



“Working with power in a faith community”¹

Ideas for leading a Conversation

For general guidance in running these sessions see
'Planning a Conversation' also available at www.agoraspace.org

This is the second in a series of three conversations that aims to stimulate thinking about power dynamics in a faith community.

Although the conversation is specifically applied to Christian communities, the principles used are general and we would be very keen to work with other faith communities on similar conversations suitable to their own situation.

Background

Most faith communities enjoy their life together much of the time and are inspired both by the life of the community and its vision, but most would also admit that there are difficulties along the way. Sometimes these cut very deep. They become the 'unmentionable' story that dogs the life of the community and saps its energy. Others are relatively trivial issues that seem to grow out of all proportion to their importance. Sometimes these problems may turn around the abuse of power in some form. Often the resolution of the struggles and the return of the community to a positive outlook depend on the wise use of power and power structures. This conversation is designed to help us explore issues related to working with power in faith communities.

Starter questions for small group discussion

- 1. Describe the structures of power and authority in your own faith community. Use the resource section to think about how power works both formally and informally. Who really calls the shots? Who are the most powerful voices and is that how it should be?**
- 2. Describe your experience of power in a family or at work. How do you make decisions about working together and ensure everyone pulls their weight? How do you resolve disputes?**
- 3. What causes internal struggles in your faith community and how are they resolved?**
- 4. How does your community come to a sense of corporate vision and then change in response to it?**

¹ These materials are produced by Project Agora, a company limited by guarantee, which is dedicated to creating new spaces in society for the highest possible quality of public conversation, the building of realistic trust and the seeking of vision. Contact Agora at www.agoraspace.org or email info@agoraspace.org

One way through the conversation

Do not feel tied to this.

Begin the evening with question one: Describe the structures of power and authority in your own faith community. Use the resource section to think about how power works both formally and informally. Who really calls the shots? Who are the most powerful voices and is that how it should be?

Let people read through the 'formal power' and 'informal power' descriptions in the resource section before tackling the question. This will introduce them to the task.

If this is done in a single faith community then it will be an exploration of their shared situation. The facilitator could allow people to talk in small groups for 10min. Some may appreciate flip chart paper to draw on. Allow each group to feed back asking particularly for points of difference in perspective or understanding from others. People are likely to emphasise the local expression of their community rather than the more distant hierarchical structure. The facilitator should make sure that these more 'distant' aspects are noted as part of the picture.

Mixed groups may learn from each other. Each person might be given a sheet of flip chart paper to draw out their faith community in power terms for 5 mins then talk it through with their small group. Ask each group to come up with one of these descriptions that they found interesting.

This whole exercise may take some time, up to 30 minutes might be allowed, particularly for mixed groups. Some will handle the task at a very 'spiritual' level, giving justifications in biblical or traditional terms for what they describe. Others may be more pragmatic.

The facilitator might draw this together with the understanding that **all human groups tend to work with power of some sort**. Power is part of what provides the glue, the cohesion, of a group, allowing it to work together, settling conflict, helping people feel safe and defending core values.

For example any group of people will need some sort of power structure if they

- want to act together in a concerted way
- need to defend core values or beliefs,
- handle common funds

(of course power is not the only factor in co-operation, nor need it be the most important, but it is there nonetheless)

Go on to Question Two: Describe your experience of power in a family or at work. How do you make decisions about working together and ensure everyone pulls their weight? How do you resolve disputes?

Take some brief verbal summaries from the groups about what they discussed. There will be considerable diversity around. People run families differently and work environments exhibit many different strategies about power. The aim of this exercise is to show that there is no one way that all groups should work. How many families or workplaces work with a simple, direct democracy, for example, where every decision

is voted on? Would they be any better if they did? Many may agree that such a direct democracy is not the answer to everything. Most groups work with a quite subtle blend of power structures that relate tolerably well to their particular functions.

Yet there may be some things about power and leadership that are common to every group. Ask this question of the whole group at the end of this section: Would you agree that all those with leadership roles need some form of accountability to the people they have power over. (for more on this see resources).

So how might we think these things through with regard to our faith community?

Go on to Question Three. What causes internal struggles in your faith community and how are they resolved?

Particular issues raised by this question may range from the utterly trivial through to very serious abuses of power. After some time in small groups, the facilitator should ask people to indicate the general type of struggle they talked about. (Avoid the use of names or of detail at this more public stage of the process. General airing of some struggles will be counterproductive) Encourage a conversation about how these issues relate to the power structure they have described in Question One and so move to the big picture. Do some people feel hemmed in by archaic rules? Are others deeply concerned to protect the tradition? Do people feel dominated by a hierarchical system that does not treat the 'lower orders' with respect? Or is the community struggling with lack of leadership so that it descends into different groups all vying with one another for power and influence. The permutations are many.

Some faith communities may have an overly idealistic view of themselves. For example they may speak of being all one 'family' and yet their diversity is such that they cannot possibly work with structures as informal and subtle as those prevalent in family life. Instead they need their 'councils' and 'minutes' to provide a safe space for the sort of disagreement that will inevitably arise. Likewise democratic decision-making may be appropriate at some level even if this is experienced to some degree as harsh and 'divisive' at the moment of decision.

