

Understanding power, abuse and trauma: a missional approach for leaders

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There was a time I would have been shocked and in disbelief about the stories that have been coming to the surface the last few years about abuses from different evangelical leaders and churches. I would have avoided talking about it to 'non-Christians', terrified of placing the church in a bad light, in case it would push people further away from God. We have all heard about Catholic priests who have sexually abused boys, protecting the system rather than the children concerned. What these recent investigations are demonstrating is that abuse does not just happen to children, neither does it just happen in the Catholic church. It happens in *our* churches to people of *all* age groups, and we too are part of a system that protects the organisation and offenders rather than the victims. Up until now, some of these stories might still have felt too distant. However, for some, the reality of it might have hit closer to home when investigations around Mike Pilavachi and Soul Survivor were revealed; worship leader Matt Redman recently attesting to the reality of it (Shepherd, 2023).

Or maybe you are like me; someone who has first-hand experience of being abused by a church leader. However, even I, as a victim did not

realise the extent of the abuse I experienced until a few years later when I learnt about *power dynamics*, *abuse* and *trauma*. I am no longer shocked, and it no longer brings me despair to read these stories. Actually, rather ironically, it gives me hope. Hope that something better and healthier might emerge. We cannot do anything about a problem if we do not know it exists, nor dare to acknowledge it. What if this is God at work, bringing justice and standing up for the hurt and broken? What if this is God's way of 'saying': 'I see you. You are not alone. This is not okay!' This is an opportunity for the church to be born again into something healthier. That should be what just and ethical missional leadership is about: demonstrating that this is not acceptable, nor should be tolerated, but instead striving to create something better. The issue of abuse goes deeper than individual leaders. There is an underlying systemic and cultural issue that allows it to continue. So, how do we prevent abuse and misuse of power in missional leaders? How can we be leaders who are ethical and just? This was the topic of my dissertation in my recent MA Missional Leadership studies at ForMission College. This topic is vast and clearly cannot be discussed in detail here. However, one important starting place is to help educate missional leaders around the issues

of *power*, *abuse* and *trauma*, and encourage them to become increasingly self-aware of how it relates to them personally.

One important aspect to understand about power is how it can be found at both micro and macro levels. As individuals, we have power through the words we use or don't use; our physical appearance (tall and muscly vs small and skinny); emotional (do we show empathy, or do we get angry?); absence (do you turn a blind eye?); spiritual (no one can argue against God!) or specialised knowledge acquired through position or title such as a prophet, just to mention a few. Although the concept of missional



leadership has an extensive focus on servant leadership, I have found that people often overlook the fact that they still carry power because of their title. We might also forget that there is also power in the spiritual gifts and labels we give people, even though we might not be leading in an official capacity. For example, will the word of a prophet often carry more weight than the administrator when it comes to sharing what God is doing in someone's life?

In addition, power dynamics are also found at the macro level, in our church culture, theology, language, the norms of our society and in a shared world view. These are often hidden powers. One way of understanding this power is, adopting Hiebert's suggestion, asking ourselves who is benefitting, and who is being oppressed by this biblical teaching or theological perspective (Hiebert, 2008, p.226)? An example of this type of power is how some communities/churches may disown you if you do not follow their interpretation of what the Bible says. In such circumstances there is little 'real' choice if you are relying on the people in that community for your survival (e.g., your family and social network is part of it).

Where there is power, there is also the potential for abuse. It may start when a person crosses an individual's boundaries, for their own gain (Collins, 2019, LOC2205; Diederich, 2017, p.53). However, this may be difficult to discern in a context where the focus is on building God's Kingdom. Dr Diane Langberg, an expert in the field of church abuse and trauma, argues that abuse happens when, firstly, we silence people's words, choices, feelings and thoughts; secondly, when relationships bring fear, shame, isolation, humiliation, betrayal and disconnection; and, thirdly, when we leave people feeling hopeless, powerless, useless and ineffective (Langberg, 2020, pp.7-8). This can be summed up as losing one's agency, autonomy, connection and/or control. What may not be appreciated is that long-term exposure to the above, can

cause trauma in the same way as one-off events, such as suffering a car accident. This form of abuse is known as *complex* post traumatic stress disorder.

