

A Learning Report
Power in Mission:
How Wycliffe Global Alliance Leaders Experience and Navigate Power

Prepared for Wycliffe Global Alliance
By Kirk J. Franklin

Executive Summary

This report synthesises survey responses from 25 leaders of Alliance Organizations and regional conversations from Africa, Asia-Pacific, the Americas, and Europe, exploring how leaders experience and navigate power in ministry relationships.

Across the Alliance, power is not understood primarily as authority, but as influence over resources, decisions, people, legitimacy and voice; all of which are shaped by culture and ethical commitments. Leaders consistently describe healthy power as stewardship of God's mission, expressed through humility, mutual respect and trust. Unhealthy power is most often associated with resource leverage, imposed conditions, disregard of local voices, blurred boundaries and competition or duplication.

At the same time, the findings reveal growing maturity across the Alliance, with a shift toward more horizontal, trust-based and intercultural collaboration. Leaders also recognise that power is multi-dimensional and widely distributed. It isn't limited to funding, but expressed through relationships, expertise, culture, language and spiritual influence.

Three findings stand out as particularly foundational:

1. *Funding as a power amplifier*: financial resources often shape influence, requiring intentional relational and structural balancing.
2. *Trust as a power-balancing practice*: presence, hospitality, language access and safe dialogue are not optional, but key mechanisms for equalising power.
3. *The stewardship-autonomy paradox*: the ongoing challenge of maintaining accountability, quality, ethical and financial management responsibility without undermining local authority.

In response, the report proposes practical tools that identify areas of concentrated power, along with a set of collaboration health indicators and actionable recommendations. These include clarifying decision rights and escalation pathways; normalising joint design and locally led implementation; strengthening peer feedback and accountability among Alliance Organisation leaders; creating

structured pathways for grassroots and underrepresented voices; and equipping leaders with cultural intelligence and conflict transformation skills.

Together, these insights point toward a shared task: not to eliminate power, but to steward it more faithfully; strengthening collaboration marked by trust, ethics, mutuality and shared participation in God's mission.

A Learning Report: Power in Mission

1. Purpose, Audience, and Scope

This report has two audiences in mind:

- 1) Alliance leadership (Global/Area), to support strategic learning and governance; and
- 2) Survey participants (and their organisations) and Regional Conversation participants, as a transparent feedback loop.

The analysis is based on extracts from a qualitative survey on power in mission, as well as on regional conversations on the same topic. The responses include reflections on positive and challenging power dynamics, cultural values that shape power, desired changes in the Alliance and follow-up topics.

This report synthesises leaders' experiences. It is not intended to be a statistical analysis of the Alliance, nor a statement on specific situations. Its purpose is to support shared learning by identifying key patterns, highlighting tensions and offering practical guidance for action.

2. Method and Approach

This report draws on responses from both surveys and regional conversations. The material was reviewed and grouped into key themes, examining how power is experienced in three main areas: spiritual (e.g., stewardship, humility shaped by Scripture), relational (trust, respect, presence), and structural (funding, decision-making, systems and accountability). Direct quotes are included to retain participants' voices and reflect real lived experience. From this, recurring patterns were identified across regions, including what helps power be used well and what tends to create tension or harm.

3. What Leaders Mean by 'Power'

Leaders describe power as both necessary for mission and risky when unchecked. It operates in four connected ways:

- *Structural*: control of funds, systems and decisions
- *Relational*: trust, respect and influence
- *Professional*: expertise, standards and capacity
- *Moral/ethical/spiritual*: Scripture-shaped identity, humility and servant leadership

Respondents frequently treat power as something that must be monitored. For example, one leader described partnership negotiations where both sides were

“proceeding carefully to detect any signs of abuse of power,” explicitly to keep “God’s mission first” (AMAS1). This signals an Alliance-wide awareness: Power is not assumed to be benign, even when intentions are good.

