Professionalization power and dependence

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IN RECENT YEARS, AN INCREASING NUMBER of victims of sexual abuse by professionals have come forth to tell their stories. Out of concern to protect vulnerable persons, out of desire to hold professionals accountable, and out of fear of legal liability, business corporations, government, schools and churches have tried to clarify their professional ethics. A common concern of professional ethics is the relationship of power and dependence in the professional relationship. Spiritual directors can benefit a great deal in the professionalization of their ministry by attending to the wisdom distilled from the discussion of the right use of power in a professional relationship. In spiritual direction, the right use of power is fundamentally about the director using power to safeguard trust in the spiritual direction relationship and to protect the vulnerability of the directee. While a code of ethics may define the minimal limits of the right use of power, what is needed more is a director who is predisposed to care in ways that are trustworthy, prudent and just.

To explore the relationship of power and dependence, and to show the importance of the moral character of the spiritual director, I will begin with a hypothetical case which will serve as a reference point for the theoretical analysis that follows. In light of this case, I will first examine the nature of power and dual relationships in ministry. Then I will offer some criteria for evaluating the right use of power in spiritual direction.

Case study

John is now in his second month as the associate director of a spiritual life centre run by his religious community. His first assignment after ordination was for five years as an associate pastor in a nearby suburban parish.

He is considered a good associate pastor. Parishioners are fond of him. He is as a minister should be: caring, sensitive, kind. He works hard and for long hours, often late into the night. While at the parish, he establishes a reputation as a

good spiritual director, even though he has never received any formal training in this ministry. He is sought out as a director not only by his own parishioners, but also by those from the neighbouring parish. Because his ministry as a spiritual director has grown so large, he applies for and gets a position on the staff of the spiritual life centre. As a member of the staff, he will be subject to ongoing supervision for his direction and will be paid for each session of spiritual direction according to a sliding scale that is adjusted to the ability of the directee to pay.

Before he left the parish, Jane, a recently divorced woman, began to see him for spiritual direction. It means a lot to her that John gives her time for spiritual direction. She is further reassured when he shares with her that he knows the pain of divorce from his experience of his mother. This is not the first time a divorced woman has sought John for counsel. His full schedule buffers him from any feelings he might have towards the women who come to see him. He is unaware of being sexually attracted to any of his parishioners or directees. Because he is so well liked, seems to be so effective, and interacts with his parishioners in so many different contexts, he is unsure where his limits should be with parishioners who are also directees.

When John assumes his position at the spiritual life centre, Jane continues to see him for direction. She knows that John likes art films, so she invites him to take in a movie that portrays some of the issues they are pursuing in spiritual direction. She suggests that they see the movie and then, as part of spiritual direction, discuss it at the coffee shop across the street from the theatre. She makes this her treat, as it is an opportunity to thank John for the time he is giving her. John has been so busy with his transition to a new ministerial setting that he has not yet established any bonds with other members of his staff. Jane is the only person who represents continuity and stability for him at this time. John enjoys his sessions with Jane and has a good, relaxed rapport with her. Before and after their meetings, the two share a hug and a light kiss. Taking in the movie together and going to the coffee shop seem like an extended part of their spiritual direction relationship.

> Meeting for a movie, coffee, and 'direction' at the coffee shop goes on once a month for three months. Then these meetings taper off as John becomes settled into his new position and with his new community at the spiritual life centre. Jane notices that John is less available for her for these 'social' meetings. She becomes confused. This is the first time she has really felt safe with a man and felt a real mutuality in their relationship. She wonders what is going wrong. John tells her that meeting as they have been doing has interfered with their spiritual direction relationship. He gives her the name of another director she might want to see and says that he is sorry that the relationship has gotten so confusing.

If you were Jane, how would you feel? These are two adults. Who is responsible for the boundaries, and why? If you were John, how would you explain what happened?

