

Where Has All the Power Gone?
Feelings of Power and Powerlessness Among United Methodist Clergy

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During the last 4 years, I have traveled around the country training United Methodist clergy around issues of Clergy Sexual Misconduct using Marie Fortune's well known curriculum, "Clergy Sexual Misconduct: Sexual Abuse in the Ministerial Relationship." At the start, Fortune asks participants to accept 5 basic assumptions, one of which is that clergy have power. Without fail, clergy have been unwilling to accept that assumption. They have expressed some of that sense of powerlessness in brief stories during the trainings, but due to time constraints, I have always been forced to ask them to set aside those conversations so that we could continue with the planned agenda. I saw this year's theme, "The Use and Abuse of Power in Religious Organizations and Denominations" as an opportunity to research and better assess those peripheral discussions on powerlessness. How widespread is it? Is it more common among men or women, older clergy or younger, those from certain regions of the country, etc.? Is it felt in regard to all aspects of ministry and/or all levels of the Church? These were some of my initial questions.

Literature Review

There have been many studies on clergy power, as well as authority, a closely related topic. Although I found none exactly like mine, many addressed the pertinent issues such as clergy sexual misconduct, the effects of growing secularization, the expanding role of the laity, the increasing focus on the local congregation, even in more episcopal denominations, etc.

First of all, the large minority, perhaps two fifths, of the recent (last 20 years) work related to clergy power is connected to the growing awareness of sexual misconduct, or the abuse of power (see esp. Fortune, 1989 and Lebacqz

and Barton, 1990). Although this was the subject that brought my attention to the current topic, and I am well aware of the problem, this work was really not pertinent to my research. From the other three fifths, I found some very interesting work.

In "Some Issues in Clergy Authority" (Carroll, 1981), Jackson Carroll notes that one reason clergy have authority is due to their close, daily connection with the deity. On the other hand, he notes that this has been in decline due to a general process of secularization in Western society. More specifically, he states that while officially, clergy have been responsible for oversight of "Word, Sacrament and Order," unofficially, the scope of authority has been much wider, especially in the past. Now, many roles previously held by clergy are shared more widely in the secular world (counselor, social worker) or have been taken by the laity in their rise to a more genuine "Priesthood of All Believers" (worship leader, fund raiser, teacher). Carroll also notes a nationwide reaction against hierarchy of all kinds, including that in the Church. Hence, the focus of ministry has tended to be more local than global, more congregational than denominational. This reaction against hierarchy was confirmed in my findings. Surely all of these trends have had some impact on feelings of powerlessness among clergy.

Richard Goodling addressed powerlessness specifically in his article, "The Clergy and the Problem of Professional Impotency" (Goodling, 1980). He cites both the decline in power attributed to the clergy as noted by Carroll, and also acknowledges a decline in the felt sense of power among clergy, perhaps two sides of one coin, yet best separated for analysis. On a more theological note, Goodling recognizes another problem: Christianity's built-in bias against power. It is the meek who will inherit the earth, and the last who shall be first. One must give up one's life to save it, and humble oneself, even unto death on a

cross. This bias makes powerlessness a normative position (in the ideal) for Christians, clergy included, or especially.

The actual role of the clergy is also a point of interest. The classic assignment to "Word Sacrament and Order" as mentioned above is perhaps the clearest delineation, though highly limited. At the other end of the spectrum, Chris Peck contends that ministry is for all Christians, and that the role of the clergy has yet to be redefined in light of the Protestant Reformation and the ensuing "laity revolution." The problem is that clergy don't know what they are supposed to do, hence the topic and title of his article: *An Abuse of Power: Confronting Clericism* (Peck, 1992)

The definition of power, especially as distinct from authority is another important theoretical topic to consider. Carroll makes the distinction by calling power "legitimate authority," emphasizing the recognition of the community as the essential element. For this study, the public recognition of the clergyperson's power or lack thereof would certainly contribute to his/her own sense of power. In "Authority in Mutual Ministry" (Russell, 1986), Letty Russell defines power as I do: "the ability to accomplish desired ends through various means such as authority, coercion, persuasion, and the like" (11).

