Power, authority, and worship leadership

Rebecca Slough

The smiling pastor in the advertisement boasted, "My AV system can bring them to their knees." I gaped at this expression of hubris. What idolatry! Then I read the smaller print: "Now they can hear the Good Word." If Christians cannot hear, Christ's body cannot act in concert to glorify God. But this advertisement hints at a not-so-benign power active in congregational worship. Who is speaking and acting? By what authority? By whose power? For what purpose? What is being said?

In my experience, sustained discussion among Mennonites about power in leading worship has been rare, although fears about abusing power abound. Many Mennonites seem to believe that the power issue (and its companion issue, authority) has been resolved simply by our claim to be a priesthood of all believers. But this slogan does not remove the power and authority issues; it obscures them.

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We do not practice our priestly vocation fervently enough inside and outside the congregation. A priest is always at the edge of a community's spiritual, social, and physical realities. A Christian priest stands as an incarnated presence of the Holy Spirit, who aids Jesus' priestly work of connecting people with God. The priest reveals the hidden yet present character of God in Christ,[1] using the gifts, skills, wisdom, imagination, and dexterity she has been blessed with, in order to help people encounter the presence and power of God. She offers herself as a servant for God to the congregation. She opens space in which Christ's empowering words of truth can be spoken, and she leads the body's response to this word. She is a mediator who senses the Spirit's movement and

guides the body to catch its empowering energy. Her ministry models the character of priestliness by which all Christians are called to serve each other and the world.

A priest works in particular places with specific people. They give him authority to minister to and lead them. The priest's role is defined and recognized by the congregation. He accepts the authority and uses the power granted by the Holy Spirit for leadership. The priest is accountable to the body.

The Anabaptists' understandings of worship, the church, and believers' free access to God through Christ constituted a rejection of some priestly practices of the medieval Roman church. The Anabaptists believed that all Christians have the authority to serve as priests in the congregation and in the world by virtue of their baptism; all Christians mediate the presence of God to one another. But a priestly function for leading people in worship remains. And every congregation has particular people whose spiritual gifts have been given for the particular priestly work of leading worship.

By the late twentieth century, some North American Mennonites understood the Reformation concept of the priesthood of all believers to mean that anyone could fulfill any of the priestly functions required in the church. Some of the practical consequences of this interpretation have been unfortunate.[2] One of my colleagues tells of the Lenten season when a child of elementary school age was asked to lead a congregation's prayer of confession. The pastors seemed oblivious to the priestly presence needed for leading this prayer. Confession is a delicate worship act that requires pastoral discernment and authority. The congregation must trust the one who leads them in this action that evokes our resistance and requires our vulnerability.

The priestly role is not trivial or inconsequential. We should not ask a child to do an adult's job! The discipline to cultivate the gifts of leadership requires commitment and perseverance. I suggest that taking the priestly function of leading worship with appropriate seriousness requires more discernment and discipling than occurs in many congregations.

The haphazard way worship leadership is exercised may seem to diminish the power and authority issues. In fact, these issues are distorted, not eliminated. Without a clear sense of leadership

purpose or a sense of authority for the task, worship leaders (particularly inexperienced ones) become self-conscious, drawing attention to themselves. Rather than helping the congregation connect with God, they become a distraction, hindering the congregation's full response to God.

Priests perform. And we distrust performance in a worship context. Perhaps this is a reason why we are reluctant to talk about priestly functions of worship. We associate performance with entertainment, glitziness, even insincerity and hypocrisy. Performances are rehearsed, canned, not spontaneous, in some ways unreal. Yet to perform is simply to do something. Doctors perform surgery. Scouts perform good deeds. A good Samaritan performs a needed service. Machines perform when they do what we expect. We are pleased when doctors, scouts, Samaritans, and machines perform well.

We distrust performance in a worship context. We associate it with entertainment, even insincerity. Yet to perform is simply to do something. Good worship leaders perform with great integrity.

Good worship leaders perform with great integrity. Often their best performances happen when they let go of their self-consciousness and get out of the way. Clayton Schmidt calls this quality of leadership *transparence*. It is as if the congregation can see through the action of the leader the hidden but active presence of God.[3] All worship leaders, whether they are reading scripture, telling the story, or leading music or prayer or a congregational response, should strive to get out of the way. Not that they abandon their priestly role: with confidence they stand at the spiritual, social, and physical edges of the worship event, pointing the congregation toward God, present in Christ and active in his body by the power of the Spirit. This willingness to get out of the way demonstrates the paradox of power in leading worship. Leaders in whatever capacity are granted the authority to perform. They are granted power to use their spiritual gifts to serve the congregation. And through this service they give up their personal power to the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

We have all experienced worship leaders who performed badly. Self-consciousness sometimes diverts the leader's attention to his own actions, words, or mistakes, and he becomes hypersensitive about his movements. Sometimes a leader becomes preoccupied

with appearances or strives for a particular effect, and he begins to try to manipulate the congregation's responses to bend toward his vision of worship. When a worship leader is elevated to celebrity status because of special gifts, the purpose and intent of his priestly work can be compromised. God as the subject and object of worship can be displaced.

Worship leaders can abuse power and authority in countless ways. The following list notes several of the most obvious.

