

PRESBYTERIAN MISSION AGENCY BOARD
October 7-9, 2020

ITEM P.201
FOR INFORMATION

Subject: Power and Privilege Report



Scope of Work: Consultation for the Power and Privilege Task Force of the Presbyterian Mission Agency Board to recommend ways which PMAB could assess power and privilege between board members in meetings. Provide an objective lens, and be able to interpret results and give recommendations. While the original concern was power dynamics among board members, consultation also included all present at meetings as power and privilege dynamics were present throughout roles.

Term: June 1, 2019 – September 30, 2020

Observances: September 26 – 28, 2019 Stony Point, NY
 February 12 – 14, 2020 Baltimore, MD
 April 15 – 17, 2020 Virtual
 May 13, 2020 Virtual

Consultant Bio: Marian R. Vasser, M.Ed.



In addition to serving as an external consultant, Marian R. Vasser also serves as the Executive Director for Diversity and Equity at the University of Louisville, where she has served approximately 27 years in various capacities. With over sixteen years of experience as a Diversity, Equity and Antiracist Practitioner, she conducts approximately 300 workshops annually focusing on Anti-Racism, Implicit Bias, Micro-aggressions, Power and Privilege, Engaging in Difficult Dialogue and more. Additionally, Marian provides coaching and consulting to over 30 external partners fostering spaces that are more inclusive and equitable for all. These partners include, but are not limited to, K-12 school districts, universities, government and corporate sponsors. To name a few:

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| Actors Theatre | All Women OBGYN | Bellarmino University |
| Center for Women and Families | Fund for the Arts | General Electric |
| Humana | Jewish Federation of Louisville | |
| KFC – Yum | KY Jefferson Community & Tech College | |
| Leadership Louisville | Louisville Metro Council Paducah Schools | |
| Presbyterian USA | Red Cross | Sacred Heart Schools |
| United Parcel Services | Volunteers of America | and more..... |

In 2019, Marian received the UofL Presidential Multicultural Engagement award and was also recognized as an Adult Black Achiever. She was also nominated as one of Today’s Woman 2020 Educators of the Year. Marian is also being featured in a documentary for PBS’ Frontline regarding school integration efforts in the U.S., looking back at Brown v. Board of Education and the current state of schools in the U.S. Marian was also accepted to participate in a prestigious learning opportunity at Harvard University.

Marian’s commitment to equitable access in education, and beyond, is evident as she sits on a number of committees designed to improve access and true inclusion throughout communities and school districts. She also serves as a board member for Louisville’s EVOLVE 502, which is designed to increase access for underrepresented and marginalized communities in Kentucky.



While this is only a snapshot, this provides an overview of Marian's credentials within the realm of diversity, equity, inclusion and antiracism work. While Marian is professionally and personally invested in this work. More importantly, this work is her ministry, a personal calling of God. Marian is a proud member of Bates Memorial Baptist Church, where she also serves as a youth ministry worker and teaches the word through a social justice lens, which she understands as one consistent message. Assisting the Presbyterian Mission Agency Board with this work is both an honor and privilege.

Findings and Recommendations

“America's pathology is her denial.” - Dr. Joy DeGruy

Dr. Joy DeGruy eloquently articulates why oppression continues to be pervasive in our country. We are sick! Until we own and work to repair the truth behind the horrific genesis of the United States of America, as we know it, racism and all forms of oppression will continue in their ugliest forms. My work with PMAB is designed to facilitate a journey of truth-telling, with the goal of acknowledging and interrupting power and privilege dynamics during board meetings and beyond.

