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'Swap shepherds for accountants' says think tank

Churches were today urged to make a last-minute adjustment to their nativity plays by swapping their shepherds for accountants and office. The Industrial Christian Fellowship (ICF), a historic cross-church think tank, also called on congregations to consider dressing up the three kings in suits to portray them as fat cat executives.

The Rev Anthony King, ICF spokesman, said the changes would help remind people of the true meaning of Christmas and its impact on everyday life.

"Christmas shows that Jesus comes to us where we are living and working. At the original nativity, he was born in a stable and was visited by shepherds.

"Today, he is more likely to have been born in an office, and to have been visited by office cleaners and office workers."

The impact of Jesus' birth was often lost behind a Christmas card scene of shepherds, wise men and donkeys, he added.

The sentimentality masked the real shock-value of Christmas - that Jesus, God's son, was born in a harsh, everyday setting, surrounded by ordinary people going about their day's work.

One way to remove the sentimentality was to replace the original players in the nativity story with their modern day counterparts - shepherds with office workers and kings with managing directors.

"If you are going to have shepherds," said Mr King, "at least make them modern day farm workers who have just arrived on their quad-bikes, dressed in their dirty work clothes."

The ICF is a Christian think tank which works to encourage individuals to deepen their understanding of God's purpose in the world of work.

Its most famous member to date was The Rev Geoffrey Studdert Kennedy, better known as Woodbine Willie, an Army Chaplain who earned his nickname by handing out Woodbine cigarettes to soldiers in the trenches of World War 1.

After the war, he dedicated his ministry to the world of work and toured the country with the ICF, preaching to crowds of thousands in industrial cities from Birmingham to Glasgow.