

Thanks, I'll Carry My Own Suitcase!

To reach the next generation, we must scrap the ridiculous 'armor bearer' mentality

My friend Charles wanted a mentor. He was eager to learn the ropes of ministry, so he asked an older pastor for training. The pastor agreed—but Charles soon realized the man wanted a valet, not an apprentice. Charles became the man's "armor bearer."

The man never took Charles on hospital visits, involved him in ministry assignments or prayed with him. Instead, Charles was expected to carry the guy's briefcase, fetch coffee and take suits to the cleaners—with no salary offered. In this case, "armor bearer" was just a spiritualized term for "slave."

This bizarre trend became popular in churches 20 years ago, but unfortunately it still thrives. It appeals to insecure leaders who need an entourage to make them feel important. Some pastors have even assigned trainees to serve as bodyguards—complete with dark glasses and concealed weapons. They are instructed to keep people away from the pastor so he doesn't have to talk to anyone after a church service (because the poor preacher might be "drained of his anointing" if he fraternizes with common folks).

Excuse me while I barf!

I'm not sure what is more nauseating: That some pastors think they are discipling young leaders by exploiting them, or that church members tolerate such pompous behavior from a so-called man of God. And we wonder why many young people have stopped going to church.

When I turned 50, I decided to spend most of my energy

investing in the next generation. This became my priority because I met so many gifted men and women in their 20s and 30s who craved mentors. Like Charles, they were looking for authentic role models but could only find self-absorbed narcissists who were building their own kingdoms.

If you want to make a genuine impact on the next generation, please make sure you are not infected with the “armor bearer” virus. Take these steps to adjust your attitude:

Get over yourself. Today’s insecure leaders don’t realize it’s the devil tempting them to become rock-star preachers. Fame is too alluring. Before they realize it, their heads have swelled to the size of Godzilla and ministry has become a means to prove their imagined greatness. A leader with an inflated ego will have zero interest in investing in others. You must tell yourself daily: “It’s not about me!”

Stay accessible. Young people today don’t just want our sermons. They want to sit down for coffee after the sermon. They want to ask questions. They can listen to a hundred preachers on You Tube, but when you invite them to dinner, offer to pray with them or take them on a mission trip, you mark them forever.

Keep it real. Older Christian leaders have picked up some bad habits that turn off young people. Some ministers preach with affected voices, wear weird hairstyles and insist on dressing like funeral parlor directors—even on their days off. Please talk in a normal voice when you preach so young people won’t dismiss you as a fake. Be transparent, admit your faults and let everyone know you’ve had struggles. Young people don’t want to follow someone who pretends to be perfect.

Pour on the encouragement. Many young people today struggle to stay disciplined. Some have addictions. And many of them have attitudes. But you will never reach them if all you do is point out their faults. You have to win their hearts before

you address problems. If you saturate them with the love of a caring father or mother, their spiritual growth will amaze you.

Don't cling to power. Jesus was the Son of God, yet He willingly handed His authority over to His disciples and told them to finish the job. Every good leader is already thinking of his succession plan. If you have a tendency to control, dominate or manipulate people, you must wrestle with God until your pride is crushed.

Young people today don't want to follow people who strut and swagger. They are looking for mentors who walk with the limp of humility.

J. Lee Grady was editor of Charisma for 11 years. He now serves as contributing editor while devoting his time to ministry. You can find him on Twitter at leegrady or online at . His newest book is Fearless Daughters of the Bible (Chosen).