One of the most significant professional challenges ministers in every ministry have to face is to use their power in ways that safeguard the trust in the pastoral relationship and that protect the dependence of the one seeking a pastoral service. In spiritual direction, this challenge is to maintain a relationship with boundaries that are neither too fuzzy nor too rigid in order to shape a relationship that will enable the directee to get appropriate direction while protecting his or her dependence from exploitation. The challenge comes from at least two fronts, the inevitable inequality of power and dependence in the spiritual direction relationship, and the dual relationships that some directors often maintain. To each of these I want to turn now.

Power

In her novel, *The robber bride*, Margaret Atwood describes the experience of Tony, a college professor:

> She unlocks her office door, then locks it behind her to disguise the fact that she's in there. It's not her office hours but the students take advantage. They can smell her out, like sniffer dogs; they'll seize any opportunity to suck up to her or whine, or attempt to impress her, or foist on her their versions of sulky defiance. *I'm just a human being*, Tony wants to say to them. But of course, she isn't. She's a human being with power. There isn't much of it, but it's power all the same.[1]

Whether as a college professor or a spiritual director, we bear the blessing and the burden of power in relation to those whom we serve. If we resonate with Tony's feeling that 'there isn't much of it', we can easily fail to recognize that 'it's power all the same'. Whether we feel powerful or not is irrelevant. The fact is, in spiritual direction, the director has the greater power and must use it in the right way.

The nature of power

Power is ambiguous. It is often a despised or feared reality arousing more suspicion and defensiveness than acceptance. It is hard for some directors to acknowledge that they have any power because the very notion evokes so many negative images: corruption, power-tripping, one-upmanship, coercion and exploitation, to name a few. This dark side of power is associated with a controlling and dominating style of ministry, wielding the heavy hand of intimidation and oppression. It reduces people *for* whom and *with* whom we are to work to people *on* whom and *over* whom we have control. This kind of negative power opposes who we want to be as people for and with others.

But power has another side. It can also be liberating by releasing the goodness in another and allowing it to flourish. Love and power are not necessarily opposites. This bright, positive side of power is the expression of power more compatible with our professional commitment. It deserves a hearing.

Social scientists commonly define power as the capacity to influence others. Power and dependence are relative to resources such as role, gender, personality, competence, social status, financial security, emotional stability, age, physical size and so on. Power describes having resources the other person needs. Dependence describes a lack of these resources. Power and dependence are always a matter of more or less, because they are relative to the resources we have in a particular context. We feel our power or dependence in the interplay of the differing needs and strengths in the relationship. In the hypothetical case, John has the power of his role, competence, gender, personality and security as well as power from the projections and transference Jane makes towards him. He also has 'numinous' power that comes from being a representative and mediator of things holy. Jane is vulnerable in her gender, social status and emotional turmoil after the divorce.

Inequality of power and the fiduciary obligation

Because of the inequality of power between them, justice demands that the greater burden of moral responsibility falls on John to establish boundaries that will give Jane confidence that her dependence will not be exploited to satisfy his own needs. Jane's action of entrusting herself to John and his accepting her entrustment by taking on the responsibilities of being her spiritual director commit him to a special moral responsibility known as a fiduciary obligation, a defining characteristic of a professional. It means that John has the duty to exercise his power and authority in ways that will serve Jane's need for seeking spiritual direction, that he will not exploit her dependence, and that he will give greater preference to her best interest over his own, when there is a real or possible conflict of interest between them. The obligation also entails the duty to avoid creating conflicts of interest, and even the appearance of a conflict, lest trust be jeopardized. John will be able to fulfil his fiduciary obligation if he is both cognitively committed to being a fiduciary agent and emotionally committed to caring for Jane as a directee. The cognitive commitment and emotional altruism foster other habits of feeling and acting in her best interest. Habits of being caring, altruistic, trustworthy, just and prudent are core virtues of a spiritual director. John will show that he is virtuous in these ways by establishing and maintaining boundaries that manage the inequality of power in the spiritual direction relationship.