Our nation's history is riddled with institutions and hallmarks created, and primarily reserved for white people, particularly men. BIPOC folk were intentionally excluded and continue to be oppressed. These ethnic and racial inequities are systemic and still pervasive present-day. Included in such hallmarks is the Presbyterian church, whose origins are complicit in racism, privilege and power. A defense of slavery, white supremacy, and segregation are what the Presbyterian church was founded upon. During the civil war, southern and northern presbyters split and the Presbyterian Church in the Confederate States of America was formed. The southern presbyters used theology to defend slavery, positing the bible as never indicating slavery was a sin. Based on their interpretation, the bible explicitly promoted racial separation. Northern presbyters opposed slavery, resulting in conflict when the two eventually reunited. Although PMAB continues to take a strong stance against racism, it must also acknowledge this conflict as an ongoing issue, both explicitly and implicitly.

Before delving into the findings, it is critical to establish a shared understanding of power and privilege. Power can be thought of as the ability to influence and/or act. While identities and positions hold power, so does history, ideas, laws and money. For example, the board members clearly wield power over staff members. We also know that, as a group, white men hold more power and are typically responsible for fiscal responsibilities within organizations. This was noticeable during the collection and handling of offerings. There were several points where I sought clarifications of various practices, such as seating arrangements, and was repeatedly told “it's always been that way, that's just the way it is”. These are just a couple of examples of how power continuously showed up in PMAB meetings.

Privilege can be understood as a set of unearned advantages based on various identities, making many environments more easily accessible and comfortable to navigate. This was noticed several times as white folk moved around and stood more freely, and for extended periods of time during board meetings. Power and privilege are obtained and sustained only by the marginalization and oppression of other groups. Additional examples of both power and privilege will be included later in this document. Power and privilege dynamics are always present in meetings, regardless of the



organization. The goal is to increase awareness and actively work to interrupt and redefine how it shows up. Findings should not be met with resistance, yet through a lens that seeks a deeper understanding of ways we can all contribute to making this world a better place. More specifically, ways each person can contribute to truly making PMAB truly a Matthew 25 church.

“You can’t fix what you won’t face.” - Author Unknown

PC(USA) professes a commitment to becoming a Matthew 25 church, calling for active engagement “in the world around us, so our faith comes alive and we wake up to new possibilities. Convicted by this passage, both the 222nd and 223rd General Assemblies (2016 and 2018) exhorted the PC(USA) to act boldly and compassionately to serve people who are hungry, oppressed, imprisoned or poor.” As PC(USA) strives to effectively respond to this call externally, it must first begin this important work internally by dealing with power and privilege dynamics throughout board meetings. In lieu of specific dates and names, trends will be shared in order to draw attention towards problematic practices and policies vs people. The following observances threaten PMAB’s commitment to be fully committed to a Matthew 25 agenda:

Ableism

Ableism, which refers to discrimination in favor of able-bodied people, was present. There were several instances where speakers were not using microphones. In addition to being problematic for deaf and hard of hearing people, staff members were way in the back of the room, often unable to hear. This issue was never raised, likely because staff members aren’t invited to engage.

Recommendations: Please use microphones as much as possible.

Antiracism/Diversity/Social Justice Efforts

With the exception of one conversation led by a white man, conversations around antiracism, diversity, equity and social justice typically fall on the shoulder of BIPOC folx. In fact, I don’t recall any white folx being on the Racial Equity Advocacy Committee. There were conversations on being “Good Samaritans” that were led by white folx. These conversations focused primarily on poverty, not race.

There is also a noticeable shift in energy during these conversations. This was reflected in a shift in body language, eyebrow raising, laptops opening, disengagement, and even looks that could be interpreted as disgruntled during these conversations. A specific instance was observed where a white woman rolled her eyes during the opening of one session focusing on racial justice.

Asian Americans are missing from the conversation. It is crucial that we assist everyone with finding their place in the conversation.

During one of the sessions on racial justice, attendees were assigned group work. There was one all-white group that declined participation. This was the only group that did not report out. This activity took place on Friday, September 27, 2019. During group report-outs, BIPOC folx were selected to speak for their group, although there were plenty of others in the group that were not white.



