

ENCOUNTERING GOD IN THE IMAGE OF CHRIST: ICONIC LEADERSHIP

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Leadership is *the* buzzword these days in Christian churches. Everyone is talking about it, looking for it, hoping for it. We hope and pray for leaders to reverse membership decline and grow our congregations. Denominational agencies offer workshops and conferences. Seminaries offer courses. Books and articles on leadership fill library shelves. Church consultants criss-cross the country. All this and more for the sake of calling, promoting, and developing quality ecclesial leadership.

Approaches to and understandings of church leadership are multiplying beyond anyone's ability to keep track of them. Given the dizzying array of "leadership options", it would not be surprising if pastors and lay leaders came down with a diagnosable case of "leadershock," the symptoms of which include 1) reading too many leadership books, 2) inactivity due to reading too many leadership books, and 3) incessant mumbling to themselves as their "second-guessing" spins out of control. Leadershock does not happen all at once; it is a communicable disease that pastors spread among one another as their self-doubts coalesce into a collective consciousness of anxiety.

More often than not, clergy are exhorted, no, admonished from all directions to take on still more responsibilities, to develop even more skills, and to adopt yet another role—in order to be a more *effective* leader. Effectiveness is the presumed target in leadership, but effectiveness is hardly ever critically analyzed for what it means and what it entails. It is not that being more effective is wrong; I am all for purposeful and edifying action. Effectiveness, per se, is a virtue of leadership. However, the growing list of different tasks, practices, and roles for which leaders are responsible makes me uneasy, even suspicious. Something does not seem quite right when so many expectations are foisted upon others.

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Church leaders hear from every corner how they are supposed to be all things to all people. They are exhorted to be visionary, charismatic, extroverted, and persuasive communicators. They must also be servant-leaders: listeners, encouragers, and nurturing facilitators. But, still again, pastoral leaders are expected to be expert managers and administrators, organizing whole communities while efficiently and effectively working harder and longer than anyone else to inspire others to go and do likewise: to burn out for Jesus. Not only are leaders supposed to keep on running like the Energizer bunny, we require our church leaders to be spiritually attuned, empathetically sensitive, even shall we say...mystical. Pastoral leaders, ordained under denominational auspices, face inordinate expectations: they are to be prophet, priest, queen/king, as well as CEO and sacrificial lamb all at the same time. The underlying but barely hidden implication is, of course, that if these practices are not performed and if the roles remain unfulfilled and the tasks unachieved, then the minister is in some sense guilty of being limited, fallible, in short, of being human. Must our understanding of leadership revolve primarily around the practices, roles, or tasks to perform? Must we try to sew even more merit badges on the already weighty stole of pastoral leaders? Is it not true of the Christian life that in some sense the yoke is supposed to be easy, the burden light?

To be sure, the increasing expectations of ministerial roles and tasks are surely a result of the limitless ways in which Christ's ministry can be and should be lived out among Christian leaders, especially pastors. But, I wonder if the multiplication of expectations for pastors is all that can result from theological reflection on the nature of church leadership. Is there perhaps a way to address the issue of leadership so that their innumerable responsibilities can be first of all, integrated within an overall understanding of Christian life? And is it possible that the array of attributes can be offered to leaders, not as incessant demands upon them, but as an encouraging celebration of the specific ways in which they manifest and embody the life and ministry of Christ?

I offer in this essay a glimpse into the ministries of two congregations and their pastors as a way to see past the

plethora of tasks, roles, and practices that are thrust upon ecclesial leaders. Within these stories lie clues, suggestions, to an alternative understanding of ecclesial leadership and its theological grounding. I am not looking to slash and burn other ways of looking at leadership; I am not trying to rid pastors of their many responsibilities. Rather, I am searching for the theological and spiritual heart of leadership.

