Virtual Faith-Based Organizations: Assessing Their Significance, Strengths, And Limitations

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Abstract
In a technologically advancing, globally interconnected society, organizations have become more interconnected in the 21st century. This is largely due to the widespread use of digital technology to conduct what were once normal operations in virtual environments. Faith-based organizations have sought to leverage the benefits of digital technology to enhance their operations. The purpose of this research is to examine the strengths and limitations that virtual environments and technology offer for faith-based organizations.
Keywords: *Organization, Faith-based, Virtual, Change, Strengths, Advantages*

I.   Introduction

In a technologically advancing, globally interconnected society, organizations have become more interconnected in the 21st century. This is largely due to many organizations' use of digital technology, such as the internet, to conduct what were once normal operations in virtual environments. The Information Age and the use of the Internet have permeated all facets of life, including faith-based organizations. Religious organizations, including churches and schools, have, not without challenges, acquiesced in the potential benefits of virtual technology for their organizations. Christian places of worship and higher education institutions hold organizational beliefs and values that heavily emphasize the physical interconnectedness of their aggregation. However, recent events, such as the 2019-2020 pandemic, have forced many organizations to adopt digital technology. This occurrence directly impacted faith-based organizations, as it did most other organizations, and prompted a reevaluation of virtual engagements. Lessons are being learned, and practices are being implemented by incorporating digital and virtual enhancing technologies. Faith-based organizations are using these technological advancements to conduct operations and recognize some of the benefits of virtual interconnectedness. The virtual environment afforded by digital technology has advantages and disadvantages for faith-based organizations.

Description of Virtual Faith-based Organizations

When describing virtual organizations, there are debates over whether they are real organizations or merely an extension or capability of conventional organizations. To avoid engaging in that contentious topic, this article defines virtual organizations as "multisite, multiorganizational, and dynamic" (Snow, Lipnack, & Stamps, 1999). The "dynamic" attribute of virtual organizations is based on the "unconventional social configurations whose structures and functions are highly dependent on computer-based information technology" (Mowshowitz, 1997, p. 48). A distinctive characteristic of virtual organizations is that their functionality transcends spatial, temporal, and conventional organizational boundaries (Mowshowitz, 1997; Snow, Lipnack, & Stamps, 1999). Virtual organizations are facilitated by networks generated across digital and computer technology.

Virtual faith-based organizations fall within the aforementioned parameters and descriptions of virtual organizations in general. Virtual faith-based organizations include online churches or multisite churches that have an online component, faith-based institutions of higher learning, etc. Essentially, virtual faith-based organizations are internet-based Christian groups that use various information technology platforms to pursue a range of religious goals (Hutchings, 2010). They can operate asynchronously and synchronously, using purely technological or conventional methods, without time or spatial constraints. Particularly, internet churches (also known as online churches, E-church, or virtual churches) conduct worship, teach, preach, proselytize, fellowship, dialogue, and mutually support one another through virtual environments such as streaming video, social media, chatrooms, forums, and blogs (Hutchings, 2010).

Organizational Culture, Structure, and Leadership

The structures and forms of leadership in faith-based organizations differ significantly from those in business and for-profit organizations. The mission and goals of faith-based organizations are distinct from those of other types of organizations. These missions and goals remain distinct and consistent in virtual environments. These differences are largely due to the types of products and services that faith-based organizations offer compared with those offered by businesses. The products of transformed lives and ministry/charitable services are unique to faith-based organizations. Faith-based organizations use a leadership and division-of-labor structure similar to many non-profit organizations, yet distinct from for-profit or business organizations. Faith-based organizations rely heavily on volunteers in their division of labor and organizational structure to carry out their mission and conduct operations. Despite the use of volunteers, some leaders in these organizations are typically compensated.