From the data, financial power is the most visible and contested. Leaders note that “money is a huge factor influencing power dynamics” and that “those with money have the upper hand. ... they often call the shots” (Europe). Similarly, “The one with power is the one with money, regardless of the needs or community request” (Americas). This often shapes whose voice is heard and whose priorities prevail.

However, power is not only financial. Relationships can rebalance power. Trust and friendship matter deeply, and in some cases, “people and relationships are more important than funds” (Europe). Yet culture shapes how power is perceived: “People from another culture attribute that power to us” (Europe), meaning intention and experience do not always align.

Capacity and expertise also carry influence. Larger organisations can “produce things with ease” (Americas), and dominant languages can exclude participation, as dominant languages “leave certain voices out” (Europe).

At the same time, leaders consistently point to spiritual power as a corrective. Scripture frames power as service, not control: “The exercise of power should be from a position of service” (Americas). Biblical themes of servanthood, humility and Christ-like leadership are frequently invoked (e.g., Mark 10:42; John 13; Phil. 2), reframing power as something to be relinquished or stewarded for others. In practice, this can take unexpected forms: In some cases, influence is expressed as “power released through prayer” (Europe). There is also growing recognition that power is shared across an ecosystem: “Everyone has some kind of power that is expressed in different ways” (Americas).

Overall, leaders see power as multi-dimensional and unavoidable, but something that must be intentionally stewarded, not assumed to be benign.

4. Positive and Constructive Power Dynamics

4.1 Cooperation replaces competition

Power works best when God’s mission is clearly in focus and aligned. In strong collaborations, shared purpose outweighs organisational interest. For example, one fellowship saw that “common vision and sense of urgency... ‘drowned’ all sense of competition and replaced [it] with cooperation” (APA3).

Healthy partnerships also emphasise complementarity, not hierarchy: “like two puzzle pieces,” where each contributes and “humility was prioritized” (AMAE1).

Regional conversations confirm a shift from dependency to shared contribution: “We can... be bigger together” (Americas). This reflects collaboration shaped by shared responsibility, not funding alone. However, this requires intentional effort. Where mission alignment is weak, duplication and competition re-emerge (Europe).

4.2 Trust-building

Relational practices are not optional; they reshape power. These include presence, hospitality, in-person visits and language access, all of which increase voice and reduce misunderstanding.

Trust takes time: “Friendship... goes beyond the details of a project. ... That’s where trust is built” (Europe). It requires ongoing effort, including sharing setbacks and navigating cultural differences.

Cultural perception also matters. Even when aiming for equality, “people from another culture attribute that power to us” (Europe). This means trust-building must include clear communication about roles and expectations. In the Americas, this is described as “power hospitality”, creating space for others’ voices within a diverse ecosystem where “we all need each other” (Americas).

4.3 Local ownership

A key positive pattern is local leadership with external stewardship, not control. In one case, local leaders set “their own goals and timelines,” while the donor oversaw funds without directing the work (AMAE2).

Regional insights show this often requires learning and adjustment. In Europe, imposed conditions led to tension until partnerships were restructured, sometimes through multiple funding partners, to restore balance. In another case, patience and dialogue helped external partners recognise “the importance of local ownership,” shifting the work to being seen as “their work” (Europe). In the Americas, this is increasingly intentional: Organisations are learning to “give up power for the sake of mission” and asking how each group can “use their power to serve” (Americas).

4.4 Tools and structures for healthy power

Structures such as audits, MOUs and development processes can strengthen partnerships when used with the right posture. For example, an audit helped identify strengths and gaps, leading to expanded work (AFA1). The crucial variable

is how they are used. When framed as mutual accountability and capacity-building, they are experienced positively. When imposed, they reinforce control.

Regional conversations highlight these essentials:

- *Clarity*: agreed roles and responsibilities (Americas)
- *Mutual agreement*: especially on accountability expectations (Americas)
- *Flexibility*: adapting to cultural and contextual realities (Europe)

Leaders also distinguish different types of partnership (alliance, pact, cooperation), each carrying different expectations of power and responsibility (Americas). Overall, healthy power dynamics emerge when mission is primary, trust is intentional, local agency is protected and structures are used relationally, not mechanically.

