

Matrix Narrative

10.14.24

17 Eli said, "What was it that he told you? Do not hide it from me. May God do so to you and more also, if you hide anything from me of all that he told you." 18 So Samuel told him everything and hid nothing from him. Then he said, "It is the LORD; let him do what seems good to him."

(1 Samuel 3:17-18)

The Power Matrix assessment tool reveals how power functions in the Presbytery of San Francisco (PSF), and how those power dynamics impact both BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, People of Color) and white individuals and communities. Application of the Power Matrix assessment tool has revealed six patterns of power dynamics at play in the PSF that disproportionately advantage white people and congregations at the expense of BIPOC people and congregations. These patterns are: rigidity, control of decision making, conflict avoidance, differential treatment of "insiders" and "outsiders," accountability gap between vision/goals and their embodiment, and scarcity culture in stewardship. Each pattern will be discussed at length below.

We offer this assessment of the power dynamics of the PSF out of a deep love for our presbytery and a desire to do and be better. As critical lovers of our presbytery, we wish to confront our full history, owning what has gone right as well as what has gone wrong, and learning from all of it to make choices moving forward that are healthier for all members of our faith community, BIPOC and white alike. As William Yoo's excellent book *What Kind of Christianity: A History of Slavery and Anti-Black Racism in the Presbyterian Church* has demonstrated, ours is exactly the kind of Christianity that historically has chosen the comfort and privilege of white people over the dignity, safety, and wellbeing of people of color. The PSF has not deviated from that historical trajectory of the PC(USA) more broadly. The history of the PSF contains stories of resistance to white supremacy as well as stories of silent complicity with racist structures, but patterns of privileging white comfort and dominance run through them all.

This summary of the Power Matrix will explain each of the six patterns of power dynamics we see at play in the PSF with examples, and summarize our conclusions about how the PSF's power dynamics affect BIPOC and white individuals and congregations.

Power Pattern 1: Rigidity

The first pattern we have observed in the PSF is rigidity. Our culture of rigidity manifests in how we use our polity and structures of governance to make collective decisions. This culture of rigidity restrains creativity, perpetuates the status quo, and stifles the movement of the Spirit. “*Do not quench the Spirit*” (1 Thessalonians 5:19)

We see this rigidity in our insistence on the strict use of such tools as Robert’s Rules of Order to direct the flow of discussion in meetings and control the decision-making process. In her Presbyterian Outlook article titled, “The inherent problem of whiteness in our polity,” Rev. Jill Duffield writes, “A well-orchestrated process, planned and executed by those of us in the majority, cannot by definition create equity and inclusion. Those of us in the majority often do not even know what we do not know. People in power cannot dictate the terms of what justice entails for those upon whom injustice has been imposed for centuries.”

Robert’s Rules is a tool that requires a certain knowledge and expertise to wield successfully. Our rigid adherence to using such a tool significantly restricts which voices can be heard in meetings. Often, we embrace such tools in the names of efficiency and effectiveness, both hallmarks of white supremacy culture¹. Yet the tools themselves are not to blame. We can change the tools, but the culture remains. Despite experimentation with methods such as Open Spaces and Consensus Making, we have not successfully moved past this culture of rigidity. Open Spaces, for example, continue to be viewed as an optional elective in addition to the main presbytery meeting, not a part of the meeting itself. Consequently attendance and participation at Open Spaces tends to be much lower than at the main presbytery meeting resulting in fewer people in the main meeting being adequately informed and enfranchised when it comes time to vote on issues.

Our culture of rigidity leads us to resist change, no matter how much we claim to want change. We say that we have shared control, participation, empowerment and autonomy, but we continue to default as a community to rigid ways of being. Resisting change caters to the comfort of the dominant (white) culture. But this continued comfort comes at the cost of stifling and alienating BIPOC members. To participate fully in presbytery meetings and committee work, BIPOC are expected to assimilate to expectations of white

¹ See Tema’s Okun’s work for a complete list <https://www.whitesupremacyculture.info/characteristics.html>.

culture and learn to use tools such as Robert's Rules of Order that cater to white comfort.

While substantive change has been discussed and desired, historically white discomfort has obstructed concrete action. Our denomination has done work on addressing the issue of racism at least since 1993 when the 205th General Assembly established the "Advocacy Committee for Racial Ethnic Concerns." In 1999 the 211th General Assembly approved the report, "Facing Racism: A Vision of the Beloved Community," a proposed churchwide strategy to address systemic racism. In 2016, the 222nd General Assembly established the "Racism Truth and Reconciliation Commission of the Presbyterian Church U.S.A." and asked for renewed implementation of strategy outlined in the 1999 report. In 2018, the 223rd General Assembly established "Special Committee on Racism Truth and Reconciliation." The 2022 225th General Assembly called for appointments to the "Special Committee on Racism Truth and Reconciliation" and to, again, act on previous work. This pattern of extended conversation, formation of different commissions and committees over the last 25 years without significant change is not dissimilar to the church's reaction to slavery and abolition. The issue of racism has not been made a priority enough for significant action likely due to the discomfort it would bring to the majority.