A final aspect of interest regarding clergy and power is a study which further defines power by isolating its various manifestations for purposes of analysis. In "Power and the Pulpit: A Look into the Diversity of Ministerial Power" (Heinrichs, 1993), Glenn Heinrichs takes French and Raven's (1959) typology of 6 kinds of power (legitimate, expert, referent, reward, coercive, informational) and applies them to clergy. He offers a compelling argument for studying each of these as distinct phenomena, especially as the most effective pastors utilize distinct forms in different areas of ministry. Referent power (charisma), for example, would be useful in the pulpit whereas reward power (giving rewards and

recognition) would be more helpful in targeting strong laity and nurturing their leadership abilities. I found this article to be helpful in thinking about my project. While not using French and Raven's typology, I want to acknowledge the clergy job as one of great variety. Clergy have to be Jacks and Janes of all trades, and they know it. Rather than distinguishing between different kinds of power, I wanted to distinguish between different tasks in ministry. In sum: in what tasks do clergy feel they have influence, or no influence at all, and how do those findings break down demographically? This seemed like a good way to get at the clergy feelings I was hearing in my workshops.

Methodology

Although currently working on my Ph.D. and teaching, I am also a United Methodist clergywoman, and remain connected to my clergy colleagues through cluster groups, retreats and the like. In addition, my husband is a UM clergyman, serving a large church while also active in clergy groups and Conference-wide commitments. His daily work in the parish is part of my life as well as the (dreaded) pastor's spouse. I state this so as to establish the fact that I am nowhere near removed from the topic of clergy and power. It was based on this first-hand knowledge and experience that I developed a brief survey which would assess feelings of power and/or powerlessness in various aspects of ministry. Clergy were asked to rate their feelings of power on a scale of 1 to 5 (1 being the most powerful) in 13 areas of ministry, including preaching, committee work, staff relations, the denomination and their communities (see attached survey). Power was defined as "ability to influence opinion." I was not only curious as to the various aspects of ministry, as mentioned above, but also who was feeling powerless (i.e.. gender, age, region, etc.). Hence I asked for personal demographic data as well.

I chose to limit my survey to United Methodist clergy because I know the language, the structure, the job, etc. To avoid too much personal connection though, I chose 4 Conferences in each of the 5 Jurisdictions, none of which were related to me (that is not my Conference, nor my husband's, nor any previous Conferences in which we have served). I did not want to send a survey to someone I knew. I also tried to choose a variety within each Jurisdiction, so for example, only one California Conference was chosen and only one Texas Conference was chosen, etc. Beyond the targeting for anonymity and regional diversity, a random sample was selected from each Conference Journal listing of Elders in full connection, serving in local churches, skipping only those who clearly served as associates. Associate jobs often include unique issues of powerlessness between two clergy (associate and senior pastor). In fact, some included comments about that very problem in previous churches. Still, I decided to limit this study to asking the supposedly powerful (sole and senior) pastors about their feelings about their jobs, assuming the only supervisory power over them (other than parishioners) is at some distance in the form of District Superintendent and Bishop. In this way, the sample would be more homogeneous.

Of the 200 surveys mailed, 146 were returned, for a rate of 73%. A few had suggestions of additional questions I might have asked (many of which were excellent ideas), and almost all showed a very high level of interest in the subject. About one quarter of those returned included optional comments, and more than half signed their names, citing a willingness to be called for a phone interview.

(Preliminary) Quantitative Findings

The first surprise was that clergy are not feeling as powerless overall as I might have guessed. The mean score of all 13 aspects of ministry was 2.47 which is about halfway between 2 (somewhat powerful) and 3 (neutral). On the other hand, there was a big difference between the means at the two ends of the spectrum. On the average, they feel the most powerful about their preaching, for which the mean was 1.7. They feel least powerful in their ability to influence the denomination, with a mean of 3.87. This comes as no surprise, as preaching is a weekly, highly personal task whereas the denomination is distant, impersonal, and may only be experienced as paper work and pension reports. More interesting was the ordering of the 13 items in question (see Table 1). Of the five committees in question (Nominations, Administrative Board/Council on Ministries equivalent, Staff/Parish Relations, Finance, Trustees), they reported feeling the most power in Nominations (mean = 1.86). Significantly, they chair this committee. It is assumed that the pastor will know most people, especially new members, and can work to eliminate domination of the church by certain laity by suggesting they be moved to different committees or making sure they step down when appropriate. This is the only committee chaired by the pastor, but it is important to note that this was almost changed at the last General Conference in 1996. Laity want more power in this committee, and evidently, pastors know of their power there. The most recent compromise was that a lay member MAY serve as Vice-Chair. (Also worthy of note, the first printing of the 1996 Discipline mis-stated the optional lay position as Co-Chair, a possibly significant error.)