5. Where Power Dynamics Create Difficulty

5.1 Funding environments

The most consistent tension is the link between money and influence. Some partnerships drift toward compliance rather than trust, in what one respondent called a “yes man’ type environment” (AMAE1).

Across regions, this is clear: organisations dependent on funding are “de facto... dependent,” and “Those with money have the upper hand. ... They often call the shots” (Europe). In the Americas, “The one with the money feels like they have the power,” even when the contribution is small, and communities may assume funders are the decision-makers regardless of local need (Americas).

This can distort communication, with partners saying what funders want to hear rather than what is true. The result is alignment driven by necessity rather than shared discernment.

5.2 The stewardship-autonomy paradox

Leaders face a real tension: how to ensure accountability (staff care, finances, quality) without undermining local leadership. One leader asked how to act without creating a “mess from the West” (AMAE2).

Across regions, this is a lived challenge. Leaders want to acknowledge power while still “hear[ing] the other parts ... without retaliation” (Americas). At the same time, external expectations (reporting, timelines, systems) can feel like control when they don’t fit local realities (Europe). This is not just operational; it is relational and theological, touching dignity, trust and the integrity of local leadership.

5.3 Imposed conditions

Tension often arises when partners impose methods or conditions linked to funding or expertise. One case described “outrageous conditions” introduced late in a project, leading to its termination (AFA3).

Regional examples echo this. In Europe, funders “put conditions on the team” that ignored local realities, eventually causing the partnership to end. In another case, external approaches were pursued until local ownership was recognised (in Europe). Even well-intended frameworks can become controlling when they override context, leaving partners with “little choice” but to comply (AFA4).

5.4 Disregard of local voice

Power becomes harmful when people feel unseen or inferior. One organisation “saw itself as superior” and disregarded a local indigenous partner (AMAS4).

In the Americas, this reflects longer patterns: “expats providing funding, nationals organizing and indigenous people doing the work.” While shifting, this legacy still shapes expectations and relationships (Americas).

Indigenous leaders may experience external organisations “telling them what to do”, reinforcing marginalisation. Even attempts at equality can be misread due to cultural expectations (Europe). The key insight is how feeling unheard is itself a form of power harm, regardless of formal structure.

5.5 Boundary violations

Tension also arises when boundaries blur; partners become competitors or work is duplicated. Examples include overlapping initiatives, recruitment conflicts and organisations shifting roles over time.

Regional conversations confirm this. In Europe, projects are sometimes duplicated without coordination, particularly by dominant groups. In the Americas, denominational dynamics can lead to fragmentation and exclusivity, with organisations tending to work within their own denominational networks rather than collaborating across them. These are not just operational issues; they reflect deeper struggles over identity, territory and legitimacy.

5.6 Ownership

Conflicts also arise around credit and ownership. In one case, a partner sought “100% copyright ownership,” and the local organisation relinquished rights to maintain unity (AFA6).

Regional insights expand this: Power is reinforced when only financial contributions are recognised. Leaders asked how time, expertise and local knowledge can be “better recognised and appreciated” (Europe). At the same time, there is growing awareness that “everyone has some kind of power” (Americas). When systems fail to reflect this, tensions emerge over recognition and value. This highlights both the cost of servant leadership and a risk: humility and willingness to serve, when not accompanied by clear expectations, mutual accountability and recognition of each partner’s contribution, can result in some partners carrying disproportionate burdens or having their contributions undervalued.

6. Culture as a ‘Power Script’

Culture shapes how power is understood and expressed, who speaks, how disagreement is handled and what counts as authority. Power is not only exercised but also interpreted through cultural lenses. As one leader noted, “People from another culture attribute that power to us because that’s what their culture teaches them” (Europe).

6.1 Harmony and safe feedback

In some contexts, respect and harmony can limit direct feedback, leading to “silent disagreements” (APA2). This is reinforced across regions. Dependency and relational sensitivity can reduce honesty, especially where funding is involved (Europe). Leaders emphasise the need for spaces where people can speak “without retaliation” (Americas). Safe feedback is not automatic; it must be intentionally created.

