

Questioning ‘the man of God’: Selina’s story.

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Abstract. This paper utilises a poststructuralist understanding of power and knowledge to enquire into the construction of problematic practices of religious authority within Christian communities. Focusing on one person’s narrative, and one theology of church leadership, it shows how the use of narrative enquiry and discourse analysis can help explain how it is that people in Christian communities—both leaders and those who are led—are recruited into subject positions and power relations which sabotage their best hopes and intentions for life together. This form of analysis usefully complements other approaches to problematic uses of religious authority, such as the application of psychological models, and opens space for revisiting the taken-for-granted status of ideas which are failing to foster life, freedom and justice.

This paper reflects a longstanding personal concern about practices of authority within Christian communities which subvert, rather than support, life, freedom and justice. With Brock and Parker (2001, p. 9), I hold that our “religious heritage gives us the imperative to confront it when it fails to foster life or advocate for justice.” Stories heard in the course of my work as a theological educator and spiritual director have caused me to question how it is that religious authority comes to be constructed and exercised in ways that diminish people’s lives, despite biblical mandates to exercise power on behalf of *shalom*. This question is taken up in my recently completed PhD thesis (Crawley, 2014), which analysed personal narratives of resistance to religious authority using a poststructuralist theorisation of power and knowledge. This paper is intended to demonstrate the advantages of this approach by applying it to one person’s account of the effects of a ‘man of God’ type of theology in her community.

Existing approaches to problematic practices of religious authority

It is evident in the New Testament that Christian communities grappled with problematic expressions of leadership from their earliest beginnings. The Gospel authors preserved a significant

body of tradition relating to what Jesus modelled and taught concerning the humble attitude required of his followers (e.g. Matthew 20:28; 23:1-12; Mark 10:42-45; Luke 9:46-48; 14:7-14; 18:9-14; 22:24-27; John 13:3-17). Elsewhere in the New Testament, leaders are exhorted to exercise authority with compassion and humility, avoiding ambition, pride or greed (e.g. 1 Timothy 3:1-13; 1 Peter 5:1-5). In succeeding centuries, the issue of how authority was exercised within particular Christian communities, and its effects on its members, has largely remained a spiritual matter for the Church to deal with behind its own closed doors (Schoener, 1995).

From the time of the Protestant Reformation, purity of adherence to particular formulations of biblical truth became the primary litmus test for the proper practice of religious authority, rather than resonance with the tradition of Jesus as the exemplar of humble, compassionate leadership. This has changed with the emergence of the spiritual abuse literature of the last three decades, in which the harmful effects of some understandings and practices of religious authority have been brought to light (Blue, 1993; Damiani, 2002; Dasa, 1999; Dupont, 2004; Enroth, 1992; Johnson & VanVonderen, 1991). While the focus in this literature is not so much on doctrinal purity, it retains an emphasis on biblical truth in its search for normative paradigms of Christian leadership.

As pastoral training has drawn increasingly on professional, psychological and therapeutic models, it is not surprising that these have also gained prominence in efforts to understand and address problematic expressions of religious authority over the last 30 years. In the same period, the issue of sexual abuse by trusted religious leaders has captured public concern and forced churches to look more closely at the issue of power relations more generally. So religious denominations and organisations have been developing professional associations, codes of ethical practice, psychological screening, improved training, procedures for claims of sexual harassment or abuse, and investing in indemnity insurance (Clark, 1993; Fortune & Poling, 1994; Gross-Schaefer, Feldman, & Perkowitz, 2011; Pauling, 1999). A number of psychological models have been invoked to make sense of, and address, situations where the use of religious authority has been problematic. Some of these approaches focus primarily on the psychology of the individual self.

They draw attention, for example, to Freudian notions of transference and counter-transference (Celenza, 2004; Kennedy, 2003; Muse, 1992), the role of sexual addiction or “predilection” (Birchard, 2004; Plante, 2006), variations on themes of “neediness” and “deficit” (Birchard, 2000; Cooper-White, 1991), role identity theory (Pooler, 2011), and various forms of psychological profiling of those responsible for abuse (Blanchette & Coleman, 2002; Francis & Baldo, 1998; Francis & Turner, 1995; Plante & Aldridge, 2005). Other psychological approaches treat Christian communities as social systems, often looking to family systems theory for their paradigm (Benyei, 1998; Bowen, 1978; Davis, 2008; Friedman, 1985; Friedman, Treadwell, & W., 2007; Giesbrecht & Sevcik, 2000; Howe, 1998; Lebacqz & Driskill, 2000, p. 133; Richardson, 1996, 2004).