The search for the heart of ecclesial leadership has been a journey deep within and even beyond my tradition of pietistic Protestantism. Looking into the long tradition of Christianity, the Orthodox and Catholic Churches have given me a new appreciation of the centrality of the concept of "image" in an understanding of the church and human nature. That we are created in the image of God and that the Church is the image and body of Christ are significant indicators of what we are as Christians and what the nature of Christian leadership is. As you know, the Greek term for image is "icon," and over the centuries icon came to signify not only "image" generically conceived, but more. Icon has come to mean the incarnational and sacramental quality of God's reflection in disciples of Christ. To my Protestant friends, I am not necessarily advocating that we adorn our sanctuaries with icons; however, if that is where you are lead, so be it. I have come to find that icons hold within themselves a wisdom of the tradition about what is most true about our life in Christ. In a suggestive manner, this essay explores iconography for its wisdom about the church and its leadership. In fact, it may just lead us to a new appreciation of what is fundamental and indispensable to ecclesial leadership.

A BRIEF THEOLOGICAL EXCURSUS ON THE ICON

These days, icon is not as antiquated a term as it used to be. It is common to hear of Marilyn Monroe, James Dean, Louis Armstrong and even other lesser celebrities referred to as cultural icons. Apple and Microsoft have made icons indispensable for the computer-bound but technologically illiterate masses, like myself. In each case, icon refers to a symbol or sign that discloses a subterranean reality, a reality that is not immediately perceived on the surface of things but one in which we are deeply embedded. The same is true

theologically. Both image and icon belong to the category of theological anthropology as human *being* (that is, the existence of innumerable human beings) is defined by and oriented to the incarnation of the trinitarian God in Jesus Christ. Initial cues to a theological anthropology arise from many scriptural sources including Jesus' self-attribution in John chapter 14, "Whoever has seen me has seen the Father," as well as the claim in Colossians that "He [Jesus] is the image [Gk., icon] of the invisible God." These and other biblical texts of the New Covenant build upon and transform the primordial insight of Genesis chapter one that human beings were made in the image of God.

To be the image of God is at once a statement of *fact* and *vocation*: The birthright of humanity is to bear forth the life of God, and it is our obligation and vocation to faithfully live out this our true nature and calling. As the fulfillment of this divine vocation, Jesus Christ was recognized by the disciples as the supreme image of God and the supreme image of the perfected human person. As such his disclosure to us reveals who God is and who we are as perfected in God. St. Irenaeus states, "When the Word of God became flesh, He showed forth the image truly, since He himself became what was His image; and He reestablished the likeness—by rendering man [sic] altogether similar to the invisible Father".¹ Christ is the supreme icon of God and the supreme icon of humanity divinized. Developing the evangelical implication of the image of God in Christ for Christianity, Orthodox theologian and commentator on icons, Leonid Ouspensky, writes, "Christianity raises the image of Christ before the world. Christianity shows the prototype according to which man was created, but which is now hidden because of his sin. This image lives in the Tradition, which is the charismatic or mystical memory of the Church, its inner life."²

When we think of icons, it is almost by default that we think primarily of painted images of Jesus and the saints. Actually, Orthodox refer to icons as "written" not "painted" because icons are considered to be theological "texts" very

¹ Irenaeus, *Contra Haereses*, V, 16, 2 (Paris, 1969), vol. 2, 217.

² Leonid Ouspensky, *Theology of the Icon, vols. I and II*. Anthony Gythiel and Elizabeth Meyendorff, trans. (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary, 1992), 482.

similar in status to scripture. Nevertheless, it is important when thinking about icons to remember that the “written” image is only an icon in a secondary and derivative sense. Only Christ is the true image of God. Christ is the prototypical icon: Whoever sees Christ does indeed see the Father, truly and fully. The painted icon and its place in the liturgical life of the church is derived from the one living hypostasis, i.e., personal existence, in whom the nature of God and of human being and of the unity of the two are most clearly vivified.

