

**Touchstones Faith in Action**

**In-Reach / Out-Reach / Justice-Making**

**Authority & Leadership**

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**1.0: Introduction**

While we often associate the sources of authority with tradition or legal examples where authority resides in the position, a third source of leadership is charismatic. Per Lumen Learning, “Not all authority figures are police officers, elected officials or government authorities. Besides formal offices, authority can arise from tradition and personal qualities. Economist and sociologist Max Weber realized this when he examined individual action as it relates to authority, as well as large-scale structures of authority and how they relate to a society’s economy. Based on this work, Weber developed a classification system for authority. His three types of authority are traditional authority, charismatic authority and legal-rational authority (Weber 1922).” Source: <https://courses.lumenlearning.com/alamo-sociology/chapter/reading-types-of-authority/> The following table is from Lumen Learning.

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| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Max Weber’s Three Types of Authority** | | | |
|  | **Traditional** | **Charismatic** | **Legal-Rational** |
| **Source of Power** | Legitimized by long-standing custom | Based on a leader’s personal qualities | Authority resides in the office, not the person |
| **Leadership Style** | Historic personality | Dynamic personality | Bureaucratic officials |
| **Example** | Patriarchy (traditional positions of authority) | Napoleon, Jesus Christ, Mother Teresa, Martin Luther King, Jr. | U.S. presidency and Congress, Modern British Parliament |

Charismatic authority is unique in that it is typically based in the personal qualities of a leader. Jay Alden Conger and Henry Kravis identified the following characteristics of leaders with charisma:

* Sensitivity to their environment and the needs of their …followers
* Articulate and visionary
* Inclined toward personal risk taking
* Adept at using unconventional behavior

Ronald E. Riggio writes that charismatic leaders are, “essentially very skilled communicators, individuals who are …verbally eloquent, but also able to communicate to followers on a deep, emotional level.”

The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was an archetype of a charismatic leader who combined powerful oratory with his engaging personality. His unwavering commitment to civil rights sought to bring about positive change in the lives of millions of people.

In a thoughtful journal article, *Martin Luther King, Jr: Charismatic Leadership in a Mass Struggle*, author Clayborne Carson suggests that the Great Man theory that has too often been used to understand King misses the reality. Carson notes the following

* “Emphasis on King's charisma obscures other important aspects of his role in the black movement.”
* “King did not receive and did not want the kind of unquestioning support that is often associated with charismatic leaders.”
* “King undoubtedly recognized that charisma was one of many leadership qualities at his disposal, but he also recognized that charisma was not a sufficient basis for leadership in a modern political movement enlisting numerous self-reliant leaders.”
* King “…rejected aspects of the charismatic model that conflicted with his sense of his own limitations…”
* … “Emphasis on King's charisma conveys the misleading notion of a movement held together by spellbinding speeches and blind faith rather than by a complex blend of rational and emotional bonds.”
* “King’s charisma did not place him above criticism.
* “King used charisma as a tool for mobilizing black communities, but he always used it in the context of other forms of intellectual and political leadership suited to a movement containing many strong leaders.”

(For the complete article see [https://swap.stanford.edu/20141218230000/http://mlk-kpp01.stanford.edu/kingweb/additional\_resources/articles/charisma.htm](https://swap.stanford.edu/20141218230000/http:/mlk-kpp01.stanford.edu/kingweb/additional_resources/articles/charisma.htm))

(Please note that in 1985, Mrs. Coretta Scott King selected Clayborne Carson, an African-American professor of history at Stanford University, to edit and publish the papers of her late husband. Carson has devoted most of his professional life to the study of Martin Luther King, Jr., and the movements King inspired.)

The success of the civil rights movement was found, in part, in the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965. King’s charisma both as a source of authority and as an empowering factor in his leadership helped lead to these two achievements. Terry Kershaw notes that King, “…would not have been successful if the social conditions were not ripe for [a] group movement.”

