

Power Play

Peter MacKenzie, Executive Officer, UCANZ

A number of years ago I was confronted with the statement that, as a minister, I held all of the power in the church. The comment caught me off guard at the time as I was struggling to make some changes in the local church and felt anything but powerful. As I reflected on the conversation I realised that the comment arose from a person who felt powerless against a church bureaucracy which was led mostly by ministers.

As a minister we get to know how the church works, we understand both the system and the people within it. Knowledge is power. So a familiarity with the structures of the church gives a certain level of power to those who know what's going on. That is not solely ministers, but they certainly are a majority because of their occupational choice.

So ministers are educated and trained – but with that there are also lessons on ethics and an understanding of the use of power. It obviously doesn't always work, but ministers are taught that the power of knowledge is a privilege and not to be abused.

But that power is also held by people in the local church. The power of knowledge is held by the regular Sunday worship attendee who knows the traditions – in contrast to the powerlessness felt by the visitor. One of the challenges of welcoming new people is the ability to give them a sense of power in what is happening.

There is a form of power held by those who organise the music in a local church. It is a power gained through skill and knowledge, but can be abused when the repertoire is limited to what they know and new ideas are denigrated.

There is a form of power held in other committees – property, finance, even pastoral committees. It is the power of knowing information and process, and can be abused when the power is wielded without consideration of other people.

The problem of power dynamics in the church is not solely about ministers – it is an issue that all people in a local church need to consider. It is not that the power of knowledge is a bad thing – we couldn't get along without it. But the misuse of power is a source of dissatisfaction and disharmony within a local church.

The real challenge is for you (yes, you – the reader of this article) to reflect on what power you hold within your local church – what knowledge do you hold that empowers action within the local church? Then ask yourself – how do I use this power? Is that power used to control others or is it used to empower them as well? How can I share the knowledge and the power so that all can benefit?

All power to you in the work of the kingdom.