My journey from the iconoclastic sentiments of my Southern Baptist roots to the eclecticism of United Methodism and through Reformed theological training to an appreciation of icons has been rather circuitous. A decisive moment in my journey came when I began teaching at Yale Divinity School; my closest colleague was a Roman Catholic priest. As we talked informally and taught pastoral theology courses together, we found it difficult to overcome in our conversations the oppositions that separated Catholic from Protestant understandings of the church. Compelled by our friendship and our mutual love for the church, we looked beyond our respective traditions for an alternative understanding of ministry and ordination. In our search, several Orthodox theologians—namely John Zizioulas, John Meyendorff, Leonid Ouspensky, and Alexander Schmemmann—provided a refreshing and substantive vision of Christian life and ministry. Though very much still outsiders, the Orthodox traditions gave us a window through which we were better able to view the truth of each other’s tradition and hold on to the truth of our own.

As I understand Orthodox iconography, icons are far more than mere religious decorations. Icons are fundamental to the central activity and purpose of every ecclesial community: to worship God in Spirit and in Truth and in so doing to become the very Body of Christ. Thus, the icon is first and foremost a liturgical artifact and aid, and it is constituted as such because of its liturgical relations. In other words, an icon is made an icon by the way it is made and used in a community as it worships. Icons are produced by iconographers within a liturgical community as a practice of devotion. Eventually the icons find their way into a context of personal and corporate worship to function there in a twofold

manner: as a window into the divine realm and as a mirror in which the communion sees the incarnate Christ within its common life.

“Icon” is, therefore, a term that does not refer just to the painted surface of wood. It refers to a religious artifact that is constituted within worship and contributes to it by disclosing both the transcendent and the immanent Christ, the Christ beyond and within the church and its members.

I make this point—that an icon is constituted within and through liturgical relations—because all too often icons are referred to as singular objects by themselves. The tendency to speak of an icon first as it is in itself and then to place the icon in a worshipping context fits neatly within the Western predilection to think atomistically of things as isolated objects which secondarily relate to other things. In this respect, icons are what they are regardless of their context. There is some truth to this way of thinking, for example, when an icon is placed in a nonliturgical setting such as a museum. But then, when an icon is extracted from its primary liturgical context, the worshipping community, it functions more as an aesthetic object than as a liturgical aid. This is an abnormal situation and contrary to the purpose of icons. For the Orthodox, an icon that is locked up in a museum is only a shadow of what it is meant to be. The worshipping community constitutes icons as such because they are rightly used as means for encountering God and becoming Godbearers themselves.³

Just as images become icons within the prayerful communion of people and God, so too does ecclesial leadership arise within a context, as a response to situations. This essential feature of leadership is often overlooked. Often our attention is riveted to charismatic individuals who rise up above all others and become in one way or another landmarks in the faith. Persons such as Dorothy Day and Martin Luther King, Jr. are those in whom it is very easy to see the image of Christ. In fact, persons such as these, whether living or deceased, tend to define for us what the image of

³ “Godbearing” refers to the central tenet of Kenda Creasy Dean and Ron Foster’s book, *The Godbearing Life* (Nashville: Upper Room Books, 1998), as well as the contention of Thomas F. Torrance that the incarnation is the supreme principle of God’s presence and activity in the world and to the inner structure of faith as disclosed in Jesus Christ. Cf., “The Deposit of Faith” in *Scotland Journal of Theology*, Vol. 36, p. 10.

Christ means. Few of us can even imagine being on the same platform with them, much less being compared to them. These are indeed heroes of the faith. Yet, because the light that shines from them is so bright, often we cannot see the communal context in which their leadership emerged and of which it was constituted. Despite the power and truth of these individual's lives, when considering ecclesial leadership, there is a more fundamental dimension than charismatic individuality. There is the relational context that gives rise to and constitutes leadership, whether it is within or without the church. To this point, Rosabeth Moss Kanter, a professor of business administration at Harvard Business School wrote, "Leadership does not exist within a person; it resides in the relationship between persons."⁴ The section that follows explores two situations in which iconic leadership emerges and is exercised. As Kanter has suggested, there is an urgent need to recognize and affirm the communal nature of the leader, and of the leader as icon. For this it is best to look at more ordinary, mundane examples of leadership. It is in the ordinary that perhaps we will discern most clearly the sacramental eruption of the extraordinary. What follows are narratives of two "leaders," both of whom were icons of Christ to others.

