

The paradox of pastoral power

Joseph J. Kotva Jr.

Pastor Inqvist and his wife, Judy, were supposed to be on their way to the Rural Clergy Conference in Orlando. They had looked forward to the event and to spending a few days away from the ever-peering eyes of his Lake Wobegon parishioners. Judy especially had anticipated the free afternoons and evenings they would spend together: she had planned every place they would visit and every ride they would try.

The expenditure had narrowly passed the deacons board. Ever since, parishioners (especially those who had been critical of his ministry all along) had let Pastor Inqvist know that they disapproved of the expense and resented his having this opportunity.

The pressure was usually indirect: whenever the topic of weather

Despite their often-justified sense of powerlessness, contemporary pastors have significant power—influence on others and the ability to make things happen—that they frequently overlook.

came up, folks would comment on their cold Minnesota winter, and then they would add, “But of course, you have that sunny Orlando trip to look forward to.”

At a church meeting just days before the conference, a deacon brought up the subject of world hunger and remarked that he wished that they could do more to alleviate this suffering. He suggested that they revisit the budget to look for nonessential spending, travel and the like, that could be redirected to address hunger. Under pressure, Pastor

Inqvist offered to cancel the Orlando trip. He hoped that someone would speak up in his behalf—affirming the congregation’s need for the pastor and emphasizing the pastor’s need to get away. But no advocate appeared. Judy was understandably angry that he had made this concession without talking to her. In an act of commiseration, the local Catholic priest visited the Inqvist home and brought a bottle of French cognac to share.

I was a seminary student when I first heard Garrison Keillor describe Pastor Inqvist's missed trip,¹ but even then it struck me as capturing the sense of powerlessness that so many pastors experience. Inqvist's inability to negotiate the power struggle is so pronounced that he feels ill. The exertion of power by the pastor's critics leaves Mrs. Inqvist feeling angry and betrayed by her spouse and the church.

The critics often seem to have more power than the pastor. And rare indeed is the pastor who hasn't felt powerless when he fails to get a raise, when distorted budget priorities are passed, or when the congregation resists even modest changes in the worship service. Whatever the authority and power pastors had in other times and places, pastors in contemporary North America often feel powerless.

The reality of pastoral power

Despite this often-justified sense of powerlessness, contemporary pastors have significant power—influence on others and the ability to make things happen—that they frequently overlook. This power has many sources and is manifest in various ways.² For example, a kind of power is conferred by institutional appointment. Licensing, ordination, and the call of the congregation grant pastors a level of authority they would not otherwise have. Because of these institutional forms of affirmation, most congregation members will listen to a new pastor's ideas with a deference she has not yet earned through direct, sustained interaction with those members. As the pastor's tenure continues, this institutionally conferred, member-granted deference grows stronger or weaker for various reasons, but it is seldom entirely lost, except through clergy misconduct. Institutional appointment also gives power, by granting the pastor a voice in congregational committees and informal gatherings, and conferring the unique privilege of regularly addressing the entire congregation in the sermon.

The pastor's role as symbolic representative of the church and of God is another source of power. The reality of symbolic representation is especially palpable when pastors conduct hospital visits or funerals. In these settings, the church and even God are often recognized as present when and because the pastor is present. Such symbolic representation is usually active at some

level, even in contexts where we may not expect it. Consider how folks at the gym or coffeeshop become careful about their speech when they discover that you are a pastor. This change in behavior is not simply an effort to avoid offending you personally, something they do not rigorously avoid with others. Rather, the change in behavior is an implicit acknowledgment that the pastor's presence symbolically represents the presence of God and the church. This symbolic representation is a form of power, and

At moments of vulnerability, words and actions that signal the pastor's solidarity or distance, affirmation or judgment, moral expectation or indifference, are incredibly powerful, for good or ill.

despite the ambivalence that Anabaptists sometimes feel about setting pastors apart, the pastor's role as symbolic representative is present at some level in most church-related encounters with most congregation members.