The spiritual abuse literature and the increased emphasis on professionalism in ministry have helped to move the problems out from behind closed doors and to strengthen structures of accountability for Christian leaders. Together with the use of psychological models, these approaches have also offered those who have been oppressed or abused ways to evaluate their own experiences and to take appropriate action. However, approaches which trace the problem to some kind of deficiency in particular leaders—whether moral, spiritual, theological, professional, or psychological—can tend to pathologise the individuals concerned. More importantly, from the point of view of this paper, they divert attention from taken-for-granted ideas embedded in church and wider societal culture that produce unhelpful practices of religious authority.

Feminist analyses of fundamental inequalities between men and women in Christian churches have looked beyond spiritual and psychological deficiencies to consider wider historical and cultural factors. Since the pioneering work of Scanzoni and Hardesty (1974), feminist scholarship in biblical and theological studies has flourished, offering sophisticated critiques of patriarchal traditions and structures of oppression endemic to religious contexts (Brock & Parker, 2001; Brown & Bohn, 1989; Schüssler Fiorenza, 1983, 2001, 2007; Schüssler Fiorenza, Collins, & Lefébre, 1985; Tribble, 1984). Feminist analyses of patriarchal practices in Christian contexts have also raised questions about the patriarchal ideas and images which pervade religious contexts (Brock & Parker,

2001; Brown & Bohn, 1989; Furlong, 1991; Stockton, 1992). Fortune and Poling (1994) call for a commitment on the part of the church not merely to the policies and procedures of professionalism, but to challenging “the patriarchal core of our collective religious life” (p. 26).

Adopting a discursive approach

Building on feminist analyses of the role of social context and its norms, my research takes up the poststructuralist theory of Michel Foucault (1972, 1980; 1980; 1988) as a framework for studying taken-for-granted ideas (discourses) within church contexts, and analysing their role in producing and maintaining authoritative practices of religious authority.

Foucault, discourse and power

Poststructuralism locates the “psychological centre of gravity” in the social realm, rather than in the inner self of humanistic understanding (Burr, 2003, pp. 53-54). Instead of viewing language as an expression of individual, conscious intention, poststructuralists argue that people’s sense of self and meaning-making are shaped *by* language, which is itself a product of the social context. Foucault uses the term *discourse* to describe the way language is structured to constitute our knowledge of the world. As Burr (2003) explains, a discourse in the poststructuralist sense means a “a set of meanings, metaphors, representations, images, stories, statements and so on that in some way together produce a particular version of events” (p. 64). For example, if the language, metaphors, images and storylines within a certain context consistently depict leadership as male, then it may seem ‘right’ or ‘natural’ to people within that discursive context that men lead and women serve. Some poststructuralists refer to people being *positioned* within discourse, to convey the idea that discourses recruit people into certain subject positions from which they view the world. People often belong to more than one social context, with the result that they are positioned within competing discourses, and therefore experience tensions and contradictions in the ways they make meaning of their lives in the world. It is when such contradictions are experienced and reflected on that the dominant discourses of a person’s cultural context become visible, and their taken-for-granted truth status may be questioned.

For the purposes of my research, Foucault's (1980) theorisation of the interrelatedness of discourse and power is particularly important. His interest is not in the linguistic aspects of social discourse, but rather in questions such as, "how is it that one particular statement appeared rather than another?" (1972, p. 27). The primacy of one set of meanings (discourse) over another is seen by Foucault as the historical outcome of a struggle for power. At the same time, the dominance of particular discourses in a social context serves the interests of some groups more than others, placing them in a more powerful position. Foucault therefore views power not as a commodity, which belongs inherently to the powerful, but as a function of discursive context. Power is a fluid, shifting force that operates within social systems according to the discourses which prevail within them. As a consequence, power relations are maintained as much by those subject to authority as by those in authority, since all are positioned within the same discourse.