One of the key difficulties with chronic internal dissent in any faith community is the way that it tends to undermine the core values of the community. Vision is lost and there is little attention to concerns for the wider world as people descend into mutual recrimination.

At the same time some of the issues that cause dissension are genuinely important so it is vital that they are settled well and the community be able to move on and regain a positive outlook on its life. The settlement of conflict and the restoration of vision is dependent on wise and effective leadership coupled to power structures that can act to restore confidence. One key factor is the restoration of vision.

Go on to Question Four: How does your community come to a sense of corporate vision and then change in response to it?

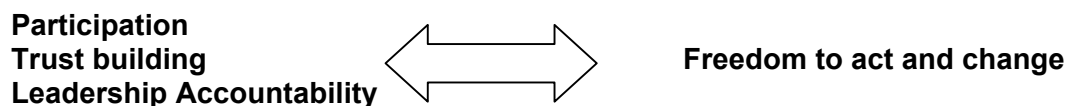
The first conversation in this series discussed core values that may be defended by a faith community. This question is designed to help people think how the vision and values of a particular community are arrived at and how they are developed into strategy.

In some communities a particularly strong leader or tradition may effectively determine the vision and strategy. Vision may be a non-question for the ordinary

member. This is what we are and always shall be. We stand in this tradition. These are our values. This is our next programme of action. Like it or lump it. However strongly these views are pre-determined, it may be that an exploration of vision, values and strategy is a healthy exercise for a faith community, encouraging real participation and ownership of the direction of the community. Yet participation without the ability to change anything may feel empty, a hollow shell, or at worst it will feel manipulative. So a leadership that engages in an envisioning task and that intends to build trust, must itself be open to learning new things and demonstrate this openness by an appropriate responsiveness. This could be summarised in terms of a principle that good leadership will nurture a sense of **participation** and the **building of trust** and will seek to be **accountable** to the community as a whole.

On the other side of the equation there are faith communities that are so deep into consultation, or so embedded in formal procedure and balances of power that they simply cannot make the radical decisions that are necessary to respond to changed circumstances. This problem is frequently compounded by belief systems that justify things so powerfully that the structures become very difficult to change. This accounts for why faith communities are generally perceived to be 'behind the times' and slow to change. There is a need in any faith community to be able to make the difficult decision, revise the strategy and promote change. This principle could be summarised as protecting the necessary **freedom to act**.

A healthy faith community will then be working in a necessary tension between



Certain beliefs of the community will determine how it works with this tension. These will be explored further in the last of this series of three conversations about power entitled 'Teaching and learning in a faith community'.

Draw to a close with the question: 'What one idea or piece of good practice have you learnt in response to this conversation that your community could work on?' (Some of these may clash – no worries – they may come from very different communities)

Resources

For use with Question One

The Formal Hierarchy – as shown in the Anglican Church

The Anglican church is set up as a religious hierarchy with people assigned to orders such as bishop, priest, deacon, reader. These are tied to particular functions within the church and the order is expressed in a strict demarcation of duties. So a priest cannot confirm. That is the role of the Bishop. A deacon cannot celebrate communion. That is the role of the priest. A reader cannot perform a wedding etc.

Grafted onto this religious ordering is another formal system of power, based on democratic ideals. There is the General Synod, Diocesan Synods, Deanery Synods and Parochial Church Councils. They are a complex hierarchical system based around representation, voting procedure, responsibilities and duties.

Added to this the Church of England has a system of 'patronage' whereby groups of people upholding particular traditions have the power to appoint ministers in certain parishes. In other places appointments are made by the Bishop. Both of these systems now include some process of consultation with the parish itself. Some would see patrons as acting to balance the power of the Bishop and ensure that the full range of traditions is upheld.

Overarching all this the systems of the Church of England are made more stable, and also more difficult to change, through being part of the law of the land. This means that legal process is required for even the simplest thing, such as moving a pew. It also means that all sorts of external bodies reserve the right to involve themselves in its work. Hence the Prime Minister has an important say in the appointment of Bishops.

The Informal Hierarchy – as shown by 'New' churches

The New churches, often originally called House churches, have tended to take a clear stance against all that seemed 'religious' and this resulted in deliberately not developing formal structures. Instead the emphasis tended to be on 'relationship' with a continuing openness to new expressions of church and the leading of the Spirit.

This radical position on structural change has gone together with strong charismatic leanings, but the movement is otherwise relatively conservative (and evangelical) in theological terms. In fact it may be that a conservative theology is used to give inward structure and ordering of relationships as a substitute for outward forms. So, for example, in the early days of the House church movement there was great emphasis on being under authority. New members would be put through an initiation that included strong teaching about submission to the leadership. Theological concerns would major on 'rebelliousness' and general sinfulness in a way that underlined the position of the leadership. In addition the different local expressions of fellowship began to organise themselves according to who they were 'looking to' and therefore accountable. De facto overall leaders were recognised, much like bishops in practice, who held responsibility for the whole. Power struggles were commonplace but generally not acknowledged as such.

