

As we work to build authentic multicultural community, the issue of who holds power in the congregation is certain to come up. If you're like me, we really feel like fish in water when we talk about power. The dynamics of power are like the water we swim in. We have a sense that those dynamics affect our lives significantly. But we can't really say how they do. Being able to see how the power works, who's pushing the button that makes the power go on in a certain manner, and where the power flows is a real challenge. Yet if we as "the church" are called to stand up against powers and principalities in the name of Christ, that definitely means learning what we can do about it.

When the word "power" comes up, what comes to your mind? Who has it? My first thoughts are "power of God," "powerful businessmen," "powerful politicians." It's influence, we realize, on all levels of society. To begin to understand power, ask the question, "Who's in charge and what do they do?"

- Personally, who's in charge? The popular answer for middle class United States is "I am!" If that's the case, we feel we have power to do, to act, and to make choices.
- At the family level, who's in charge? Husband, spouse, either or both, depending on the situation?
- In a congregation council or leadership group, who's in charge? Who determines how meetings are conducted, and for what length of time, and has the final say in decision making?
- Studying power at broader levels of organization (businesses, city/state/federal government, synod/churchwide offices), there's a great deal more to learn about who makes things happen or blocks them from happening.

Yet for all levels, the question remains: who's in charge? For Christians called to proclaim God's love and justice in the world, answering that question is key. It calls for finding out who pushes the power buttons, and analyzing the results that ensue. Where there is injustice, abuse, or violence, we are called to act as God's agents for social change.

Pushing the Power Button—Together

Faith-based discussions across culture, race and class are going to have an entirely new outlook on who's in charge, or ought to be. Often the world defines power as those who are the biggest, strongest, most forceful, most able to do what they want, no matter how it affects others.

But God's radical concept of power calls us to ask a new question: "How shall we push the power button, together?" In other words, to share power for the good of the whole community.

As a leadership team, who do you see as those who currently hold power?

What challenges do you face as a congregation in shifting power so all are included?

Continued: For Discussion: Setting the Agenda, Hearing all the Voices



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Being truly multicultural means creating an environment in which decision-making is shared among all those at the table. It means standing up for those who

are not able to voice themselves, so that their needs can be included. The world being what it is, there are many in positions of power who would say, "What concern is it of mine when people do not speak? And what need have I to listen?"

People of faith, however, seek to genuinely hear all the voices involved, and to include them in decision-making. Becoming an authentic multicultural community takes practice and change.

Consider the following questions for starters. Your answers will suggest who is in power in your given setting. Remember, power isn't in and of itself a "bad" thing. Each person has power. Power becomes bad or oppressive when it is misused as power over; when it becomes concentrated in the hands of a few who then are able to make decisions and dominate and control the lives and situations of many. In the right hands, it can be an opportunity to wield the power (the influence) to serve God's purposes for community.

1. Who sets the agenda? Is there a mechanism for group members to ask in advance that agenda items be included? Does everyone know that and is it an easy and accessible process? How could you open the process of setting the agenda?
2. Who determines how meetings are conducted? Are they run in a manner so that all in attendance truly have a chance to speak and be fully heard? If there is a barrier that stands in the way of full participation, how can you remove it? For example, if English is not the first language of persons attending, how can you enhance participation? (E.g. offer printed agendas/information in the other language(s) before and at the meeting; look for cues that people are wanting to speak, and help them get their turn; use a structure for sharing that enables all to participate...)
3. Who is included in decision-making? Who is not, and what are the reasons? How will you address those reasons?
4. How are decisions made? Is there both a formal and informal process? How can you address informal, behind-the-scenes decision-making? In the formal process, are all thoughts equally open on the table? Do some voices generally have a "last word" in the decision making? Does "majority rule" (and who holds the majority)? Are decisions made by consensus? If so, is adequate time given to the process; are there unspoken rules or pressures to conform?
5. Are there persons who are unable to come to meetings or join committees, due to lack of transportation or family responsibilities? How can you improve the chances of participation across barriers?
6. Who is invited to serve on ministry teams? Do they have to be official members of the church in order to do so?
7. How open is the group to new ideas, new members and new leadership styles? How can openness be cultivated?

8. Are you open to discovering new ways for business to be conducted, especially when the former ways are not working well, such as not leading to full inclusion?
9. What if there is already diversity in your governing groups, and there is tension between older and newer members? How can you explore the root of that tension – values, ways of doing things, communication patterns, traditions, etc.? How can you incorporate awareness and understanding of different ways of approaching problems and one another? What guidelines for communication might be helpful to enhance empathetic listening and reduce tension?

