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Seeking God's will: the experience of information seeking by leaders of a church in transition

Abstract: I explored the perspectives of leaders of churches in transition seeking to answer the question "what is God's will for our church?" This is significant because religious information seeking has received little attention. Issues arising were feelings of frustration, the impact of digital media, and the role of prayer.

Résumé : J'ai exploré le point de vue des dirigeants religieux d'églises en transition cherchant à répondre à la question : « Quelle est la volonté de Dieu pour notre église? ». Cette étude est importante, car la recherche d'information en contexte religieux n'a reçu que très peu d'attention. Les enjeux observés comprennent le sentiment de frustration, l'impact des médias numériques et le rôle de la prière.

1. Problem

This study explores the question "what are the information seeking experiences of lay and ordained leaders of churches in transition, as they seek to determine 'what is God's will for our church?'" Churches in transition are churches that are engaged in intentional processes of restructuring or renewal, which may prompt significant information seeking. Three sub-questions are:

1. How do they perceive the information sources they choose to access?
2. How do they determine the value and usefulness of information they gather?
3. How do they believe communication technologies have changed the information activities tied to the process of seeking God's will?

The question of the "will of God" addresses concerns in the congregation around the overall vision and mission of the religious organization. Discerning God's purpose for their lives can have significant importance for evangelical Christians, as they desire to accomplish something significant for Christ (Kovach 1999).

2. Literature

This study is informed by a constructivist approach and Dervin's Sense-Making theory that focuses on the individual's experience actively constructing meaning in his/her life contexts. This study considers non-work or everyday life information seeking (ELIS) activities recognizing that information seeking is not always task directed but information is routinely discovered in the course of daily life (Wilson, 1977). Two models of ELIS that I found useful are Savolainen's (1995), around the concepts of "way of life" and "mastery of life", and McKenzie's (2002) which extends the discussion of passive monitoring and active seeking. One significant limitation in the HIB literature is the lack of research into ELIS in the social context of a religious community. Studies of religious HIB have considered clergy information seeking (Wicks, 1996, 1999; Roland, 2007) and religious scholars (Michels, 2006). Religious information use has been identified in well known studies such as Harris & Dewdney's (1994) study of battered women where clergy were information sources, and in Chatman's studies (1992, 1996) where informants used information sources such as religious books, television and radio. In a study of

“information grounds”, Fisher, Landry & Naumer (2006) noted that several respondents indicated that church was an important context for unexpectedly encountering useful information. Kari and Hartel (2007) have theorized that HIB research has focused largely on problem solving activities rather than the “higher things of life” such as questions about ethics, the meaning of life, the supernatural, spirituality and religion, values and higher needs and volunteerism. As HIB research has not yet considered religious contexts in any depth, I am drawing on sociology of religion literature, especially the interpretive approaches of Weber (1968) and Geertz (1973) where religion gives meaning to the experiences of life. My study cannot ignore the role that media and new media play in finding spiritual purpose and identity. Hoover (2003), when considering the importance of media, suggested that the purpose of religious information gathering is identity construction. This idea is also picked up in Clark’s (2002) research on identity, media and the “funky” side of religion, and in Linderman & Lövheim’s (2003, 2005) research on religion and the internet. The America Online Pew study has found that 64% of U.S. internet users have gone online to do things related to religious or spiritual matters (Hoover, Clark, and Rainie, 2004). Although research has begun to present a picture of what religious users are doing online (Larsen, 2001; Helland, 2002; Madden, 2004), the perceived significances of these activities as information gathering events needs further examination. Campbell (2006) in reviewing the literature found that most research on religion, internet and identity has focused on minority religious groups and called for more broader research. Online practices raise new questions regarding the roles of religious authority that still need to be explored (Campbell, 2007, 2010).

3. Methods

I used ethnographic methodologies (Spradley, 1979, 1980; Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007; Dubois, 2005) and methods developed for congregational study (Ammerman, 1998, 2007) to gather my data. For this study, I developed three recruitment criteria: 1) the congregation must be activity engaged in a restructuring or re-visioning process, 2) it must be stable enough to ensure the data collection can be completed, and 3) it must be willing to allow a significant degree of access to congregational and leadership life. Three congregations were approached and one was selected for study. This congregation is in the conservative evangelical Christian tradition. I share many of the religious beliefs of this congregation, and I have wrestled with the question of the will of God personally and as a church leader. This creates the potential for researcher bias, but also allowed me to be an active participant of the pilot study congregation during then period the data was collected. As a result, I was given access to significant demographic and historical information compiled during the church restructuring process. A survey of the information assets and activities of the church was conducted using blogs, websites, audio, video and photographic records. Individual interviews were conducted with the five church governance team members to understand their task through their eyes. A church governance team meeting was observed and audio recorded. Field notes from these meeting were also taken to assist in the analysis of the data. Data were coded using HyperResearch software, but analyzed manually using a grounded theory approach (Glaser and Strauss, 1967).

4. Findings

It was found in the pilot phase that an ethnographic methodology was able to generate rich data from the perspectives of the participants. Full participant observation allowed greater access. The faith position of these informants leads them to believe that finding an answer to their question “what is the will of God” is achievable but they feel frustration when the answer eludes them. Pilot phase data suggest that participants continue to value traditional types of information (Bible, religious books, personal experience, local church

history) but many leaders are increasingly comfortable using other forms of information (surveys, secular marketing materials, digital media, web 2.0). Leaders were found to both use and produce digital information in a reflexive manner. Although valued by many participants, the use of digital media was also perceived to be creating challenges for decision-making, and perhaps compounding generational differences. The data suggest that respondents were more restrictive when selecting information sources for their leadership role than for personal faith building. Prayer, as either an information source or means of evaluation of information, also plays a significant role for leaders. Prayer, as an information source, has both cognitive and affective elements and poses a challenge for integration into existing information models. Criteria of usefulness, convenience and authoritativeness were found to be important in evaluating information as well as a criterion of orthodoxy.

5. Implications

The use of ethnographic methods has provided very rich data for further analysis and preliminary analysis has begun to sketch a picture of this neglected information context. The pilot data are preliminary, but are raising questions about the ability of current IS models to incorporate belief based information activities such as prayer. I propose that prayer may play similar a similar role as people information sources, yet this may be dependent on specific religious contexts. The impact of new forms of digital information needs to be further explored.