

Power and authority are real. We use and deal with them all the time, both consciously and unconsciously, in our family, in work and play. Whether it is in the apparently simple issue of what color to paint a room in the church or the more volatile issue of a teen-ager's curfew or the complex issue of calling a new pastor, assumptions about power and authority are continually tested and used in our lives. Power is the ability to act, to get what you want or what you want to accomplish. Authority is the legitimation of power by a group or system. Power and authority are gifts of God. The Christian is neither powerless nor without authority. Power is not related just to what we want to accomplish but to what we think God wants us to be and do.

## History and Background

Power is present in individuals and in groups. In individuals it comes from knowledge and training, from physical strength, from experience, from social position and the kind of resources we command. It also comes from suffering on behalf of others, based on the model of the one who sacrificed self for greater good. In groups power comes from the collective knowledge, position or status of the members as they join together to pursue a mutually supported and owned purpose.

Power is good. Life without power is not life. We do not always believe

that. Often we call power evil, or at best, neutral. Power can be misused. It can corrupt. These characteristics are not inherent with power but are the result of how it is used and dispersed. Power is essential for healthy, functioning people and situations. It is to be generated and claimed, not dissipated or denied.

Authority is the recognition of the presence of power and the sanctioning of its use. Leaders are those authorized by the system to claim the power that is present and to use it for the ends which the group defines and intends.

## Power and Authority in Groups

The following things are true of power in groups:

- All groups have power.
- If a group does not claim and use its power, the power will gradually be lost.
- A group uses its power by authorizing certain people to leadership positions to do certain things on the group's behalf, such as lead meetings and make specific kinds of decisions.
- Leaders must accept the authorization for power, because if they don't use it, power will diminish.
- A group can misuse its power through poor delegation, through not claiming it or through the pursuit of destructive ends.

- A group can increase its power through managing its life effectively and responsibly.
- The amount of power of a group is in direct proportion to the collective commitment of the members to a common vision and purpose.

The following things are true of authority in groups:

- A group confers authority by granting roles and offices to people.
- Authority is the way a group orders its life and the flow of its power.
- A group can confer authority upon a person yet also withhold power from that person. In those cases, despite the authority granted, the person's capacity to act will be minimal. This kind of thing happens when someone who does not have the confidence or trust of the group is selected as committee chairperson.
- A group's capacity to confer or withhold authority allows it control over individuals and situations.

## Power, Authority and Faith

Christians' understanding of power is informed by the concept of servanthood. Servants seem powerless, yet are powerful because they make themselves available for service.

For people of faith God is the root and source of power. All power comes from, and is given by, God to be used for God's purposes. In the

creation narratives God stands in the midst of nothingness and creates form, light, water, life and people. Creation comes out of void, order out of chaos and being out of non-being.

The people came to know themselves as being empowered by God. They were chosen to be God's people to go "to the land that I will show you ... and become a great nation" (Genesis 12:1). Leaders have continued to rise out of the midst of the people, to be called forth by them to name the power of God in their lives and to lead the people in the pursuit of the vision of God who gives power.

Jesus declared the power of God focused in him, set his face toward Jerusalem and invited people to follow and claim the power offered.

## Power, Authority and the Church

The Holy Spirit called the church and gave it authority to be the body of God's people that continues the ministry of Jesus. Christians believe that God's power flows through the church, that when two or three are gathered in the name of Jesus, the power of the Holy Spirit is present. That power becomes visible as the church proclaims itself a community committed to the purposes of God and as it calls people to lead and act to fulfill those purposes.

Some churches choose to develop clearer channels for the exercise of power than others. They authorize specific people and groups. This

minimizes the presence of un-structured and informal power. The clearest example is the Roman Catholic Church, but more limited expressions are in the Episcopal, the Methodist and the Evangelical and Reformed churches, where clear definitions of authority are favored as a corrective to undisciplined and informal power.

Other churches favored more limited and less detailed structures to which they would grant authority, fearing the price of too much authority in a few channels. They chose to lean in the opposite direction and encourage the flow of informal power and energy. The Baptist, Presbyterian and Congregational Christian churches are examples of this way of dealing with authority.

## Power and Authority in the UCC

The United Church of Christ expresses its use of power and authority through the making and living out of covenants. These covenants hold power and authority in creative tension. Covenants are amplified in constitutions that acknowledge power and authorize its creative use by people in the church, defining how it is to be vested in the church and in collective structures beyond the church. Thus, certain people and groups are designated to carry out specific functions on behalf of the church. Authorization is granted for all to work within certain

limits. For example, deacons are named to oversee the spiritual and liturgical life of the congregation. The Christian education committee is chosen to develop and coordinate the educational ministry of the church. A pastor is called to provide pastoral and administrative oversight for the church.

The many parts that make up the United Church of Christ--local churches, associations, conferences, the General Synod and national bodies--function with varying degrees of independence. At the same time, they are linked in a partnership covenant that calls for mutual responsibility and faithfulness. That covenant is totally voluntary for the local church, while other parts have limited constitutional mandates.

In doing this the United Church of Christ maximizes the power potential of the individual units while minimizing the capacity of any part to impose its will upon the whole.

## Understanding and Using Power as a Leader

Leaders can call upon two kinds of power: (1) the collective power of the group, which is available because the group has given it, (as seen in titles, positions and symbols of status); and (2) personal power, which comes from recognized competence and skill and from personal inner authority.

The following things are true of leaders:

- To have power, leaders must claim the position and power that are granted by the group.
- Leaders generate power to the degree that they delegate responsibility in such a way that it contributes to the desired outcome and helps others be empowered and grow.
- Leaders know whether the group has released the power needed to carry out the task or fill the position.
- Leaders recognize that power in a group does not always rest in the formal structures, but sometimes it is in a series of informal systems and procedures. It is important to understand where the power forces are and how they operate. For instance, a board of trustees may be elected to administer the investment portfolio of the church. The actual power to handle the investments, however, may be in the hands of one or two "financial veterans" who are no longer on the board.
- Leaders are sensitive to the source of authority for different actions. For instance, it may seem that the board of trustees has the authority to decide to paint the church hall. The congregation, however, may have the final say over undesignated budget items and will need to authorize the painting before it can begin.
- The leadership style used by the leader influences the use and effectiveness of power.

## Ways to Increase Skills, Knowledge and Effectiveness

- Ask your pastor to develop sermons on the difference between power and authority and on the need for both in the church.
- Discuss how power and authority are present in the church and how they are used to carry out the church's ministry by a committee or group in which you participate.
- Discuss with your conference minister ways in which the United Church of Christ attempts to hold power and authority in a dynamic tension and the role of the local church in the relationship.
- Hold or attend a workshop on leadership styles that will help you understand power and authority.
- **The Manual on Ministry** is a guide for associations as they authorize and oversee ordained and other ministries. In section eight, review the introduction which discusses the meaning of "oversight." How does this description shed light on the ways different groups and individuals in your church relate? (The manual is available at [www.ucc/ministries/manual](http://www.ucc/ministries/manual) or from your conference or association staff.)

## Issues Facing the Church

- In the United Church of Christ we fear abuses of power and therefore may not give much authority to others. Can you illustrate this in your experience?
- How can abuses of power and authority be detected? How are those with authority accountable to others?
- What do you do when power is wielded by unauthorized, hidden or informal sources?
- Power and authority are seen as the enemy of autonomy. Are they?

## Questions

- What is power?
- What are sources of power in society? In the church? For individual leaders?
- What is authority?
- How is authority expressed in your church?
- How is that authority granted?
- What conditions are likely to lead to abuses of power in society? In the church? In individual leaders?