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THE USE AND MISUSE OF POWER IN THE CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY:  
A THEOLOGICAL CONCERN FOR MINISTRY AND CONGREGATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

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The other day as I picked up the morning paper I was jolted by what is now all too familiar news. Terrorists had struck again. Innocent people had been killed and violence had run amok. What I read was a reminder of an age old problem, now grown to mammoth proportions. Power, when cut from its source, will destroy everything in its path. As the Psalmist so clearly reminds us, "God has spoken once, twice have I heard it, that power belongs to God". [62:13] Power is the energy of love. The way it is understood and used lies at the heart of the Christian witness.

THE CONGREGATION AS A SIGN OF THE KINGDOM

The Christian church is a sign of the Kingdom of God in human history. Even with all of its imperfections, the church in its most local expression is called to bear witness to the meaning of the power God gives to His creation. We are called to bear witness to an understanding of power which runs counter to most of what we see around us. The congregation, therefore, is the Gospel's most visible witness. The way we live together, the way we manage to accomplish our mission, the way we deal with conflict and diversity, embodies what we say we are. When what

we are expresses what we claim to be, we, by God's grace, become a sign not only of what God intends for the church, but more profoundly, what God intends for the world.

"This is my commandment," Jesus said to his disciples, "love one another as I have loved you. There is no greater love than this, that {we} shall lay down our {lives} for our friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you. I call you servants no longer: a servant does not know what his master is about; I call you friends because I have disclosed to you everything that I have from my Father. You did not choose me: I chose you. I appointed you to go on and bear fruit, fruit that shall last; so that the Father may give you all that you ask in my name. This is my commandment to you: love one another." [John 15:12-17]

In John's account of Jesus' final words to those men and women who had gathered around him, we have the essential ingredients of Christian community seen in the context of the way we use power. First of all, Jesus makes it very clear that love is more than sentiment. It involves relinquishing power on behalf of others - even laying down our lives for those persons given to us in Christian friendship. The power of God put to its rightful use always involves empowering others to love. It is out of this empowerment of one another in the Spirit that Christian community is born.

Secondly, the words recorded in John's Gospel make clear that the friendship which Jesus offers to us and invites us to offer to one another always invites disclosure. Information is

power. Jesus empowers us by His self-disclosure. Community is formed as information is shared freely among all whom Jesus calls in friendship. "I call you servants no longer," he says, "A servant does not know what his master is about. I have called you friends because I have disclosed to you everything I have from the Father."(John 15:15) Information is both personal and communal. By sharing some truth about myself with you - something of consequence - I make a connection which allows the Spirit to empower us both. When information that should be shared is withheld, power is blocked, and the possibility of love is diminished.

And finally, Jesus reminds us that we are all empowered when we are given authority to act in his name. In Baptism we are appointed to go and bear fruit in the name of Jesus, calling on the Spirit for the power we need. It is this mutual empowerment celebrated in Baptism that makes it possible for the church to reflect a different way of being together - not as servants with masters, that is, those with power and those without, - but as friends in Christ living not for ourselves but on behalf of the world.

#### POWER AND EMPOWERMENT

In the Prologue to a fascinating study of five Victorian marriages entitled Parallel Lives, (Alfred Knoph, 1984) Phyllis Rose makes some observations about the use of power in marriage

which seems to me to have equal relevance for the way we structure community in the life of the church. "Marriages go bad", Phyllis Rose writes, "not when love fades - love can modulate into affection without driving two people apart - but when...understanding about the balance of power breaks down, when the weaker member feels exploited or the stronger feels unrewarded for his or her strength" (p.7) "Perhaps this is what love is," she continues, "The momentary or prolonged refusal to think of another person in terms of power," and conversely, "the reason we humans tend to evoke love at moments when we want to disguise transactions involving power."(p8)

Christian community is always a problem in becoming. We have difficulty empowering one another for ministry because our expectations are so unclear, particularly in what clergy expect of laity and laity expect of clergy. Underneath the surface of those many transactions that go on in the local church lies the issue of power: who has it and how it is to be used?

