## Power in the Church

It all depends on your perspective:

An assessment of the Church from a survivor of abuse, Cliff James in 2020,

“If you look at it from the outside, it is beautifully decorated. It has lovely stories, it promises so much, it promises everlasting life and redemption; but, if you strip away the veneer, it is a cold machine, it is gun coloured…it’s not about love, compassion, or kindness, or sympathy, or any human quality like that. ”

This session will cover the following 4 main themes:

The nature of power

Power and authority

Power in pastoral relationships

Assessing and challenging the use of power

In this session I will be drawing on insights from the Conference Report The Theology of Safeguarding, which I contributed to along with members of the Methodist Survivors Advisory Group, which were consulted at an early stage, Scripture, theology and my own writing in this area. We will break and move into Break Out Rooms to reflect on 2 questions and there will be time for questions at the end of this session. A full set of notes from this session with a short suggested bibliography is also available to anyone who finds that helpful.

## The nature of power

Before we can appreciate the responsible use of power in the Church we need to be clear about the nature of power.

Power can be defined in the human context as the capacity to influence the behaviour, thoughts, emotions and attitudes of others. Scripture leads us to understand that power can be used destructively to oppress others or in ways that are liberative and which enable the flourishing and growth of others.

In Mark 10:42-45 we read:

“ So Jesus called them and said to them, “You know that among the Gentiles those whom they recognize as their rulers lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them.But it is not so among you; but whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and who ever wishes to be first among you must be servant of all. For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many.”

We need power if we are going to make things happen. Power is not usually a matter of all or nothing, of some having it all while others do not. Power is usually a matter of more or less, because the capacity to influence another is relative to who the other is in a given context. There are those who more influence due to their gender, their role, the office they hold. We feel our power or vulnerability in the interplay of the differing needs and strengths in our interpersonal encounters. Power can shift and vulnerability increase temporarily. It is not static.

We believe that through the promises of God we have become “participants in the divine nature” and so as God is powerful so human beings too share in God’s power through the gift of the Holy Spirit. We see that Jesus, in his life and ministry, both exercises power in response to human need when invited to do so, but also relinquishes power and control when he chooses to do so. Most notably this is expressed beautifully in John’s Gospel,

“For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life in order to take it up again. No-one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it up again.

 (John 10:17-18)

Power can be picked up and laid down..

…and we need to become a humble Church (to quote Martyn Percy), led by lay and ordained leaders who are immersed in humility, able to be relaxed and non-anxious about being in receptive or listening mode rather than in broadcast or pontificating, assertive mode. We need to rediscover a “kenotic ecclesiology” – or a way of thinking about Church, which is about loving service of others rather than acquisition.

## Power and authority

Authority is legitimated power. It is power that is publically validated and institutionally conferred (a name on a notice board, on the front of a preaching Plan, the person who stands at the front of Church and is listened to). A person has authority who is acknowledged by the community as its representative.

James and Evelyn Whitehead would say that three primary sources of legitimising power are dominant. These are:

Institutional

Personal

Extra-rational

**Institutional sources of Power**

Ordination

Appointment to an office

Commissioning

Employment

are all routes to the community recognising us as a person with religious power and authority and the right to exercise it on behalf of the Church. Power comes from what the Church ascribes tot hat role and the expectations people have of it.

**Personal sources of power**

Competence

Training

Personality

Character

**Extra-rational sources of power**

Symbolic representation (praise and blame beyond deserving)

Conduit of deepest hopes and feelings about God can lead to projection

**Slide 8**

Whitehead suggests that these sources of legitimating power reinforce the power gap between people in the Church. This gap can undermine any inclination people in the life of the Church have to challenge the use of power.

***“Power without accountability tends to corrupt”***

Courage, Cost and Hope (the Past Cases Review Report)

“Local churches will not become really safe place places until the understanding of safeguarding, and abuse of power in relationships is understood by the whole congregation.”

## Power in Pastoral Relationships

Everything we do to support the life of the Church flows through pastoral relationships. These are often fluid, more ambiguous and are rarely boundaried in the same way as a professional client: professional relationship. (employer, colleague, socialising, worship, governance, are only some of the kinds of dual or multiple belongings and potential conflicts which exist.) This means that we may need to develop some criteria to help us assess how power is used in pastoral relationships.

