Power outage: When leaders don't lead

by Anthony B. Robinson in the October 18, 2003 issue

What happens when power is seen as inherently suspect and even evil? What happens when power in the church is viewed as bad? What are the implications for the church when its leaders eschew power and influence and consider them qualities or capacities to be avoided?

This past summer I taught a course at a seminary in Canada. Forty people showed up for “Pastoral Leadership for Congregational Transformation.” Most were pastors of the United Church of Canada, with a little leaven from other church bodies, including Anglican and Lutheran.

Early in the week I asked participants to complete an exercise that explores motivation. Why do we do what we do? What “gets our engines going”? What activities give us the greatest satisfaction? As they answered these questions, people found themselves in one of three groups. They learned that their prime motivator was one of three factors: affiliation, achievement, or power and influence.

The first of these, the affiliators, focus on relationships, feelings, and how they can help with the process. They specialize in sensing the “temperature of the room,” and in seeing that everyone feels welcome and included. The achievers, in the same situations, pay attention to outcomes, to the product and to what is being accomplished. They tend to focus on goals and how to achieve them, problems and how to solve them. The power or influence types are those concerned about impact, about changing people’s hearts and minds, and about leveraging social power. If one were to imagine a dinner party, the affiliators would want to see that everyone felt welcome and comfortable; the achievers might be out in the kitchen concocting a gourmet feast; the power/influence types would be paying attention to who’s on the invitation list and to whether or not the dinner-time conversation is substantive and even inspirational. Clearly, a great dinner party needs all three types of people.

When the participants completed the exercise, we discovered that we had 23 affiliators, 15 achievers and only two people motivated by power and influence. “What do you make of that?” I asked the group. Their initial comments were self-congratulatory. There was praise for the heavy bias toward people skills and affiliation as motivation, and for the apparent lack of interest in power among the assembled church leaders.

But one person challenged the consensus. “In the United Church of Canada,” she said, “we’ve been told for so long now that power is bad, that power is suspect, that I’m not surprised that few of us acknowledged power or influence as a motivation.” There was an uncomfortable silence as she continued, “I wonder if more people aren’t motivated by power rightly used and influence for the good than we’ve let on, only it’s been socialized out of us?”

Perhaps emboldened by that query, another chimed in, “When people label all exercise of power as inherently bad or suspect, power issues or needs don’t just go away. They go underground. They get expressed in all sorts of distorted and unhealthy ways. We’ve got plenty of that in our churches.”

These comments generated a valuable discussion about power, leadership and the church. I noted that two vocations that attract people motivated by power and influence are teaching and politics, and that these are two of the more challenging and troubled callings in our society today. I shared my concern for any denomination in which only 5 percent of the clergy claim power and influence as a motivation or primary capability. What happens to a gospel and church that has historically sought to change the hearts and minds of people if we grow timid or disinterested in influencing others?

One can understand ambivalence about power in the church, given the stories of clergy abuse of power. In Canada, the church has been living with the sad and sordid story of “residential schools” for native peoples. Operated by churches in the last half of the 19th and first half of the 20th centuries, these schools have been the target of many allegations of cultural insensitivity and child and sexual abuse.

Is there anywhere that power is being exercised for the common good? Isn’t it important to openly address questions about power and its use so that power doesn’t go “underground” and become manifest in harmful ways? Shouldn’t we acknowledge that all persons have power, that organizations are reliant on the

responsible use of power to fulfill their goals and mission, and that leaders who exercise power may in fact be servants and not simply in it for themselves or their group?

In sector after sector of life—education, religion, politics, health care and policing—we assume that we should distrust those in positions of power and assume that self-interest is their primary motivator. Not only is this not fair to many devoted leaders, it is also counterproductive for organizations and for society as a whole. It forces those called to leadership tasks to live in an unnecessarily harsh climate, one in which they pay dearly for any mistake. It also means that many who might be good leaders say, “Thanks, but no thanks,” or “Who needs it?” And we do need them. Our churches, institutions and society need capable and dedicated leaders.

Power is one of the goods God created, blessed and pronounced good. Power is not God and ought not be divinized nor made into an idol. When it is absolutized it will, as Lord Acton remarked, “corrupt absolutely.” And yet when power is in its place and directed toward appropriate ends, it has the potential for building and sustaining the fabric of life. If we demonize all power uncritically, we reject God’s creation and sap its potential.

The flip side of a bias against power and a suspicion of those entrusted with it is the tendency to automatically assign the moral high ground to those we deem to be powerless or “victims.” Today the quickest and surest route to capture that high ground is by claiming to be a victim. Many today sentimentalize victimhood and locate goodness in the class of people called victims. As a result, almost everyone claims to be a victim.

In the fourth Gospel Jesus counters this tendency by denying that he is a victim. “I lay down my life. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it up again” (John 10:18). Jesus retained power even as he suffered, even as he died. He was nobody’s victim.

Yes, it is true that Jesus addressed and called those who had experienced victimization—the poor, the meek, the grieving, the persecuted, those who suffer for righteousness’ sake. But he did not encourage a victim mentality. Rather he urged victims to claim and exercise power. “If anyone forces you to go one mile, go also the second mile.” “If anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also” (Matt. 5: 39-40). This is not counsel in how to be a doormat. It is counsel in how to

rise above those who persecute you and to exercise power that they would strip away.

There are at least two downsides of this tendency to claim victimhood. First, those who wrap themselves in the mantel of victim make a bargain. In order to be a victim, they surrender their own powers, their capacity for choice and responsibility. Someone else makes the decisions. Someone else is responsible. It's "them," "they're in control," "I am only a victim."

The other downside is that those who claim victimhood widen the divide between the good guys and the bad guys, and include as bad guys those who are in positions of power and responsibility. We are not well served by further dividing the world, the community or the church into good guys and bad guys, victims and victimizers. We are better served by figuring out how to "paddle together" in the boat that we all share when we try to solve common problems or face common challenges.

This is where we need good leaders, those whose primary task is to mobilize the rest of us. How can we see what we have in common and paddle together so that all of us get to shore? How can we avoid paddling in circles forever because the oars are working on only one side of the boat?

Jesus transcends our polarization of power and powerlessness, leader and follower, agent and victim. He had power to heal, to transform and to influence others. He also suffered at the hands of others and was victimized not only by the state and organized religion, but also by his closest comrades and friends, which ought to make us think before hastily designating people as good guys and bad guys. Jesus had power and he gave it away, which may finally be the most powerful and faithful exercise of power.

And what about us? Is it the task of the church to adjust to the world or to change it? If we seek to stand in the faithful line of those who would change the world, then we need to reclaim the positive potential of power as well as a modest but sure conviction of the gospel's capacity to influence, to change lives and to renew communities.