A healthier presbytery would demonstrate tolerance for white discomfort as we shed our rigidity for more flexible and inclusive means of conducting our corporate business. Less rigidity involves a surrender of control over decision-making processes which can create discomfort.

Power Pattern 2: Control of Decision Making

The second pattern we have observed is control of decision making. Decision making within the PSF and the PC(USA) more broadly is usually done by identified/elected leaders and committees (i.e.: councils, standing committees, etc.). It is rare for decisions to be made by a wide and participatory gathering. It is hard to bring new business to the floor, and hard to move new ideas through committees, especially if one is not already a well-known committee member with actual and/or perceived authority. This practiced control of decision making restricts whose ideas can be heard, by whom, and how seriously those ideas can influence the business of the PSF.

For example, a charismatic white pastor from First Presbyterian Church of Hayward became the primary decision maker concerning property use and property sales revenue for New Bridges Presbyterian Church, a primarily

African immigrant congregation. New Bridges's historic use of the property referred to as the "South Hayward Parish" paled in comparison to a white pastor's influence at Presbytery. To this day the proceeds from the sale of the South Hayward Parish property that were supposed to be distributed to New Bridges remain under Presbytery control.

Despite ongoing efforts to increase the diversity of those who sit on bodies such as councils and standing committees, this increase in "representation" has not moved these individuals towards empowerment and belonging. The bureaucracy of the presbytery is likely to be much less approachable for BIPOC individuals and communities than for those who find comfort within a white supremacy culture. Some BIPOC individuals who have served on PSF committees and working groups have resigned prematurely likely due to not feeling accepted as a peer.

When directed toward BIPOC, the rigidity of our culture is often couched in paternalistic language such as, "you don't know enough to make that decision, so we will make it on your behalf." This perspective maintains control, power, and authority in the hands of the dominant white culture.

Majority white communities benefit from perpetuating the status quo because the standards and rules for "being" originated from white culture priorities. This allows the dominant white culture to continue to be unchallenged and blissfully ignorant of the harms being done to BIPOC individuals and communities by standing on the rigid white supremacy foundation of the Presbyterian church. The seats of power and authority might be challenged at times but remain the same, providing status and comfort to and justifying/allowing the ongoing pursuit of goals and priorities of white individuals and communities.

Power Pattern 3: Conflict Avoidance

The third pattern we have observed is a culture of conflict avoidance. The culture of conflict avoidance or maintaining the status quo also is related to the white-centeredness of the presbytery. By following the Presbyterian model of completing work in a decent and orderly fashion, conflict or any type of disruption is viewed negatively, and also disrupts the comfort of the white majority. Differing viewpoints and having discussions on difficult subjects typically results in great discomfort and is another reason conflict is avoided as much as possible (avoiding, delaying, ignoring, etc.). White supremacy and racism are such topics.

BIPOC individuals and communities are harmed by this “conflict avoidance” because when difficult subjects are brought to the attention of the majority white culture, the BIPOC individuals and communities are labeled as “difficult,” “trouble-makers,” and “disorderly.” BIPOC individuals and communities also experience accumulated trauma each time a race-related issue is responded to with the word “wait.”

Avoidance of conflict as a general pattern is an unsuccessful strategy long term. Conflict can be avoided for a little while, but ultimately leads to escalation and explosion, increasing the likelihood of disrespectful and unhealthy communication during conflicts which can cause injury and do harm.

When conflicts resulting in trauma-induced injury do occur within the Presbytery, there is no pro-active trauma healing afterwards. Injured and traumatized BIPOC individuals and communities are expected to just continue afterwards, with the issues swept under the rug. There is a lack of healing, repair, reconciliation, and reparations for the harms done as a result of Presbytery conflicts. One example is the experience of Primera Iglesia Presbiteriana Hispana (PIPH) in sharing space at what was then High Street Presbyterian Church (HSPC) and the Presbytery’s attempt to assist in resolving conflicts between the two congregations. Through this experience, the pastor and congregants of PIPH developed a mistrust of both the primarily white congregation of High Street Presbyterian Church, and also the Presbytery. The Presbytery Administrative Commission recognized the role of the PSF in the unhealthy relationship between the two congregations, but when HSPC closed, the PSF chose not to pursue any judicial process to address potential pastoral misconduct and highly questionable disbursements to HSPC staff and remaining congregants that basically emptied the HSPC accounts. The approx. \$40K could have been used by Primera Iglesia who would remain as sole occupants of the High Street property. The PSF’s unwillingness in this situation to name and explore potential misconduct and seek to repair the damage caused by that misconduct resulted in financial losses to a BIPOC congregation as well as emotional and psychological harm.