IMAGES OF ECCLESIAL LEADERSHIP

James Ebert

I first came to know James Ebert when he was a student at Yale Divinity School. Although he was reared in a quasi-fundamentalist culture, he came to Yale and left behind a theology and denomination who represented it. He was very much at sea personally and theologically. I remember thinking after one particularly in-depth conversation about his perspective and vocational goals that it was a shame that he was so uninterested in pastoral ministry, for I was sure he would be an extremely gifted pastor. James is diligent, creatively intelligent, sensitive, and very articulate. Sometime later I was surprised to learn that he was an intern in a congregation and enjoying it. After graduation he changed his mind about pastoral ministry and was ordained in the United

⁴ Rosabeth Moss Kanter, "Forward" in Lovett H. Weems, Jr. *Church Leadership: Vision, Team, Culture, and Integrity* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1993), 13.

Church of Christ. Although James and I had very little contact up to that point, we began to correspond. After his first year in ministry, we sat down for a formal interview.

In his first year of full-time pastoral work, James was an associate in a large, wealthy, and prominent Connecticut congregation. When we met for the interview, he was exhausted and somewhat disillusioned. The congregation was filled with high-achieving workaholics who expected the ministers to be made in their image. Personal worth was measured in terms of performance and accomplishments, and little attention was given to the quality of spiritual life. Disillusioned, confused, and frustrated he was considering other vocational directions. His reason was clear: he was not willing to sacrifice his well-being and family life if pastoral ministry meant giving up his personal life in order to meet the inordinate and unending expectations of the senior minister and the congregation.

As I sought to put the pieces of his life together in my mind, we explored the process by which he heard his call to ministry in the first place. His internship during divinity school had been decisive. He served a small congregation in a quiet and affluent shore community. As we delved into his experience with that congregation, his face lit up with new energy. He remembered that community fondly as the people who voiced his call. They were accepting, and they were grateful for his personal gifts and presence. To my surprise, when asked how the congregation voiced his call, he struggled in vain for words. He was essentially speechless. He could not say with any clarity what the congregants did or what they said that communicated his call. But he reiterated one phrase many times, "When I was with them, I saw myself as a pastor." I have the feeling that that was a congregation who recognized James' particular talents and skills and called upon them. They saw him as a person and a pastor and configured the tasks, roles, and responsibilities to his strengths, perhaps without knowing the significance of what they were doing.

It is particularly interesting in this case that James could say almost nothing about the pastor of that small congregation. Early in his internship, the pastor was taken seriously ill and, in effect, James became for several months

the senior minister. But it was not the senior minister who James credits with his call; rather, it was the congregation. And when pressed, James could not identify particular people who were especially influential, but he kept coming back to his impression that his new pastoral identity was a gift of the whole faith community.

Things changed radically for James in the fast-paced, “just do it” congregation. He was surprised and confused by the lack of interest in spirituality. The flurry of activity, the inordinate expectations, and the ever-increasing roles he had to fulfill were almost too much for him to bear. Moreover, he was losing his sense of calling, his sense of ministry, and he was in danger of surrendering to the treadmill mentality of the upper-middle class. After our conversation and over the next few months, James struggled with his sense of call and eventually came to recognize and reclaim his calling to ministry. Not that his struggle to live out his calling became easier, but he began to see the distinction between pastoral acts and pastoral ministry, the latter entailing in many respects a prophetic and critical presence among the people.

Before I introduce the next pastoral situation, a few comments about James’ story are in order. First, this is a narrative about leadership, but not in the normal sense. It is not principally about James’ leadership, although he certainly acted as a leader in the congregation. The primary leader in this situation was not one “person” at all; it was the congregation. Even though it might seem a bit odd to say that a group of people led James, this is precisely what I suggest occurred. How did they lead? What did they do to James? What did they do *for* James? Well, in James’ mind, the congregation did nothing to or for him that was demonstratively influential. He could not identify any particularly powerful actions. Resolutely he concluded, “In their faces I saw myself as pastor; I saw my future in ministry.” Now, this is a very interesting form of leadership. It cannot be exactly described as mentoring or as modeling. And it seems rather strange to characterize the relationship of James and the congregation in terms of the typical leader-follower dyad. What then, is this type of leadership? And is it ecclesial?