Discursive narrative analysis

My PhD research was based on semi-structured interviews with nine people about their efforts to resist practices of religious authority which had affected their lives in adverse ways. Transcriptions of these interview conversations provided the narrative data which then became the focus of discourse analysis. With Murray (2003), I view narrative as the means by which we give structure and meaning to our lives: "we tell stories about our lives to ourselves and others" and thus "create a narrative identity" (as cited in Sparkes, 2005, p. 192). The coherence of the narratives we construct is, Sparkes (2005) argues, "both artfully crafted in the telling and drawn from the available meanings, structures and linkages that comprise stories" (p. 203). From a poststructuralist point of view, therefore, narration is shaped by the dominant discourses of our contexts. Careful analysis of narratives can help to shed light on the discursive regimes which produced them and the events they narrate. This, then, was the focus of my analysis, as I prospected for past and present layers of discursive influence within the participants' narratives. In what follows I focus primarily on one person's narrative and one category of discourse that emerged from my analysis of this account, and of others in which the same discourse was evident.

Selina's story and the man of God discourse

Four of the participants in my research talked about experiences in churches which might broadly be described as Pentecostal. Their stories had a number of common features, including their encounters with hierarchical practices of religious authority. In each case, this structuring of authority was underpinned by the belief that this authority was given to the pastor by God, along with the spiritual gifts, wisdom and direction necessary to lead the church. The narratives of two other participants—one who had been in the Exclusive Brethren, the other in a Christian cult—reflected similar discourses of authority, although in more extreme forms. In their communities, the senior leader had been referred to as “The Man of God.” One of the four participants who had belonged to Pentecostal churches, Selina,¹ recalled similar terminology being applied in her community. On taking up his leadership role, the new senior pastor had explained that he was “God’s man” for the church. It is the discursive aspects of Selina’s story that I now outline, focusing particularly on those which relate to the man of God idea.

Selina's earlier discursive contexts. In describing the early stages of her involvement in her church, Selina spoke warmly of the diverse and inclusive character of the community: “it was gentle, it was respectful and it was embracing . . . it was good.” She had encountered the same values earlier, during her university years. There she met a diverse group of people who related to one another with mutual respect and care, and she learned “that thinking is good and that development is really important, and that change is good.” Selina recalled that another positive feature of the early phase of her involvement in the church was its belief in a shared form of leadership. There was one senior leader, but leadership was understood to be the collaborative responsibility of a team of equals.

Encountering the man of God discourse. Selina named the early ideas in which she had been positioned in order to make meaning of the difficulties and disappointments she experienced when

¹ A pseudonym.

leadership practices in the church began to enact a different discourse. When the new pastor was called to lead the church, the leaders were convinced that he was, as he declared, “God’s man”:

This was God’s man! And it was that language that was used—absolutely. This was God’s man. It was said over and over again. I remember.

Both words in this description were significant: leadership was *God*-appointed and it was *male*. In theory, Selina recalled, the new pastor was still “one amongst equals,” in line with the previous practice of shared leadership. But as time went on, it became clear that his language and leadership practices were being constructed by a rather different discourse. In her view, the new pastor believed that he was specially chosen by God to be *the* leader, and that God would speak to the church through *him*:

The kind of spirituality that [he] brought into the church was—and there would have been some of it already, but there were kind of counterweights, if you like, to it. . . . He used to call himself, “God’s man.” . . . Yeah. “I’m God’s man for here. God speaks to me before he speaks to anybody else. I know what’s necessary for this church and you guys don’t.”

In suggesting that “there would have been some of it already,” Selina was referring to her later discovery that man of God type thinking had always been present in the wider network of churches to which her church belonged. She had not had been aware of these ideas previously, because they had been masked by the collaborative leadership style of the earlier pastor. Reflection on the discursive contradiction she was now experiencing helped her to identify three shifts which were taking place: from shared leadership toward hierarchy; from an embrace of diversity toward conformity; and from collaborative participation in decision making to control from the top.

