Chapter 7

The Impact of Power and Management Issues on the Actualization of Ubuntu

Bishop Verryn played an important role in people’s perceptions of the Refugee Ministry as well as in members’ reasoning about the challenges at the CMM and, hence, he continues to take a central place in the following analysis which examines the impact of power and management issues on the actualization of the ubuntu vision at the CMM. The interest in this chapter is not on the leader as a person but on how members and, to some degree dwellers, perceived the situation from this particular perspective, because these perceptions and experiences affected relationships at the CMM and the reception of Verryn’s ubuntu vision, especially among the members; it thus focuses on the social and relational aspects of leadership rather than on personal psychological analysis. The leader is understood as one participant in a social context which is being shaped by his vision, actions and directives; in return, he and his ministry are shaped by the context and the people in it.

Drawing from Alvesson’s understanding of leadership, Petersen and Swart introduce a cultural approach that involves the idea of mutual shaping. Many definitions of leadership, they maintain, concentrate on an asymmetric relationship in which the leader is seen as the sole person of influence. They, on the contrary, emphasize that “leadership simultaneously shapes and is shaped by meanings, values, ideas, and feelings in the midst of others.” Such an understanding of leadership is, of course, compatible with the liberation theological view of the central importance of the choice of interlocutors for theology. Petersen and Swart, both South Africans, call their approach to leadership phenomenological but their model “via the Broken Ones” also resembles the method of liberation theologies; they speak of “the ethical dimension of being in relationship with others as the space where discernment takes place between people rather than exercising leadership on people.” Indeed, understanding power relations and questions related to agency are also a key to understanding relationships at the CMM.

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1 Alvesson 2002 paraphrased in Petersen and Swart 2009, 30.
2 Petersen and Swart 2009, 30.
3 Petersen and Swart 2009, 29. Italics added.
Interviewees’ accounts of the issues that are addressed in this chapter differ, thereby illustrating both the nature of qualitative research and that of power relations. The qualitative interview material consists of people’s perceptions of the situation and events at the church and perceptions of their impact on relationships between the different parties. Some were supportive of the Refugee Ministry whereas others were critical about it. This, of course, affected the way they saw and described the situation. Power relations also look different to those in power (or those sharing the leader’s power) and to those with little or no influence vis-à-vis the debated issues. Furthermore, the way people located me in relation to Bishop Verryn or the dwellers/members probably influenced at least the tone in which respondents expressed their opinions. Nevertheless, themes recur and, through listening to the differing views, it is possible to get an overall picture of the way power relations and management choices affected the relationship between dwellers and members. The aim is not to explicate one ‘truth’ but to portray the contested interpretations and listen to many voices in order to offer a nuanced picture of the situation. This chapter portrays the first of the three sets of issues that contributed to limiting ubuntu in the context of the Refugee Ministry. However, as reality is not symmetrical, while limiting the actualization of ubuntu, these very matters also, to some extent, enabled its promotion.

Remarks on the Concept of Power

Academic discussion on power forms a background against which the dynamics at the CMM are examined so before engaging with the primary data I introduce three conceptualizations of power that are relevant for the following discussion. Firstly, several scholars define power as relational. Foucault speaks of power as “relations, a more-or-less organised, hierarchical, co-ordinated cluster of relations”,4 thus underlining the necessity of social relations for the existence of power and the hierarchical organization of these relationships. Castells, who applies a similar definition of power in studying the network society, defines power as “[t]he relational capacity that enables a social actor to influence asymmetrically the decisions of other social actor(s) in ways that favor the empowered actor’s will, interests, and values”.5 In other words, power that exists in social relations is a means to influence other actors. In the following analysis of the CMM, the term power is used in this sense, which means that

4 Foucault 1980, 198.
5 Castells 2009, 10.