

# Power and congregational discernment

Sally Weaver Glick

**F**irst Mennonite of Anywhere is in the midst of discernment about a major decision. Some members are sure that the appropriate solution is A, while others are convinced the best response is Z. Each group is trying to influence the other and those who are undecided. Congregational leaders have begun to hear murmurings about how much power some members have and about the way they are using it. They have even gotten a few questions about their own power.

How do we understand power? What is our attitude toward the role of power in congregational discernment?

## The power of the cross

The body of Christ is diverse, as Paul captures so vividly with his 1 Corinthians 12:12-31 metaphor. We are not all feet, or ears, or eyes. We bring different gifts and different perspectives, and the

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body needs them all. This diversity is both a gift and a challenge. In congregational discernment, we seek to discern what God desires and where God is already at work, so that we can make decisions that are in tune with God. As we meet together, we inevitably discover that we do not all see things the same way. Disagreement and even conflict are a natural, healthy part of congregational discernment.

Our goal is not to cover up disagreement but to work through our differences to a more complete understanding. By the grace of

God, through the aid of the Holy Spirit, we may come to unity, our different perspectives blending like the notes of a chord into new insight and action.

Reaching this unity comes through our use of power. That statement may sound odd. Power carries negative connotations for most of us. We are aware of ways it has been misused and abused, and we are suspicious of it. Our attitude toward power may be like that of Paul Lacey's students. In a book on Quaker attitudes toward power, Lacey describes a classroom discussion on power and authority.

*I threw my book into the middle of the room and asked my students to imagine that it represented the power to do whatever one wanted with the college. All anyone would have to do would be to pick up the book, in order to have power to affect whatever he or she wanted. How the power was to be used would depend on the ethical standards of whoever picked up the book. My students were rather sobered at the prospect I was offering them, and for a time no one moved. Then an older student—a former career navy man now a pacifist—tentatively made a motion to stand up. Immediately another student, who had insisted there was not enough support for individualism in American society, leaped from his chair, rushed to the center of the class, and stood on the book!<sup>1</sup>*

We are skeptical about power. We understand it as the use of force or coercion—something to be set aside by good Mennonites.

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After all, it is the meek who will inherit the earth, isn't it? And so, like the students in the class, we stay in our seats, hesitant to pick up the symbol of power and authority. Or we stand on the book, reluctant to allow others access to power they might abuse, ignoring our own use of power in doing so. Or perhaps we pick up the book and hide it behind our backs, denying that we use power.

We have been overly influenced by one face of power. Power can indeed be a negative force, used to destroy, dominate, or subtly manipulate. But we see another face of power in the crucified and risen Christ. In Jesus, we encounter one who used power

to heal and reconcile and bring transformation. We encounter one who met the onslaught of this world's powers and principalities with vulnerability, accepting death on the cross rather than resorting to the power of the sword or calling in angel armies. As Peter proclaimed on Pentecost, "God raised him up . . . because it was impossible for him to be held in [death's] power" (Acts 2:24).

The crucified and risen Christ turns our assumptions about power upside down. In *The Power of the Cross*, Sally Purvis suggests that understanding the power of the cross calls us to unlearn old thought patterns, coming to a radical reinterpretation of the nature and function of power.<sup>2</sup> As Paul wrote to the Corinthians, the power of the cross is foolishness to the wise of this world. This "foolishness" only appears to be folly—to those who have not learned to see through resurrection eyes:

*What is the understanding of power against which the power of the cross would appear to be folly? It is, of course, a conception of power as control, of force, of efficacy over others. The cross represented for Paul and represents for us utter lack of control, the inversion of force, a deep and astounding failure to achieve one's own ends, if we understand success to be characterized by victory even at the price of violence. If one understands power as control, the cross represents victimization, loss of power, defeat. However, that is precisely the interpretation that Paul rejects. For him the cross is the central symbol of the power of God, a power that no one could seriously characterize as weakness or folly. . . .*

*The power of God in the cross is not the power to die but the power to live. It is power that does not try to control events to affect one's will but rather power that brings forth life even from the desolation of defeat and death. The power of the cross is not the crucifixion but the resurrection—surprising, astonishing, utterly unpredictable.<sup>3</sup>*

Power as the world understands it is based in fear. It dominates and controls, and it has violence as a close companion. In contrast, God's power is defined first and foremost by love. God is not

enslaved by fear and so can risk compassion and vulnerability. This power bursts forth with new life, creating, transforming, healing, and reconciling. This face of power helps us work through disagreement, resolve conflict, and come to congregational unity.