There is visible discomfort during conversations around white supremacy and white privilege. During the presentation of Racial Equity findings, several white attendees were visibly checked out, and likely were unaware of the findings. This was very noticeable as some even left the room for an extended period of time, returning immediately upon completion of the report.

Recommendation: When introducing these topics, CLEAR and DIRECT expectations of full participation and self-reflection should be reiterated.

Closed Sessions

Consultant was omitted from closed sessions, which is a critical point of observation. These are times where power and privilege are most prevalent, as folk tend to be navigating stressful environments, leaving them vulnerable to authentic engagement. This was a missed opportunity. Unfortunately, prior approval and clearance had not been established.

Recommendation: Advance clearance/approval for consultant to observe closed sessions, with the understanding of complete confidentiality, is crucial.

Gender Roles

Questions that are more emotional and subjective were consistently deferred to women, while more concrete and procedural questions were directed towards men. This was particularly noticeable during a skype call with a guest speaker who was seeking feedback on PMAB procedures. This session took place on September 26, 2019. For example:

1. Questions regarding budget and policy were directed to and primarily answered by men. For example, the conversation around P107 was primarily led by men. Women were only engaged in support roles and to add supplementary information.
2. Questions such as “How did people respond to those changes” were directed to and primarily answered by women.

There are patterns, in terms of committee composition and leadership as well. Committees with a specific focus on nurturing, social justice, etc. are typically led by and/or reported out by women. Committees focusing more on budget and policies are typically led by and/or reported out by men.

Recommendation: This requires individual awareness and self-reflection. It is also recommended that various roles and responsibilities be reviewed and modified.

Guarding Space

For the majority of services and meetings, there were white people (multiple genders) standing on the parameters. They were moving around and conversing freely throughout presentations. It gave an appearance of white folk “guarding the space”, if you will. Even when BIPOC folk joined, they were men. I rarely witnessed BIPOC women re-seat/reposition from their original spaces, with the exception of leaving out for brief breaks. While it was common (and understandable) for attendees to stretch and move about freely, it was noticeable that white participants did so more often and more freely. There was a clear sense of freedom and ownership. Additionally, they would utilize the entire room, while BIPOC participants typically stood right behind the chair where they were sitting. Even then, their periods of standing and stretching were much shorter.



There was an apparent shift when the conversation transitioned to a racial justice focus. White participants were less mobile and stayed in their seats, for the most part. BIPOC folk, however, seemed to move about more freely even extending beyond their chairs. It was as if they felt “at home” during this discussion. It was really interesting to observe. Upon conclusion of the racial justice conversation, the dynamics literally returned to white folk moving more freely and often. There was one exception to this trend. The President/Executive Director of PMAB, who is also a black woman, moved around the room freely. It is unclear if this exception was a direct result of the position of power or not.

Recommendations: While it was not explicitly stated that white folk had more power and privilege to move around, white supremacy clearly influences this space. There should be an explicit encouragement of movement during each session, as well as breaks in the agenda. It is recommended that this finding be called out specifically. The goal is not to stifle free movement, but to begin to heal the space in a way that everyone feels comfortable doing so. This is one of those truths we must tell in order to heal the space.

This particular trend was reported out during the initial meeting and there was a noticeable change at subsequent meetings. It is important to continue making regular announcements until the space feels safe for all.

Language

“Living Beyond Our Means” – This comment was made during a discussion around budgets. There was perceived resistance around funding a particular initiative. This language tends to be coded as maintaining the status quo. This could threaten the ability to reimagine how funding is used to address inequities. This particular comment was made by a white male. Not doing anything new or not making room for new initiatives/resources often disproportionately impacts marginalized identities/communities. Historically, budgets have not included resources designed to address inequities so if we aren’t fostering dialogue that promote a reframing of narratives around resources, we are inevitably perpetuating practices that widen, instead of closing, gaps for the most marginalized communities. It is important to remember maintaining the status quo keeps marginalized communities out of the conversation, since they have been historically excluded.