Clear boundaries create a safe space for Jane to focus on her own experiences of God rather than on John's needs and conflicts. Even though she may try to manipulate the situation and is responsible for that behaviour, nonetheless John is obligated to maintain appropriate boundaries because, in spiritual direction, the director has the greater power. In his early relationship to Jane, he does not seem to be aware of his feelings and of how much Jane is influenced simply by his being a symbolic representative of God, the Church, and a religious or spiritual tradition. Moreover, he is very busy, perhaps overly committed, and seems unaware of the transference and countertransference going on in his relationship with women generally, and with Jane in particular.

Marilyn Peterson's provocative book, *At personal risk*, makes the point that when, for whatever reasons, professionals lose sight of the power gap between them and those seeking their professional service, they pave the way for exploiting their clients. She documents quite convincingly that professionals are most at risk of unethical

behaviour when they minimize the significance of the relationship and refuse to accept the authority that comes with their role, ignore the magnitude of their power or are unaware of their own needs.[2] Her work shows that the person in the best position to help others is the very person in a powerful position to hurt them. Once hurt, people only with reluctance trust again. This is evident in the testimony of one victim of sexual abuse by her pastor who was asked, 'What do you struggle with today?' She said, 'Well, it's very hard to regain the sense of trust, not only trust in pastors, but also trust in people and trust in the goodness of the universe'.[3] In the hypothetical case, John must first acknowledge and own the power that he has. In order to create a safe space for Jane, he must then be sufficiently self-disciplined so as to restrain himself from using the spiritual direction relationship to satisfy his need for companionship, acceptance, pleasure or profit.

The lure of the friendship model

One of the great temptations to minimize or ignore the inequality of power in the pastoral relationship is to treat it as if it were a friendship. This is what happened to John when he began to socialize with Jane. Trying to make spiritual direction a personal, peer relationship only falsifies its real nature, confuses roles, and puts the director at greater risk of unethical behaviour.

In her analysis of different styles of pastoral leadership, Martha Ellen Stortz shows that several of the facets of friendship conflict with what ministry demands. She shows, for example, that pastoral relationships do not enjoy the equality of friends or the mutual self-disclosure that creates the emotional bond of intimacy in a friendship.[4] I find Stortz's analysis to be very helpful for clarifying the difficulties of using the paradigm of friendship for pastoral relationships in general and spiritual direction in particular. The demands of self-disclosure and trust made upon the directee conflict with the mutual demands of the personal relationship of a friendship.

Dual relationships

The above discussion about mixing pastoral relationships and friendships falls squarely within the domain of dual relationships in ministry.[5] When we interact with another person in more than one capacity, we form a dual relationship. This happens, for example, when, as teachers, we become the spiritual director of one of our students; or, as pastors, we become long-term counsellors/directors

to someone on our staff; or, as spiritual directors, we develop a friendship with one of our directees.

The strict prohibition of dual relationships is a well-established principle in the helping professions. The wisdom enshrined in this restriction warns helping professionals about the great potential for harm in mixing roles with the same person. Dual relationships can be inappropriate and even wrong because they are fertile ground for impairing judgement, harbouring potential conflicts of interest, and exploiting the trust and dependency of the vulnerable.

But spiritual directors are not exactly parallel to other helping professionals, even though they share many of the same skills and objectives as helping professionals. Spiritual directors in some settings, such as seminaries and schools of theology, interact with their directees in many different aspects of life, not just in the specifically religious sector. Those for whom spiritual direction is a specialized ministry, and who work out of a spiritual life centre, as in John's case for example, can avoid mixing roles with their directees more easily than spiritual directors can who are also teachers of their directees in seminaries and schools of theology. As a general rule, spiritual directors ought to avoid mixing roles with their directees as much as possible. But in some settings, they will know only an inevitable overlapping of roles. For example, sometimes, out of necessity, a spiritual director is the teacher and director for the same student, or a pastor will be a director for an employee of the parish. In small towns, spiritual directors have few options for professional services. In such contexts, certain kinds of dual relationships are inevitable. While it is a good rule to avoid dual relationships as far as possible, spiritual directors cannot always do so, and they are not necessarily wrong in having them in those instances where they can fairly easily avoid conflicts of duties or loyalties.