### **A dynamic understanding of power**

The field of conflict transformation has also helped expand our view of power. I have found the dynamic understanding of power presented in *Interpersonal Conflict*, by Joyce Hocker and William Wilmot, a fruitful one for reflecting on congregational discernment.

**Power is present in all social exchanges.** Social power is the ability to achieve particular ends, to affect results, or to prevent change. It is present in all human interactions. As we communicate and interact with others, we are always influencing and being influenced. Whenever we interact with others—whether we speak with passion, ignore, threaten, or calmly reason—we exercise some degree of power. This power is not inherently positive or negative. For well-being and proper human development, we all need the ability to meaningfully influence important events around us. Abuse of power happens when we manipulate events to our advantage at the expense of others.

**Power is a product of the interpersonal relationship, not the individual.** In my current congregational system, I have a lot of power. I facilitate congregational meetings, chair the worship committee, work in the church office, and am known and trusted by many people. I have power currencies of role, skill, information, contacts, and long-term experience in the congregation. But it would be absurd to try to create a test that would somehow measure these currencies and come up with a “power quotient” for me. Each of these currencies carries a certain amount of weight for some in the congregation and a different amount for others. Some of the currencies would transfer to another congregational system; others would not. Our power resources or currencies have meaning in the context of a relationship. How much power I have in a system depends on how others value or are influenced by those resources.

**Power is not static or finite.** Because power is located in the matrix of social relationships, it is not fixed or measurable. Lacey’s

use of a book to symbolize power can be misleading. It gives the impression that power is something static and finite. If I am standing on the book, you can't pick it up. If I have it, you don't. A lot of the tension around power issues comes from the assumption that power is limited in nature, like a pie that can only be sliced into so many pieces. The more you have of it, the less there is for me. This image is inadequate. If I use my power to enhance others' power, my power is not diminished, but the total amount of power increases. A better metaphor for power is the friendship

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sourdough starter that people pass around. You use some starter to make bread, you keep some for your next batch of bread, and you pass some along to a friend. Properly handled, there is more than enough starter—and power—to go around.

*Power is complex and elusive.* Power is notoriously difficult to assess. Because it resides in the relationship rather than in individuals, it is always changing. Our feelings about our place in the balance of power are

often inaccurate, especially in the midst of conflict. Hocker and Wilmot note that in conflict, generally each person firmly believes that the other person has more power. Many misuses of power result from fear of the power the other party has and of how they intend to use it.

*People attempt to balance power, either productively or destructively.* In relationships that work over time, a continual realignment of power occurs. For productive conflict management and for congregational discernment, the best scenario is a relative balance of power. When imbalances of power are not addressed, power is likely to be misused and abused in ways that work devastation in our congregations and relationships. Like a weed sending shoots underground, it sprouts up in noxious forms where least expected or wanted: in factions, behind-the-scene maneuvers, passive-aggressive behavior, the breaking of relationships, or violence.

These destructive attempts at balance are not the only option. We can instead attempt to balance power more productively, through open discussion of power issues, by high power parties

intentionally limiting their own power or empowering low power parties, by low power parties becoming aware of their own power resources, and by all parties concerned working to preserve the relationship.

### **Implications for congregational discernment**

Expanding our understanding of power has implications for our congregational discernment. As followers of Christ, we want our decisions to be in line with what God desires for the world. Both the decisions we make and the process we use to reach those decisions should be consistent with the face of power that Christ shows us. When we use the power inherent in social interactions, we want to do so in a Christ-like manner.