“Our/My staff” – It is recommended that people are not referred to as property, which traces back to slavery. Consider terms such as “team”, “colleagues”, “siblings”, “partner”, “associate”, etc. At the very least, consider dropping “our” and “my” and just say staff.

Liberal White Women

In Robin DiAngelo’s book *White Fragility: Why It’s So Hard for White People to Talk About Racism*, liberal white women are described as “the worst”. While this seems harsh, DiAngelo is simply referring to blind spots white liberal women often have around this work. They tend to be fairly good at pointing out the speck in others eyes, but often miss the plank in their own. More importantly, they tend to separate themselves from issues of oppression and fail to engage self-reflectively.



While there were several occurrences, most notably were white women who repeatedly inserted themselves in the space designated for the consultant, offering tips and advice. While the intent may have been good, there was a clear assumption that the consultant was not skilled or wise enough to identify power and privilege without assistance.

Comments include:

“What you should really pay attention to is ageism. We have more issues with age than we do racial stuff. I mean, we have it, but I think age is a bigger issue that you need to focus on.”

“Are you watching out for sexism as well? It seems to be increasing.”

“What are you working on?” After sharing a brief overview of my charge, “Well, that’s interesting. I’m glad you are here. I hope you include in your report how they treat staff. I’ve told them over and over, but nothing has changed. What all have you noticed?”

I also had a white woman pull a chair up to the table where I was sitting, clearly isolated, who was not-at-all shy about trying to read what I was typing.

Recommendation: Consultants should be seated at a small table in an inconspicuous location, unless otherwise indicated.

There were several instances where black women were trying to talk to me and we were regularly interrupted by white women. It is not clear if there was an assumption that these black women were sharing information with me or if black women are significantly rendered invisible/insignificant in these spaces.

Lodging and Seating

Lodging assignments were notable at the Stony Point location. There was a clear distinction of power and hierarchy, in terms of where board members, staff, and even the consultant were housed. It was later made clear that the separation between staff and board was intentional, it was an interesting placement for the consultant as well (Maple).

Recommendation: Serious consideration should be given in terms of lodging assignments. What message is intended to be conveyed?

The energy in the room was noticeable when staff got a chance to join the board in the front of the room for dialogue. Staff were visibly excited to move to the front of the room and engage with the board. The energy shifted in a positive way and was more inclusive and energizing. The energy immediately returned to the status quo after this dialogue and they were instructed to head back to their seats. I could have had my eyes closed and would have felt the energy drop significantly.

Recommendation: Staff and board seating should be combined, even if board members are seated together at separate tables. You can always use distinctive nametags to identify board members.



Rendered Invisible (People of Asian Descent)

With the exception of one man, who dominated conversations at times (perhaps as a result of his position?), people of Asian descent appear to be rendered invisible.

1. People of Asian descent were explicitly omitted from conversations around racial injustice.
2. Comments made by an Asian male appeared to identify more with the white experience, lending itself to a perpetuation of the model minority stereotype.
3. Most notably was an initial conversation I was having with a woman of Asian descent, who was interrupted and disregarded by a white woman. It was shocking to witness this happen on the initial day of my service in this capacity. We were literally engaged in conversation when a white woman cut the Asian woman off to introduce herself to me. She proceeded with instructions on how to navigate the space. While I later learned providing critical instructions was in the scope of the white woman's role, the woman of Asian descent was cut off and completely disregarded. This was particularly interesting, because the woman of Asian descent is a board member, which is typically regarded in this space with clear respect and authority.

Recommendations:

While folks of Asian descent are clearly not monolithic, perpetuating narratives of Asians being "model minorities" is concerning. Within this community, it would be advantageous to explore how explicit or implicit efforts to present as anything other than a racialized community serves to reinforce white supremacy.

How do we uplift and foster a true appreciation and acknowledgement of the Asian community in these spaces? Incorporate presenters who are experts in Asian studies with the goal of increasing awareness and cultural sensitivity around this community. PMAB should begin with those within this particular agency.