6.2 Over-concentration of power

In times of crisis, there is often a tendency to look for strong leaders “to save us” (AMAS1). Regional conversations show how power can quickly centralise, especially when a single actor controls resources (e.g., the Americas). At the same time, leaders are asking how different groups can instead “use their power to serve” (Americas). A crisis can concentrate power. Therefore, leadership must pay attention and intentionally redistribute it.

6.3 Hierarchy and accountability

Respect for authority can stabilise, but also silence. Risks include treating seniority as unquestionable or allowing leadership to drift into domination. Hierarchy is

shaped not only by age, but by size, funding and expertise. For example, organisational scale influences perceived authority (Europe) and historical patterns: “expats... nationals... indigenous people” still shape expectations (Americas). An insight is that hierarchy is not the problem; the lack of accountability is.

6.4 Relationship-first cultures

In many contexts, relationships come before tasks. When this is ignored, power is experienced as misuse. Trust takes time: “friendship... goes beyond the details of a project” (Europe). Where relationships are weak, imposed expectations (funding, reporting, methods) feel controlling. In some cases, this has led to partnership breakdown (Europe). Similar tensions arise where work is introduced without collaboration, leading to resistance or duplication (Americas).

How decisions are made matters as much as what is decided. Culture acts as a “power script,” shaping both behaviour and perception. Healthy partnerships require cultural intelligence, relational sensitivity and ongoing dialogue, not just structural fixes.

7. Change Wanted

Leaders affirm the Alliance’s move toward more horizontal, trust-based partnerships. At the same time, they recognise that progress is uneven and they are asking how to make it more consistent in practice.

7.1 Deepen trust with role clarity

Power is increasingly “more horizontal... a good thing” (AMAS4). Leaders note healthier collaboration: “We used to just receive, but now... it is much healthier” (Americas). But trust takes time: “Friendship... goes beyond the details of a project” (Europe) and requires intentionality. At the same time, horizontality without clarity creates confusion. Trust-based relationships need to be developed and practised, with clear roles, responsibilities and expectations.

7.2 Reducing funding leverage

Leaders consistently ask that funds not be used as leverage and that no single organisation becomes the “make-or-break” actor (AMAE3). Regions echo this concern. Money still shapes power, sometimes making relationships feel transactional; valued only “as long as we have money to contribute” (Europe). There is a clear shift toward shared contribution: “We can ... be bigger together” (Americas). This speaks to a shift from dependency to interdependence, both financial and non-financial.

7.3 Strengthen underrepresented voices

Leaders want more direct input from local communities, field staff and underrepresented groups. “Nothing about us without us” is the clear direction. Regional conversations highlight gaps: indigenous communities may still be told what to do or excluded from decisions (Americas). There is also a call to value local knowledge and lived experience, not just funding (Europe). Structured ways are needed for local voices to shape decisions, not just be consulted.

7.4 Increase accountability

There is an appetite among leaders for more direct, formative feedback. This must be done carefully. Leaders call for “no polarization, no power struggles” and spaces where concerns can be raised “without retaliation” (Americas). Honesty and relational accountability are needed to build trust, not defensiveness.

7.5 Equipping leaders

Leaders are asking for practical support in navigating cross-cultural power, conflict and funder relationships. Regional insights highlight the complexity of working across cultures and systems, and the need to understand different worldviews within a shared mission: “We all need each other” (Americas). Beyond just training, formation is needed: developing cultural intelligence, relational maturity and theological grounding. Leaders are not trying to remove power, but to reshape it toward mutuality, service and shared participation in God’s mission.

8. An Alliance ‘Partnership Power Scan’

Power in partnerships tends to concentrate in five key areas. These can serve as checkpoints for design and review:

1. Money and funding (stewardship and leverage)
2. Decision rights (who sets priorities and methods)
3. People and care (HR, supervision, certification)
4. Expertise and standards (training, frameworks, quality)
5. Legitimacy and ownership (credit, voice, representation)

Regional conversations confirm these areas and show how they play out in practice.