When Selina attempted respectfully to put her concerns before the pastor and other leaders of the church, she discovered how difficult it was going to be to stand against the new discursive tide, especially as a woman. She put her thoughts in a letter and arranged to meet with the leaders (all men) to discuss them. Before the meeting, one of the leaders rang to tell her to bring her husband with her: “You’ll find it more comfortable if you do.” Selina rejected this advice, preferring to

speak as a person in her own right. As people gathered for this meeting, she recalled, there was an awkward silence in the room, broken when the pastor finally asked her what she wanted to say.

I was quite surprised, because I thought, well, it was all in the letter, and so I expected that [the pastor] would say, “Now Selina, in this letter you said this, and can we—do you have anything else to say?” Or, “We’ve talked about it, and we think this,” or whatever. But [he] just—he just said, “What do you want to say?” And I said, “Well, it was all in the letter.” And so [he] looked at everybody, and this look came across his face. And he just looked at the others. He said, “Got your letters boys?” . . . I had my copy of the letter, so I sort of started, and I launched through the points. And it was just—I just delivered it to this very cold silence basically.

Afterwards, Selina “drove home in a daze,” overwhelmingly aware of how different this experience had been to any previous meetings with the church leaders. The other leaders had clearly known the senior pastor’s view, and had been unwilling to step out of line to offer her any support. She “never heard another word” about her letter.

Selina recounted her memory of another encounter with the pastor, which occurred a few months after this meeting. To her surprise, he had agreed to include her in the church’s preaching roster. Six months later, during a visit from the pastor to her home, Selina asked him about the fact that no invitation to preach had yet come. Her memory of his response was still vivid at the time of our interview. Her question was met with a very defensive and angry tirade that left her feeling “totally traumatised.” “I really, really thought he was going to actually punch me!” Selina recalled. She resolved after this to “lie very, very, very low” and not to do or say anything “to even be a blip on [his] radar.”

When I asked Selina why she made this resolution, she spoke not just of fear of the pastor as a person, but of having had “the strong sense that something very terrible, that shouldn’t have happened, had happened.” She recalled feeling that there was something which *she* had done, as a woman confronting a man, which was wrong. Looking back on this, Selina offered an articulate account of her experience as a woman in the church context, bridging from these historical incidents to the general situation for women in the church:

[I thought], clearly the culture is now completely different, and so I will do my best to lie down and float with the current because that apparently is what's expected. So, clearly I've been a naughty girl. . . . If you're a female, and you stand up with an opinion, or try and be a person, you very easily can be labelled somebody who's trying to control things, or somebody who's being inappropriate somehow. It's like the culture says that it's inappropriate for women to hear from God, or act like a normal person.

Selina went on to offer a compelling account of how deeply “awful” it was to feel that she had violated the “given order,” i.e. the dominant cultural and spiritual discourses, by making a man feel threatened:

It's a horrible thing—it's like an awful thing, to feel that you make anybody feel threatened. But I think as a woman, you're very aware that basically men hold the power in society. So when you become aware that you're making a man feel threatened, that is awful. Because you feel like—you feel that you are actually somehow going against the whole kind of given order of—you know, like I've—somehow I've done something wrong here.

In raising her questions, respectfully, Selina had done what she felt to be right according to the values formed in her by earlier contexts. More than that, she reflected, she had done what she felt to be required of her by God. Yet the forcefulness of the response, the response of male power under threat, invited her into a conflicted subject position in which part of her felt that she done something wrong, and had been disciplined for threatening male power. The imagery of lying “very, very, very low”—in an attempt to preserve life and avoid violating longstanding cultural structures of male authority—had a telling connection with a metaphor Selina used later in describing how she felt to a friend:

I said to her, “I feel like I've been presented with this very, very, very shallow coffin that I'm being asked to lie down in. And I don't think I can fit my body in there.”

Despite these powerful discursive conflicts, the strength of the values formed in Selina through the earlier contexts enabled her to recognise and critique the discourses of religious authority which were being reproduced through the new leaders' words and actions. Some of the other participants I interviewed, who also encountered versions of the man of God type theology in their communities, took longer to feel a sense of permission to critique the theology itself. This was hardly surprising,

given that the language itself implied that to challenge the leader's authority was to challenge God. Spiritual wellbeing was supposed to be contingent on submission to leaders' authority and wisdom, a teaching that three participants recalled in terms of *covering*. To step out from under this covering was to be in rebellion, to manifest a Jezebel or Absalom spirit (depending on your gender), and/or to expose yourself and your family to spiritual attack.

