

# power in student leadership

Matthew Amer reflects on the power of Christian students in leadership



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The headline 'Partygate' filled our news feed for much of 2022. Those of a certain position in our society had broken stringent lockdown rules that were so heavily enforced on the rest of us. The news struck a chord deep within our societal structure; those with power and authority had abused their elevated position, consciously or otherwise, at the expense of everyone else.

I wonder what the word 'power' makes you think of or feel? Power so often has negative connotations in our current culture. The big cultural scandals of the last few years have all

involved the abuse of power: 'Partygate', the murder of Sarah Everard, and the Russian invasion of Ukraine, to name just a few. Generation Z, my generation, are acutely alert to power dynamics. It is through the lens of power, and only power, that many of us view the world. However, rejecting this worldview, and considering scandalous, power-hungry politicians as distant news stories, I considered my own life unassuming, believing I was neither the recipient nor creator of unjust treatment. But power features across the landscape of our lives more than we might anticipate. Although the concept of power in our lives as

Christian students may not be immediately evident, I hope to explore how we should be aware of, reflect on, and manage well power in our Christian lives.

## why this topic?

The past two years have brought tremendous joy and growth as I've served as a co-chair on CMF's National Student Committee (NSC). This service has brought an element of authority with it (unwanted it should be said). I have reflected on this, and how I have viewed my position as a student leader, with the intention of helping others in student leadership to reflect on their own experiences and positions.

With Christians being new creations, and likely having a heightened sense for injustice and exploitation, we would hope that abuse of power is uncommon in our churches, CMF groups, and relationships with each other. But there have been several well-known Christian figures in recent years that have used their position, notoriety, and power to abuse, intimidate, and coerce those around them. It is vital to think through our positions of leadership and interactions with others to prevent similar situations arising. Recognising power dynamics now, as young adults and students, is essential if we are to live out the rest of our lives as good and godly leaders.

## authority dynamics do exist in CMF/CU

Marcus Honeysett's book *Powerful Leaders*<sup>1</sup> is a wonderful exploration of how power can turn sour, particularly in a Christian organisational context. This book helped me realise that power plays a role in our interactions with each other, consciously or otherwise, and that the Christian student environment is no exception. I'm sure we can all relate to arriving at our first event as a fresher and looking up to the apparently wise, godly, and competent third year students running the Christian Union (CU) or CMF group. This dynamic is an example of power and authority; that between older more experienced students in certain

positions and younger, less experienced students. Often, as students we hold the feeling of being at the low end of the dynamic, without realising that in our later years of study we may now inhabit a position of authority in the eyes of younger students. Holding a position of leadership, whether on a committee, in mentorship, or other role, brings with it a certain standing in the eyes of other students. We all recognise this in the abstract, but rarely do we recognise it as something we inhabit right now. With this image comes influence, and with influence comes the wielding of power. Like all things, the corruption of goodness can lead to the malicious twisting of power. It is therefore essential to consider further what this authority might look like, and how we can stay vigilant in preventing its exploitation.

## your image may not be what you think

One lesson I've learned is that there is often a divergence between how you view yourself, and how others do. Whilst making an announcement at CMF student conference or leading a small group session, I view myself as nervous, timid, full of mistakes, and weak. I see with hyperfocus how silly my arms look dangling by my side or become obsessed with whether I'm clapping correctly. Do you relate to these feelings? Yet others can and will view you in ways you do not expect. Some roles bring an image of position, authority, and influence whether we desire it or not. To be aware of this helps us to be more understanding and gracious in how we interact and work with other students.

I remember attending a 'Dial a Donut' CU event in first year, where the CU president joined our group. I remember my perception of him and the alienation I felt from him as being far more respected and competent than I. He is now one of my closest friends and, knowing him the way I do now, the veneer of authority is certainly not the same as it was!

## an example for reflection

As I reflected on these ideas, I started to remember

instances when I may have utilised a position to gain something. I once asked a younger student if they would like to take over my role on the CU committee. With doubts and worries, they initially said no. I persisted, despite the obvious fact they did not feel comfortable taking the role at that point in time. Eventually they said yes. I was content and self-righteous in knowing how wonderful I thought they'd be at the position.

Reflecting on this now, however, I realised I used my position and influence to corner this poor student into a position where it was very hard for them to say no to, just to satisfy my own conviction of prudence. Did I actually leave them with any choice?

It is in situations like this that we can so often exploit our positions. Are you fully aware of the influence you have impacting another student? We can, so often, forget that our position on a committee or experience on our course gives us influence and an element of power. This can easily be used in ways we might not even be cognisant of, as in my example above. We must be purposefully vigilant in all we do to ensure the exploitation of influence is never used against another.

## we are sinful and so can actively exploit our position

We have leaders for a purpose; to ensure a group or organisation functions well and remains steady in its course. There is nothing inherently wrong with power structures in themselves. However, our nature can lead to the manipulation and desecration of these meaningful and essential dynamics. *'The heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure. Who can understand it?'* (Jeremiah 17:9) We are prone to rejecting righteousness, meekness, kindness, and sacrifice, and embracing exploitation, selfishness, and greed. All good and wonderful things, like having the opportunity to lead other students, can be twisted by sin, even unconsciously. We should reflect on how we might fall into the trap of actively exploiting our position and influence. We should

engage with structures that prevent us from doing this. But to ultimately prevent this, we must turn to the one who conquered sin for help.

## what does the bible say about preventing the abuse of power?

We must, of course, turn to the Bible to help us live our lives well, for the glory of God and those around us. Colossians 3 explores the qualities of those made alive in Christ. We find here important lessons on how we can lead well. We are encouraged to: *'Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things.'* (Colossians 3:2) The end goal of our leadership position lies not in this life, but in helping to bring as many people to know and see God as possible. If we find ourselves looking for significant worldly benefits, it may be time to reconsider our goals and uses of power.

*'Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, since as members of one body you were called to peace. And be thankful. Let the message of Christ dwell among you richly as you teach and admonish one another...'* (Colossians 3:15-16)

It is to Christ we look and from Christ we receive instruction on how to lead. Christ came to serve, not to be served,<sup>2</sup> and our leadership should be modelled on this. As creatures made alive in Christ, we should strive towards emulating him in all facets of life. We should serve others whilst in positions of authority, as Christ did for us. Recognising that we may have authority, praying we wield it wisely, and looking to Christ as the example of how to handle power, are essential in ensuring we do not use it for wrongdoing, even unconsciously.

Set these habits and thoughts in process now, as students, and we will take great steps in serving others and glorifying Christ into the future. ■

### REFS

1. Honeysett M. *Powerful Leaders*. London: IVP, 2022
2. Matthew 20:28, Mark 10:45