- Money remains the most visible power. “Those with money have the upper hand” (Europe), and “The one with the money feels like they have the power” (Americas). Financial flows must therefore be managed not just as stewardship, but as power.
- Decision-making often follows resources. Control of funding, systems or frameworks can leave others with “little choice” but to align (Europe), even when local readiness or priorities differ (Americas).

- People and care create layered authority. Different roles—expatriates, national leaders, indigenous communities—bring overlapping responsibilities that require clarity and relational sensitivity (Americas).
- Expertise is also power. Larger organisations can “produce things with ease” (Americas), and external frameworks can override local knowledge if not adapted (Europe).
- Legitimacy goes beyond ownership. Power includes who has a voice and representation. “Everyone has some kind of power” (Americas), not just those with funding or expertise.

These domains are interconnected and shaped by culture. For example, language can “leave certain voices out” (Europe), affecting both participation and legitimacy. Partnerships struggle when one party controls these areas without agreement. They thrive when these are clearly discussed, shared and regularly reviewed. Healthy partnerships move from dependency to interdependence: sharing responsibility, valuing all contributions and stewarding power together for God’s mission.

9. ‘Partnership Health Indicators’

The responses point to practical indicators that can guide partnership reviews, MOUs and leadership conversations:

- Mission alignment: Shared purpose outweighs organisational self-interest. When mission is primary, competition reduces; partners can “be bigger together” (Americas). When it is not, duplication and fragmentation emerge (Europe).
- Decision clarity: Decision rights are explicit. Clear agreements (often through MOUs) prevent confusion. Without them, decisions default to those with funding or structural power (Americas).
- Mutual contribution: All contributions are recognised, not just funding. Leaders emphasise valuing time, expertise and local knowledge (Europe), moving toward shared contribution rather than dependency (Americas).
- Trust practices: Relationships are intentionally built. Trust takes time: “Friendship takes time” (Europe) and requires presence, hospitality, language access and safe dialogue. “Power hospitality” creates space for others’ voices (Americas).
- Accountability with dignity: Systems support learning, not control. Accountability works best when mutually agreed and culturally appropriate, rather than imposed (Americas; Europe).
- Boundary protection: Roles and mandates are clear. Early clarity helps prevent duplication, competition and fragmentation (Europe; Americas).

- Voice and representation: Those affected shape decisions. Local and indigenous voices must be present and influential: “Nothing about us without us.” Without this, communities are excluded (Americas).
- Conflict pathways: Safe and clear processes exist. Healthy partnerships include ways to address tension openly without “power struggles” or retaliation (Americas).

Overall, these are not ideals but practical conditions. Collaboration thrives when these efforts are intentionally designed, regularly reviewed and sustained by a commitment to relationships.

10. Recommendations

10.1 Standardise a ‘Power Conversation’

Name power early in every partnership. A simple, structured conversation during formation and renewal that covers the ‘Power Map’ domains can surface assumptions and prevent conflict. Leaders emphasise this is “very helpful” (Americas), especially across cultures where power is perceived differently (Europe). It also opens deeper questions about how power should be understood and exercised.

10.2 Use a ‘Decision Charter’

Many tensions come from unclear authority. A brief charter attached to collaboration agreements can clarify what is local, what is shared or what is required by funders and how disputes are handled. Without this clarity, decisions default to those with structural power (Americas, Europe). In other words, the purpose is clarity, not bureaucracy. Clarity provides a safeguard against assumed control.

10.3 Create pathways for underrepresented voices

Leaders want more than consultation; they want participation in decision-making. This requires intentional structures (e.g., facilitated forums, clear speaking rights, feedback loops), along with practical enablers such as language access. Without this, key voices remain excluded, especially local and indigenous communities (Americas; Europe). The guiding principle is that representation must be designed and not assumed.

