Transparent Glass — On the Way of Christian Leadership

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The Image of a Piece of Glass

Whenever I try to describe what Christian leadership is, what always comes to mind is a piece of glass.

A clean, transparent piece of glass. Light passes through it without being tinted, without being refracted, without being blocked. The glass itself does not emit light, nor does it direct the path of the light. It simply does not obstruct the light.

This, to me, is the deepest pattern that a Christian leader should embody: to live as an example of following Christ, acknowledging His sovereignty, willingly obeying even at great cost — living in such a way that you become so transparent that people can look through you and see the God who sent you.

But I did not arrive at this understanding from books. It came through a series of experiences I neither chose nor would have actively chosen, through being

repeatedly stripped of things I once thought were essential, that I slowly came to recognize this truth.

My Formation: From Shantou to Toronto

I was born in Shantou, Guangdong. When I was eleven, my mother fell seriously ill. The brothers and sisters in the church stayed with her constantly — sitting with her in the hospital, eating together, even sharing the same bowls and chopsticks. Meanwhile, our own relatives had quietly distanced themselves. These were not dramatic acts, just ordinary, warm, embodied presence.

That day, I did not know the meaning of the word “kenosis” (虚己). But with my body I understood: what it looks like when someone empties themselves so that another person can go on living.

The years that followed were years of accumulation. In the summer of 1998, I won first place in the National English Speech Contest sponsored by the Ministry of Education, receiving prize money and a tuition waiver for university. During college, my daily food budget was three yuan RMB — about sixty Canadian cents — hunger kept me alert and resilient. In my junior year, I began teaching at New Oriental School and became one of the earliest managers. At twenty-six, I owned my own house in Guangzhou. Yet at the peak of material success, my father and grandmother both died of lung cancer one after another. I used my savings to pay for their treatment and to buy their burial plots.

Later, I worked at Oxford University Press in Hong Kong, holding the Hong Kong government’s Quality Migrant Admission Scheme permit, commuting daily from Shenzhen to Hong Kong. I still remember the cross-border schoolchildren I saw at the border — tied together with a rope, led by their teacher, walking between two worlds that did not fully belong to them. That image reflected my own situation: fluent in two languages, yet never fully belonging to either side. At that time, my “glass” was still full of my own colors.

In 2015, our family immigrated to Toronto. What followed was six years of quiet loss: education consulting projects failed to take root, the market changed, the identity I had built in one context could not be carried into another. It was not until I entered seminary, began serving, and one night while driving through the mountains of Pennsylvania with a child suffering from neuroblastoma and his exhausted parents in the back seat, that I slowly understood: those six years were not wasted. They were the time God used waiting to shape me.

Three Theological Anchors

When I reflect on my years of ministry, I find three theological words best describe what has happened: kenosis, liminality, and participation. They are not abstract concepts from books, but descriptions drawn from my lived experience.

Kenosis comes from Philippians 2:5–11: Christ, who was in the form of God, emptied Himself, taking the form of a servant, obedient to the point of death. But what made kenosis most concrete for me is John 13: Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into His hands, did the first thing — He laid aside His outer garments, knelt down, and washed the disciples' feet.

The order is crucial. It is not "despite having authority, still serve," but "precisely because He has all authority, He first serves." The direction of power is downward. The greater the authority, the more concrete the service.

This is the kenosis I have tried to practice in ministry. When I started a children's cancer care ministry, I personally drove families from New York to Hershey Children's Hospital in Pennsylvania — five and a half hours one way, often at night, over mountain roads, my wife and I taking turns driving. That was not a spiritual high; it was simply doing one's duty in exhaustion. After the ministry was handed over to an organization with a solid structure, I stepped back from operations and continued to seek donors but no longer managed daily work.

Leaving the church I had served for three and a half years was also an act of kenosis. In August 2024 I announced I would move to part-time, in November to voluntary service, and on April 1, 2025, I completed my last day of paid work. I gave the church eight months of transition time and accepted no compensation. At that moment, this was the only wholeness I could offer.

Kenosis does not produce visible results on a predictable schedule. The very day after I announced unpaid service, a former colleague from Hong Kong whom I had not contacted in ten years reached out, asking if I had time to teach. I did. I share this not to say that obedience always brings immediate reward, but that the timing was so precise it felt like a response.

Liminality is the "threshold state" described by anthropologist Victor Turner — having left the past but not yet arrived at the future. Diaspora Chinese communities know this state better than most. It is not dramatic crisis but slow erosion: degrees no longer recognized, networks no longer effective, an identity built in one context that becomes incompatible in another.

My six years in Toronto were such a time. I did not feel "being shaped" then; I felt only prolonged waiting. The theological meaning only became clear in hindsight: liminal space, though uncomfortable, is a place of formation. The old self is dissolved so the new can emerge.

In ministry, I have learned not to rush others through their liminal seasons. What I can offer is to try to dwell patiently in their "not yet arrived" state without demanding they hurry to "arrive."

Participation refers to union with the divine life — the word sounds radiant, but the actual experience is far less luminous. Driving mountain roads at night in Pennsylvania, I felt no surge of divine love, only exhaustion and the responsibility to keep the car on the road. Participation is not an experience; it is a decision sustained even when experience is absent. We kept driving through the night not because we felt the Holy Spirit's presence, but because a family needed to reach the hospital, and we were the ones who had said, "We will go."

