

Maybe Some Churches Need a Different Kind of Leader

An explosive growth in literature devoted to leadership has taken place over the past 20 years.

From Jim Collins' influential "Good to Great" to Patrick Lencioni's remarkably accessible "The Five Dysfunctions of a Team," many pastors' bookshelves are filled with resources that promise insights in leading organizations, achieving goals, establishing expectations and cultivating visions.

Many of these bestsellers come to us from the fields of business and the social sciences.

And, as a former teacher of mine was fond of saying, "There's something right about that." We do have much to learn from these disciplines.

The danger, however, is that we not only appropriate their insights but that we also unwittingly and uncritically adopt their underlying assumptions and attitudes. We might even confuse their purpose and identity with our purpose and identity.

For example, I have heard more than a few church leaders lament, "We need to run this place more like a business."

I can appreciate this sentiment especially if we are discussing financial accountability as well as fair, consistent and transparent personnel policies. But really?

Are we really trying to earn a profit? Is our governing body no more than a board of directors? Do we actually want to treat our church members as shareholders and our guests and neighbors as potential customers?

No doubt many in our congregations prefer to use the flat language of balance sheets and committee reports to the rich vocabulary of our faith. It's familiar. It's safe. It's what we know.

We decide rather than discern. We strive for success rather than reach for

faithfulness. We hire a minister instead of calling a fellow servant.

We discuss donors and giving units rather than brothers and sisters. We end letters and emails by writing, “Regards,” rather than “Grace and peace” or “In Christ” or “Peace and joy.”

But words matter. They have texture. They shape us and form us. They focus how we see the world and how we view one another.

The Scottish theologian, Alastair Campbell, once described the pastor as a “wise fool.”

Similar to the court jester, she is the one entrusted with the responsibility of speaking truth, uncomfortable truth, ridiculous truth, dangerous truth.

The wise fool is no mere comedian. She uses the language of parable, metaphor and image to subvert expectations, challenge the status quo and stretch imagination.

The wise fool compares the kingdom of God to a mustard seed. That seems impressive when we consider the size of the plant in comparison to its seed.

But what happens when we recall that in the first century our Jewish ancestors regarded mustard as we do kudzu today?

The wise fool doesn't answer questions directly. She reframes them and asks a different question altogether.

“Who is my neighbor?” the man asks looking for precision and specificity. The wise fool rejects the flat language of the “real world,” tells a strange story and then asks, “How are you going to be a neighbor?”

The wise fool points to children and says, “That's what God's way is like.”

The world has plenty of businesses and business leaders.

But wise fools? Women and men who speak truth? Servants sensitive to the seductive allure of transactional relationships? Communities who refuse to take themselves too seriously?

Hmm. I'm not sure. I'm not sure at all.

Editor's note: A [version](#) of this article first appeared on Pinnacle Leadership Associates' [blog](#). It is used with permission.