A DISCUSSION OF POWER AS IT RELATES TO A LOCAL CHURCH CONTEXT
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Introduction

Personal context:

It can often be the case in local church congregations that certain people continually feel marginalized and overlooked while others are clearly in control. While churches attempt to present a neutral, inclusive context in which everyone can feel accepted, the reality is usually quite different and, I would suggest, is one of the main reasons that churches run their course and lose relevance. My husband and I have been involved in pastoral ministry for over 15 years and always in church planting or church restart situations. The last two churches with which we have worked fall within the latter category and it is precisely in these kinds of restart church situations that issues of control and power are more easily identified than may be the case in larger churches or more established churches. In churches that are trying to restart or struggling to stay alive, power relations become front and center and are most often the reasons why people leave the church or why they perceive that they need to take control, if anything is to be done. What I have learned is that all church groups have certain perceptions and accepted definitions of how church should be and these are openly "battled" in a struggling church situation. I have also learned that, rather than battle out these perceptions, a process of negotiation should be nurtured during which discussion and dialog can take place even though negotiation can leave some people feeling insecure about the church environment. Insecurity arises when sensitive issues of traditional practice and church systems are addressed and challenged.

In a struggling church situation, along with a feeling of insecurity, there is also a feeling of failure. What clearly distinguishes a religious institution from any other is the belief in absolute truth, and the desire to continue that truth for subsequent generations. In other words, there can be a real fear for church attendees, if numbers are going down, that the church is failing in its mission to the world. If this continues, there can develop a strong feeling of failure and despair. What is often the case, however, is that there is little clear understanding as to why the attendance is in decline or why younger generations or people representing others cultural groups (social and racial) are not interested in attending. To begin to address these issues in real terms, it is important to examine how the particular congregation defines itself and what are the foundational beliefs that will move it forward. Identity and purpose are key in progress and this is a first step in exploring issues of power within the group.

Ideology of "church"

When I use the phrase "definition of church", I am referring to how people perceive church; what people perceive the church to be, what they feel is important about church, why it should continue, and so on. This represents a certain ideology. Interestingly, within a church context, people can quote from the Bible and legitimize a way of thinking as spiritually correct or true but which actually has more to do with the influences of society, politics, economics, and the religious system itself. In other words, there can be a lack of clarity of actual beliefs or faith. There can also be confusion between the local church as a dynamic group and the religious system of "doing" or practicing church. The system can actually consume the participants to the point where it is difficult to establish the real reasons for continuing, other than a mere

perpetuation of the system itself. It can, therefore, be very difficult to identify a particular ideology within a church, as this complex interplay of influences are often ignored in favor of a simpler, more generic appeal to a perception of Biblical truth as the motivation for everything. It is important to identify the ideology of the group in order to establish perceptions of power so that change can take place. While systems of practice are being confused with beliefs and are seen as one, change is very difficult. Superficial changes may be possible (e.g. times of services, order of service etc.) but nothing significant can take place that will actually move the church forward to include those that are excluded and to democratize the system.

Any ideology is a conglomeration of many influences, but it is important to attempt to address these in the context of organizational change as it represents the mind set of the people concerned. Therefore, if a mind set is not conducive to change, yet change is desired, that mind set must be identified and altered. This cannot happen successfully, in my opinion, if there is an inadequate understanding of how ideologies are constructed.

Biblical mandate:

Given the scriptural mandate for existence as the body of Christ: "The body is a unit, though it is made of many parts; And though all its parts are many, they form one body. (I Corinthians 12:12)," as well as the mandate for meeting together from the Early Church models presented in the New Testament, meeting regularly to fellowship and to share their faith, (Acts 2:42-47, 4:32-37) mean that church attendees usually feel a strong sense of mission. There is also the biblical mandate for future growth as found in various biblical references to spreading the faith and making converts to it. The most famous of these, and most often quoted, are probably the words of Jesus Christ as recorded by Matthew, where Christ encourages his disciples to go and make followers in all nations, teaching them to obey everything Christ taught. (Matthew 28:16-20)

A successful church, then, within this kind of Christian context measures its success by how many converts are made to the teachings of Jesus Christ, the number and quality of its meetings together and its functioning as an equal and accessible body of believers. Interestingly, however, although the biblical mandates are clear in the minds of the believers, .the social, economic and political interweaving of culture are left unidentified and unaddressed – yet this is precisely what should be negotiated. The cultural context of the church group must be acknowledged in order to truly understand the dynamics and values of the group as well as to identify gaps or misrepresentations.   While scriptural mandates can motivate, methods of interaction, communication, decision making, representation, and presentation are what constructs the culture of the group. It is the culture of the group that should be dynamic and flexible and supportive of change and it is precisely the absence of the acknowledgment of intentional cultural construction that leaves many church groups inflexible and diminished. Also, without understanding the socio-cultural perspectives, the ideology cannot be effectively identified.