Staff

Paternalism is reflected in practices where those in positions of authority restrict duties and freedom of those deemed to be subordinate. This practice results in decisions being made with the alleged best interest of the subordinates in mind. One board member approached me extremely emotional and in tears at their discomfort with staff being rendered invisible. They were conflicted as to whether they should sit in the back with staff or follow the rules and not be disrespectful.

1. Practice of seating staff members in the back of the room.
2. Staff were only invited to speak and participate as deemed relevant by board members, which was particularly concerning. This practice remained in place even during teambuilding and informal activities, and was consistent in every in-person meeting.

There were several conversations around justice and serving the least of these, yet there was a clear divide being perpetuated right in the room with staff. Staff appear to be "kept in their place" and only invited to engage by board members.

Recommendations: There was one instance where staff were "allowed" to engage, and it became apparent that staff input is critical during decision-making. Staff not only add



a critical lens to the discussion, they tend to be knowledgeable around day-to-day processes and details. There is a critical lens missing when staff are disengaged. It is concerning knowing staff are mandated to attend, leaving their families and obligations, but rarely engaged in meaningful ways.

It is strongly recommended that seating arrangements be reconsidered. The only plausible reasons provided for separate seating arrangements were regarding voting processes. When board members sign in, perhaps they can be given special signs that can be used during voting processes. These signs can be included with name tags and other pertinent documents handed out during registration.

These meetings are mandatory for staff, so engaging them in meaningful ways will prove to be beneficial across the board. I witnessed one activity/dialogue where staff were engaged and there was a drastic shift in energy during that time. Staff and many board members alike expressed how great that experience was, as staff have so much to offer.

Stony Point

Lack of diversity among leadership team. While great that BIPOC folx are provided an opportunity to work at Stony Point, they were all in servant roles.

Virtual Meetings

Virtual meetings present significant challenges during observances of power and privilege dynamics, particularly with cameras off and multiple screens to navigate. This made it particularly challenging to observe body language. Being notified at the last minute about virtual meetings also presented a challenge, as I was unable to adjust my schedule accordingly. However, there were a few incidents noticed.

1. Only a few voices dominated conversations, mostly men.
2. During comments about racial injustice, several cameras noticeably shut off. Unfortunately, it was difficult to tell if it was solely due to the topic or just bad timing. Based on previous in-person sessions, this seemed consistent with body language observed during other conversations around racial injustice.
3. During the Resource Allocation and Stewardship subcommittee, at one point, a black male was seemingly overlooked for a comment, although his thumb/hand was up. It was difficult to tell if he was even actually visible to the speaker, who was an Asian male. It was nevertheless significant enough to notice.

Recommendations: It should be encouraged, but not mandated that all cameras remain on. Please keep in mind there may be attendees who have childcare duties or lack office space in their home, preventing them from keeping cameras on at all times. The following website provides guidance on how to manage power and privilege dynamics in virtual settings:

<https://aspirationtech.org/blog/virtualmeetingpowerdynamics>.

White Fragility

After the consultant conducted informal report-outs at several meetings, white folk inevitably responded with resistance. While most were pleasant, it was resistance



nonetheless. After making attendees aware of how white folk were guarding space, a participant went back and forth defending why they were standing. The consultant clarified the point was to illuminate who feels comfortable taking advantage of that freedom and not. The resistance continued even after the consultant explained standing and stretching wasn't the concern. There were other participants who later defended their need to move at other times during the meeting.

Recommendations: Perhaps there is a way folx can provide anonymous feedback.

Misc.