The tipping point. Despite her vow to lie very low, Selina reached a tipping point after which her resistance became more active. She understood herself as someone gifted with an ability to see things that often she would rather not see. This, and witnessing the effects of what was happening on others, strengthened her resolve to act.

And so yes, I guess a sense of responsibility. And a sense of, I'm not going to just be pushed around by this guy who thinks that he can just march in here and change everything when people are—a lot of people were leaving the church without saying anything. They were just not coming back. So it was like a sense of the church haemorrhaging, and it was well, we can't just let this happen!

When the leaders issued new conditions on which people could continue to exercise any roles within the church, Selina and her husband decided that they could no longer stay. People were shocked and upset, Selina recalled, but “were told after we'd gone that they weren't to have anything to do with us.” To rebel, it seemed, was not only to expose oneself to spiritual danger, but also to become spiritually dangerous to others. Learning of these restrictions was the occasion for Selina's use of the coffin metaphor, mentioned earlier. In that light, leaving the church became not simply a measured next step for Selina, but an act of survival. On the day of their leaving, her body, within which the life-denying effects of repressive religious authority had been manifested, resonated even more powerfully with a joyful sense of freedom:

I remember really clearly walking down the central aisle of the church, and as I stepped outside, it was like this explosion in my head. I physically felt the freedom of it. It was like I went—whoah! It was physical. It was—it shocked me. I physically felt this great weight, this huge weight, lift right off my head, and it was just like a total like clear sky straight up to God. And all this garbage just gone. It was amazing!

The man of God discourse and its effects

My discursive analysis of the participants' narratives focused not only on identifying taken-for-granted ideas, such as the man of God discourse, but also on the effects produced by these ideas.

This reflected the ethical orientation of the project, as briefly stated at the beginning of this paper. I found that there were two related clusters of effects connected with the man of God discourse. The first cluster of effects concerned authoritative leadership practices produced by this discourse, while the second related to the effects on those subjected to such practices. In outlining these effects, I will draw both on Selina's and other participants' narratives.

The construction of authoritative leadership practices

Selina's analysis of the shifts that occurred with the arrival of the new leader highlighted key aspects of the man of God discourse which had been latent in earlier years, and which were now constructing a new authoritative style of leadership, reflected in the pastor's self-description as "God's man for the church." One of the other participants encountered similar teaching in his church, and observed that it produced a view of leadership as "something to do with God's authority on earth, and so challenging his authority on earth is like challenging God." Another recalled that "the beliefs were that they heard from God for you." This last comment underlines the epistemological dimension of the man of God discourse. Not only is the leader endowed with divinely sanctioned authority, he also receives knowledge and wisdom from God on behalf of the rest of the community. In Selina's summation, "God speaks to me before he speaks to anyone else. I know what's necessary for this church and you guys don't." This combination of God-sourced authority and divinely revealed wisdom exemplifies Foucault's assertion that power and knowledge are mutually reinforcing within social systems. From the point of view of the leaders who found themselves positioned within these ideas, I observed three interrelated effects: a sense of entitlement, a perception of questions as trouble, and consequent disciplinary responses.

A sense of entitlement. As noted earlier, dominant discourses tend to position certain people with privilege and power, while marginalising others. This means that what might appear to

outsiders to be a desire to dominate seems to those in the privileged position simply to be a natural right and/or responsibility. In the case of leaders, this can amount to a sense of entitlement to exercise power, and to receive respect and cooperation from those they lead. This is reflected in the changes that Selina identified. When a whole community embraces a man of God type discourse, the degree of unchallenged (and unchallengeable) authority held by a leader can have destructive consequences. In the case of the participant who spent several years as part of a Christian cult, this sense of entitlement took on sexual dimensions when her leader demanded sexual favours. Although she knew that adultery was wrong, the grip of the dominant discourses of leadership and authority was such that she felt “terrified” and “powerless” to resist, telling herself “I have to obey the man of God.”