The mention of hospital rooms and funerals suggests another aspect of pastoral power: access to people's lives when they are most vulnerable. Pastors are admitted into the intimate corners of people's lives during major illness, death, job loss, and family crises, but also during life-affirming transitions such as

weddings and baptisms. At these moments, words and actions that signal the pastor's solidarity or distance, affirmation or judgment, moral expectation or indifference, are incredibly powerful, for good or ill. The rituals and interpretive framework the pastor offers for understanding these events are equally powerful in assisting or obstructing the integration of these moments into members' life stories.

Competence and expertise furnish yet another aspect of pastoral power. In various areas of our lives, we grant power to those with relevant expertise. As we make choices about matters as varied as health care, car maintenance, and hairstyle, we listen to the considered opinions of our physicians, mechanics, and stylists. We may or may not follow their advice, but we generally recognize that in their areas of expertise, their voices should carry more weight than do other well-intended but less informed voices.

When Anabaptist-related communities recognize the importance of well-trained clergy, they are acknowledging the need for a certain kind of expertise and granting a corresponding power. The sustained study of Scripture, pastoral care and counseling,

homiletics, church history, theology, and Christian ethics provides pastors with expertise relevant to vital areas of Christian life. Without claiming that pastors are saints to be singled out, we grant that well-trained pastors bring expertise that is uniquely relevant to Christian life and thought. This expertise is a form of authority and power, whether or not members follow the “expert’s” advice.

Less tangible than expertise, but more important as a source of power, is pastors’ authenticity in their Christian walk. The Christian life well led is remarkably compelling. The lives of the martyrs and saints such as Martin Luther King Jr. and Mother Teresa exhibit an undeniable power to influence others; so do the lives of everyday Christians who know themselves to be loved by God and who in turn love God and their neighbors. Several years ago, I performed a funeral for a man who had always lived within a few blocks of the church, had a high school education, and whose most prestigious employment was as a tire salesman. Our church was filled beyond capacity at his funeral. Every space—pew, aisle, foyer, hallway—was occupied by those who wanted to testify to the way this simple man’s life had influenced them. Such is the power of a grace-filled Christian life.

Pastors are not unique in their potential for this type of power, except that the life of the pastor is uniquely visible and almost always on display. Pastors who are genuinely grateful for God’s grace and who love the members of their church and the neighbors down the street will influence others, often in ways that are indirect and serendipitous. The force of an authentic Christian life defies our attempts to grasp and manipulate it but is all the more powerful for its elusive character.

Directing pastoral power

With justification, pastors often feel powerless, yet they have many sources of power. It is dangerous to allow the first half of this paradox to overwhelm our awareness of the second half. As pastors, we must acknowledge that we are often in a position of great power even when we feel completely powerless. Failing this acknowledgment, we risk burnout, and we risk abusing the very power we fail to acknowledge. Burnout is likely because it is difficult to continue meaningful ministry when we constantly feel

helpless. And the shortest route to clergy misconduct is the one that turns a blind eye to the inequality of power we often have vis-à-vis congregation members or people in need. Among other things, truth telling in our preaching, sexual fidelity, counseling that empowers others, confidentiality, and honest accounting practices are put at risk when we deny that we hold power that can be abused.

Much could be said about the appropriate restraint and use of such power. Here I suggest two broad principles and two practices that can help guide pastors. First is a basic norm that the “greater burden of moral responsibility falls on the one with the greater power”—that is, on the pastor.³ This principle remains true even while we honor the contribution and dignity of everyone in the community, “the evangelical equality of all,”⁴ and while we hold all parties accountable for their behavior, including those who try to manipulate the situation. The fact remains that enormous responsibility comes with pastoral power.

Pastors must acknowledge that we are often in a position of great power even when we feel completely powerless. Failing this acknowledgment, we risk burnout, and we risk abusing the very power we fail to acknowledge.