Richard Gula suggests that there is a covenantal action of entrusting to another and accepting entrustment by others and this makes fidelity to trust a moral imperative. Is this person trustworthy? Are their motivations right? The Church has a fiduciary responsibility in a way which means we serve the needs of others before ourselves and we commit to not exploiting vulnerability but give greater preference to the needs of others rather than ourselves.

It is the Church’s responsibility to maintain appropriate boundaries that create safe space for those we engage with. It is for the Church to address its own needs and not use the pastoral relationships with others to answer our own need to be liked, receive attention, find pleasure or profit or prestige.

## 4. Assessing and challenging the use of power

We are called to live, as Jesus did, in the liminal space between power and authority and vulnerability and weakness, we must therefore constantly ask

“How do we use our power?”

We must acknowledge and own the power we have. See Marilyn Peterson

*At Personal Risk”* where she suggests that practitioners are most at risk of unethical behaviour when they minimise or ignore the magnitude of their power. The person in the best position to help someone is also in the best position to hurt them. The greater burden of responsibility to maintain appropriate boundaries is always with the person who has most power. To accept the responsibility to monitor our own needs, and to discipline ourselves to answer them outside our pastoral relationships in the Church is key. The next important principle is to monitor and reflect on our use of power through supervision and oversight.

The work of Rollo May in *Power and Innocence* (1972) is important here. May describes the use of power along a continuum that demonstrates how power can be used to oppress or to expand another’s freedom.

 POWER

Exploitative Manipulative Competitive Nutrient Integrative

 FREEDOM

Exploitative and manipulative actions are expression of domination. They presume a relationship of inequality and a determination not to change that. They undermine the dignity of the person and they are abusive forms of power in pastoral relationships. If persons are equal competitive power is not necessarily destructive and can bring vitality. But pastoral relationships in the Church are rarely equal so this form of power has too much potential for misuse.

Nutrient power is that applied for the benefit of someone with less power – it enables or empowers them. Integrative power respects the freedom of others. This kind of power is expressed as co-operation and collaboration with the gifts of others and makes team working possible.

“***Our power in the Church, then, is used rightly only when we use it to enhance another’s freedom so that they might more fully participate in the mission of the Church”.***

The whole Church needs to reflect on the power we hold and the responsibility this confers on us as we engage in Church life and as we offer Christian witness. If the language we offer in worship as God’s people includes images of power used uncritically we may unintentionally encourage abuse of power.

In the Report to the Methodist Conference on A Theology of Safeguarding 2021,p.370 “

“if we use language of God as all powerful, as radically different from human beings and separate, as holy and majestic and above the world, without saying anything about God as intimate, involved,…inviting human beings into relationship , we may also glorify those people who claim to be powerful, who understand power in a limited way and use it to dominate or manipulate.”

Furthermore,

“the way we are to understand God’s power is through the costly self-giving love shown in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. This, then, will also be the model of power properly exercised by human beings. God’s power cannot be conceived as co-ercive domination”.

And finally.

***“The God of freedom, the true God, is... not recognized by his power and glory in the history of the world, but through his helplessness and his death on the scandal of the cross of Jesus”***

**Jürgen Moltmann,** " **The Crucified God: The Cross of Christ as the Foundation and Criticism of Christian Theology”**

***Questions:***

***1. Which story or event in the life of Jesus best illustrates for you God’s use of power? Or what part of the teaching found in the Gospels should influence***

***the Church to re-imagine the use of power in relationships?***

***2.The Past Cases Review Report noted that local Churches will not become really safe places until, “the understanding of safeguarding, and abuse of power in relationships, is understood by the whole congregation”. What progress have we made and what are the limits on progress?***

**Introductory Bibliography**

**\*\*\* Trigger warning\*\*\***

**Please note that the first two titles and the last title contain descriptions of abuse.**

Fiona Gardiner *Sex, Power, Control*, Lutterworth Press, Cambridge, 2021

Andrew Graystone *Bleeding for Jesus,* DLT, London 2021

Alan Lewis *Between Cross & Resurrection,* WB Eerdmans, Cambridge, 2001

Jurgen Molton *Crucified God*, SCM, 2015 (40th Anniversary edition)

Marilyn Peterson *At Personal Risk,* WWNorton , 1992

Amy White *Towards a Theological Definition of Spiritual Abuse,* Grove, 2021

Alan Wilson & Rosie Harper *To heal and not to hurt*, DLT, 2019

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