In my interviews with participants from churches with man of God type theologies I was struck by the forceful language often used to describe their leaders’ responses to being questioned, and I account for this in terms of the leaders’ sense of entitlement. Selina connected her pastor’s violent outburst to her sense that she had violated the “given order” of men’s entitlement to “hold the power.” Another participant recalled that those who did not “toe the line” of submission to leadership were “dealt to” and ended up being “bruised and battered” and “bruised and confused.” An associate pastor, who recalled that in his meetings with his senior pastor he sometimes felt “right on the edge of physical violence,” used the language of entitlement to explain what was happening:

I’m sure he felt that somehow or other, that ... there was an entitlement to treat people the way he did ... A God-given entitlement to treat people that way ... A failure to respect him was a failure to respect God.

The associate pastor acknowledged that his senior leader probably “genuinely believed he was doing this for God, and he was doing the best thing.” Similarly, rather than offering psychological analyses of the people involved, a discursive analysis focuses on taken-for-granted ideas which are producing and maintaining this sense of entitlement. The next two effects can be seen to follow logically from this first.

A perception of questions as trouble. While the man of God type discourse called people into positions of loyalty and respect, even as they tried to engage in dialogue, the same discourse produced in their leaders a perception of these approaches as troublesome challenges to their authority. As Selina experienced, it was women especially who found that they were perceived as being spiritually out of line. One woman reflected on the irony of the fact, that while relationships were strongly emphasised in the teaching of the community, her desire for honest dialogue with the pastor resulted in her being cast “more and more in the role of—well, ‘Jezebel’ was bandied around a lot.”

Consequent disciplinary responses. If the man of God discourse supports beliefs such as “I know what’s necessary for this church and you guys don’t,” as well as perceptions of questions as trouble, then it’s not surprising that leaders’ responses to this supposed trouble should acquire a disciplinary edge. If part of a pastor’s responsibility to the flock is to protect it from harm, then this includes dealing with the contaminating influence of supposed troublemakers. That was certainly Selina’s experience, as she found her ministry in the church was steadily being restricted, and, after leaving the church, discovered that others had been advised against having any further contact with her or her husband. Others I interviewed likewise found themselves being cautioned, labelled, castigated and quarantined. Alongside any pastoral motivation for these strategies, Foucault’s theory suggests that when people begin to question the dominant discourses of their context, then the power to control them will be lost.

The effects of monologic positioning

The difficulties named by the participants in my research in relation to authoritative practices of religious authority shared one common theme, which can be summarised in terms of *monologic positioning*. The word ‘monologic’ is drawn from Mikhail Bakhtin’s (1981) dialogical literary theory. It is taken up by social psychologist Edward Sampson in his book *Celebrating the Other* (1993) to describe social interactions in which the only subject position offered to a person or group is one which serves the interests of the dominant party. In contrast, ‘dialogic’ interactions involve

“two separable presences, each coming from its own standpoint, expressing and enacting its own particular specificity” (p. 15). What may appear to be dialogue—two parties talking—is not genuinely dialogic if one party “must speak in a register that is alien to its own specificity, and in so doing lose its desires and interests” (p. 11). The recurring accounts of monologic positioning offered by the participants were striking and unbidden. My questions were framed broadly around the issue of resistance to religious authority, but the participants’ accounts of what it was that prompted their resistance quickly and consistently turned to this theme.

There is a variety of ways in which the man of God type discourse produces monologic conditions for participation in the life of a community. Selina’s account of her meeting with the pastor and leadership team, ostensibly to discuss her letter, vividly illustrates an experience of monologic positioning. In theory it was a discussion, but in practice her voice was rendered mute. Several participants who had initially felt welcomed and cared for by their communities soon discovered that continued acceptance was conditional on conformity: “if you don’t toe the line, you have to leave.” Others, like Selina, found that their ideas and concerns were not welcome. This was only to be expected, since these ideas cannot rival the God-given knowledge of the man of God. One woman observed, “You could never actually have a conversation, because your point of view [as a woman] wasn’t actually valid.” For those who felt that what they wanted to share was also God-given, this positioning produced a sense of confusion and inner conflict. There seemed to be little room for the Spirit to speak through others’ gifts, such as Selina’s uncomfortable gift of seeing things which required her to act.