Reflecting upon my interview with James and about the relationship between him and the congregation, the image

that comes to mind is that of a person presiding at the Eucharist table. In this case, however, the “person” is corporate. The many have become one for James. What the congregation did as a whole seemed to follow a liturgical pattern: they accepted James’ offering of his talents and questions and enthusiasm, and these gifts were laid on the altar to become bread and wine by which the community was nourished. Offering his gifts to God in thanksgiving and invoking the Holy Spirit to transfigure his gifts into spiritual nourishment, the community of faith distributed these gifts among one another for the edification of the Body of Christ.

A number of images are at play in this scenario. In the faces of the congregation, James came to see Christ as clearly as he ever had. But he saw more. In their faces and their actions, he came to see himself in a new way, as a disciple of Christ. In still another respect, the images of Christ and of James merged, and James saw for the first time the face of Christ in his own. Seeing Christ within and having Christ’s ministry expressed as his own, James was able to envision the vocation of pastoral ministry as his own. It seems to me that iconography discloses an important truth about leadership in this case that helps us appreciate the multiple ways in which Christ was reflected in one to the other, and that reflection was a crucial catalyst to the emergent ministry of Christ in James. Icons help us understand how the congregation as a whole and many persons in particular were vivid icons to James by which he was able to discern more clearly how Christ’s life and ministry might be expressed in his own, how the congregation was a light by which the inner reality of James’ life was illumined.

James was fortunate to have been a participant in a eucharistic fellowship in which the congregation acted collectively to become a presiding celebrant who called forth and blessed the offering of his life. In this next situation, copastors vivify to the congregation the eucharistic potential within it.

Copastors: Maria LaSala and Bill Goettler

Maria LaSala and Bill Goettler are spouses who happen to be copastors. They share one position in a Presbyterian

congregation of about 150 members in New Haven, CT. I first visited First Presbyterian Church years before Bill and Maria arrived. It was a rather stodgy and sleepy congregation of upper middle class white folk, many of whom were associated with Yale University. I was initially struck by the clash between the architectural style of the building and the rather chilly feel of the community. The A-frame edifice is built of rough-hewn lumber and exudes a warm, woodsy, and casual feeling. It reminds me of a summer camp chapel. But the members were hardly casual and friendly. A mix of New England reserve and academic distance made this an intellectually interesting but socially impenetrable community. It was an individualized group of people who suffered with a bad case of emotional constipation. Since Bill and Maria have arrived, the congregation has increased in membership and is thriving in many ways with renewed vigor and interest. However, even after 2 years of copastoral influence, changes in the emotional climate are only beginning. Although the people are nice to one another, many of the regular attenders still seem to be relative strangers to one another. During the coffee hour and at church picnics, people tend to clump together in tightly knit groups. It has not yet become a congregation in which one feels quickly welcomed even though people are well mannered and cordial.

One quickly gets the impression that one of the first priorities for the copastors is to loosen up the congregation, to pump some energy into their staid and comfortable existence, and to weave them together to be a caring community. Maria and Bill are specially suited to such a task. Although each has a unique and vibrant personality and leadership style, they work together like few married couples I have witnessed. Without in the least sacrificing the individuality of each, they act with unified synergy. And after observing the congregation for about two and a half years, I can attest that new winds are blowing among the membership and a new spirit of hospitality is catching on and emerging among them.