The two committees which deal with property and money are those in which pastors feel the least powerful, with means of 2.48 and 2.56 respectively. This may be one of those areas that clergy have passed over to more

knowledgeable laity, such as bankers and attorneys. It also may be related to church budgets. Where money is plentiful, laity may be more willing to listen to the pastor's advice about spending, but they may be more careful where funds are tight, especially since the pastor is usually seen as the primary fund-raiser. I did not ask about church budgets.

Although not a surprise, it was notable that clergy indicated a sense of more power in their communities (mean = 2.59) than in their Conferences (mean = 3.19), in the denomination (mean = 3.87), and with their cabinets (largely District Superintendents and Bishops; mean = 3.21). Evidently, the administrative structure of their own United Methodist Church and its hierarchy are more imposing for pastors than their ecumenical and secular communities.

In running tests for association between the 13 questions and the various demographic items, 5 significant relationships warrant discussion. Of the 5 relationships, 3 were anticipated, so I will first discuss them briefly. First, one's theological position is related to feelings about one's preaching. In general, those who called themselves conservative feel more powerful in their preaching than those who claimed either the moderate or liberal labels. A full 2/3rds of the conservatives said they feel "very powerful" in their preaching. Except for one who feels "neutral", the other third said they feel "somewhat powerful." Amongst liberals and moderates, about 3/5ths felt only "somewhat powerful." Only one third of this group indicated feeling "very powerful." While only about 4% of the liberals and moderates reported feeling powerless, none of the conservatives noted powerlessness in preaching at all. This is consistent with other studies which have shown that clergy feel more powerful when they accept their authority from God rather than persons (Falbo, New and Gaines, 1987). It could be that these more conservative clergy sense just such a divine mandate.

The next anticipated result was that locale, that is urban, suburban or rural coincides with one's feeling of power in the community. The only pastors who feel "very powerful" in their communities were those in rural settings. 10% of rural pastors chose this response. More than 2/3rds of the remaining rural pastors feel "somewhat powerful" in their communities. For those in the suburbs and urban settings, none feel "very powerful" and just less than half feel "somewhat powerful." Of course, one could guess that the smaller size of rural communities might make access to persons and structures easier, thereby making the pastor feel s/he has had an influence. On the other hand, rural communities might be the slowest to change, so that sense of influence may be illusory. I received comments affirming both of these rationales.

The third non-surprising result was that number of church members correlates with how powerful the pastor feels with his/her staff (staff were defined as paid or volunteer.) First of all, those with membership under 100 all claimed to feel "neutral" about staff. It may be that they don't have any, or very few. Beyond that, 84% of those with the largest charges (those with memberships over 250) indicated feeling very or "somewhat powerful," while this number drops to about 54% for mid-sized charges (101-249 members). A full third of the mid-sized charge pastors reported feeling "neutral" about their ability to influence staff. Again though, it seems quite tenable that those with larger churches have more staff, more professional/paid staff, and more control over the staff than those depending on volunteers and part-time workers in smaller settings. A larger church staff usually has regular staff meetings to coordinate the work and develop lines of accountability. The smaller church staff member may be working more independently, and therefore less under the control of the pastor.

Now for the two, more surprising variable relationships. First, clergy couples reported feeling more powerful in the denomination than did non-clergy couples. While about 1/3rd of both groups chose "neutral" as their response and no one said they felt "very powerful," about 27% of the clergy couples reported feeling "somewhat powerful" in the denomination. This was only true for 6% of non-clergy couple respondents. Similarly, only about 1/3rd (36%) of the clergy couples said they feel at all powerless while this was true for almost 2/3rds (63%) of those not in clergy couples.