It may not be widely understood that trauma is not about what happened in the event itself, but what happens *inside the body* (both at the time and afterwards). When our body senses a threat, such as fearing a disconnection in a relationship, it can go into *survival mode*, also known as being outside our *Window of Tolerance* (Siegel in Kolber, 2020, p.72). When our body is in survival mode the nervous system becomes dysregulated and goes into fight, flight, freeze or fawn responses where the logical part of our brain shuts off. In practice, this can be manifested in anger, becoming controlling, overly people-pleasing, becoming emotionally overwhelmed and paralysed from taking appropriate action, to mention just a few. How our bodies react in survival mode is outside of our control and it is akin to passive responses such as being unable to say 'no' (Scaer quoted in Collins, 2019, p.173). That is why it can be so hard to recognise when abuse is happening, both for the victim and also for any leader who might abuse, even unintentionally. Putting it another way, when our body is in survival mode it might be *impossible* to scream, run, fight, walk away or *even say no*, and instead we do what we are told. The body is reacting on autopilot, doing what it believes is the safest option at the time, based on what has worked best in the past. For many who have lived long-term in *survival mode*, especially in childhood, a person of authority or power can easily trigger a *survival mode* response, because the body *remembers* how it has been treated previously by authority figure. The problem of trauma is that the body is unable to recognise that the threat from the past is over and therefore re-lives it as if it is happening in the present.

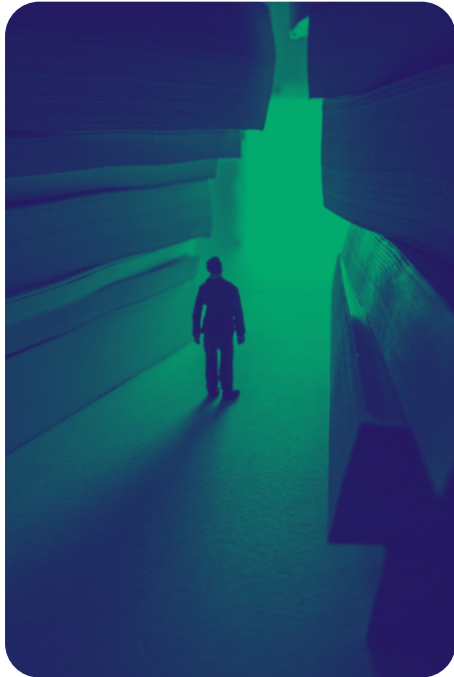
There are two aspects for a leader to be aware of when it comes to understanding survival mode. The first is, as previously discussed, how we can unintentionally abuse people

simply by virtue of the power we carry, if we do not make it *feel safe* to say no. Secondly, if as leaders we operate outside our *Window of Tolerance*, we might unintentionally become abusive because the body might resort to unhealthy leadership styles, such as demanding perfectionism, bullying, or trying to control people and outcomes. This is why it is so important to gain awareness of how we react *when our body feels threatened*. Unfortunately, receiving a no to a request or experiencing disagreement can be perceived as a threat to our nervous system, as it can feel like a threat to the connection of the relationship.

To create healthy, just and ethical leaders we need to address this issue from a variety of angles. We need leaders who understand power and recognise the ways they carry it, both through their character, status, and appearance as an individual, but also through the culture and theology they have adopted, and then promote through their words and actions. Leaders need to understand what abuse is, the tactics that abusers use and the harm they might be causing, even when done with good intentions. We also need to let go of some of the naivety of how we might think we know what an abuser looks like, or that they do not exist among us, because they do. As Scripture warns us, there are wolves in sheepskin.

It is crucial that missional leaders become trauma-informed, both to develop understanding of how we, even with the best of intentions, might actually harm others, rather than bring healing. Being trauma-informed will help us to create communities where it feels safe to set boundaries and raise concerns. It is also important to be trauma-informed from a personal perspective. Leaders need to learn to recognise when they are acting outside of their *Window of Tolerance* and may be resorting to unhealthy coping mechanisms. An important question to ask oneself is, how do I react when I receive a no to a request? Do I keep on pleading until someone says yes? Do I take it as personal rejection and become angry? Or maybe I become manipulative by saying things such as, 'If you don't help out, we cannot run this group, which means people will not experience Jesus.'

Unfortunately, these responses are all too common. At that point, there is danger of creating a slippery slope resulting in serious harm. Or we allow the creation of a culture that allows abusers free play. Leaders need to learn the tools to help them get back into their *Window of Tolerance*. Unfortunately, for many, myself included, our faith can become a way to justify, bypass or ignore the signals our body is making about our needs, through our emotions and sensations. Learning about power, abuse and trauma needs to become an important part of missional leadership training as we practise loving our neighbour as ourselves and as we share the good news of Jesus.



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