White culture benefits from conflict avoidance by skirting the hard work of self-reflection/repentance by using the priority of “unity” to preserve the status quo of authority, power, and priorities. This aids in maintaining the comfort of the majority white culture and the existing power dynamics while not requiring any empowerment of others. This is a perpetuation of a historical model in the Presbyterian church that spans more than 200 years (Wm Yoo, *What Kind of Christianity*). In the case of High Street Presbyterian Church and Primera Iglesia

Hispana, the PSF chose to maintain comfort by not pursuing judicial process and thus, the congregants and staff from the legacy congregation also avoided any type of punishment, while Primera Iglesia was unable to access the funds that were remaining in the High Street accounts when they disbanded as a congregation. This gives the perception that the Presbytery turned their eyes away from the misdeeds of a primarily white congregation to avoid conflict and the effort and cost to pursue a judicial process.

Power Pattern 4: Differential Treatment of “Insiders” and “Outsiders”

The fourth pattern we observed is the differential treatment of “insiders” and “outsiders.” There is a felt sense of unequal “membership” within the Presbytery. Presbytery leadership may feel good about the organization because of its “diverse” representation, but in reality BIPOC individuals and communities often feel like unequal members without experiencing the actual feeling of “belonging” (defined by Ben McBride as *inclusion and acceptance*)².

The PSF claims that “the Presbytery is the people,” but in reality the people and communities who have had decisions made above/over/for them do not have a felt sense of belonging or ownership in the presbytery. There continues to be an “us” and “them” mentality operating within the Presbytery. Those in power are the “we” while the majority of Presbytery members, especially BIPOC, feel like “them” or “the other.”

Several key examples include charismatic, white male pastors being trusted for leadership or control of resources with much less evaluation and taking much less time in receiving support and approvals. Whereas other leaders, especially BIPOC individuals and communities, are tested, challenged, and questioned as part of a time-consuming process. This results in BIPOC individuals and communities losing trust in the presbytery and feeling “less than” compared to others.

The case study of the New Bridges Presbyterian Church (as detailed above) demonstrates this dynamic in action. The patriarchal stance taken by the Presbytery in controlling the distribution of New Bridges’s money communicates to New Bridges that they are not capable of making decisions to expend these funds on their own church property, and they are not trusted to manage their own financial resources and future.

² McBride, Ben, “Troubling the Water: The Urgent Work of Racial Belonging, Augsburg Fortress, 2023.

The case study of the closure and sale of Hillside Presbyterian Church (Oakland), a primarily African-American congregation, is yet another example where the Presbytery was negligent in working with the struggling congregation over several decades. When Hillside was eventually closed, the proceeds of the sale of the Hillside property were to be distributed evenly between the remaining African-American/immigrant congregations in the Presbytery. The actual disbursements did not happen until over a decade after the sale of the property. After the sale in 2005, funds were wired directly into a Synod custodial account. About three weeks later about 90% of it was wired to a bank to provide security for refinancing Westminster House. About five months later, when the refinance closed, the funds were deposited back into a Synod custodial account. , and there were questions about what happened to the funds during this time. One yet to be confirmed story was that the funds were being held in a Synod account and that the Presbytery even used it as collateral for taking out loans for other churches (if this is true, this is a very questionable and inappropriate practice at the expense of the African-American/immigrant churches that were to receive these funds).

The experiences of New Bridges and Hillside demonstrate both a white supremacist attitude that a white-controlled Presbytery knows better how to manage property, money, and other resources than a congregation of color. They also subordinate the needs of congregations of color to the priorities of a white-controlled Presbytery inspiring BIPOC members of the Presbytery to feel othered and marginalized.

This differential treatment of BIPOC individuals, communities, and congregations reinforces white supremacy values in the Presbytery through the expression of greater trust in those individuals and communities that better reflect the dominant white supremacy culture found in the presbytery. Self-sufficiency and qualifications are both highly valued in a white supremacy culture. Those who project these and other white supremacy cultural characteristics are valued and appreciated much more by the dominant culture, and this results in these “insiders” being able to access power, authority, and resources much more easily than those seen as “outsiders” (or different from the dominant culture).