Issues of power and decision-making need to continually be re-examined as we easily fall back into old patterns. Much of Paul's message to the church at Corinth addressed how some members were using and asserting their power over others. The pull to dominate and control and have things our way is strong. The call to live God's vision of justice for the powerless and silenced is the call that moves us forward.

Continue to - Presentation and Discussion: Cycle of Gospel Living



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For many years I observed that racial/ethnic/multicultural discussions would reach an impasse when the issue of power came up. “Multicultural ministry” in our church began to offer special ways in which people of color communities could meet. But for many reasons, it wasn’t clear to many white members that ethnic caucusing was not meant to be an end in itself. It was meant to enhance ethnic community strengths so that we could take part more holistically in building a church for our children, a church that embraced all people and included sharing of power (white as well as people of color).

One of the best teaching tools I’ve ever seen about faith-based power and diversity comes from Episcopal priest Eric Law. For those who fear that we will lose power that we have, and for those who fear we will not gain power that we need, this chart illustrates how we are all living on the same cycle, but with different entry points! It is a vital and foundational message to understand and to share, as we travel on our journey across culture, race and class.

Eric Law provides background for understanding the meaning of the cycle. (Reprinted from *Living the Gospel of Peace: Tools for Building More Inclusive Community*. Presbyterian Peacemaking Program, Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), 2004.)

When dealing with inclusiveness, we have to consider who holds more power in a situation or institution. Because of power differentials, we create institutions that are not inclusive. In any given context, an institution might favor one group over another. These institutions then serve to perpetuate the differences in power that led to their creation. The ability to discern power differentiations is an essential skill needed to challenge an institution to be more inclusive because the challenge of inclusion is different for the powerful and the powerless.

In the Judeo-Christian tradition, God’s attitude toward powerful and rich people is very different from God’s attitude toward people who are powerless and poor. The powerful in society are challenged to give up their power and wealth and redistribute it in order to achieve equality among the people of God. The emphasis is on serving and being humble. God judges the powerful by their use of their power and privilege. “It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God” (Matt. 19:24).

The powerless, on the other hand, are lifted up, cared for, and loved by God. God has compassion for the oppressed and suffering. God loves them and will deliver them. The emphasis is on endurance and faithfulness. “Do not be afraid, stand firm, and see the deliverance that the Lord will accomplish for you today. . . . The Lord will fight for you, and you have only to keep still” (Exod. 14:13-14).

This difference in attitude toward the powerful and the powerless was clear throughout the ministry of Jesus. Jesus never told the poor and powerless to sell all they owned and give the proceeds to the poor. That would obviously be absurd. Jesus healed the poor, loved them, ate with them, touched them, comforted them, blessed them, served them, encouraged them, taught them, and liberated them by his own suffering, death, and resurrection. Finally, Jesus breathed on them, infusing them with the Holy Spirit’s power to teach and heal in the name of God.

At the same time, Jesus did not tell the rich and powerful that they are blessed. Jesus warned them and challenged them to serve and to humble themselves. He reminded them of what the law and the prophets said and extended an invitation to relinquish power, take up the cross, and follow him.

Jesus never asked the powerless to choose the cross because, by their condition of powerlessness, they were already on the cross. Because the powerless were already on the cross, they were called to endurance and faithfulness in the hope of God's deliverance through the resurrection.

In a given situation, it is crucial to determine where we are in relation to the cross. No one can stay on one side of the cross all the time. Living the gospel involves moving through the cycle of death and resurrection, the cross and the empty tomb, again and again. The moment we are resurrected into a new life of empowerment, we must begin to think about serving, giving away our power, and taking up the cross again. Failing to do so brings the chance of abusing our power. The moment we take up the cross and become powerless, we must begin to think about faithfulness and endurance and looking toward empowerment through the empty tomb. In this dynamic of death and resurrection, the cross and the empty tomb, Lent and Easter, the gospel comes to life in each of us. This is the Cycle of Gospel Living.

Questions for Reflection and Discussion:

- How do you see your congregation in relation to the Cycle of Gospel Living?
- Who are the powerful? In what ways are they being called and challenged to give away their power?
- Who are the powerless? In what ways are they being called to empowerment?
- What new understanding and insight does this cycle give you for the ongoing dynamics of living together as one body in Christ?

Issues of Power Completed - Continue to Communication and Conflict



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