Another variety of monologic positioning experienced by some participants consisted of having their wellbeing defined for them, and its conditions prescribed. The primary condition for spiritual wellbeing was to submit to the authority of God’s appointed leaders. Ironically, several participants who did their best to remain under their leaders’ covering found their wellbeing diminished, rather than enhanced. As I worked with the interview transcripts, I was struck by the vivid language used by participants to describe the felt effects of being positioned in these ways, or

of seeing how others were being treated. Selina's mentioned metaphor of the shallow coffin, an image of confinement and death, has already been mentioned. It was something she felt at a bodily level: "I don't think I can fit my body in there." Others also spoke of embodied responses as they reflected on what brought the tipping point in their eventual resistance to authoritative practices. Such responses included tears, sickness, pain, tiredness, depression, anxiety, outrage and a physical urge to escape. One participant struggled adequately to describe her experience of years of monologic positioning: "I wouldn't be able to get the words to say how huge it was—there aren't words big enough—or how painful it was. It was extraordinarily painful."

These reported effects of monologic positioning can be understood in more than one way. From the point of view of the poststructuralist theory underpinning my project, they may be accounted for as the embodied experience of discursive contradiction. In other words, there were alternative discourses within which the participants were positioned which conflicted with the man of God discourse and its associated practices. These alternative discourses may have belonged to other contexts, as in Selina's experiences of collaborative leadership at university and in the earlier years of the church. In other cases, the seeds of this alternative positioning were found in the Christian tradition itself, as Scripture readings, worship and sacraments rehearsed themes such as freedom, justice, compassion and servanthood.

The adverse effects of monologic positioning might also be explained on the basis of a psychological or theological assumption that human flourishing is contingent on having the freedom to pursue the realisation of one's own potential (Maslow, 1968). Social psychologists such as Sampson (1993) critique the individualism inherent in this perspective, and show that this form of freedom cannot always be achieved justly. Sampson argues instead for a dialogic approach to freedom and justice, "in which groups meet as equals with different voices to negotiate issues of their shared concern" (Sampson, 1993, p. 175). This dialogic ethic resonates strongly with participants' explanations of the hopes and intentions they held for their lives and their participation in their faith communities. Their intentions were never expressed in terms of wanting the freedom

to do whatever they liked, or of having their own way without respect for leaders. Rather, they spoke of their hopes in terms of being accepted and valued for who they were, not for their conformity, of having opportunity to engage in genuine dialogue, without fear of being judged, and of knowing that their knowledge, gifts and experience would be welcomed as the community together sought to discern the mind of God.

Concluding reflections: the benefits of a discursive approach

My intention in this paper has been to demonstrate the importance of paying attention to the ways in which problematic situations are constructed and maintained by their discursive contexts. Shining a light on taken-for-granted ideas, and on their effects, helps to explain how it is that people—both leaders and led—are recruited into subject positions and power relations which sabotage their best hopes for life in community with God’s people. Moreover, a discursive approach does this in a way which does not pathologise people, because it locates the problem in the social context and its prevailing discourses, rather than within individuals and their deficits. Instead of asking, “What is going on within these people?” the question becomes “What are these people going on within?”

When, in response to the latter question, particular dominant discourses are identified, then the possibility of revisiting their taken-for-granted status is opened up. There is not the space to pursue that possibility here, in relation to the man of God discourse, but questions to be addressed might include: How was it (historically) that this particular theology of leadership came to be privileged in our context? What alternative approaches to leadership are being overlooked because this one happens to have gained prominence? Why does it draw heavily on Old Testament narratives, rather than New Testament perspectives on leadership, ministry and discernment? How well does it serve this community’s best hopes and dreams for its future?

My purpose in highlighting the effects of the man of God type discourse on Selina and others in similar situations has in part been to help address the last of these questions. I see two benefits in paying careful attention to such stories. First, stories in themselves have power to catalyse change, by offering others opportunities to recognise and evaluate their own experiences in a fresh light.

Second, enquiring into these effects in terms of discursive contradiction helps to bring to light hopes, intentions, values and alternative knowledges which otherwise tend to be rendered invisible or problematic by the dominant discourses of authority. With an awareness of this perspective, and with a willingness to create space for genuinely dialogic conversations, leaders could reframe signs of 'trouble' as opportunities for the corporate life and discernment of the church to be enriched (Meek, 2011, 2014).

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