In the case studies of South Hayward Parish and Hillside Presbyterian Church, the Presbytery’s actions bolstered the white supremacy values of a white pastor (South Hayward Parish/Hayward Presbyterian Church) and using financial resources belonging to a BIPOC congregations and using them for other purposes (rather than distributing these funds immediately (Hillside Presbyterian)).

Power Pattern 5: Accountability Gap Between Vision/Goals and Their Embodiment

The fifth pattern we've observed is an accountability gap between stated vision and goals, and their embodiment or implementation. The PSF has documented priorities: Supporting Congregations, Nurturing Ministers, Incubating New Ministries, and Encouraging Regional Missional Partnerships. The accountability gap between what is "said" versus what is actually "done" is immense within the Presbytery. The current racial assessment is an example of work that has been attempted in the past, but never embodied so that actual change would be the result. This lack of actual repentance, reconciliation, and reparations for the harm that has already been inflicted upon BIPOC individuals and communities truly demonstrates the Presbytery's lack of commitment to the Matthew 25 goals. By continuing to say "wait" to BIPOC individuals and communities through this inaction, the Presbytery continues to harm BIPOC individuals and communities by communicating that you are not seen or valued and that your concerns are not our priority.

An example of this pattern is the long-time struggle to address racism within the Presbytery and the denomination. The PC(USA) has made efforts to address and examine the issue of racism for several decades through policy development, theological reflection, and committee/commission creation. The Presbytery has also taken important actions in addressing racism through education, workshops, and through the work of the Committee on Representation (COR). The PSF COR is combined with the Nominating Committee (NOM/COR), despite the Book of Order stating, "A committee on representation should not be merged with another committee or made a subcommittee of another committee," (Book of Order; G-3.0103 Participation and Representation). This is direct evidence about the priority (or lack thereof) given to the work of COR by the PSF. Finally, the work of T-CARE (Truth Commission Assessing Race Equity), is an example of yet another effort to address the issue of racism through the establishment of a committee and the writing of a report. All the words written in a report and spoken at any number of committee meetings are meaningless until substantive action is taken. The PSF continues to await substantive action on issues of racial justice.

Power Pattern 6: Scarcity Culture In Stewardship

The sixth pattern that was observed was the consistent expression of a culture of scarcity, particularly as related to financial resources and property assets. A culture of scarcity is when the focus is on what one does not have instead of what one has. An inordinate amount of time and attention is given to

calculating what we are lacking rather than our abundance. A scarcity mindset is identified as a characteristic of white supremacy as it reflects the mindset of the importance of competing for limited/scarce resources with others.

“Adopting a scarcity mindset leads us to believe we must make the most money via the cheapest means, thus exploiting the labor of others, which often ends up being the labor of the most marginalized and oppressed within society,” (Asare 2022).³ Thus, the priority of a scarcity mindset culture is being competitive versus collaborative.

A very recent example of scarcity mindset within the PSF was the sale of St. Paul’s Presbyterian Church to Sunset Youth Services (August 2024 PSF Meeting). The one and only issue of disagreement regarding this property transaction was the sales price (which was approximately 50% of market value). The sales price was deliberately negotiated below fair market value with the missional motive of supporting the work of Sunset Youth Services which primarily serves people of color. “We are leaving too much money on the table” was a sentiment shared during the discussion of this agenda item by multiple individuals. It is also telling that it is generally a struggle to recruit volunteers to serve on most PSF standing committees, except for Finance and Property Oversight Committee (FPOC). FPOC is the largest PSF standing committee and is where we have observed the most contention being expressed during the nomination process.

Conclusions

Our assessment of the power dynamics of the PSF has revealed troubling patterns of rigidity, control of decision making, conflict avoidance, differential treatment of “insiders” and “outsiders,” an accountability gap between vision/goals and their embodiment, and a scarcity culture in stewardship. We cling to our established tools and structures (such as Robert’s Rules of Order) to consolidate and preserve power in the hands of the dominant white culture, creating barriers for BIPOC participation. In this way we silence BIPOC voices in collective decision making and limit BIPOC involvement in Presbytery work, engineering a situation in which for the most part white people make the decisions and control the resources, including those that directly affect and belong to BIPOC congregations and communities. Despite our long history of calling for change and professing a desire for greater racial equity, these patterns persist because they support white comfort and allow the white participants in our Presbytery to avoid the discomfort and hard work of meaningful change.

³ <https://www.forbes.com/sites/janicegassam/2022/05/21/4-ways-white-supremacy-harms-humanity/>