Maria and Bill's decision to be copastors was as much a choice for a relaxed quality and style of life as it was a commitment to reinvent pastoral ministry. Having only one position meant that they had the luxury of a slower pace and

somewhat more relaxed family schedule. As I talked with them about their shared ministry, Bill and Maria were rather reluctant at first to share with me fully their thinking on their pastoral vocation. They seemed to know that making it too explicit might hinder the transformation that is only budding in the congregation. The changes they hoped for were not something they wanted to impose or to direct. They trust that through their example of shared leadership, the congregation might imagine a more communal way of being together as a congregation.

To be sure, Bill and Maria are examples and models of a communal way of living. They exemplify for the congregation a relaxed and friendly camaraderie. But they are more than “models”: they do not merely point the way, nor are they asking others to emulate them. Modeling does not sufficiently communicate the fact that ecclesial communion is not primarily a relationality of observation and imitation, although it includes them. Communion is primarily about persons participating in one another’s lives.

Bill and Maria are extending an invitation to the congregants, not to imitate them, but to participate more fully with them in a communion that is much larger and more wonderful than that particular New England congregation. To be sure, the way many people begin to participate in something different is by following and imitating those who go before them. This is a natural way many people learn. Within the framework of invitation and mutual participation, the paradigm of modeling makes much more sense. The point is not to oppose modeling to participating, but rather to understand modeling within the framework of an interpenetrative sharing of life.

In this sense, Maria and Bill invite the congregants to share corporately a common life, and in so doing become the Body of Christ. Nothing demonstrates their commitment to a communal life as the way these copastors preside during the Lord’s Supper. They are resolute that whenever the Eucharist is celebrated, if at all possible, there will be two or more concelebrants at the table. They believe that the common life we share in Christ is most vividly portrayed as two presiders become a unified presence that invites, welcomes, and shares the bread and wine. Then, as the people approach the table,

in an extension of Christ's personalizing hospitality to all, Maria and Bill look each person in the eye and call each person by name as they offer the elements. Young, old, member and visitor, all receive body and blood of Christ by name.

To be called by name, to be recognized as an individual while receiving the common life of Christ is a remarkably powerful experience. As I watch the procession of persons to the altar, one can detect those for whom this is a new experience; it seems to hit them with unexpected poignancy. Rather than being one anonymous face among many, for a moment, they are singled out, recognized as an individual with direct, compassionate eye contact. If the pastors have not yet met them, they are asked for their name which is then repeated to them, slowly, deliberately, lovingly. In this moment, through this action, an essential principle of the Christian common life, the eucharistic life of Christ, comes into focus and is enacted. As members of the Body of Christ approach the Lord's Table, it is not that they are only receiving, but they are bringing their whole self, and as they approach the altar, before they receive they give. They offer themselves, not just their name, but their self. Asking for the communicant's name, the pastors acknowledge an essential reality of the ritual: that as the communicant's name is offered and received, so too is that person received and accepted as an important member of Christ's communion. Taking part in the oldest of Christian rituals, one that is reenacted daily throughout the world, on every continent, involving hundreds of millions of people, one can very easily feel nameless and faceless. But the practice of calling people by name during the eucharist celebration is one way of enacting what communion is all about: recognizing and enhancing the individuality of each person in the sharing of a common life.

Maria and Bill are models of personal recognition and acceptance, of building communion one person at a time. But they are much more than models that can be imitated. They are images of the very thing they hope to call forth from the congregation. They are images, partial and imperfect to be sure, of the life of the Spirit of Christ who unites everything and everyone in a common origin and destiny. But, they also reflect back to the congregants what is most true about their

common life (although it is concealed behind layers of cautiousness, defensiveness, and apathy): a community in which the unique individuality of each person is recognized, accepted, and valued, a community to which each person contributes and from which each receives. Given what we have discovered as the icon's reflective quality, we can say that the pastors are living icons that disclose a way of living more fully in the trinitarian life of God. They are personal icons calling their congregation to be persons who form a communion of sharing and serving so that each becomes the staff of life, bread and wine, for one another and for those beyond the visible boundaries of their faith community.