To do so, we need to set aside the impression that we shouldn't be talking about power dynamics in the congregational setting. Doing so may be uncomfortable, but it is necessary. We can

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celebrate the good, evaluating and making changes where necessary to increase the productive use of power and to decrease destructive practices. We can work at the following suggestions:

***Strengthen relationships, especially across differences.*** The call to love God and one another is the foundation for all of congregational life. Discernment is grounded

in our relationship with God and our relationships with each other. Investing in those relationships helps the relative balance of power and makes discernment possible.

***Become aware of and develop many power currencies.***

Hocker and Wilmot observe that often those with low power are not aware of the resources they have and of the options for productive use of power. Possible power currencies include special knowledge and skills, control of tangible and intangible resources, interpersonal connections, communication and listening skills.

Our congregational discernment is richer when we recognize and draw on a wide range of power currencies contributed by many people.

***Check perceptions about possible power imbalances.*** When we feel the power balance is out of kilter, we tend to focus on

others' resources and lose sight of our own. Jim feels he has less power than Carmen in the decision, because he knows that with her education and verbal skills, she can talk circles around him. Carmen feels Jim has more power because he is a long-term member of the congregation, with many contacts and relationships. Exploring our perceptions in a safe setting (one-on-one, in a small group, or under the care of a third party) can open our eyes to resources we have discounted and help us to use those resources wisely.

***When power imbalances do exist, find ways to bring balance.*** When we are part of an imbalanced power situation, we may need to experience some conflict and tension before we recognize that fact. When aware, high power holders can limit their use of resources or use their power to empower others. Lower power people can gain power through persistence and by presenting small, manageable moves based on thoughtful analysis of the problem. Discernment processes should provide space for stating differences and for working through disagreements. Creative solutions are more likely to be found when we recognize there are a number of perspectives and frameworks for understanding a given situation.

***Authorize leaders to use power well.*** Don't stand on the book as a congregation. Provide leaders with clear expectations about the authority and responsibilities you give them, freeing them to exercise power in behalf of well-being and justice for individuals and for the congregation as a whole. Develop systematic ways of evaluating and holding leaders accountable for their productive use of power. Recognize that there are different styles of leadership: male and female leaders may have different approaches to leading and using power, and different personality types may find different modes most fitting.

***Be aware of structural power and use it well.*** Both leaders and congregation should be aware that some power resources come with a leadership position. Recognize the following as resources to be used productively, and find ways to maintain a relative balance of power with the rest of the congregation.

***Role.*** The congregation often grants a certain amount of authority and good will to a leadership role. This power is not absolute, but it is a resource others don't have in the same way.

*Structure.* Leaders have the privilege and responsibility of defining problems, framing issues, and setting priorities about what the congregation will spend time discerning. “Deciding who gets to decide is one of the best indicators of the current balance of power in any relationship.”<sup>4</sup>

*Knowledge.* Because of their position, leaders will usually have more information than others in the congregation. They often will have worked in depth with an issue or question that the rest of the congregation is looking at for the first time.

***Use your own power well and be open to evaluation.*** Whether we are leaders or other members of the congregation, we are all to grow into the fullness of Christ. We should all be open to conversation and reflection on our use of power. Questions we may want to reflect on as we evaluate this power include: Does it build up the body, both individuals and the congregation? Is it truthful rather than manipulative? Does it enhance others’ power rather than block it? Does it reconcile and strengthen relationships? Does it contribute to well-being and justice for all?

## **Conclusion**

The use of power in congregational discernment is an inevitable aspect of our life together. With awareness and care, we can draw on the creative, life-giving power modeled by Christ to work through our differences and find unity, discerning what God is calling us to in this place and time.

## **Notes**

<sup>1</sup> Paul A. Lacey, *Quakers and the Use of Power* (Lebanon, Pa.: Pendle Hill Publications, 1982), 17–18.

<sup>2</sup> Sally B. Purvis, *The Power of the Cross: Foundations for a Christian Feminist Ethic of Community* (Nashville, Tenn.: Abingdon Press, 1993).

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 74–75.

<sup>4</sup> Joyce L. Hocker and William W. Wilmot, *Interpersonal Conflict*, 4<sup>th</sup> ed. (Madison, Wis.: Brown and Benchmark, 1995), 91.

## **About the author**

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