Since 2021, I have led a weekly online Bible study via Zoom, now more than four years running. The content is archived on YouTube and shared via WeChat voice messages, connecting diaspora Chinese in North America with house church members across provinces in China. When asked about measurable outcomes of this ministry, I can only say: it has lasted four years, with no institutional funding, no staff support, and I myself have benefited the most. In this work, the boundary between "server" and "receiver" is far more permeable than any institutional model admits — exactly what Henri Nouwen discovered while caring for Adam: day after day washing, feeding, and accompanying him, thinking he was giving, only to gradually realize Adam gave him far more.

Authority in the Digital Age

In 2021, I personally paid for a Zoom account to start that online Bible study. It was a practical decision, but it carried theological weight.

Because I paid for it myself, no institution could cancel the account. Because there was no institutional funding, no board could dictate the content. Because I received no salary, no employer could use financial leverage to influence what I said. The absence of institutional support seemed like vulnerability, but in practice it became a form of freedom.

Every month, I send short messages to 112 individuals — a single blessing, an encouragement, a prayer — not according to any system, but as I am moved to write.

One brother received my message wishing him peace and replied that he had just been in a car accident and wondered how I knew. A sister received a word about abundance in the Lord and replied that she had just lost her job that day and was gripped by fear; the message arrived right then. I knew nothing of the accident or the job loss. I simply wrote what felt right to write, and it landed where it was needed.

This kind of ministry has almost no material cost. It requires time, attention, and remembering that every name on the list is a real person with a real life.

The boundaries of digital ministry became clearest during the lifting of COVID restrictions. At the end of 2022, China abruptly reopened, the virus spread rapidly, and many elderly people passed away. In my online community, many had parents and grandparents in China. In those days, I accompanied people's grief from an uncrossable distance. What I could do was pray, connect with house church networks to ask someone to visit dying elders or arrange baptisms. Sometimes people arrived in time; sometimes they did not. Some parents lost consciousness before anyone reached them. Their children in Toronto, Vancouver, and New York sent me messages in the middle of the night, and I had no words sufficient to touch their pain.

What I could do was stay online, keep praying, and acknowledge that this was a loss no comfort could truly reach.

Screens can do much; they can also do very little. An honest account of digital ministry must admit both.

The Particular Dilemma of the Chinese Diaspora Community

After years of observing churches in the Chinese diaspora, I am convinced: the greatest obstacle preventing kenosis-centered ministry from taking root in these communities is not lack of theological knowledge, nor personal moral failure, but a structural temptation created by the immigrant condition itself.

In a new country, the church is often the only institution where Chinese immigrants can hold real authority, be recognized, and occupy some social status. Outside the church, degrees may not be recognized, language is a barrier, networks must be rebuilt from zero. Inside the church, a pastor or elder can become, in a sense, "a person of importance."

This asymmetry creates conditions that concentrate the desire for influence heavily in the church and produces predictable distortions. I have seen pastors place family members in every key position, with subsidies totaling two-thirds of annual offerings;

pastors who publicly say they do not care about numbers but privately measure their self-worth by attendance — reminding me of David in 2 Samuel 24 numbering the people, not because counting was wrong, but because the motive was pride that could not be sanctified. I have seen pastors bypass mature mission agencies in cross-cultural work and connect directly with local communities, not because the agencies were untrustworthy, but because working through them meant sharing credit and relinquishing control.

These are not isolated character failures; they are predictable responses to a structural situation: when the church is the only place a person can become an "important figure," the temptation to use the church to satisfy that sense of importance becomes almost impossible to resist.

A truly kenotic leader is one who has learned not to aim at being indispensable. This learning cannot be rushed; it forms slowly through specific experiences: in years when no one sees and no results appear, in moments when the church publicly calls you a financial burden, in nights on mountain roads when you are too exhausted to feel anything and can only rely on duty to keep the car from veering off the road.

To Leaders Without Expectations

This essay began with an act of care and ends in a small church of about thirty people.

The church I now serve has roughly thirty members. Most are elderly, visiting on temporary visas; most will not be here next year. Another group will come. Few are willing to pray regularly.

I have no expectations for this church. I do not expect revival or growth.

The letter to Laodicea in Revelation 3 describes a church neither hot nor cold — comfortable, self-sufficient, unaware of its poverty. I recognize this picture. I say this not to condemn the congregation I serve, but to describe reality honestly. Serving in a Laodicean church is not strategic failure; it is faithfulness that receives no external validation and bears no observable fruit within any foreseeable timeframe.

This is where leadership centered on presence ultimately arrives: not a model, but a posture. The posture is simple — staying. Preparing sermons for thirty people with the same seriousness one would give three hundred. Showing up week after week in gatherings that will not remember you were there. This is what Paul meant when he

called himself doulos — slave of the Lord — in Romans 1, in complete seriousness of obedience.

The One who washed the disciples' feet knew who would betray Him, who would deny Him, who would fall asleep in the garden. He still washed their feet. Not because it would bring Him deserved results, but because love, when there is nothing left to prove, does exactly this.

This is the ministry we have been entrusted with. It is enough.

Amen.

Sheng'en Zhu currently serves as a part-time preacher in a Mandarin-speaking church in Toronto and continues to connect with brothers and sisters in North American diaspora communities and house churches in China through online ministry. This article is adapted from a course paper he submitted to Tyndale Seminary.