IMAGE AND ICON ECCLESIAL LEADERSHIP

Leadership, in whatever context, will always entail a variety of roles, tasks, dispositions, and practices that are crucial to the community and context in which the leadership is exercised. However, ecclesial leadership is more than the sum of these expectations, and it is more than their effective performance. I am suggesting that an incarnation-oriented understanding of ecclesial leadership is fundamentally iconic, that is to say, it discloses the transcendence and the immanence of God. To interact with the iconic is to participate ever more deeply in the reality of which it is a part.

I have to admit that using "icon" in its adjectival form, iconic, is not pleasant sounding. However, I am not alone; in his book, *The Educating Icon*, Orthodox educator Anton Vrame argues for "iconic catechesis," the goal of which is "iconic living and knowing—becoming an icon in the process of attaining communion with God—*theosis*."⁵ In this respect, I believe it is useful to speak of iconic leadership. By this I mean *being an icon of communion with God in which persons see Christ and see themselves in Christ*. This is the fundamental ground of ecclesial leadership upon which all of the tasks, roles, and practices of leadership are based and in which they find their fulfillment.

In both James' and the copastors' situations, it is not enough to say that people are doing things to or for each

⁵ Anton C. Vrame, *The Educating Icon: Teaching Wisdom and Holiness in the Orthodox Way* (Brookline, MA: Holy Cross Orthodox, 1999), 17.

other, even though that is indeed happening. It is not enough to say that people are giving or endowing someone with something, even though that, too, is happening. These situations are also much less about a pattern of leader and follower, although there are leaders and followers. Moreover, it is even less adequate to explain these situations in terms of modeling and mentoring in which followers imitate the leaders.

It seems to me that these are situations in which the relationality is much more synergistic, and the power of the interaction does not have to come from physical and direct contact. The power of the relation is well...to speak precisely, spiritual. This is certainly true of James' experience in his internship. Although James and the congregants were interacting, there was no one-to-one correlation between what they were doing and the consequences. The congregation did not intend to have a particular effect upon James; it is his impression that they were relatively unaware of his internal struggle with his calling. To suggest that the congregation was intentionally acting together to call from James his life's offering in ministry would be a rather strange notion. It is likely that if the congregation could in fact try to influence James in this way, and if James detected their intentions, he would have resented and resisted it, and their attempt would have backfired. It is much more reasonable to characterize the relationship of James and the congregation as a fertile field of shared life in which individuality and talents are cultivated so that they grow and flourish. It is a relational field of nurturance in which life is abundant.

The same is true of the relationship among the Presbyterian copastors, Maria and Bill and their congregation. While the congregation recognizes that the pastors encourage them to be hospitable and generous to one another, I believe it is safe to say that if the individuals in the congregation felt that the pastors were in some way trying to *make* them be more friendly and open, the congregants would resent what they would undoubtedly interpret as manipulation. For this reason Bill and Maria are careful to avoid giving the impression that they are attempting to force or impose a particular way of relating. Rather, they demonstrate communal life in Christ and trust that in the image and presence of the

pastorate and through the primary rituals of congregational life, the people will recognize the joy of communal life and will join them in an open and loving community.

In both of the narratives above, there is a fundamental dynamic at work. In both situations, people see more than what is ostensibly there. For James, the congregation was the very image of Christ's ministry and of himself in Christ's ministry. It is as if James could see through the many members to catch a glimpse of the ministry of Christ that transcends them individually and as a whole. And also, James saw his reflection mirrored in the congregation. But he saw not just his reflection; he understood himself in a greater depth and truth than he had ever anticipated.

The same dynamic is at work in the Presbyterian congregation. Week by week congregants witness the possibility of a greater communion among them as demonstrated in their pastors. The pastors vivify a perichoretic relationship in which two become one without losing the individuality of each. As such they are an image, partial to be sure, of a trinitarian relationality. So, if the congregation has eyes to see and ears to hear, they will hopefully discern, even if intuitively, the trinitarian life of God in and through the pastoral partnership. Furthermore, as the copastors become the image of the Trinity for the people, it is hoped that they are functioning as mirrors to the people, who are even now recognizing their own potential for living together communally. That is to say, perhaps they are seeing the truth of their life in Christ—that they are indeed one in Christ—as they look upon and participate with the pastors in the community of faith.