Richard Gula suggests that the clergy/parish relationship is a covenantal relationship that can be informed by God’s covenantal

relationship with Israel.⁵ In covenantal relationships of unequal power, the one with greater power (God, the pastor, various professionals) has the greater responsibility to protect the boundaries of the relationship and to work in the other’s behalf (that of Israel, congregation members, patients or clients). Israel’s prophets apply this principle when they call on leaders to act with justice and to judge fairly; Jesus assumes this principle in his often-caustic denunciation of the religious leaders of his time. In covenantal relationships, power brings responsibility, and however fleeting it sometimes seems, pastoral power places disproportionate responsibility on clergy to protect relationship boundaries.

A second, related principle is that pastoral power is judged by whether it aids the well-being of others. Many words can express this well-being—healing, liberation, empowerment, among others—and all of them have certain limitations. Still, the direction of the power used by Jesus, the disciples, and early church leaders

is relatively clear: the offer of healing and hope, moral accountability directed at reconciliation, justice, good news to the poor, and release to the captives.⁶

While the general direction is clear, the actual use of pastoral power to foster people's well-being requires discernment in the given situation. What constitutes liberation in one context might mean coercion in another or enabling un-Christian behavior in still another. Discernment is needed, and in that discernment, special attention must be paid to the perspective of those who are most vulnerable because of economic, emotional, or other circumstances. Most often, those in positions of vulnerability are best situated to judge whether they are being oppressed or set free.⁷ But even privileging the perspective of the vulnerable requires discernment, because good news can be met as judgment, liberating accountability can be experienced as oppression, and the "blind" do not always want to see.

Two practices are essential in discerning the direction of pastoral power: friendship and prayer. We need good friends in all matters of discernment, not least in discerning the direction of pastoral power.⁸ After all, we are most likely to seek advice and to expose our judgments to correction among our friends.⁹ Even when we seek advice from others, it is the counsel of those friends whom we have come to love and trust (among other things, we trust that they love us) that usually influences us most.

Good friends, especially others in ministry, are uniquely positioned to offer advice and correction. To start, good friends are close enough to us to understand how a question or event looks and feels to us; yet because they are distinct individuals, they can also understand how that same incident looks and feels from a different vantage point. The advice that arises from this bifocal perspective is invaluable in discernment. Moreover, because we trust that our friends both understand our situation and seek our well-being, we are more likely to hear and heed their correction. In addition, good friends are sometimes so attuned to each other that they perceive that something is amiss before their friend is able to explicitly acknowledge the issue. A change in humor, tone of voice, or body posture is sometimes enough for a friend to realize that we are contemplating an illicit act, struggling with guilt, or unsure of our next step.

Friends also offer a listening ear. Sometimes what our moral discernment most needs is to voice the issue with which we are struggling. At such times, friends do not offer advice or criticism; they listen. By listening, they provide a forum that enables us to gain some distance from the issue and think it through.

Of course, good friends do more than listen, advise, and correct. When we feel powerless, good friends can see what we cannot and can point out ways our ministry exhibits constructive power; they can highlight the uplifting and liberating use of pastoral power. Good friends also remind us of ministry's power by modeling it in their own lives. Sometimes when we despair about our ministry's powerlessness, we discover hope when we glimpse God's power at work in our friend's work of challenging Christians to renewed discipleship and offering healing, hope, and liberation.

The role of friends in moral discernment has analogs in prayer.¹⁰ In prayers of discernment, we seek the Holy Spirit's prompting.¹¹ We listen for the correction or leading of the one we most trust; we listen for the voice of God.¹² Even more than a good friend can, God understands our temptations or choices before we can articulate them. And like friendship, prayer provides a forum to think through issues. Often enough, the issue comes into focus for us simply in the act of our bringing it to God.¹³ And what friendship does indirectly, prayer does directly, reminding us of ministry's constructive power by putting us in touch with the source and destination of that power.

Prayer also forms us in virtues, such as humility, that are essential for pastoral power's proper direction.¹⁴ Humility is the virtue that enables a fitting and truthful self-appraisal in relationship to God and others. Learning to pray well requires growth in this virtue. To pray is to attend to God, but if we are attending to God, we are not absorbed with ourselves, with our accomplishments or our problems. When we focus on God, we cease to be the center of reflection and thereby begin to acquire the virtue of humility. In attending to God, we also approach God not as God's equals but as God's cherished, loved, and sinful creation. This too is a lesson in humility.

