

Missiological symposium  
Varkaus 11.6.2010  
Auli van 't Spijker - Niemi

## **Use of Power in Pastoral Care and Counseling in Africa – Cultural Dilemma's**

### *1. Introduction*

In my contribution I shall speak about the use of power in the Pastoral Care and Counseling in Africa, and about the dilemmas in teaching it. I do this on the basis of my teaching experiences as a visiting professor, at the Theological Faculty of Butare, in Rwanda, in 1996 and the last years annually, and at the Protestant Theological Faculty of Yaoundé, Cameroon, in 2006.

In my teaching I started with explaining the theoretical backgrounds, the methods and techniques of pastoral care and counseling in the contemporary literature. After this introduction the students had to practice the counseling in the parishes during the holidays. They made exact reports of their dialogues, and we studied their reports together in small groups of 8-12 persons. Through these reports I got quite a good impression of the use of power in pastoral care and counseling in these two different African contexts, in Cameroon and in Rwanda.

In Europe and in the Western cultures the use of power has changed enormously in the last 60 years. In our democratic way of thinking and in our democratic systems we don't accept easily authorities above us, we are all equal and we use the Christian names of each other, we say Du , tu, 'sinutellaan'.

Pastoral care and counseling and its development in Europe reflect this change in thinking and practice. In the counseling relationship it is not the pastor who is the authority and who tells the Christian what to do and how to believe. In general, the pastor is the one who helps the person to find his own solutions and her own answers.

In the African cultures the use of power and thinking about power is quite different. In traditional African cultures, also nowadays, people respect the persons in positions of power, and accept their decisions and advise. They are used to obey a chief, an older person or also a pastor because of their position. They are also expected to use their power. These different ways of thinking about power and using the power is for me one of the dilemma's in the teaching pastoral care and counseling in Africa. What are the consequences of these different conceptions and feelings of power for pastoral care and counseling? In how far must the pastors adapt to the cultural expectations in their pastoral work?

The second dilemma is my own position and my power, as a western woman and teacher: How and how far can I use my power in introducing western concepts of pastoral care and counseling?

### *2. The power of the pastor in Cameroon and in Rwanda*

In both countries, in Cameroon and in Rwanda, also the pastor enjoys a great authority. Even the theological students, as soon as they start their study, are called "man of God" or pastor. (probably not "woman of God"! But I have the impression that in the modern after - genocide Rwanda the women in positions of power enjoy almost the same respect and authority as the men. My impression is that in Cameroon it is less accepted that the women should use their power above men). The people expect the pastors to give them a powerful advice or to speak a wise word. The pastor cannot leave without giving an advice or without speaking encouraging words. The pastor must speak with power and authority, also in a dialogue.

Often people say: "Pastor, pray for me, God hears you." In the feeling and understanding of many Christians, the pastor lives nearer to God, and has more influence on God.

The authority attributed to the pastor is like the authority and the power of the traditional diviner or witchdoctor. The traditional diviners know the secrets of the spirit world. They know the reasons of the illnesses and they can tell what to do in order to live in peace with the spirits. They give exact advices about which rites the person must perform. This is more or less expected also of the pastor.

When the first missionaries came to Africa, they were attributed much power. They used this power and authority also in their personal relationships. They used their power in the same way as it was common in that period in Europe. In the conception of the African people also their power was connected with the traditional use of power, by the chiefs and by the diviners and witchdoctors.

Something of this way using the power, by the missionaries and by the traditional healers and witchdoctors, is still present in the way the future pastors, my students, consider their pastoral role. In a natural way, the modern African pastor takes this role of "man of God". It is expected of him. If he does not do so, he disappoints the Christian he meets.

### *3. The use of power as a challenge and as a risk*

This is a great challenge and great risk for the pastor.

The challenge is that the pastors can really have a great influence and power on the lives of the Christians. What they say, happens. People are willing to follow their advice.

The risk is that they misuse the power.

The African pastoral theologian Emmanuel Lartey says that the Christian faith, also in the pastoral counseling, should not adapt to the culture, but correct the culture. He mentions the dangers of the fact that people only follow the advice of others.

1. They don't get used to take their own responsibility for their acts. They will not arrive in the maturity and growth to adult faith, as responsible children of God and members of the modern society.

2. They are easily manipulated to follow all directions of their leaders. I point here to the consequences this has had to the Rwandan people. Also Christians followed their leaders, and participated in the killings and massacres, without thinking of it was right or wrong.

We noticed that the students often used this power and gave their advice because of their own embarrassment: they were impressed by the difficult situation, e.g. the poverty of illness, and they felt their own inability and powerlessness to help. "You must try to seek work", said a student to a poor mama, knowing that this was not possible. They used what I call "empty words". They gave promises only to comfort the Christian. "Pray, God will hear you." "I am sure you will recover." "Your wife will come back." "You are not allowed to divorce, even if your husband is violent." When the student-pastors were embarrassed, they gave advice and promises. And in fact they knew that this could not help. But often the pastors themselves and also the Christian was comforted for that very short moment.

On the other hand, of course it is sometimes necessary to use the power in pastoral care and counseling, especially in urgent situations. The pastor can also use his power of the word and position, pleading for the poor in front of the civil authorities.

A Rwandan pastor, who had made advanced studies in pastoral care and counseling, said to me: until now, I thought I had to give advice and give an answer to all the problems, even without listening. Now I listen first. And I am astonished: that is sometimes enough!

#### *4. The power of the teacher*

My second dilemma is in how far, as a western foreigner, I can use now my power in the teaching? In how far can I introduce Western democratic counseling models in the African situation, where the relationships and the interaction between the pastor and his parishioners are so different from the culture where the counseling model is created? Am I using my power, in the same way as the old missionaries who are now criticized? I am aware of this temptation.

I try to avoid misusing my power by introducing the knowledge of different pastoral models. In some of these models the pastor is the therapeutic listener, in others the powerful preacher of the forgiveness, in others the charismatic exorcist with power over the spirits, in others the organizer of the community and the mutual care. Together with the students we study their dialogues in the parishes, in their context. We analyze the situations and the reactions of the Christian and the pastor. And the students themselves notice and learn what kind of pastoral care or interaction is salutary in that particular context for that particular person. I try to facilitate this process of learning by doing.

But also this is a western concept, which I introduce to the students!