



# **EMBOLDENED** and EMPOWERED

*by Susan Engh*

“Are you hungry for power?” I was asked that question at the beginning of a leadership training seminar a dozen years ago. My initial response was negative. Power hungry? Not me! To be power hungry was hardly positive, especially in my upbringing.

Power-hungry people were characterized as egomaniacs at best, tyrants at worst. But as the week of training progressed, I warmed to the idea of being hungry for power. I began to see such hunger as God-given, Christ-honoring, and Spirit-driven. I remember I learned that week at training that the word *power* appears 460 times in Scripture and is lauded (yes, lauded) more often than *humility* (a word found only 19 times.)

What does it mean to have power? In the simplest terms, it means “the capacity to do something; the ability to act.” Given that basic dictionary definition, it’s not such a scary word. So why do we tend to have a negative reaction to power? In part it’s

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because we know the famous quote from Lord Acton: “Power corrupts; and absolute power corrupts absolutely.” And certainly we’ve seen that lived out. Still, it worries me that the Lord Acton quote flows more freely from our lips than this

quote from our Lord in Acts, chapter 1: “You shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you. And you will be my witnesses . . . to the ends of the earth.” The way I read Scripture, here and in other places, we are called to be powerful. So when we reject power, when we shy away from claiming or building it, we’re rejecting a key part of our call to be God’s agents—God’s witnesses—in the world.

### A CHOICE

When women of faith consider their relationship to power, extra baggage comes with it. In many cultures and times, women have been systematically denied power. Furthermore, women have long been

the alternative—powerlessness—can also be evil. Think of the path that powerlessness paves for corrupt power to rule.

We have a choice: We can wring our hands, hoping and praying that someone else with enough power will come along and solve the problems that we see around us. Or we can claim and build enough power to address our communities’ problems, meet noble goals, and live out our faith in the world. An adage attributed to Thomas Jefferson rings true: “All that tyranny needs to gain a foothold is for people of good conscience to remain silent.” Perhaps injustice gets its foothold when people of faith choose to remain powerless.

### GREAT RESPONSIBILITY

Fear of power’s tendency to corrupt isn’t all that makes us wary of claiming it. For with great power comes great responsibility. Jesus said something similar, recorded in Luke’s Gospel: “From everyone to whom much has been given, much will be required; and from the one to whom much has been entrusted, even more will be demanded” (Luke 12:48).

When we refuse power, it speaks to our unwillingness to take responsibility for anything beyond familiar and necessary obligations. We resist power: We don’t want the responsibility. When we’re not

the ones in power, we can always blame someone else if something goes wrong. When we wield power, we become responsible for actions that affect others.

What if, in my foray into power, I make mistakes? What if I'm wrong? What if I fail? Because that's always a possibility. Power involves risks; and risks might lead to failure. And most of us prefer to avoid failure.

### TAKING A RISK

It becomes a vicious circle, with powerlessness gaining an ever-tightening grip. But I can choose to step out of this pattern. Perfectionism, the fear of failure, is a learned behavior. We're not hard-wired this way; we can change. Deciding to take risks, to encounter failure, to be powerful is a giant step toward becoming who God created us to be.

True, people who exercise power must deal with tension, controversy, and outright conflict. Do we really want (more of) this in our lives? Many of us were raised to avoid such unpleasantness. So we may not have learned the tools to manage it constructively.

In choosing to be a powerful woman of faith, I've had to fight my habit of trying to smile every conflict away, my tendency to calm all the waters around me. I've had to deal with people being angry around me, even, at times, angry at

me. I've learned the value of tension as a creative force, as an indicator that something truly important is stirring, that the Spirit just might be blowing up a storm of positive change.

I've also learned that risking controversy for the sake of my values wins me the respect of others. In fact, I have deeper relationships with people with whom I've resolved conflicts.

### POWERFUL RELATIONSHIPS

If we acknowledge that we as individual and communal believers are called to be powerful, we must also remember the source and context of our power. Our only legitimate power comes from our relationships, primarily the one we have with God. We are children of a powerful God, in whose image we are created.

God chooses to share power with us as co-creators. God gives us the capacity and the ability: "You shall receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you."

If and when we do lay claim to our God-given power, the only way to fend off the temptation of corruption is to wield our power in the context of healthy human relationships. When we serve with others who have also chosen to wade into the risks of power and influence, we are more likely to be held (and to hold them) accountable.

ELCA pastor and author Dennis Jacobsen writes in *Doing Justice: Congregation and Community Organizing* (Augsburg, 2001), "We need the community . . . because we are battling principalities and powers, wickedness in high places. On our own we would be ineffectual, co-opted, or crushed. As a community, we experience a power that is greater than the sum of its parts. Within the community, we discover gifts, abilities, and power that we did not realize we had. As a community, we are emboldened and empowered to take stands and engage in struggles that we would not conceive of doing on our own."

### POWER AS SERVICE

All this talk about power is just theory until we discuss what our God-given power is *for*. If God has important work for us to do and gives us the power to do it, what's the nature of that work? From a Christian perspective, all that we have, our power included, is to be used (a) for the glory of God, and (b) on behalf of the neighbor. Power should not be used to increase our self-esteem, but in service to and in loving partnership with God and neighbor.

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of justice, positive social change can result. Jacobsen contends that “moral persuasion does not create social change. Social change is the product of power applied effectively in the public arena.”

With this understanding of power, people of faith, acting together in community, challenge each other much as Esther’s cousin challenged her. Mordecai dared Esther to take hold of her unique opportunity to use power, saying, “Perhaps you have come to royal dignity for just such a time as this.”

In service to God’s vision for a more just society, faithful people claim, build, and use their power for good.

### **GO FORTH WITH POWER**

Are you power-hungry? Do you long for that which is right, for the values you really believe in,

to win the day? Do you want to change the world so it more closely matches what you understand to be God’s design? Jesus said, “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled” (Matthew 5:6).

As a baptized child of God, you have been filled with the Holy Spirit, just as Jesus promised. This spirit is not one “of cowardice, but rather a spirit of power and of love and of self-discipline” (2 Timothy 1:7).

If you long for goodness, then cultivate a hunger for power. Increase your capacity to get things done. Build up the courage it takes to act out of your faith convictions. Enter the public arena where decisions are made that affect the way the world works. Take companions of faith who share your vision of divine justice with you. And be assured that you go filled with

the power of God’s Spirit, just as Esther did when she approached the King’s throne on behalf of her community; just as Jesus did when he emerged from his time in the wilderness (Luke 4:14) to take on the public demons that oppressed God’s people.

Since I began with quotes from a couple of Lords, I’ll conclude with one, fittingly uttered by an amazing woman. Audre Lorde was a poet and 1980s human rights activist who knew first-hand that claiming and exercising power doesn’t eliminate our fear; it simply trumps fear’s power over us. Lorde said, “When I dare to be powerful, to use my strength in the service of my vision, then it becomes less and less important whether I am afraid.” 🌸

**The Rev. Susan Engh** is the ELCA director for congregation-based organizing.

## **CONGREGATION-BASED ORGANIZING**

Engaging power for justice is at the core of Congregation-based Organizing (CBO). Hundreds of Lutheran congregations are involved in CBO, many through local affiliates of one of four national interfaith leadership training and organizing networks: DART, Gamaliel, IAF, and PICO.

Susan Engh, along with her advisory team of organizing practitioners, promotes CBO as a ministry model. Two critical aspects of congregation-based organizing are development of vital congregations and justice work in the public arena. Both involve focused leadership training, community building, issue identification, and strategic action, along with theological and biblical reflection.

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