King’s focus began to broaden in 1964 to include a greater focus on poverty, and a growing concern about militarism. President Lyndon B. Johnson sought King’s support in January 1964 for his War on Poverty initiative when the national poverty rate was 19% (or 36.5 million). (In 2018, the poverty rate in the U.S. was 11.8%, affecting 38.1 million people.) Then, in August 1965, King publicly opposed the Vietnam War at a mass rally at the Ninth Annual Convention of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference in Birmingham.

Of note was King’s speech, “Beyond Vietnam,” delivered on April 4, 1967 to the National Emergency Committee of Clergy and Laymen Concerned about Vietnam at the Riverside Church in New York City. He demanded that the U.S. take new initiatives to end the war.

King was dismissive of Johnson’s multi-billion-dollar War on Poverty. In his speech, “The Other America,” delivered on March 10, 1968, King said, “Now, what we’ve got to do …is to attack the problem of poverty and really mobilize the forces of our country to have an all-out war against poverty, because what we have now is not even a good skirmish against poverty. I need not remind you that poverty, the gaps in our society, the gulfs between inordinate superﬂuous wealth and abject deadening poverty have brought about a great deal of despair, a great deal of tension, a great deal of bitterness. We’ve seen this bitterness expressed over the last few summers in the violent explosions in our cities.” King’s concern prompted him a few months earlier (December 1967) to publicly reveal his plans to organize a mass civil disobedience campaign, the Poor People's Campaign, to force the government to end poverty in Washington, D.C. Planning was interrupted by King’s death on April 4, 1968. The Poor People’s Campaign began in Washington, DC on Mother’s Day, May 12, 1968, when thousands of women led by Coretta Scott King, formed the first wave of demonstrators. The next day, Resurrection City, a temporary settlement of tents and shacks, began to form on the Washington Mall where protestors stayed until June 24, 1968 when the permit to use national park land expired.

King saw poverty connected to war, arguing that America would have been far better off spending the money for the Vietnam War on a real war on poverty in the U.S. In that same speech he said, “…I knew that America would never invest the necessary funds or energies in rehabilitation of its poor so long as adventures like Vietnam continued to draw men and skills and money like some demonic destructive suction tube. So, I was increasingly compelled to see the war as an enemy of the poor and to attack it as such.”

Joel Schwartz, in a 2002 journal article, wrote that, “as King went north and saw up close the emergence of the black underclass, he simply lost heart. Blacks in northern cities like Chicago, where he and his entourage started working in 1965, were far more demoralized and dysfunctional than southern blacks, King discovered. The moral influence of the black church was much weaker than in the South. Illegitimacy, welfare dependency, and criminality were more prevalent than in the South, with its much stronger bourgeois values. No longer, explains historian Christopher Lasch, did King address ‘a constituency that cared to hear about self-help, the dignity of labor, the importance of strong families.’ King’s associate Hosea Williams put it bluntly: ‘We’re used to working [in the South] with people who want to be freed.’”

It is important to note that the work took its toll on King. By 1968, as David Lewis writes, “…the strain and changing dynamics of the civil rights movement had taken a toll on King, especially in the final months of his life. ‘I’m frankly tired of marching. I’m tired of going to jail,” he admitted in 1968. “Living every day under the threat of death, I feel discouraged every now and then and feel my work’s in vain….’”

Clayborne Carson writes, King’s “… strategy of emphasizing nonviolent protest and interracial cooperation enabled him to fight effectively against the Southern system of legalized racial segregation and discrimination, but it …proved inadequate during his final years as he sought to overcome racial and economic problems that were national in scope.” This was especially the case as black militant leaders like Malcolm X increasingly called King’s approach into question. Malcolm X said, “Concerning nonviolence, it is criminal to teach a man not to defend himself when he is the constant victim of brutal attacks.”