Definitions of power in the church

Cultural bias as hegemony: To understand or identify one's own culture is a very illusive and complex task. There are some more obvious, superficial social behaviors and customs which are often identified as representative of certain cultures. However, there are also more complex influences which can affect or even alter a culture. These are more accurately described as hegemony, but, I would suggest, have powerful effects on any culture, including a church

culture. That is, we cannot describe culture realistically without due consideration being given to notions of power, political pressure, or economic concerns. Culture does not exist in a vacuum, but is lived out through real lives. What is interesting in this regard is that people can be so unaware of these influences that culture is misunderstood and can often be accepted without question or continued as a "holy" or divine rite. Similarly, people within a church can be unaware of both their individual culture and the collective culture of the church or how it is constructed. In fact, the culture of any church is constantly being modified by the participants just as any social culture. Church culture is just as influenced by political, economic and social input as any other. Moffett (1989) refers to this kind of influence on culture as bias; it is impossible to imagine culture as free from various influences and it is, therefore, necessarily biased. Regarding religion in particular he states: "However divinely inspired, any religion partakes of a certain civilization function through human institutions, and is, therefore, culturally biased" (Moffett, 1989, p.70-71). That is, because it is difficult to distinguish religion and culture, or culture as social behavior and culture as hegemony, what can often be perpetuated in the name of religion is actually a culturally biased system of practice. Additionally, cultural bias can be easily legitimized as "truth" within a church setting as people are in search of truth and feel that their church represents the real truth. People within a church are familiar with notions of absolute truth and when it is confused with cultural bias, it is difficult to convince otherwise. This process of the legitimization of cultural bias through a system of beliefs is referred to by Moffett as the "civilizing functions" of human institutions. (Moffett, 1989) Indeed, the history of colonization reveals in dramatic reality where this process can lead - a hegemonic system being imposed and legitimized as progress. What was in fact foreign to the recipients was justified as normal and civilized through a system of religious, social, political and economic structures - or cultural bias.

Fabian (1986) speaks about missionary involvement in education in the Belgian Congo in the early part of the 20th.century. The actual education system and the practical implementation of it were one thing. Quite another was the ideology which lay behind it. The education offered to the Africans was "total". "....it had to form and transform the whole person in all respects, religious as well as secular". (Fabian, 1986, p. 70-91) The whole person would have to be totally altered if the new system of society was to be successful. The goal of colonization was pursued one individual at a time. Thus, belief in progress and the right of every individual to be civilized produced a hegemonic system of legitimized suppression and control through a dominator model of power and perpetuation.

Within a church, the hegemony or cultural bias of the dominant group is also perpetuated, but the system of legitimatization is often legitimized in terms of the absolute truth of the faith and, therefore, nonnegotiable. Instead, the cultural bias of a church *must* be critically analyzed and the religious beliefs unpicked from the mesh of the dominant cultural agenda, if any true change is to occur. Although churches claim to be neutral, safe zones of acceptance, they are not. The safety is experienced by the dominant and not the weaker groups within that particular culture.

Power as Dominance

Absolute power vs generative power: Not only, then, do we need to realize the cultural hegemony of a group, but the systems of dominance perpetuated within the group itself. Let me borrow from several educational theorists here. Roger Simon (1992) makes some interesting comments concerning the links between culture and power,

To fully grasp the relation between culture and power requires the recognition that particular modes of semiotic production are not arbitrary but rather are historically and economically constituted by the social forms within which we live our lives. (Simon, 1992 p.39-40.)

Social norms can not only prefer a particular cultural bias, but they can also support a system of dominance. Simon's focus is the public school system and he refers to the influence of politics on all levels of school curriculum and life. He suggests that schools are sites of the reproduction of social inequalities and prejudices and the form of pedagogy they contain are also sites "of semiotic production and inevitability caught up in the inseparable relation between culture and power...".(p.39-40) In my opinion, lack of critical awareness within a church context to similar links between culture and power also allow the perpetuation of dominance to go unchallenged.

As I have mentioned, churches often claim to be safe, free spaces for all to worship God as they desire. This may be the theory, but reality can often offer a different picture. Roxanna Ng (1995) states that the "...role of the critical teacher is to relieve inequalities imposed by history and social structure and to facilitate the radicalization of students".(Ng, 1995 p.131) She holds that there is little examination of power as a "dynamic relation that permeates classroom interaction"(Ng, 1995, p.131). Interestingly, within a church context, there is usually a familiarity with the word "power", but it refers to the more abstract notions of God's power or absolute power. Little attention is given to the discussion of political power or the positioning of race, class or gender in the structures of influence within the church. It is, 'power' as in Ng's notion of "dynamic relation" which should be recognized and negotiated. If the reference to power predominantly concerns an abstract concept, not related to structures and procedures within the church, then the whole concept of power tends to be regarded as absolute and "given", rather than relational and "negotiable".

