

Appendix C – Power and Authority in the Church

Ultimately all power comes from and belongs to God who, through the Holy Spirit, creates, nurtures, enables and empowers human beings. This is power in its perfect form, flowing in the relationship between the three persons of the Trinity. It is the power which sets people free to become all that God intended them to be. However, there is a greater risk of power being used badly when we do not recognise that we have it or how we are using it and/ or we fear losing it or try to possess it, rather than sharing it and allowing it to flow amongst the community, for the good of all.

Bullying and harassment can involve the misuse and abuse of power. It is more likely to arise where there are significant power differentials, power structures are complex, there are many informal sources of power and where people feel threatened or insecure. Inequalities of power can be inherent in pastoral relationships where one person is being helped by another and may feel dependent and vulnerable.

Sources and uses of power in parish, benefice and diocese.

Ordained and lay people within the Church community have power from many different sources, both formal and informal for example:

- **Officeholders:** members of the bishop's staff, parish clergy, readers, churchwardens, etc. have influence by virtue of their office.
- **Relational:** established relationships, with individuals or groups, give influence or control and may be used to prevent or affect change.
- **Resources:** access to/ control over resources (e.g. parish treasurer, organist/choir leader, wealthy donor, landowner, landlord, local employer, caretaker, administrator) can enable or restrict ministry and mission.
- **Physical:** physical attributes (e.g. size, age, strength, attractiveness, voice) give varying degrees of influence over others.
- **Personality:** an attractive, charismatic, or authoritative personality can motivate or control others; emotional volatility (angry outbursts) used to dominate or manipulate; extroverts can be instantly powerful, whilst introverts may have 'slow power'.
- **Occupational status:** high-status occupations or celebrity in secular life (doctor, academic, businessperson, senior military officer, diplomat, headteacher) give influence, even after retirement.
- **Knowledge and information:** theological & liturgical knowledge, practical knowledge (how the heating system works), knowledge of relationships within the local community or Diocese can be used to disempower or empower others.
- **Experience:** the long-standing life experience of the local church. 'That's been done before, it won't work' or 'We always do it this way, people will leave if you change that'.
- **Spiritual:** there is a genuine spiritual power which is wisdom in discernment rooted in prayer. But spiritual language can be misused to manipulate outcomes. (e.g. 'God has told me we must do this').
- **Gender and power:** historically, in both church and society, men have held more social, economic, and physical power than women.

Transparency and good communication are crucial to the positive use of power. Our faith communities are sustained and enabled through the **positive** use of power **to nurture** others so that they can grow strong and develop their gifts and abilities and **to enable and empower** others, encouraging them in the use of their strengths and gifts for the good of the Church and the wider community.

Clergy and laypeople have access to different sources of power which they may use positively or negatively. There is a risk of bullying or harassment going unchallenged in the Church, due to the differentials of power and authority, the emphasis on loyalty and obedience to authority, and with lay and ordained people, stipendiary and voluntary, working together, sometimes with differing expectations and assumptions. Lines of accountability between the parish and diocesan structures can appear complex and not easily understood. The traditional hierarchy of officeholders, the more recent addition of democratic elements (election of churchwardens, PCC's, synods), new patterns of collaborative ministry and diocesan financial and administrative responsibilities delegated to the diocesan secretary, all add to this complexity. As a result, it can be difficult for individuals to know where to turn for help and advice or for those in authority to respond effectively. Our faith communities are undermined by **negative** use of power whether by clergy or laity which can develop into bullying or harassment:

- **the exploitative** use of power to dominate or control, to get their way, to force or block necessary change
- **competitive** use of power when clergy or laypeople who feel threatened prevent others from using their gifts. In the local church, individuals may also be afraid to own their gifts, for fear of envy. ('Who does he/she think she is?')
- **manipulative power** is often used when there is fear of conflict or fear of legitimate opposition (e.g. doing things behind the scenes, holding back information).

Power and authority in the local church

Church authority and power structures can be complex and difficult to negotiate within parishes, perhaps especially in rural parishes, and in multi-parish benefices, where a particular parish may dominate or, conversely, feel weak and vulnerable or where parishes resent being joined with others.

Change is part of life and, whether, in the life of the church or the wider community, it will threaten existing power and authority structures. The stakes are high for clergy who have moved home (and family) to serve in a new ministry or those who have lived and worshipped in a community for decades, perhaps even for a lifetime. So, some conflict, whether overt or hidden, may be unavoidable. The key issue is how change is managed and conflict handled. Small communities and congregations, who are dependent on volunteers for essential duties, are sometimes vulnerable to those who use their power to dominate or manipulate, or who compete for power with the incumbent. Some who do this are unaware of the effect they have and can be helped to use their power more sensitively. Others are aware of what they are doing and may need a firm response. Fear of diminishing congregations or of how overt conflict will

affect the congregation or the minister's family can inhibit ministers from challenging misused power.

While all should reflect upon their potential for misuse of power, clergy must be enabled to remain secure and calm in their legitimate authority, affirmed by the Church and rooted in prayer and the study of scripture. Clergy are called to be compassionate in relating God's word to the reality of people's lives, not least because to be accepted or rejected by the minister can, for some people, feel like being accepted or rejected by God. Clergy attract hope, fear, guilt, joy, anger so that laypeople may project on to them more power than they have, just as clergy may find themselves projecting negative emotions onto parishioners or those in authority over them. It can be difficult to recognise inappropriate projection of emotions but, unless some insight is gained, the result will be damage to the varied tapestry of relationships which exists in our church communities.