

AUTHOR Q&A



FOOLISH CHURCH

Messy, Raw, Real, and Making Room
by Lee Roorda Schott

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I have a hunch that when we make room for, well, *anyone*, we're going to end up needing to make room for the people who have been waiting for the church that matters, for the church that's willing to be The Church in all its fullness. That's the foolishness I've discovered inside a prison.

— from the preface to FOOLISH CHURCH

Q: One of the first times you shared the ideas behind this book, a colleague responded “What foolishness!” What compelled you to persist?

A: I realized that my life—and my experiences in many churches—had been impoverished by the absence of people I wouldn't have made time for, or couldn't see even though they were right in front of me. People with mental illness, addiction, or a history of trauma. Families dealing with the effects of incarceration, or domestic violence, or sexual assault. Folks who didn't look like me, whom I didn't know how to approach and hadn't really ever met in church. Then I experienced that great shake-up of coming to care for women in prison. How could I not persist?

Q: Why is it so important to “practice foolishness” toward people the church has often overlooked—especially now?

A: Churches lament that they are shrinking, and that their message isn't connecting with young families and millennials. But we have been foolish in overlooking people who didn't fit the demographic we had imagined. When we look more openly, we realize there are still plenty of people right next door whom Jesus wants us to reach with love and grace! Making room for the person who feels alone and unseen is a work of gospel significance—and it's way overdue in our culture increasingly marked by division, suspicion, and hate.

Q: Before becoming a pastor, you were a Harvard-educated lawyer. How have both of these vocations shaped your ministry in the Iowa women's prison?

A: Law school taught me to see the shades of gray in situations that may first appear black and white. Virtually every significant court decision could have gone a different way. I learned to argue both sides. That experience has served me well in my ministry with incarcerated women, whose lives and stories are filled with nuance and complexity much deeper than the fact of their “prison blues” and their seven-digit offender number. I came to this work already conditioned to see people from different perspectives, and to be curious about what happened to them along the way. God invites us, I think, to meet people with that kind of openness, which has sometimes been missing in our churches.

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Q: You've now served as a prison pastor for eight years. What fresh foolishness are the women you serve teaching you?

A: I keep pondering how to make room for the wisdom that gets expressed among people we tend to overlook. It's curious, because I've sat in classrooms, boardrooms, and churches with highly credentialed people whose insight is immensely prized. But in prison I hear extraordinary wisdom, where I don't think we expect it. It's just real, and generous, and pieced together from extreme life experiences that would have laid me low. It makes me wonder how our churches and other institutions would be strengthened if we made room for a broader range of voices, chosen less for their resume and more for their heart. Foolish, right?

Q: How do you hope readers will use THE FOOLS' MANUAL, the companion guide to FOOLISH CHURCH?

A: The book FOOLISH CHURCH casts a vision for churches in the world; THE FOOLS' MANUAL says, "Here's how we can do it," starting in small groups that explore the book together. If we're going to do church that is raw and real, we'll have to step out of our comfort zones. As I explored that reality in conversations with readers, I found myself inviting them to talk about their personal experiences, or to role-play certain conversations, which helped to bring the book's lessons to life. The manual contains those invitations in written form—on a spectrum of minuscule to gargantuan levels of daring.

Q: What's one small way churches can begin breaking down walls and making room?

A: Have a conversation with leaders about who is welcome, and what behaviors are required of people who want to be part of your church. Talk before questions come up about whether someone with tattoos, or who smells, or is transgender, or is on a sex offender registry is welcome. (I pray that your answer is yes!) Once you've decided that the doors are open, then you can talk about what boundaries need to be in place. What expectations are appropriate for folks in our midst, in order to carry on our life together? Start to clarify what those are, and apply them fairly. In some cases, like with a sex offender, you'll need a written covenant. This is holy, important work. Begin it.

About the Author:

Lee Roorda Schott is a United Methodist elder and pastor of Women at the Well, a church inside the women's prison in Mitchellville, Iowa. She is a graduate of Saint Paul School of Theology and Harvard Law School and worked as a lawyer for fifteen years before becoming a pastor. Her writing has appeared in such varied places as the Immersion Bible Study series, *Doxology: A Journal of Worship*, and *Harvard Women's Law Journal*. Lee resides with her husband on her family's century farm near Prairie City, Iowa. Learn more about Lee at www.leeschott.com or join the conversation on the @FoolishChurch Facebook page.

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