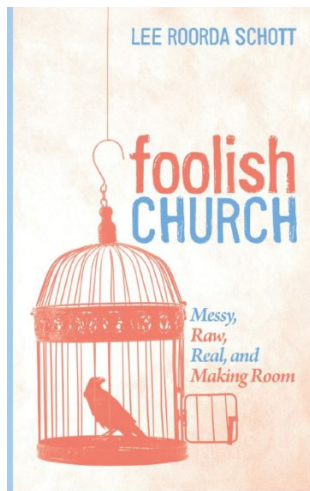


EXCERPT



FOOLISH CHURCH

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

Published February 2019 | \$20.00, 148 pages, paperback |
ISBN 978-1-5326-5327-8 | Cascade Books

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

Many women I meet in prison, when they describe their early faith experiences, mention *tights*. They don't describe unconditional welcome or spiritual awakening. They remember *tights*, as in those stretchy, constricting nylons pulled onto little girls' legs. It should give us pause that many women's most vivid memories of church are the tights they wore as girls. Tights are a rigid marker of being "dressed up" and therefore good enough—uncomfortable enough!—for church. Ask any woman of a certain age; we remember how relentlessly the tights would slip down or bind or, heaven forbid, get snagged. That memory of tights seems an apt metaphor for the dressed-up, constricted experience church has been for far too many people.

One of our leaders inside the prison, Connie, once described prison as a place where "we know we're broken." It's a truth that, for many women, brings freedom. They don't have to hide anymore, which is a relief for those who have hidden, most of their lives. She gets to bring her whole self. And she gets to be part of a community of people doing the same thing. It's the opposite of *tights*; here we loosen.

This means I have a lot of conversations that go deep, faster than I would have imagined. The filter that makes many of us reticent to speak of our deepest wounds feels mostly inoperative inside the razor wire. I barely knew Danielle when she told me about her abortion. One of the first things I knew about Marissa was that, during her recent year outside prison, she had attempted suicide four times. Desiree told me about her son born of rape; Krista shared her struggle with gender identity; Stacy said quite openly that she would probably return to prostitution after she left prison. Countless women admit they're mad at God.

What gets said so openly can become a starting point for further conversation, prayer, and healing. Sometimes just putting it into words seems to be enough. One day I sat with a woman I had never met, who tearfully let loose a long story of challenges, losses, and hurts. When she fell silent, I felt mute. What could I say in response to all this pain? I stammered out some halting words to that effect and was astonished when she looked at me, visibly heartened, and said, "That's OK. I needed to talk. I feel better. Thanks for listening."

Something important happens when we shed the *tights*.

—from chapter one, "The Church Doesn't Need Us to Hide Our Scars"

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