Power, as I am using the word here, refers to the energy we need to take a desired action or achieve a desired goal. The witness of the Christian community is most justly expressed when power is identified, acknowledged, and seen primarily as energy for the empowerment of the congregation to carry out its mission. The congregation is empowered to the degree that each member feels empowered to live out his or her baptism in the arenas that are opened to them. We are empowered, I believe, in four primary ways. In each there is both problem and possibility and unless

we are clear about what is going on, power is often misused.

## FOCAL POINTS OF POWER IN THE LOCAL CHURCH

First of all, in Christ all of us possess either recognized or unrecognized, internal spiritual power that is the fruit of faith. "You shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you," we are told in Scripture, "and you shall be my witnesses to the end of the earth." (Acts 1:8) Unless we experience some clear authorization to act on this power, however, it can only contribute to a sense of frustration and alienation, rather than empowerment. I have heard too often of persons returning from a conference where they experienced a new sense of empowerment for ministry only to return to their church to encounter indifference or downright hostility. Sometimes these people do not present themselves well. Sometimes their sense of the ministry to which they are called does not check out with the community's perception of them. As we all know this happens often. Nevertheless the responsibility of giving direction and support to those who have been nudged by the Spirit even in the most secular and mundane ways, is and always has been a primary task of the Christian community. It is my experience that processes for doing this are still relatively unformed and rare, except in those instances where people's awareness of power matches those structures already established within the institutional church. Although we say that form follows function

or ministry follows mission, it is all too often the other way around. Rather than developing ministries and structures necessary to express mission we make mission conform to what is and always has been, and generally, with limited results.

People are empowered when they are given authority to act. This authority can indeed come from within as we respond to the authority of God's Word alive within us, but more often, we do not feel empowered unless we experience some form of external authority which commands our respect. There are many groups in any given congregation that authorize the exercise of power. Sometimes this authorization comes by some formal act. More often it comes by peer approval and encouragement. Unless we understand where these focal points of authority are in a church - which group, what people, - we will not be able to discern how power is given or confirmed and how it is taken away.

Secondly, power within the Christian community is closely tied with the way we symbolize the sacred. The priest, therefore, by the very nature of what he or she represents is empowered in ways others are not. This power can produce separation and isolation, or it can be a source of energy that is profoundly sacramental. As people move in their spiritual pilgrimage from seeing themselves as consumers of the power released in worship toward an awareness of themselves as participants in this power, a new sense of self can emerge. Our encounter with the holy touches dependent needs in us all. We reinforce this dependency by withholding power, by accenting

difference, or by creating the illusion that because one person bears the symbol of the sacred, he or she does indeed possess special power. In a short story by Andre Dubus entitled "A Father's Story", a very down to earth Luke Ripley, tells what it means for him as a secular man to participate week after week in the celebration of the Eucharist in his church. He does not pretend that "going to church" is necessarily an experience of great fulfillment, (He does not always get something out of it.) but he notes that through the very act of participation something inside of him is touched. "Ritual," he muses, "allows those who cannot will themselves out of the secular to perform the spiritual, as dancing allows the tongue-tied man a ceremony of love." (Andre Dubus, "A Father's Story" The Best American Short Stories 1984, John Updike, ed; Houghton-Mifflin 1984. p. 78)

The move from being a consumer of worship to being a self-conscious participant is absolutely essential for there to be any degree of mutuality in the church. Participation does not necessarily mean being "up-front" in worship, but it does mean owning the significance of one's place and the importance of what we do. Congregations that involve laity in the planing of worship, or who recruit and train persons to be part of intercessory teams who gather up and offer intercession at the Sunday Eucharist, or congregations who work at involving people in significant ways relating to worship, are addressing what I believe to be at the heart of how power is shared in the local church. Until priest and laity alike understand themselves to be

sharing in liturgy, that is, the work of the people of God, access to the sacred is seen as special privilege.

