

## BOOK REVIEW

# MAKING SPIRITUAL SENSE: CHRISTIAN LEADERS AS SPIRITUAL INTERPRETERS

By Scott Cormode  
Nashville, Tennessee: Abingdon Press (2006)  
139 pages, paperback  
Reviewed by Skip Bell

The value of Christian leadership is affirmed often, but rarely do we reach accord on just what Christian leadership is. Attempts to characterize it are marked by themes like casting vision, effective administration, building influence, or managing change. But leadership definitions commonly fail to acknowledge one essential aspect: the process of leadership is one in which people make spiritual sense of the world around them.

The focus of this perceptive book by Scott Cormode is the vocation of providing a Christian framework for making sense of daily life and the things that challenge our understanding of the world. Scott Cormode is the Hugh De Pree Associate Professor of Leadership Development at Fuller Theological Seminary and the De Pree Leadership Center. He is an ordained Presbyterian minister and the founder of both the Academy of Religious Leadership and the Journal of Religious Leadership. Pastoral ministry is the primary context of the book, and pastors will find the text both supportive and challenging as well as deeply pastoral. If viewed as a work defining the pastoral vocation, the message may seem radical. Cormode suggests that the congregational leader's primary calling is to help his or her parishioners see the world, and their place in it, through God's eyes. "Christian leaders help other Christians see and understand everything in their lives in spiritual terms." Cormode calls it spiritual sense making. Therefore, pastoral leadership is always exercised at the frontier of experience with the world in which we move and live; the leadership challenge is to interpret experience through the revelation of a God of grace, thus helping people adopt a set of perspectives, attitudes, and habits that make living as a Christian possible.

*Making Spiritual Sense* may be dismissed too quickly as a work for those in congregational ministry. True, any committed pastor is confronted with the challenge of being truly faithful in the calling of pastoral ministry while balancing the tasks and needs that compete for time, consideration, and energy. And Cormode challenges congregational leaders to claim their identity as spiritual interpreters, shaping people to live as Christians in the world, a vocation he calls "the interpretive office." This is a radical view of pastoral leadership, avoiding the leadership models of hierarchical authoritarian and egalitarian enabler.

But Cormode provides a unique contribution of wisdom for all in the leadership journey when he draws on insights from leadership research and literature, including the work of Ronald Heifetz, Max De Pree, Chris Argyris, and others. He presses Christian leaders to dwell in the daily thoughts and night-time fears of others in order to speak to their real life issues and concerns and to guide them into Christian frameworks for giving spiritual meaning to it all. Cormode examines the ways in which people create meaning, including hope, culture, and pre-legitimized paths. It is in this reflection that Cormode assists any thoughtful reader, especially one who is engaged with others in the relational journey of leadership. This is not a book for pastors alone.

Cormode weaves theory into practical case studies from a fictional but familiar congregational setting. Anyone who belongs to a church will identify with times when “perfectly reasonable people” found it impossible to communicate with one another, resolve problems, and move forward in mission. Again, while pastors and other congregational leaders will find incredibly helpful ways of interpreting and understanding congregational dynamics, any thoughtful leader will see their group or team in the narrative.

Are you looking for ways to shape meaning within your community? Do you seek resources to help your group make spiritual sense from its experience and mission? Would you like to help people interpret life’s sometimes terrible blows in the eyes of a God of grace? *Making Spiritual Sense* explores how to transform ordinary tasks into creative moments available to those working to shape meaning—powerful moments that build community, beliefs, values, goals, narrative and ritual, and practice. Cormode approaches practical prescription with respect for the nature of life and its freedom. He encourages us to be hopeful, to believe that we can shape meaning, though he reminds us that meaning can never be dictated.

In his concluding chapter Cormode applies what he has learned about spiritual sense making to personal and corporate decisions regarding money and its use. His fresh insight on money in the church is reason enough to buy the book.

*Making Spiritual Sense* instructs, clarifies, and enlightens, making the journey of Christian leadership simultaneously more practical and more sacred. Though it does offer practical application and case study, it is far more than a guide for Christian leadership. Rather, it invites us to seek wisdom, to see leadership in more sacred terms. We are invited to try this radical reflection. Within the relational art of leadership, a theological framework is provided that enables others to make their own spiritual meaning.