Dual relationships become problems when roles get confused, transference and countertransference prevail, and professional boundaries are crossed. But they do not have to become problems if the director is

- being honest with him- or herself;
- paying attention to his or her own needs;
- satisfying his or her personal needs beyond the limits of the spiritual direction relationship;
- keeping the role of spiritual director as the primary one in the relationship;

- monitoring the development of this relationship, e.g. through therapy, supervision and/or spiritual direction.

By following such guidelines, some directors have not let inevitable dual relationships become a hindrance to effective ministry. So, to insist only on rigid boundaries in all instances would be as crippling of ministry as would be allowing flexible boundaries to prevail. But because the inevitable inequality of power in spiritual direction demands clear boundaries, the greater burden of responsibility falls on the director to keep the boundaries clear. Although all dual relationships are not automatically wrong, they do need to be carefully evaluated, and the director has the professional duty to make this evaluation.

Dual relationships can become a problem when we are not satisfying our needs appropriately and so take advantage of another's trust. This seems to be the case with John. He is more vulnerable than usual because of the stress of making a transition to a new ministry and a new community. Times of transition are ripe for boundary violations. He was not meeting his needs for acceptance and companionship adequately outside his ministry. Often the people we meet in our ministry are the most accessible and attractive ones to whom we turn in seeking to satisfy personal and social needs. We can easily end up using them more than ministering to them. That is what John seems to have done.

Marilyn Peterson's observation about professionals violating boundaries is instructive here:

> Most of the time, professionals find that their misuse of the client did not grow out of some malicious intent or unresolved psychological issue. Rather, the violation happened because they were unaware of their needs and the client was convenient. Using him or her made their life easier. Within this reality, professionals begin to grasp how they used their greater power in the relationship to cross the boundary and take what they needed from the client.[6]

Peterson goes on to say that to understand why we cross boundaries we have to examine the rationalizations we use to disregard limits. Perhaps we believe that our behaviour is not really interfering with the goals of the relationship, or, since we are both adults, each can take care of him- or herself, or that we are doing what other directors do.

Rationalizations like these or any others only avoid facing the responsibility we have to find acceptable options for meeting personal needs. Peterson argues that what really leads to crossing boundaries is that we have 'either minimized the relationship or equalized the power differential'.[7] Making use of ongoing supervision is one way to monitor and to check our rationalizations and the dynamics of transference and countertransference going on in the dual relationship. John, of the hypothetical case, is contributing to transference and counter transference by socializing with Jane and meeting in a non-professional setting. He does not seem to be making the best use of his opportunity for supervision of this relationship in order to notice the relational shift going on and the importance of confronting it as gently as possible. The reality of dual relationships in spiritual direction is one of those instances of an ambiguous situation that calls, in the end, not for extensive rules in a code of ethics, but for keen moral sensitivity, prudential discernment, and a virtuous character that can strike the balance between serving self-interest and the interest of the other.

Assessing the uses of power

If the nature of spiritual direction is marked by a difference of power between us and those seeking direction, then the pressing ethical question is 'How do we use our power?' Our moral criterion for the right use of power must be one that protects and promotes the dignity of the person made in the image of God. Karen Lebacqz holds up the criterion of justice through liberation as the proper measuring rod for relationships in which power and dependence are unequal.[8] To assess our use of power, we can ask, 'Is liberation happening here?' Power is used rightly when it enables the other to become increasingly free. The perspective which determines power as enabling or disabling, empowering or oppressing, belongs not to us who hold greater power, but to the one who is vulnerable, as long as he or she is being reasonable about this judgement.