Thirdly, the authority to exercise power in the church is granted to those who are acknowledged as sources of wisdom. When I served three rural churches in the early days of my ministry, I was privileged to work with a Senior Warden whose ability to mobilize power within the congregation was absolutely amazing. People granted him authority because they saw him as a person of wisdom. He would talk about the history of the community and the history of the parish in a way which made people feel that this history was their history. Wisdom is knowledge that has been infused with the Spirit of God. Wisdom therefore, is always a source of power. Although being trained in the tradition is a source of power in that some people know more than others, it is not the same thing as possessing wisdom. Wisdom comes as a result of tempered experience. It is the fruit of coming to know God in the midst of struggle, born in solitude but tested by the hard reality of meeting life head-on.

Clearly, clergy have no special claim on wisdom. They might possess information of a particular kind which others can draw on, but wisdom is scattered everywhere. For leadership to be effective it needs to have access to this wisdom which demands that we come to appreciate what it means to learn from each other. There is wisdom that comes from knowing the Scriptures, but there is also wisdom that comes from wrestling with the faith questions that imerge in the market place. Unless we find ways



to honor the wisdom that is available to us - to lift it up, to test it, to draw from it - we will always be susceptible to those substitutes that cause power to be separated from its source.

Celia Hahn, in her splendid new book, Lay Voices in an Open Church, writes "when the world is out of sight, laity are devalued. As George Peck puts it, 'The very word 'lay' implies a less than positive judgment, and expressions like, 'he's only a layman', come to readily to our lips.' But if you had reason to respect the wisdom that person described as 'only a layman' brought from his experience in a role outside the church, you might think of a number of questions you wanted to ask him." And Celia concludes, "...the whole structure communicates to the lay person, "you do not know", and the lay person replies, "Yes, I do not know" and, of course, the power of wisdom is diminished." (Celia A. Hahn, Lay Voices in an Open Church, Alban Institute Publications, 1985 p.44)

Finally, power in the Christian community, like power in any organization is associated with designated leadership. The rector, as the designated leader of the congregation, is given power by nature of his or her office. The authority to exercise this power is given by the community to which a leader is accountable. Authority is given, but it can also be withdrawn, - sometimes officially, but often unofficially by an unwillingness to respond. I suspect that the more unsure a leader is of his or her authority, the more anxious he or she is about giving power away. And when power is held tightly by the designated

leadership, hierarchical structures become hardened, and love is diminished. Authority is empowered when it is shared and lines of accountability are clear, but it never exists in a vacuum. As my colleague Philip Turner points out, "We must learn that authority in the church exists first to interpret and make available the power that comes to the church and to each Christian through Christ, it must yoke power to Christ's purposes in such a way that we make that purpose our own." (Philip Turner, Sex, Money and Power, Cowley Press, 1985 p. 118)

#### DEVELOPING A THEOLOGY OF POWER

Power is a fact of life. It is an expression of the created order - the energy by which we create and connect with one another. The issue, of course, is how it is used and to what ends it is exercised. The use of power, therefore, is a theological concern which underlies every transaction in which we are engaged. If we are concerned about renewal and the development of congregation life, we would do well to look carefully at where in the life of an congregation power is lodged and how it is expressed. I remember so well going to a conference on spiritual renewal when before anyone was introduced, a rather aggressively pious individual gathered us all together in a circle insisting that we pray. As that person began to speak, I realized that I was the only one who was a stranger, and I felt coerced and powerless. Pray, I did, but

not, I suspect as the others. I prayed that God would get me out of that group and set me free. My prayers were answered as I left the conference that night, deciding not to return.

The way a congregation is structured, the ways decisions are made, the way ministries both in and outside the church are affirmed, the way people are recruited and supported, the way we pray and the way we worship are all issues that involve the use of power. The power God gives to His Church is power that remains connected to its source only as it is given away. For the power we are given is the power to love, power given to us on the Cross where nothing was held back, even life itself. The power of God is unlimited - bursting forth in measure beyond our comprehension. The Spirit has come upon us and power has been given, that we might be for others a sign of that Kingdom which has come, but still is becoming!