



BUILDING SAFEGUARDS AGAINST THE MISUSE OF POWER IN THE CHURCH

KEN SANDE | 2022 PCA GENERAL ASSEMBLY | WWW.RW360.ORG/PCA-POWER

A. INTRODUCTION

1. Report of the Ad Interim Committee on Domestic Abuse and Sexual Assault (CDASA)¹
2. Many ways that power can be misused: emotional, physical, sexual, spiritual
3. 40 years of conciliating “The Good, the Bad and the Clumsy” exercises of power
4. Focus of this workshop will be on the misuse of spiritual power in the church

B. POWER DYNAMICS 101

1. Power is the capacity to influence or shape something, the ability to make something happen or to stop something from happening (Diane Langberg).
2. Origins of Power
 - Power is not inherently evil: “Power belongs to the Lord” (Psalm 62:11).
 - All image bearers possess power (Gen. 1:26-28).
 - All power is derived from the Lord (see Dan. 2:21, John 19:11; Rom. 13:1-7).
 - In a fallen and chaotic world, power must often be exercised to maintain order and to do justice (Rom. 13:1-7).
3. Power differentials are normal and natural and not inherently wrong

“Power is what enables us to make things happen or not. In this sense everyone has power, but we do not all have it to the same degree. Power as influence is always relative to our resources.” - Richard Gula

 - Knowledge - Education, training, skills acquired, cognitive ability
 - Verbal - Language, mastery of words, speaking quickly
 - Emotional - capacity to express, read, and process emotions (EQ)
 - Spiritual - Scriptural knowledge, relationship with God
 - Positional - office, title, role, or position
 - Relational - trust-based relational credibility, who you know and can access, wooing and winning social capital through connection, perceived power
 - Physical - physical characteristics, strength, gender and sexual identity
 - Cultural - Age, race, gender, and ethnicity
 - Resource - money, time, material goods

¹ See www.rw360.org/pca-abuse-report

C. MISUSE OF SPIRITUAL POWER

1. "You cannot do justice without recognizing how power has been used to exploit and abuse, but you also cannot do justice without exerting power yourself." Tim Keller
2. We must also take great care to guard against efforts to label all exercises of power as abuse (e.g., Matt. 18:15-20; Rom. 13:1-7). Many exercises of power in the church are appropriate and necessary, even though some people experience it in a negative way.
3. Spiritual abuse is often difficult to define and prove because it is often a subjective experience that lacks the objective evidence of physical or sexual abuse.
4. Abuse occurs when power is misused in relationship to another image bearer of God to exploit, manipulate or control the vulnerability of another for one's own ends (Ezekiel 34:1-16, Matthew 23).
5. Scripture repeatedly condemns "oppression" of all kinds, using words that mean to "exert power over" or to afflict, harass, suppress, exhaust or crush others (see, e.g., Isa. 1:17). Such oppression is especially evil in the eyes of God when it is carried out by spiritual leaders (Jer. 23:1-2; Ezek. 34:7-10).
6. Power is seductive, self-deceiving, controlling and easily misused
 - Power often involves an intoxicating mixture of pride, self-righteousness, fear, control, fits of anger. These factors are magnified when we delude ourselves into believing that we are acting for the glory of God.
 - As illustrated all too tragically by the kings of Israel (Saul, David, Solomon, Herod, etc.), the Pharisees and countless modern politicians.
 - Jesus aptly described this dynamic as "Lording it over them" (Mark 10:42).
 - Signs and tactics of misuse: fear, anger, alliances, avoidance, technicalities, etc.
 - Marriages
 - Disciplinary cases
 - Pastors and leadership teams
 - Christian conciliators
 - Consequence: Grief, broken relationships, loneliness, and in some cases, God brings upon us the suffering we imposed on others through the misuse of power (e.g., David/Absalom), all of which dishonors God and discredits his church.
7. Defining spiritual abuse: (CDASA, p. 2436)

"Spiritual abuse is an attempt to exert power and control over someone using religion, faith, or beliefs. [It is often used to] solidify the power, prestige, and gratification of the abuser ... or to manipulate peoples' emotional responses or loyalty for the benefit of the church, institution, or of another individual."

"The means are a misuse of Scripture and of the victim's desire to please God and their leader. Victims suffer shame, confusion, and spiritual doubt, having a negative impact on the victim's perception of God's character."

8. Key Characteristics of Spiritual Abuse²

- Coercion and control
 - Use of Scripture to coerce and control
 - Use of “divine calling” to coerce
 - Manipulation, pressure and exploitation
 - Expectation of excessive commitment and conformity
 - Enforced accountability
 - Censorship: Inability to ask questions, disagree or to raise concerns
 - Requirement for obedience
 - Fear
 - Isolation and rejection
 - Public shaming and humiliation
 - Threats of spiritual consequences

D. SAFEGUARDS AGAINST THE MISUSE OF POWER

1. Building Personal Safeguards

- Beware the “magnification factor” – leaders are 10x “louder” than they realize.
- Guard against idolatry
 - Good goods can become bad gods
 - Desire → Demand → Judge → Punish (James 4:1-3)
- Remember that you are a steward of the power God entrusts to you:

“For it will be like a man going on a journey, who called his servants and entrusted to them his property.... ‘Master, you delivered to me five talents; here, I have made five talents more.’ His master said to him, ‘Well done, good and faithful servant’” (Matt. 25:14, 20-21).
- Cultivate a servant’s heart and mentality:

“And Jesus called them to him and said to them, “You know that those who are considered rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones exercise authority over them. But it shall not be so among you. But whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be slave of all. For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many” (Mk 10:42-45).
- Cultivate the character of Christ:

“Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light” (Matt. 11:29).

² *Escaping the Maze of Spiritual Abuse: Creating Healthy Christian Cultures* (Dr. Lisa Oakley and Justine Humphreys)

- Exercise power in the light and the power of the gospel:

“Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. Therefore, God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father” (Phil. 2:5-11).
- Strive to be “approachable”³
- Establish genuine accountability⁴
 - Find advisors who tell you what you don’t want to hear (see 2 Tim. 4:3; cf. Rehoboam, 1 Kings 12-15; Abraham Lincoln, *Team of Rivals*).
 - Seek and receive advice and correction humbly (Ps. 141:5; Prov. 13:10)⁵
 - Schedule a rigorous annual performance review.

9. Building Organizational Safeguards

- Implement all the personal safeguards throughout your leadership team.
- Beware of protective systems and image management⁶
 - Manipulative personal strategies
 - Protective inner circle
- Submit unresolved issues to denominational review with a humble and teachable attitude ...
- But always treat the judicial processes (BCO) like a loaded gun (both can do much good or much harm) and never neglect “justice, mercy and faithfulness” (Matt. 23:23). The Bible always trumps the BCO!
- When necessary, seek assistance from professional conciliators.⁷

10. Improve your relational skills

- *Discovering Relational Wisdom 3.0 Online Course* - www.rw-academy.org
 - Request coupon for free access at www.rw360.org/semcode
- RW Training and Certification Program - www.rw360.org/rw-training
- 2022 Sowing Peace Conference - www.rw360.org/2022ac
- For more information contact Ken Sande at ken@rw360.org, 406-294-6806

³ See www.rw360.org/approachability

⁴ See www.rw360.org/accountability

⁵ See *The Cross and Criticism*, by Alfred Poirier at www.rw360.org/cross&criticism.

⁶ *Something’s Not Right: Decoding the Hidden Tactics of Abuse* (Wade Mullen)

⁷ See www.rw360.org/christian-conciliation-service and www.rw360.org/reassess-cc