10.4 Strengthen accountability

There is an appetite among leaders for more direct, formative feedback. This could take the form of regular partnership health conversations, with support from Area leadership when needed. However, this must be relationally wise, avoiding “power

struggles” and enabling honest feedback “without retaliation” (Americas). In other words, accountability should be both courageous and relational.

10.5 Equip leaders

Leaders need practical help to navigate cross-cultural power, conflict, and funder relationships. This includes understanding different cultural “power scripts,” building organisational capacity and recognising that “we are part of an ecosystem where we all need each other” (Americas). The focus is on formation: not just skills, but how power is understood and practised.

10.6 Establish guardrails

Clear guardrails (e.g., rules, limits or guidelines) can prevent funding from becoming a form of control. These include joint design, local leadership in implementation, transparency around conditions and regular review with local input. Regional insights show that without this, funding can distort relationships or impose unrealistic expectations (Europe; Americas). The goal is to ensure stewardship serves mission without dominating it. The aim is not to remove power, but to steward it well, building partnerships marked by trust, mutuality and shared participation in God’s mission.

11. Further Dialogue

Respondents identified areas for continued Alliance-wide learning:

- Donor–receiver dynamics: how financial stewardship can coexist with shared leadership and interdependence
- Cultural intelligence and power scripts: how culture shapes authority, communication and participation
- Conflict resolution: developing non-polarising ways to address tension and restore relationships
- Women’s participation: strengthening pathways for inclusion in Bible translation movements
- Succession and transition: recognising leadership change as a power issue
- Power mapping: understanding internal and external power structures

Regional conversations deepen and extend these priorities:

- Types of power: What different kinds and bases of power exist? (Europe)
- Beyond financial contribution: how to recognise time, expertise, and local resources (Europe)
- Dependency and interdependence: addressing how funding shapes behaviour and initiative (Europe)

- Diplomacy in power dynamics: “no polarization, no power struggles” (Americas)
- Partnership models: how alliance, pact, and cooperation shape expectations of power (Americas)
- Ecosystem awareness: recognising interdependence across diverse actors: “We all need each other” (Americas)
- Local ownership: ensuring decision-making genuinely resides with local actors (Europe)
- Theology of power: What is God’s perspective on power versus secular assumptions? (Europe)

Overall, leaders call for deeper, more nuanced and theologically grounded engagement with power that moves from critique toward shared learning and transformation.

12. Conclusion

The survey reveals an Alliance with growing maturity: leaders increasingly name power explicitly, value humility and mutuality, and affirm a shift toward more horizontal partnership. Regional conversations confirm this trajectory, highlighting movement toward intercultural collaboration, shared contribution and a willingness to “give up power for the sake of mission” (Americas).

At the same time, persistent asymmetries (e.g., unequal or unbalanced), especially in funding, decision rights, organisational capacity and standards, continue to generate tension. Financial power remains the most concentrated, with recognition that “those with money have the upper hand” (Europe), shaping voice and decisions, often unintentionally. These dynamics are further complicated by cultural “power scripts,” where authority is interpreted differently across contexts.

Leaders also recognise that power is more widely distributed than assumed, extending beyond money and formal authority to relationships, expertise, culture, language and spiritual influence. As noted, “Everyone has some kind of power... expressed in different ways” (Americas), opening possibilities for more mutual and interdependent partnerships.

The way forward is not to eliminate power, but to steward it faithfully in Christ-like ways:

- Making power explicit through ongoing conversation;
- Building trust and friendship as essential infrastructure;
- Protecting and empowering local agency;

- Valuing diverse forms of contribution;
- Strengthening voice, representation and accountability; and
- Developing cultural and theological capacity to navigate power.

Ultimately, the invitation is to reimagine power not as something to hold, but as something to share and express through service within an interdependent global body.

These insights are a gift to the Alliance, revealing both progress and ongoing challenge. They call leaders to continued learning—practically, relationally and theologically—so that power becomes not a barrier, but a means of serving God’s mission with integrity, humility and shared participation.