‘sandbag’ analogy because that weight of judgment is something they carry with them.”

“Shame is an impediment for people to move forward,” Regan tossed into the conversation after hearing Russell’s most recent comment. “God’s dignified people. We’re peeling back layers of shame so they can see that dignity. We have to be real with people and give them a safe space.”

Williford then jumped in again to relate another thing done at The Table with intentionality.

“Something we do with volunteers to help with this is to say, ‘they’re women engaging in prostitution,’ not ‘they’re prostitutes.’ They’re not a label.”

So, where did the passion and conviction come from for the work each of the women do leading their organizations?

“After a 26-year corporate career, I thought I had earned the chance to relax and shift,” Russell answered. “Around that time, my father had gotten diagnosed with terminal illness. Dad said, ‘You’ve spent 26 years honing skills, and now you’re doing nothing with it. If I can leave you with one thing, it’s to do things for others.’”

After Russell’s father passed, she said she doubled down and came back to Catholic Charities Atlanta in a more engaged way.

“I thought I was done and had done well. My dad said, ‘You’re just getting started.’”

Regan then mentioned, “Mine was more gradual. My mother so exhibited unconditional love. Now I’m caring for her. For me, pro-life is about the full circle of life. Having unconditional love hits home the need to protect all life.”

Williford rounded out the responses to the question by recalling the importance justice has always had for her in her life.

“For me, even as a little girl, I had a serious bent for justice,” she stated. “It was all about right and wrong. It was easy for me to translate my desire for justice into the work at The Table. My struggle has always been to clothe the desire for justice in compassion. It helps to remember our enemy is Satan, not one another.”

Before closing, Williford took one additional question about why the organization she leads is The Table at Delk, versus the Table somewhere else; and Russell spoke a bit more on how the service to others is she and her team provide is changing.

“The name ‘The Table’ comes from a table being a leveling or meeting place where relationships can be formed,” Williford explained. “We use circular tables because no one’s the boss. ‘Delk Road’ came from my work in jail ministry from Out of Darkness – specifically from encounters in Cobb County jail where a woman said, ‘It’s not just Fulton Industrial, it’s on Delk Road too.’ This led to opening The Table in 2016.”

Russell followed, speaking about how she and her team are serving others today.

“Catholic Charities Atlanta serves people wherever they are,” she stated. “We find there’s great poverty shifting to the suburbs. We serve wherever there isn’t help. One of the best things with the pandemic – if you can say that – is a new step change with technology, enabling us to serve more people. I think next year we’ll see a different ‘heat map’ of our service coverage area.”

A specific example of this is where Catholic Charities Atlanta is partnering with Catholic Charities Savannah to have a chat bot help people with mental health so that the whole state of Georgia is covered.

“We’re trying to find ways to help people wherever they are.”