The perception of the minister is interesting in this regard. He/she is often viewed as being "sent by God" or spiritually led by God to lead the congregation. This, therefore, elevates the position beyond the rest of the group. Also, the position of other leaders in the church can have a similar elevation. In most religious institutions, there is also a larger denominational body with an overall leader. Systems of church government vary, and each local church offers its own distinguishing characteristics of leadership I would suggest, however, that the common acceptance of absolute power and the hierarchical forms of church government and leadership roles present great problems for negotiating the distribution of power. Therefore, many decisions tend to be made in a top-down, non-collaborative way rather than through a process of generative power negotiation..

Cummins (1996) discusses the difference between coercive and collaborative definitions of power. Coercive relations of power, he suggests, "..refer to the exercise of power by a dominant group"(p.9). This kind of power relation is reflected in and shaped by the use of language or discourse, or Simon's (1992) notion of "semiotic production". I would also suggest that within a church context, this notion of power can become legitimized through biblical language of authority and the symbolic representations of God's power. Collaborative relations of power, on the other hand, "...operate on the assumption that power is not a fixed, pre-determined quality, but rather, can be generated in interpersonal and inter-group relations"(Cummins, 1996.) This kind of power relation is "additive", rather than "subtractive" and it allows for an atmosphere of empowerment, rather than a silencing of certain groups by the dominance of others. Thus, even if God's power remains acknowledged as absolute, human

power relations must be critically analyzed and negotiated if the church is to develop a sense of "community" rather than that of an exclusive club led by an authoritarian leader. Cummins states, "...empowerment can be defined as the collaborative creation of power". The result of the common definition of power as absolute within a church is, not only a view of a minister as the representation of that power (so that everything he/she attempts is seen as an imposition of authority), but also a view that if power is to be had, it must be "taken". Therefore, new groups can feel they have to get some power, while other established members decide whether they will give any, or not. Power, then, becomes a commodity, rather than a generation of energy from a collaborative group enterprise. These definitions and processes of power involve the discursive and elements of power distribution within a church. There is also, however, another element to such processes and that is of the symbolic aspects of a system of dominance.

Symbolic dominance as coercion

A power structure or system can be supported and perpetuated through what Bourdieu (1977) calls, "symbolic domination". These hegemonic systems provide an explanation as to why subordinate groups accept the power of the dominant as legitimate, "so that coercion is coupled with consent". It is often not until a process of change has been initiated that these systems of coercion are revealed. Consent is given to perpetuate a system which has been imposed coercively. The reason why symbolic domination can operate so successfully in a church again involves the notion of absolute power. If true power belongs to God, it is amazing how decisions can be legitimized through notions of God's approval or His divine purposes for human kind. Often, God's approval can be claimed simply because of traditional ways, as if tradition represents truth. Other times it is the role of God's authority through the Bible or the leaders of a church which carries enough power to legitimately coerce approval.

Gal (1989) raises an interesting point about the "representation of reality" as it relates to power. She suggests that the control of these representations can present arenas for conflict and struggle; that is, when the control of one representation of reality is challenged by another, a struggle ensues. If, however, the same control is claimed by the challenger it would seem that no real ideological shift has taken place; merely a transferal of a position of power. If any real challenge to the ideology of power is to take place, then a substantial redefinition of that power must be achieved.

Resistance

Gal also holds that, according to some theorists, "....hegemony also implies the possibility of resistance or subversive practices and contradictory consciousness among subordinate groups" (p.348). Within a church situation where the dominant group has control, the main form of resistance can either be to financially cease support, or to physically leave the congregation. As church is a voluntary organization, either tactic can be extremely successful in accomplishing subversive goals. For the dominant group, however, the same possible tactics can be used to resist change. In some church situations, this threat is enough to render a minister incapable of independent action or creativity in his/her approach to leadership.

Summary

Power relations, then, are either coercive or generative and, within a church, either absolute or negotiable based on how power is perceived and distributed within the church organization. The complexities of applying religious characteristics to power that is really a

socio-cultural construct can cause restrictions in growth and distortions in representations. Most of all, power relations within a church group can either include or exclude participation from members and visitors. If any lasting change is to be affected, perceptions of power must be understood and challenged where necessary and a system of practice that includes rather than excludes individuals is required. Where this doe not happen, congregations last as long as those in power. There is no progress possible beyond those individuals.

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