As half of a clergy couple myself, I have been active in their retreats, meetings, etc. and have read the clergy couples newsletter, so I know of some the concerns. Above all, clergy couples know they are hard to appoint such that they can be near one another, and many make professional and personal sacrifices to bridge long distances. Another widely heard complaint is that they are seen as a single person, or associated with the other, and often ignored as individuals, especially by Cabinets. In fact, that was one comment on a survey. Finally, clergy couples often feel that church legislation is usually aimed at the non-clergy couple pastor, and that they have to make creative alterations to make their appointments work. For example, the official norm in United Methodism is full-time service, but for clergy couples, part-time service, sharing one appointment is often the only way to be in the same county. Pensions have to be adjusted, parsonages negotiated, etc. Another example: many clergy couples want to serve as co-pastors, yet some Cabinets insist that one be listed as the Senior Pastor for record keeping purposes (I won't get into the gender issues here). In any case, clergy couples often report feeling like second-class citizens in our highly bureaucratic church in which they are the exception, not the rule. Hence, I was surprised to hear of their feelings of power in the denomination. It may be that things are changing. I haven't followed these

issues since leaving my last appointment in 1993. It also may be that two people, serving on different Conference committees, etc. feel they have double the voice in the wider structure. I suspect it is both of these, and perhaps more that I have yet to discover.

The other big surprise was that Jurisdiction (i.e.. region of the country) is related to how clergy feel about the denomination. Although no single, clear linear relationship exists, there is at least one interesting observation. First, no one in the Southeastern Jurisdiction (the largest and purportedly most conservative region) feels at all powerful in the United Methodist Church as a denomination. Although no one in any Jurisdiction claimed to feel "very powerful," at least one in each of the other Jurisdictions reported feeling "somewhat powerful." In the Western Jurisdiction (the smallest and most liberal Jurisdiction), a full 7 people, or 23% said they felt "somewhat powerful" in the denomination. Another way to look at this would be to say that of those who feel at all powerful in the denomination, 2/3rds serve in the Western Jurisdiction (which represents only about 10% of the United Methodist Church).

One could argue that much of the power of the United Methodist Church is in the Southeast. They have the most members, the most money, the most Bishops and the most growth. On the other hand, that may work to make individual clergy feel small. The structure of the denomination gives over-representation to Westerners, especially in light of their low numbers and continued decline, but again, this might make for more opportunities to serve in leadership per capita. I suspect that this explanation is valid, yet on the surface of it, the numbers were surprising. Bigger isn't better when measuring the individual's chance to be influential.

(Preliminary Qualitative Findings)

The other findings of interest were included in the freely written comments included on many of the surveys. First of all, the lion's share of comments were in regard to the definition of power, and the "newer" understandings of shared power or empowerment. Many wanted to make sure I knew that shared power is their goal and that the older paradigm of "power over" is not what they desire. They condemned power as force, control and domination, and instead used words such as consensus and caution. They mentioned the care they take not to abuse power, some because it had been used against them. Two mentioned the changes over the years, saying that ministry used to be easier. One pastor said, "People used to care what the pastor said; now they just listen politely and do whatever they want." Another pastor said that clergy should have more power, but they have to fight for it. He thought that laity had much of the power that rightfully belongs to the clergy. Also, it was clear from a number of the comments that some assumed I saw power as a positive thing, while others thought I saw it as negative. One said, "I don't see power as a negative thing," as if I did, and another asked, "Is power equated with strength?" again as if I had implied such. Evidently the instrument was read in many different ways, and each person responded in light of his/her own perspective.

Some of the other comments highlighted the many issues related to clergy feelings of power and powerlessness:

- One pastor said he didn't feel empowered to do the job, and then when he failed, blame was all too easy.
- Another said that there is an anti-conservative bias in the denomination, so that even though his churches are

enjoying phenomenal growth, he receives no recognition due to his theology.

