

PRESS RELEASES & STATEMENTS

CMSM/LCWR

RESOLUTIONS TO ACTION

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Power: Inside and Outside

The way we use our own power determines the credibility of our challenges to those who abuse power

by Peggy Nolan, BVM and Toni Harris, OP

Experience

Practices and policies that promote poverty, racism and violence seem to engulf us. We see our President and his advisors careening toward military action. We see people suffering from failures in our welfare system. We see new and smarter forms of racism afoot in our country. In response, we make phone calls, send faxes and e-mails, endorse statements, and engage in public protest. We engage in advocacy efforts on behalf of those who suffer oppression.

Meanwhile, what about practices and policies in our own congregations and in the institutions closest to us? Do we also engage in the subtle practice of power over another? Recall our use of coercive efforts to encourage a problem member to change. Remember yielding to the expectations of sisters who want the superior to finally decide. Think again of those times that others have been excluded by our unnecessary withholding of information. Might assuring practices of shared power and fostering relationships of mutuality in our own systems help to undermine and subvert the violence that surrounds us?

Social Analysis

In our society, examples of the abuse and centralization of power abound. Although we claim to be a constitutional democracy, the choice for war seems to be entirely in the hands of one man and his small circle of advisors. We cherish freedom of the press and yet allow control of information by the media. Tax breaks for big corporations, intended to stimulate our economy, often mean more money for CEO's and less money for workers. Every day we hear another story of a church official who made a unilateral decision without consulting the people whom the decision affects. Many people with power do not listen to the powerless.

Most of the governing structures of religious institutes are based on a hierarchy of power. The "Supreme Moderator," whether she is called major superior, mother general, prioress, president, or community life coordinator, is entrusted by canon law and local constitutions with nearly unilateral authority in some areas.

Since Vatican II, many congregations have rewritten documents and adjusted practices in

order to better incorporate the principles of mutuality and collegiality. At a spring 2002 meeting of LCWR Region 10, Kathy and Jim McGinnis (30 year veteran peacemakers) applauded efforts of women religious over the years to renew their congregational structures of governance by creating more participative processes and procedures. They identified this move from the use of dominating power to shared power as the work of peacemaking.

Reflection

“What definitely distinguishes the community that Jesus calls into existence from the power structures so universal in human society is the love of friendship expressing itself in joyful mutual service for which rank is irrelevant.”

Written That You May Believe,
Sandra Schneiders

Familiar Gospel stories emphasize Jesus' attitude about the use of power. Consider the words of Jesus after washing his disciples' feet: “What I just did was to give you an example: as I have done, so you must do.” (JN 13:15) Remember the entreaty of Jesus: “You know how those who exercise authority among the gentiles lord it over them; their great ones make their importance felt. It cannot be like that with you.” (MT 20: 25-28)

In addition, when power is not shared but is abused, we must speak out. Luke's story of the tireless widow who persisted in demanding her rights from a corrupt judge offers us an example of unrelenting effort. The words of proverbs seem to describe that same woman: “Wisdom calls aloud in the streets; she raises her voice in the public squares; she calls out at the street corners; she delivers her message at the city gates.”

Action

Acts of advocacy demand that those holding power listen to those who are powerless. However, integrity requires that we also work to transform our own congregational structures and practices, enhancing the shared power of all members and reducing our own reliance on the power of domination.

As elected leaders, we are for a time in positions of authority having a certain social status. We may enjoy the privilege of access to those with political and ecclesial power. At those moments, we have a particular responsibility to use our voices as advocates for the voiceless. Eric Law summarizes the point well. He says that if we are standing with someone and we hold the power, we have a responsibility to listen; if we are standing with someone who is in a position of power, we have a responsibility to speak. (The Wolf Shall Dwell With the Lamb) In both the powerful one who listens and the powerless one who speaks the Spirit is at work moving us through the Paschal Mystery of dying and rising.

Through our LCWR goal “to work for a just world order,” we commit ourselves personally (not simply through delegation) to continue to use our corporate voice and influence in solidarity with those who suffer violence and oppression.

Consider the following actions:

- Together with your leadership team, identify ways that you share power and the ways that

you hold on to power.

- Name the ways that power and privilege are available to you because of your position.
- Explore practical situations in your congregation where you and your team might reflect the “love of friendship expressing itself in joyful mutual service for which rank is irrelevant.”
- Identify any opportunities that you have to speak on behalf of those without power when you “are standing with someone who is in a position of power.”
- Commit yourself to make an appointment with one of your elected officials to share your convictions regarding a particular public policy issue.
- Participate in a public demonstration organized to address a social justice or peace issue.

The Leadership Conference of Women Religious (LCWR) has approximately 1,000 members who are the elected leaders of their religious orders, representing 76,000 Catholic sisters in the United States. The Conference develops leadership, promotes collaboration within church and society, and serves as a voice for systemic change.

Leadership Conference of Women Religious

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