As a result of the 2019-2020 pandemic, faith-based organizations were compelled to adopt and adapt to virtual operations. The mission, product, and services remain mostly unchanged; however, the events pressured many of these organizations to conduct conventional operations in new, technology-driven ways. The structure and division of labor in these organizations were significantly impacted. Hutchings (2010) acknowledges that before the pandemic, it was common amongst certain online churches, i.e., the Cathedral and Church Online, to "take care to follow theologically and socially acceptable patterns of organization" (p. 72). The hierarchical structure is common in many faith-based organizations. This type of organizational structure creates stability and control within the organization. Certain trends surfaced early on with the advent of virtual organizations and have recently resurfaced, increasingly, in virtual faith-based organizations. Job responsibilities and authority structures shifted to promote workable operations necessitated by the virtual environment (Mowshowitz, 1997). The once conventional hierarchical stability and control of leadership were now behind the scenes in a virtual environment. In most faith-based organizations, only senior leadership and/or select representatives were visible through digital and computer-based technologies. With faith-based organizations operating virtually, their organizational structures and management actions are not directly observable in practice. The focus remains on and intensifies the work of clergy (i.e., pastors) in a virtual environment, while the work of the laity decreases or becomes unobservable. Pastors should continue to use internet platforms, but they should also create a well-rounded communication plan for their ministry (Naidoo, Israel, & Naidoo, 2021).

Strengths of Virtual for Faith-based Organizations

Advancements in technology throughout the years have positively contributed to the organization's success. Faith-based organizations may be considered late adopters in many ways in their use of computer-based technology in a virtual capacity. Whether compulsory or not, these faith-based organizations have begun to operate virtually and, as a result, have enjoyed some of the benefits. While some faith-based constituents maintain that virtual operations inhibit authentic connections, which they consider fundamental to their organizations, they do not deny the internet's capabilities.

Global Interconnection

The general advantage of virtual technology is the ability for organizations to be globally interconnected beyond physical, spatial, and temporal barriers (Foltz & Foltz, 2003; Mowshowitz, 1997; Snow, Lipnack, & Stamps, 1999). This is an advantage for all organizations or users who utilize the internet. For faith-based organizations, this advantage produces numerous positive outcomes. For one, it potentially increases the cultural diversity of the aggregate. It also enables faith-based organizations to expand the reach of their ministry and operations, such as missions and evangelism, to a wider demographic. Virtual operations facilitate connections among individuals, small groups, and unitary local churches to the larger global Christian community. In 2025, the Global Church met for 25 hours, gathered in local churches and venues, and connected with the world across digital platforms. The global Church itself told the story and purpose of the worldwide Church during the historic and free 25-hour global broadcast event known as "Gather25." The goal is to reach the world effectively and cooperatively, and to have the 2.5 billion believers worldwide come together in prayer and worship (Gather25, 2025). This event demonstrates that virtual communities are more than just group chats. They serve as gathering places where people exchange ideas and learn from one another (Hayes, 2020). For example, websites can be extensions of local churches/communities where "regional and national traditional church bodies provide this kind of service by offering information, official statements, help for congregational life, and aids in finding a local congregation near you" (Foltz & Foltz, 2003, p. 326).

Efficient Communication

Virtual technology enables people and organizations to connect and communicate with others. It allows people to engage by sharing ideas in learning and ministry. The Internet's ability to facilitate communication is an advantage for all organizations. Faith-based organizations are no exception because virtual technology can

facilitate more effective communication in ministry. Given that virtual technology is not limited by space or time, faith-based organizations operating virtually can communicate and share information anytime, day or night, and any day of the year. The global reach of virtual technology enables faith-based organizations to communicate in almost any language through translation to people from diverse national, ethnic, and multicultural backgrounds (Snow, Lipnack, & Stamps, 1999). The byproduct advantages of no restrictions on time and distance are the speed and flexibility that virtual environments offer. Snow, Lipnack, and Stamps (1999) claim, "The mantra of the dynamic network organization is 'anything, anytime, anywhere,' and these organizations are dedicated to conducting their business efficiently, effectively, and quickly" (p. 3).

Engage Dislocated Persons

Virtual technology addresses the problem of traditional organizations, where those who are unable to physically gather can benefit from the organization (Russell, 2016). The elderly and disabled persons are just two examples of deserving constituents who are limited in their ability to physically gather in the community and congregations of faith-based organizations (Baker et al., 2013; Kahn, 2000). Virtual technology enables people with disabilities and the elderly to overcome barriers in daily living. "The incarcerated, ex-convicts and their families, the differently-abled, homebound, residents of nursing homes, rehabilitation and adult living facilities, hospice patients, and those who fear attending brick and mortar church" are other potential constituents that may benefit from virtual engagements of faith-based organizations (Russel, 2016, p. vi). Holden et al.'s (1999) study shows that a virtual environment helps link hospitalized children with others in a virtual community. Moreover, there has been increased interest among many people in connecting with organizations online. A significant number of church attendees have not focused on expressing their faith solely through Sunday Christianity or religious institutions, but instead opt to come together in real time online (Schafer, 2020). Connecting these dislocated populations and constituents is advantageous for many reasons to compassionate, mission-serving faith-based organizations.