- Two noted problems with previous Senior Pastors while they were Associates.
- One said that he lost power after having served on Religion and Race, implying what I heard as racism. (He was a person of color.)
- Three complained about the "antiquated bureaucracy" and top-heavy hierarchy, which makes them feel powerless.
- One cited the ridiculous expectations as a source of powerlessness.
- One said that smaller churches are harder to influence, while another said that rural churches give a lot of power to their pastors.
- One woman noted how much more power she feels as the second woman to serve her church. They "got over" many of the problems with the first.
- Another noted how his feelings of power have changed in different appointments; some churches grant it and others do not.

Conclusion

It seems there is no one trend nor opinion. Some clergy feel powerful (more than I had expected) while others do not. The ability to influence is greater in some areas of ministry (especially local ones) than in others. There are more factors at work than I had anticipated. Certainly the stories of powerlessness that continue to arise in my Clergy Sexual Misconduct workshops

are not isolated exceptions, but they do not seem to be the norm either. It would be too simple to say that clergy feel powerless, or that there is a trend in that direction. Rather, we should say that clergy are faced with a complex job within a huge and changing institution, and there are times when they feel powerful, and times when they do not. There are some who feel generally more powerful than others. If I had to make one important conclusion, it would be that this study affirms the well known reaction against hierarchy in the United Methodist Church. But it does not translate into a general malaise about all of ministry. Individual clergy feel most power in their own churches (no matter what size), in the smallest Jurisdiction, in rural settings, and when they have a spouse with whom to share that power (twice the power). The local pulpit remains the center of clergy power, the place where they feel most influential and connected. In relation to the larger "connectional" system, they feel small. The days of the big bureaucracy may be over: too few can share in its power.

TABLE 1

<u>Variable</u>	<u>Mean</u>	<u>Std Dev</u>	<u>Minimum</u>	<u>Maximum</u>	<u>Valid N</u>
preach	1.7	.69	1	5	145
teach	1.74	.62	1	4	146
nominate	1.86	.87	1	5	145
staff	2.11	.81	1	4	123
com	2.14	.67	1	4	142
sprc	2.15	.77	1	5	146
trustees	2.48	.88	1	5	144
sunsch	2.52	.80	1	4	143
finance	2.56	.93	1	5	142
communit	2.59	.89	1	5	145
anconf	3.19	1.03	1	5	144
cabinet	3.21	1.07	1	5	142
umc	3.87	.98	2	5	144

SUMMARY TABLES

A. Preaching by Theological Position (p = .05):

	<u>very +</u>	<u>some +</u>	<u>neutral</u>	<u>some -</u>	<u>very -</u>
conserve	18 66.7%	8 29.6%	1 3.7%	0	0
moderate	20 27.4%	47 64.4%	3 4.1%	2 2.7%	1 1.4%
liberal	15 38.5%	23 58.9%		1 2.6%	

B. Community by Locale (p = .002):

	<u>very +</u>	<u>some +</u>	<u>neutral</u>	<u>some -</u>	<u>very -</u>
rural	6 9.5%	41 65.1%	12 19%	2 3.2%	2 3.2%
suburban		21 40.4%	20 38.5%	10 19.2%	1 1.9%
urban		13 46.5%	10 35.7%	3 10.7%	2 7.1%

C. Staff by Members (p = .005):

	<u>very +/some +</u>	<u>neutral</u>	<u>some -</u>
101 - 249	15 53.5%	9 32.2%	4 14.3%
250 - 499	51 83.6%	7 11.5%	3 4.9%
500+	27 84.4%	5 15.6%	

D. Denomination by Clergy Couple (p = .057):

	<u>some +</u>	<u>neutral</u>	<u>some -/very -</u>
clergy couple	3 27.4%	4 36.3%	4 36.3%
non	8 6.1%	41 31.3%	82 62.6%

E. Denomination by Jurisdiction (p = .04):

	<u>some +</u>
Southeastern	0
Western	7 22.6% of West 63.6% of column
North Central	2 6.5% of N Central 18.2% of column
Northeastern	1 3.4% of NE 9.1% of column
South Central	1 3.4% of S Central 9.1% of column

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