Controlling affectations. Sometimes worship leaders try to pump up the congregation by being overly dramatic and emotionally excessive, acting coy, joking or teasing, seeking to cajole worshipers to reach desired levels of enthusiasm, receptivity, or vulnerability. But no worship leader can control how worshipers feel at a particular moment. And feelings are notoriously unreliable indicators of change in people's minds and hearts.

Pursuit of the meaningful. Worship leaders are tempted to anticipate what will be deeply felt in the congregation. Sometimes what leaders deem meaningful is cheap sentiment. No one can predict precisely what will be meaningful in an experience. It is the Holy Spirit who brings authentic meaning out of the congregation's action.

Pursuit of creativity. Pursuit of novelty for its own sake is an abuse of power, particularly when the quest to be creative displaces what has been authentic to the congregation's expression. The presence of Christ in the midst of the body and the movement of the Holy Spirit make things new.

Pursuit of specific desired outcomes. Worship leaders abuse their power when they predetermine what they want the congregation to get out of a service or how they want people to respond. They set up circumstances to yield ends they desire. Abuses around the practice of the altar call illustrate this temptation.

Tight control of all worship elements. Worship leaders who cannot graciously respond to the unpredictable limit the range of congregational response; those who are overly invested in how things ought to go abuse their power. The desire to control worship or—more precisely—to control the worshipers is the primary power issue that must be confronted continually.

Amplifications. Sound projection, a legitimate need in many worship spaces, has significant potential for abuse. The amplifica-

tion of worship leaders' voices over those of the congregation opens the way for power imbalance and distortion. The advertisement for a sound system that can bring people to their knees points exactly to this potential abuse.[4] Hearing their voices amplified can be a head-swelling experience for worship leaders. When sound engineers can simply turn down the volume of a singer or speaker at will, power issues are also present.

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Lighting that focuses attention on the worship leader or preacher, dramatizing the difference between the enlightened and the unenlightened, can be abused. Larger-than-life projections of worship leaders can also create distortions. The impact of celebrity worship leaders and singers is heightened by large projections of their soulful singing. The power issues may seem insignificant to the worship leader who sees the congregation in its actual size, but the super-human images the congregation sees can magnify the authority and power they attribute to the leader.

Spiritual massage. The worship leader singing into a microphone with eyes closed, as if the congregation did not exist, is massaging her own spirit and has lost sight of her true leadership responsibilities.

Abdicating responsibility. Unprepared leaders may believe they are acting humbly, but their behavior reflects arrogance. Lack of preparation draws attention to itself. To disregard their priestly responsibility is an abuse of the authority that the congregation has entrusted to them and which they have accepted.

A first step toward exercising power responsibly is recognizing that worship leadership is not about leaders' desires, reputations, or anxieties. It is not about the power of their personalities or piety; the power of their words or actions, insights or knowledge; the power of their equipment or their building. It is not about any power they possess. The power of priestly leadership comes from the Holy Spirit, who gives the spiritual gifts required for the congregation's worship.

A second step in exercising power responsibly is acknowledging that worship leadership is about serving God by serving the

congregation; it is not about controlling the worshipers. The Holy Spirit moves in the hearts, minds, souls, and bodies of worshipers, revealing the presence of Christ in his body. That movement appropriately brings people to their knees.

Notes

[1] Clayton Schmit, *Too Deep for Words: A Theology of Liturgical Expression* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002), 39, 66–77.

[2] The "priesthood of all believers" slogan has inspired a number of unfortunate distortions. One is a misunderstanding of the idea of participation. In some congregations, participation is understood to mean actively providing leadership, speaking or singing. Listening and silence are not valued as forms of participation. A second distortion arose when the need for pastoral leadership came into question: if everyone in the congregation is a priest charged with ministry to all in the community, then why have pastors? Fortunately this distortion is being reexamined. A third distortion seems to have arisen in the breach between more formal leadership of the pastor and more casual leadership of congregational members. The inexperience of many new worship leaders, coupled with a somewhat magical theology of the work of the Holy Spirit, provided an excuse for poor preparation. Many inexperienced worship leaders would "wing it," not realizing that the capacity to improvise effectively itself takes deep cultivation and disciplined preparation. A fourth distortion arose, I think, from an inadequate understanding of the priestly function of leading worship. Lacking a clear understanding of what they were to do, many worship leaders developed an "aw shucks!" worship style. Highly self-conscious, embarrassed, homey, and chummy, this small-group style of leadership has been used in large-group settings. And under the influence of a misunderstanding of the priesthood of all believers, congregations have endured much worship leadership that was inappropriate to the specific situation.

[3] Schmidt, *Too Deep for Words*, 66. F. Russell Mitman takes exception to use of the term *transparent* for what worship leaders should strive to be. Borrowing from Paul Wilson, Mitman makes the case for *translucence* as the guiding metaphor. He believes that transparence drains the human leader of his or her unique personality and character. Arguing from an incarnational perspective, he notes that worship leaders should strive to let the light of God/Christ shine through their ministry rather than hoping to become invisible. See *Worship in the Shape of Scripture* (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 2001), 86–87. I believe both concepts have merit.

[4] Congregations are slowly realizing the tremendous power that sound and media engineers have as they control the various projection systems needed in some worship spaces. While not exercising the same responsibilities as worship leaders, these ministers must also be taken into account.

About the author

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