To reiterate, the words, image and icon, refer to more than visual artifacts used for worship. There are all sorts of images, and we use images in innumerable ways. But the kind of image to which I am referring is special. It is uniquely (though not exclusively) suited to the incarnational nature of the Christian faith. It is the type of image whereby in one, we see another. That is to say, in the image of one thing, something else is present, is incarnated, is made known. To designate an incarnational image against all other types of images, the Church has developed an elaborate tradition of making and painting images and used the Greek word "icon"

to mean the visual means that reflect who God is and who they are in God.

In the spiritually charged relationships within the above congregational settings, people are attuned to realities lying beneath the surface, and they see these spiritual realities in the discipleship of others. People relate to one another in such a way that they became icons for each another. In one another they discerned a two-fold spiritual depth: a revelation of the life of God and of themselves in God. This reflective-refractive disclosure is important for a theologically adequate understanding of ecclesial leadership. For what is Christian leadership but a more visible, a more prominent form of discipleship? And who is a disciple but one in whom Christ dwells? The distinguishing characteristic of ecclesial leadership, in distinction to all other forms and practices of leadership, is its iconic function: others see Christ for their own edification. Thus, *an ecclesial leader is a disciple in whose life others encounter Christ and sense the meaning of the divine life in their own.*

There are several reasons why the notion of iconic leadership may not suit the present “just do it” culture. One of the most ironic things about iconic leadership is that it is not something for which one can strive. One cannot make oneself an icon. And iconic leadership is not something one can attribute to oneself. The main reason is that we cannot control what others see in us. In fact, it might very well be that striving to be iconic would make it all the more remote and elusive to our grasp. It is similar to the sense of inner peace. The more one urgently strives to achieve a sense of peace, the more anxious and frustrated one becomes. A peaceful spirit comes from surrender, from acceptance, as one focuses on a transcendent reality beyond one’s self and situation. In the same sense, the more we obsess about the spiritual life we want to acquire, our goal will become more and more distant.

Yet, many a reader may be worried that the “iconic” description of leadership may lead to ministerial inactivity and inertia. What we need, they may respond, is better skilled, more committed, harder working leadership. I do not doubt that for a second. The issue here is not “being” versus “doing.” To assert that the essential and distinctive characteristic of Christian leadership is that others see and encounter Christ in

the person of the leader is not to discount hard and effective work. But, it is to claim that whatever is done or accomplished in ministry betrays its fundamental purpose if the Person of Christ and the communion of the Spirit are not vividly disclosed by it. Even if the hungry are fed, if they are kept separate and distant from our communion, the work may be important and effective, but it is not the work of Christ. Even if houses are raised for homeless persons, if the work does not foster a greater sharing of life among workers and families, then it is not done in the Spirit. Even if a leader is charismatic and many are those who follow, when the people see nothing more than the leader, and when their personhood is overshadowed by the leader's grandeur, it is not ecclesial leadership that is being exercised.

The call to iconic leadership is not an admonition to "do" anything, certainly not to do anything "better." My exhortation is for leaders to understand themselves first and foremost as disciples who, in their primary devotion to the God incarnate in creation, love and serve that creation with abandon. Iconic leaders are no less purposeful and no less faithful. Indeed, they are faithful to the only One in whom faith should be placed. They are not looking around to see who else is following; they are looking ahead, within, and around for the Christ Immanuel. For others to see Christ in and through us entails a forgetting of self and an intentional orientation to Christ. Neither are they measuring themselves by the standards of the world. Our call is to be faithful to the incarnate God who dwells in, among, and beyond us, all the while knowing that we are witnesses of Christ, and that others are watching. According to the surprising logic of the Spirit, as we lose ourselves in devotion to God, we may indeed be found by others who are seeking as well. The ultimate criterion for Christian discipleship and for its prominent expression in leadership is the question, "Do others see God through me?"