The weakening of his charismatic authority was captured by the following by Dr. Vincent Harding who wrote, “And what about all the other folks ‘of good will’ who were eager to set the South straight, to use troops if necessary to show those ‘rednecks’ what this country is all about—they said—but who didn’t think there were any such problems in *their* community, North and white, and comfortable, and far from all those people whose hands you insisted on holding, and who might just have to get the troops on you if you got out of hand—in the North? Were you ready when they stopped holding and singing and giving and backed away and wondered out loud if you were qualified (meaning ready) to discuss foreign policy and national budgets and militarism and institutional racism and all the things only qualified white people (and crazy ‘militant’ people) talked about? Does it still hurt in the place where they/we backed off and left you exposed to the coming of the night?”

While there are limits to charismatic authority, King remains an exemplar of the power of effective, transformative leadership. We continue to remain in his debt.

**2.1: Observances**

**2.1.1:** *Martin Luther King, Jr. Day*—January 20, 2020

Observance of this day can emphasize the importance of authority and leadership in terms of what King achieved. As suggested below, you may want to focus on the issue of poverty.

**2.2: Activities & Resources**

**2.2.1:** *MLK Day Service Project*

“Everybody can be great, because everybody can serve. …You only need a heart full of grace, a soul generated by love.” Martin Luther King, Jr.

“Legislation was signed in 1983 creating a federal holiday marking the birthday of Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. This federal holiday was first observed in 1986.

“In 1994, Congress passed the King Holiday and Service Act, designating the Martin Luther King Jr. Federal Holiday as a national day of service and charged the Corporation for National and Community Service with leading this effort. Taking place each year on the third Monday in January, the MLK Day of Service is the only federal holiday observed as a national day of service – a ‘day on, not a day off.’”

**Consider designing and implementing a service project on MLK Day or the preceding Saturday.**

For resources visit the following websites:

Corporation for National and Community Service at <https://www.nationalservice.gov/mlkday>

Martin Luther King, Jr. Memorial

<https://www.nps.gov/mlkm/index.htm>

The Martin Luther King, Jr. Research and Education Institute at Stanford University at <https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/>

MLK Day Legacy of Service video (7:21)

Link to Video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?list=PLCCB28B2082C802BF&time_continue=3&v=PUdPxEn4vnM>

**2.2.2:** *Addressing Poverty*

King’s last planned civil rights action was the Poor People's Campaign. While some progress was made as a result of Johnson’s War on Poverty, poverty persists in America, as well as Canada and the rest of the world. In many ways the poor have no voice since political campaigns focus on the plight of the middle class and not the poor.

*Effects of Poverty on Society, Health, Children and Violence*

While this goes back to 2011, it is a thoughtful overview of the many effects of poverty. Poverties.org is an extensive website created by Dario Berrebi.

Link: <https://www.poverties.org/blog/effects-of-poverty>

*Outreach International – Five Ways to Fight Poverty*

Link: <https://outreach-international.org/blog/5-ways-to-fight-poverty/>

*Oxfam International*

Link: <https://www.oxfam.org/en/what-we-do/about>

*Poverty USA*

Link: <https://www.povertyusa.org/>

*Canada Without Poverty*

Link: <http://www.cwp-csp.ca/poverty/just-the-facts/>

*Who’*s *poor in America? 50 years into the ‘War on Poverty,’ a data portrait by Pew Research Center*, January 13, 2014

Link: <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2014/01/13/whos-poor-in-america-50-years-into-the-war-on-poverty-a-data-portrait/>

**2.2.3:** Poor People’s Campaign: A National Call for Moral Revival

The campaign was launched on December 4, 2017 by co-chairs Rev. Dr. William J. Barber II and Rev. Dr. Liz Theoharis fifty years to the day that Rev. Dr. King Jr. announced the first Poor People’s Campaign. See <https://time.com/5048917/poor-peoples-campaign-martin-luther-king/>. The UUA is a partner in this campaign. See <https://www.uua.org/racial-justice/poor-peoples-campaign>. In February 2018, Rev. Dr. Barber wrote *America’s Moral Malady* in the Atlantic to draw connections between King’s Poor People’s Campaign and the new campaign that he helped launch. See <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2018/02/a-new-poor-peoples-campaign/552503/>.

This new campaign offers a vehicle to work with others on poverty and other systemic problems. See <https://www.poorpeoplescampaign.org/>.