

# Spiritual Abuse

Chaplain Larry Hirst\*

Power is a strange thing. Without it nothing would be accomplished. As hospital chaplains, we deal almost every day with the loss of power: loss of power in a limb due to a stroke; or loss of power to make one's own decisions due to mental decline, dementia or Alzheimer's; or, the loss of power to effect any change in the impending death of a family member. There is a corollary between health and power and sickness, disease and the loss of power.

Power is also at work in hospital settings through the power of the system. Hospitals must exercise power in caring for the physical and psychological needs of its patients through its agents who determine when and how health care is delivered to those in need. The power or lack thereof is determined by the policies established, budgetary limitations, and finite human resources that are available.

On April 3, 1887, John Dalberg wrote in a letter to Bishop Mandell Creighton: "Power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely. Great men are almost always bad men." This quote has been cited often, for there is the ring of truth to it. Most of us have experienced this abuse of power by someone who has power over us. It may have been a parent, a teacher or employer; it may have been a spouse or a spiritual leader. Of course, it would be rare that we ourselves haven't abused our power, however limited our power might be. It seems our nature to use power to harm instead of to heal.

This is also true when it comes to spiritual power. There is a special power that those in spiritual leadership within their religious tradition, or in positions like mine as a chaplain, possess. Some people I visit are separated from the spiritual foundations upon which they grew. Curious about why this separation has taken place, conversations sometimes reveal a soul wound that is in need of some attention. I have heard stories of spiritual leaders who used their power to destroy, who used their powers to condemn, who used their powers to judge, and in so doing inflicted wounds that have not healed over many years.

When the abuse of spiritual power occurs, it is not necessarily intentional and malicious. This potential exists when those in leadership forget that they hold their office for the purpose of serving God and God's people. One of the things we must do to guard ourselves against abuse is to be aware of it and to identify it. The following characteristics are common in a spiritually abusive leader:

1. **Power positioning** –The spiritual leader constantly reminds those who are under his care that he/she is the authority.
2. **Unquestioned authority** –The spiritual leader labels anyone who questions his/her teaching or authority as rebellious.
3. **Secrecy** –Church leaders broker information and maintain levels of secrecy for the purpose of maintaining control.
4. **An elitist attitude** –A spiritual leader insists that only those who agree with him/her on everything are true and refuses to acknowledge anyone else as being able to truly know God.

5. **An emphasis on performance** –A spiritual leader measures spiritual vitality by self established standards of performance and codes of behavior are imposed over all areas of life.

6. **Motivation by fear** –Spiritual leaders use fear of falling into the hands of the devil or fear of falling under the wrath of God to maintain control of their followers.

7. **Painful exit** –A person cannot leave the group on good terms. Any decision to leave results in excommunication or some other public humiliation and ridicule and censure.

People's spiritual lives have crumbled as this abuse leaves them alienated from God and leads them to believe that God is on the side of the abuser. Spiritual abuse can happen in any congregation, for power as a bent towards corruption.

Many "unchurched" share stories of experiencing spiritual abuse. They don't call it that, but there are many victims and the tragedy is that the damage often leaves them forever outside a caring congregation. When people have a belief system but live outside a community of faith, it may be that they find a faith community so terrifying that they can not bring themselves to come back.

I pray that God will give us wisdom as we minister to these wounded souls. I also pray that we will be ever diligent not to abuse the spiritual power that is invested in our position as chaplains.

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