Other resources that may fit with different approaches to the conversation

On structure and hierarchy

Demarcations of duty within the faith community such as those recorded in the 'formal power hierarchy' above are also found in the Bible.

Study Numbers Chapter 4. There you will find a long list of religious people and their duties. It seems really tedious, but if you read it through carefully you notice that there is also another purpose hidden in the detail. The service of the tent of meeting involved two types of religious functionaries. There were 'Aaron and his sons' and there were the Levites, who were the sons of Kohath, Merari and Gershon. What becomes apparent is that their respective duties are recounted so as to emphasise the fact that the Levites are always subservient to the Aaronic priests. Tasks to do with the most holy items are the preserve of Aaron and his sons. See Chapter 4 verses 9 and 32 for example. (or for similar privileges and duties see Chapters 10 v 8, 6 v 22 or 19 v 8)

So underneath the list of duties is a serious concern about hierarchy.

Some may benefit from comparing this with the **The Book of Common Prayer** of the Church of England and its prescribed initiation services for Bishops, Priests and Deacons. They begin 'It is evident unto all men diligently reading holy scripture and ancient authors, that from the Apostles time there have been these Orders of Ministers in Christ's Church; Bishops, Priests and Deacons.'

Go on to study the descriptions of the tasks allotted to these people in the particular initiation services. Notice two things in particular. Firstly the designation of different tasks acts to create a hierarchy. So a deacon cannot take Holy Communion, a priest cannot confirm, that is the task of the bishop etc. Secondly, notice how these descriptions of role are illustrated with New Testament mandates toward leaders to care for the poor, to seek out the lost sheep, to be the steward, the shepherd and the servant. So we see an expression of hierarchy modified and interpreted by Christian understandings of leadership, which work to hold power in check and make sure that it is exercised for the good of all. Do these services adequately reflect what you understand to be a Christian model of leadership?

On making challenge

Many of the stories of the book of Numbers concern God's anger at challenges to authority, while other biblical writers take an opposite view. They imply that God actually inspires the challenging of authority. So Jeremiah will rail at the priests and the king of his day in the name of God. (eg Jeremiah Chapters 7 or 22 v 13 ff). Some Christian communities have built their ideas about authority solely around texts on submission such as Romans 13 v1 or Colossians 3 v 18, but there are clearly challenges within the scripture that would conflict with such simplistic readings.

Do you think that submission to authority is always right? If not, should systems be put in place that positively encourage challenge so as to channel it to constructive purposes?

Territory and informal power

It is very possible to overemphasise the power of those in established positions of authority. It is common in all voluntary organisations for leaders to feel vulnerable because of the ease with which people can simply get up and go. Authority figures may worry about upsetting people and some may even spend all their time simply keeping people happy and fail to offer any real leadership to the community.

This is frequently coupled with 'territorial' behaviour, which happens when people accept roles within the community, but then grow to enjoy the status and recognition

that this position affords and will not let it pass on to another. The leader feels the need to tread a very careful line, wanting to put someone else in the role but not make the present person so cross in the process that they leave. This can also make the leader feel very powerless.

What do you see as the answer to this sort of problem?

Who can be a leader?

One common cause of systematic oppression within faith communities is the exclusion of particular classes of people from leadership.

Without explaining the purpose of the exercise invite the group to draw up a list of characteristics of good leadership in regard to their faith community. Having completed this task, list particular groups of people that are currently excluded from this role. What reason is given for this? Can a case genuinely be made that these people are less well endowed with the stated qualities of good leadership?

On leadership and accountability

Study two passages from the gospels about leadership.

1. the washing of feet at the Last Supper in John 13 paying particular attention to verses 12 – 17.
2. the dispute over who was the greatest – Luke 22 v 24-27

Invite people first to imagine and then try to express what a leader working faithfully to these mandates would look like. Try to use non-religious language and be as practical as possible. Would such leaders be accountable to their people?

On internal dissension

Paul had a serious problem. He was convinced that the gospel of Christ was for the Gentiles and also that they should not have to subject themselves to the full weight of Jewish law. These were core values that brought him into contention with other Christians of his day.

Study Acts Chapter 15, which records the time when Paul struggled with the people at Antioch on this issue and decided to appeal to the Church in Jerusalem. The account reads superficially like it was all resolved relatively easily, but it may well be that there was a row of the first order. (See 15 v 2 which records 'no small dissension' or 15 v7 'much debate'. Also see Galatians (Chapter 2 and 5 v 2-12) to get the strength of Paul's feeling on these issues.)

See how the issue was resolved practically, sending authorised representatives from the Church in Jerusalem to Antioch with a letter to back up Paul and Barnabas.

Think about this process in terms of power and the process of resolving conflict. Can you see any modern parallels in your own experience? Faith was clearly part of the problem here, but was it also part of the resolution?

For a fun introduction to issues of power and leadership some may enjoy a clip from 'Bruce Almighty' a film that plays with the idea of 'being God for a week'.