Lower Costs

Another advantage of virtual faith-based organizations is the associated lower or nonexistent expenses. "Variants of virtual organization facilitated by computer-communications technology offer an economic advantage that will not be denied" (Mowshowitz, 1997, p. 25). In many cases, there are no or minimal overhead costs for constituents meeting at facilities such as church buildings, whereas the associated utility expenses in a virtual environment are higher. This applies to most virtual organizations and is particularly beneficial to faith-based organizations that operate on charitable contributions from their constituents. "Virtual organization can increase efficiency, lower production costs, and improve the coordination and control of functions" (Mowshowitz, 1997, p. 50).

Limitations of Virtual for Faith-based Organizations

While the benefits of virtual technology are many, there are some lingering disadvantages for faith-based organizations. Most of these disadvantages stem from whether virtual technology can offer "real" connections for faith-based constituents. A major potential negative byproduct of virtual organization is the unfulfillment of organizational beliefs, values, mission, and goals. This contention has been held by many faith-based constituents who have resisted technology and viewed it as a rival to faith. "The political and technological structure of the Internet prevents the church from fully proclaiming the gospel through it" (Jenson,1987; Jenson, 1995, p. 161). Other faith-based constituents view the internet's connections as superficial and "undermining unconditional commitments" (Dreyfus, 2001). Boggs & Fields (2010) argue that the church considers success as commitment and concern for people. Pettigrew (1979) argues that organizations generate commitment and purpose through ideology and beliefs, which are components of organizational culture. As aforementioned, some do not believe virtual technology is conducive to this type of commitment and concern. The potential lack of genuine commitment and connection threatens a faith-based organization's values, mission, and goals.

Other Disadvantages

There are various other disadvantages associated with the lack of face-to-face encounters or the physical connectedness that comes with meeting locally. There is a potential decrease in the impact of ministry practices such as discipleship. Practices such as discipleship often involve, in the traditional sense, face-to-face engagements. Arguably, in these types of engagements, physical social interaction is necessary to convey spiritual truths, lessons, and conduct. Such experiences require physical presence and interaction. An analogy would be that you can not build a physical house on the internet; similarly, certain aspects of Christian building require physical social interaction. New converts and the laity of faith-based organizations may need physical social interaction to best learn the organization's norms, values, practices, and code of conduct. There is a possibility of social, psychological, and emotional issues arising from a lack of physical interconnectedness (Boggs & Fields,

2010). An additional social issue is the challenge of building trust between people within the organization (Kasper-Fuehrrera & Ashkanasy, 2001). Trust is paramount in faith-based organizations, where life transformation results from relationships among Deity, organizational leaders, and constituents. Visual and auditory cues of individuals are lacking in virtual engagements, and emotional authenticity is often difficult to determine (Connelly & Turel, 2016). Lack of "real" experiences, such as face-to-face seeing and hearing, hugging, and shaking hands with pastors and congregants, is a challenge for virtual faith-based organizations.

Another possible disadvantage is the loss of revenue for these organizations. A concern exists that decreased in-person connections will decrease constituents' desire and opportunities to support the organizations. This largely applies to churches whose revenue is largely generated by voluntary giving from attendees (Dzirasa-Payne, 2024). This is the primary means by which churches generate revenue through congregants' tithes, offerings, and donations. This issue can be partly mitigated through either the low-cost alternative of augmenting traditional gatherings with virtual options.

II. Conclusion

This article sought to highlight some of the advantages and disadvantages that a virtual environment offers for faith-based organizations. While the advantages and disadvantages discussed in this article are not exhaustive, there is compelling evidence for faith-based organizations to utilize virtual technology in many capacities. Many faith-based constituents, until recently, were reluctant and/or resistant to virtual technology; however, given the widespread use of the internet and the advent of particular events such as 9-11 and the recent pandemic, many are completely on board with online. Most traditional faith-based operations and ministry practices translate online, and going virtual does not in the least affect core theology or practice. Core practices such as preaching, teaching, and evangelism have in the past been facilitated through various media beyond the local church, such as radio and television. The internet is the prevailing medium of choice for many in the 21st century and offers faith-based organizations the opportunity to reach a global community. The Christian community remains firm in its belief in the value and usefulness of the local churches, but sees an increasingly complementary value in becoming more virtual.

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