Specific forms of prayer require growth in humility. In prayers of petition, for instance, we are reminded of our dependence on God and others. Likewise, in prayers of confession, we acknowl-

edge our guilt and learn to take responsibility for our limitations and failures. Confession is particularly important for developing a sense of how often we act wrongly, even when we desire otherwise, and for understanding how badly things go when we assert our freedom from God and others.

Prayer reminds us of our limitations but also of our value. After all, Jesus taught us to ask for things—food, forgiveness, safety—which implies that we are worthy of receiving good things from

Humility or proper self-understanding, an estimate of ourselves that is neither too high nor too low, frees pastors to see their power honestly and clearly.

God. Moreover, in prayer we meet a loving parent who created us good, who values us and sacrifices for us. And we meet a God who desires our company. These too are lessons in humility, lessons in proper self-appraisal.

Humility is likely the most important virtue for keeping pastoral power rightly directed. Proper self-understanding, an estimate of ourselves that is neither too high nor too low, frees pastors to see their power

honestly and clearly. Because we know that we are capable of terrible things, we are less likely to be scornful of members' failings and less likely to impose our personal agenda on them. Conversely, because humility involves proper self-respect, there is less danger that we will use parishioners to boost our sagging egos.

More positively, proper self-understanding helps us remember pastoral ministry's power even as we recognize our powerlessness. It takes humility to recognize simultaneously that we lack power and that we have it. Humility as proper self-understanding similarly allows us to truthfully remember our call to ministry and to recognize the limitations and possibilities entailed in that call. Most importantly, humility knows that ministry's constructive power to move people toward discipleship, reconciliation, and justice comes from God, and God is never without such power.

Notes

¹ Garrison Keillor, *Gospel Birds and Other Stories of Lake Wobegon*, audiocassette ([St. Paul, Minn.]: Highbridge Audio, 1986).

² Many ideas in this section were initiated by the chapter on "Power in the Pastoral Relationship" in Richard M. Gula, *Ethics in Pastoral Ministry* (New York: Paulist Press, 1996), 65–90.

³ *Ibid.*, 76.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ Ibid., 14–21.

⁶ Luke 4:18; also e.g., Luke 13:10-17; Matthew 18:12-20; Acts 3.

⁷ Cf. Gula, *Ethics in Pastoral Ministry*, 86.

⁸ For my somewhat fuller account of friendship, see James F. Keenan and Joseph Kotva Jr., eds., *Practice What You Preach: Virtues, Ethics, and Power in the Lives of Pastoral Ministers and Their Congregations* (Franklin, Wis.: Sheed & Ward, 1999), 71–80.

⁹ Martha C. Nussbaum, *The Fragility of Goodness: Luck and Ethics in Greek Tragedy and Philosophy* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 363; Nancy Sherman, *The Fabric of Character: Aristotle's Theory of Virtue* (New York: Clarendon Press, 1989), 139.

¹⁰ I always thought it instructive that John Wright's chapter on discernment immediately follows his chapter on friendship with Christ. See John H. Wright, *A Theology of Christian Prayer* (New York: Pueblo Publishing Company, 1979).

¹¹ See Mark O'Keefe, *Becoming Good, Becoming Holy: On the Relationship of Christian Ethics and Spirituality* (New York: Paulist Press, 1995), 118–19.

¹² See the descriptions of decision making and wandering prayer in David Hansen, *The Art of Pastoring: Ministry Without All the Answers* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1994), 53–55.

¹³ See Karen Lebacqz, *Professional Ethics: Power and Paradox* (Nashville, Tenn.: Abingdon Press, 1985), 105.

¹⁴ For my somewhat fuller account of prayer, see Keenan and Kotva, *Practice What You Preach*, 147–56.

About the author

Joseph J. Kotva Jr. is director of the Anabaptist Center for Healthcare Ethics, Elkhart, Indiana.