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# Parish Newsletter

A Service of the Parish Evaluation Project  
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## The Ups and Downs of Authority

Where does our authority come from? It may be the position we hold, whether pastor, administrator, director of a ministry, chairperson, parent. We assume such positions because we have been trained for them, have some background and experience in that area and are called to take them on. As we exercise this authority, it can at times come easily and we feel comfortable in using our position for the good of others. At other times it is a struggle; we feel anything but comfortable. People are not responding to our lead and push back. We feel unequal to the task and ill-equipped for what we are facing. We discover that there is no precedent to follow, no previous experience to fall back on, no place to google that will show us how to use our authority in this particular situation. These are the ups and downs of our exercise of authority.

## Critiquing Authority

The Gospels provide some advice in the use of our authority. What not to do becomes clear in the way Jesus confronted the Jewish leaders. “Woe to you Pharisees! You pay tithes on mint and rue and all the garden plants, while neglecting justice and the love of God. . . . Woe to you lawyers also! You lay impossible burdens on people but will not lift a finger to lighten them.” (Luke 11: 42-46) In Matthew we read, “The scribes and the Pharisees have succeeded Moses as teachers; therefore, do everything and observe everything they tell you. But do not follow their example.” He goes on to say, “The greatest among you will be the one who serves the rest.” (Mt: 23; 1-12)

## Good Authority

One example of a person in the position of authority “serving the rest” was Bishop Ken Untener of the Saginaw, Michigan diocese. When he died in 2004, thousands mourned him because he used his authority so effectively. His creative gestures had an impact and people said of him, as others did of Jesus, that he spoke with authority. He began his tenure as bishop by putting his residence into escrow and living two or three months at a time in parishes across the diocese. He established the Little Books for Lent, Easter, Advent and Christmas to offer the people a method for daily prayer. He gathered small groups of priests and others who preached to critique each other’s homilies, himself included. His authority was not *over* others but *with* others. At the present moment, not all those in positions of Church authority exercise this same model of participative leadership.

## Using One’s Authority

Most of us are called to exercise authority in some fashion. Rather than holding it tightly to ourselves, fearing we might lose it, a more freeing way to use the authority is to let go. Share it, spread it around, *authorize* others, invite, encourage, model, include. If the mantra is that people no longer volunteer for tasks, committees and ministries as they once did, look within and ask, “Do I really make room for others to become involved, or do I jump in and *rescue* the situation so it won’t fail?” *Serving others* means making room for people to use whatever gifts they have to offer and adjusting the project, task or agenda to make use of these gifts. If those in authority appear heavy-handed and controlling, gather a few people together to brainstorm ways of counteracting this behavior, not by intimidation and criticism, but by speaking the truth, but always with kindness. If you feel something is missing in the ministry or work of a parish, tap into your inner authority that comes from prayer and conviction, and begin planning ways to correct this shortfall. Use your God-given authority to empower others.

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