I have been a leader in the church for almost 40 years. In addition, I have served as a director on nine boards, for organizations very small to very large. I have always thought it important to amass as much knowledge as possible to be a good leader and board director. When it is my job to seek board candidates, I am always on the hunt for people who are intellectually sharp and come with significant life experiences and achievements. That only makes sense, doesn’t it?

I’d like you to meet B.P. Agrawal, who takes a contrarian view. Mr. Agrawal worked in research and development for some very large companies, such as General Dynamics, Hughes, GTE, and ITT. His current gig is a nonprofit start-up called Sustainable Innovations, which seeks to bring clean water and better medical care to India’s poor in the state of Rajasthan, the region of his birth.

In a recent interview with NACD Directorship magazine, Mr. Agrawal challenged my mental picture of what good board members should bring to the strategic discussions of their organizations. When asked what boards can do better in their oversight of sustainability and social issues, he said: “First, if you are going to bring a change, the board should unlearn—forget their knowledge, leave their expertise at the door. . . . I think board members need to go and experience firsthand what people’s real problems are. Rather than imposing a corporate structure on the nonprofit, go the other way. Learn from the nonprofit what the issues are, and then go and design. To do social good, we need to empty our minds. Renunciation is the prerequisite for innovation.”

Whoa. What is he saying? That an ideal board consists of people with empty heads, who know nothing? No. I think he’s saying that people in top management and governance should not assume that they know everything, or even that they know enough. People are changing; culture is constantly changing; society is changing; families and their needs are changing. It is the task of the leadership of every organization to examine and reexamine the value proposition and mission of what they do. They need to stay focused not on their organization’s past achievements or loyalty to a certain style of operation but rather on what people need and want. If you are full of yourself, you can’t hear well and won’t listen well.
Mr. Agrawal’s words have great value for the church. Pastors, church staff, and church board members need to stay engaged with their members but also their communities. They need to maintain a humble posture, always listening first, always willing to challenge the status quo, always willing to act more like servants than masters. This is especially true for pastors who are trying to build bridges to people not like them, either racially, culturally, or economically. St. Paul told the Christian leaders in Corinth long ago that he had chosen to make himself all things to all people so that by all possible means he might win some (1 Corinthians 9:22).