While the following did not fit neatly into any of the aforementioned trends, they are also significant:

3. During a conversation around hate speech via social media, there was more conversation around not upsetting dominant groups, instead of reaffirming a commitment to PC(USA)'s commitment to racial justice.
4. Be mindful of the images you use when discussing poverty. Avoid using stereotypical images (BIPOC folx, tethered clothing, etc.). During the video focusing on the homeless camp, the white savior narrative was perpetuated. Women were also stereotypically reflected as helpers and nurturers. In fact, only women were included in the video.
5. Current leadership may be masking more than meets the eye. Overt acts of power and privilege are more challenging to observe, because most will not openly challenge BIPOC folx within an organization committed to social justice. It can also provide a false sense of arrival, in terms of diversity, equity and inclusion. The organization still has racist roots, which deserves significant attention.
6. There was a clear shift in energy when PMAB and COGA were combined. It was rather chilly and tense.
 - o During a meeting, a white man told a white woman to answer a question in 30 sec or less. He seemed annoyed and uninterested in hearing her authentic truth.

I would also be remiss if I did not share my concern for the perceived lack of commitment to this work. While adequate resources were committed to this effort, the consultant was rarely provided details in advance, nor adequate guidance in several areas. There were many times where it was clear this effort was an afterthought. A few examples include:

1. When the consultant arrived at the initial site, there was absolutely no one there to greet her. Arrival was not warm and welcoming.
2. The Stony Point lodging (The Maple) was inadequate, in comparison to where others were housed. While the consultant does not require royal treatment, it was surprising to learn the difference in housing assignments for both the consultant and staff.
3. Consultant had to reach out to receive meeting details, as well as lodging and transportation details. It was unusual for this information not to be provided in advance. There were several changes in meetings schedules that the consultant was



informed of late, making it impossible for the consultant to accommodate the changes.

4. While I do not believe this was a situation where the consultant was intentionally disregarded, I think it was more of a reflection of this effort being an afterthought. It was almost as if it fell off the radar at every level.
5. The consultant was regularly left off the agenda, and then usually thrown on the agenda towards the end, after most participants had departed.
6. Seating had not been considered for the consultant. The consultant had to request seating onsite, which automatically limited the ability to be inconspicuous. Again, this was a direct reflection of the lack of intentionality around this work. I am not sure the Admin Asst. had enough information for this to even be a priority, which is likely not her fault. This is just what I gathered, although I am only pulling from what was observed. I make this distinction to ensure responsibility rests with the institution/leadership, instead of one particular individual.
7. Nobody was clear on permissions for the consultant, in terms of attendance at closed sessions, which was a missed opportunity. Power and privilege dynamics tend to run rampant in such settings.

It is also important to note that many of these concerns were expressed with minimal changes in several areas. There were no changes in prioritizing this work, in terms of being included on the agenda in meaningful ways.

In summary, PMAB is very hierarchal, all the way down to where folx are allowed to sit and when they are allowed to participate. As a result, power and privilege dynamics are engrained and inevitable. If PMAB is truly committed to disrupting power and privilege dynamics, it must be willing to acknowledge how deeply embedded hierarchies and tradition are in this organization. Holding onto tradition, in a way that the organization continues to operate business-as-usual, is in direct conflict with innovation, diversity, inclusion and justice. Included in the beginning of this report is a brief history of the Presbyterian community. Reflecting on that history, take note of what it means to hold onto that particular tradition, which is a system controlled by white supremacy. In essence, to hold onto tradition is to hold onto and perpetuate white supremacy. Tradition seems to guide practices, policies and procedures. Serious consideration needs to be given to maintaining tradition, particularly since there is a legacy of tradition that does not pair well with innovation and social justice. Instead, consider celebrating instead of maintaining all traditions.

It has been an absolute pleasure serving PMAB in this capacity. While this seems like a lot to digest, this is actually typical for an institution with a history directly tied to slavery and discrimination. Following are a few additional resources that may be useful for your team moving forward:

<https://interactioninstitute.org/power-dynamics-the-hidden-element-to-effective-meetings/>

https://aorta.coop/portfolio_page/anti-oppressive-facilitation/

https://www.racialequitytools.org/resourcefiles/power_privilege.pdf

Marian R. Vasser
Diversity, Equity and Inclusion Practitioner