Our power as directors, then, is used rightly when we enhance the directee's freedom. We fulfil our professional commitment to serve the interests of others not by doing for them or giving to them in ways that keep them passive and dependent on us. Rather, we serve by enabling and empowering them to recognize their potential, and then we encourage and guide them to develop it. This is using power as service and not as lording it over others.

The ministry of Jesus is a model of the right use of power. He rejected the use of power that dominates or promotes oneself over others in favour of power that serves others by empowering them. Several scenes in the Gospels give us examples of Jesus insisting that those who share his values must re-imagine power and its use in human relationships. Perhaps no episode in the gospels illustrates better the character of a minister and the style of what ministry ought to be like than the foot-washing scene at the last supper. This story from John 13:6–10, which captures the dynamics of the fuller character and style of Jesus, is used as the gospel reading in Holy Thursday in conjunction with the Pauline text of the institution of the eucharist (1 Cor 11:23–26). When taken in that context, coupled with our understanding that it takes the place of the institution narrative of the eucharist in the Gospel of John, the action of Jesus in washing feet highlights even more what the character and style of a minister in a eucharistic community ought to be like. In this scene, when Peter sees Jesus, the master, acting like a servant, he knows something is wrong. This is not the picture Peter has of how power works. So Peter resists being washed. He realizes that if he complies with this washing, he would be accepting a radical reversal of the use of power for domination. When Jesus deliberately reverses social positions by becoming the servant, he witnesses to a new order of relationships in the community and to a new use of power where domination has no place in its ministers.[9]

Jesus further demonstrates that power is for service, particularly the service that liberates, in his healing the crippled woman in Luke 13:10–17. There Jesus calls to a woman who has been bent over by an evil spirit for eighteen years. First, Jesus addresses her as a 'daughter of Abraham' to show that she is equal in dignity to the 'sons of Abraham'. Then he places his hands on her and she stands up straight. She who was once weak is now strong. Friends of Jesus rejoice over her liberation, but the religious officials who rule over the community are angered by this deed. The power which liberates by making the weak strong is too challenging to them. The power of control wants to keep some weak while others remain strong. But the power which Jesus expresses challenges behaviour which seeks to dominate.

In spiritual direction, the difference of power and dependence is inevitable. The right use of power is the key moral issue. We inevitably have power over those seeking direction because we have something they need. Our fiduciary responsibility protects their vul-

nerability and dependence, for it obliges us to maintain clear boundaries and to subordinate self-interests to serving their best interest. The ministry of Jesus models for us a power that need not be oppressive but liberating. He demonstrated justice through liberation in the way he set people free. As disciples, we are called to go and do likewise.

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NOTES

1 Margaret Atwood, *The robber bride* (New York: Bantam Books, 1993), p 24.
2 Marilyn R. Peterson, *At personal risk: boundary violations in professional–client relationships* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1992).
3 Taken from the video tape *Choosing the light: victims of clergy sexual misconduct share their stories* (Milwaukee: The Greater Milwaukee Synod of the ELCA, 22 May 1990).
4 Martha Ellen Stortz, *Pastorpower* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1993), pp 117–119.
5 For a psychological perspective on boundaries and dual relationships in ministry see Donna J. Markham and Fran A. Repka, 'Personal development and boundaries shape ministry', *Human Development* 18 (Spring 1997), pp 33–45.
6 Peterson, *At personal risk*, p 154.
7 *Ibid.*, p 15.
8 Karen Lebacqz, *Professional ethics: power and paradox* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1985), pp 128–129.
9 For an elaboration of this interpretation of the foot-washing scene see Sandra Schneiders, 'The foot washing (John 13:1–20): an experiment in hermeneutics', *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 43 (January 1981), pp 76–92; see esp. pp 80–88.