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Seeking God's Will: The Experience of Information Seeking by Leaders of a Church in Transition

À la recherche de la volonté de Dieu : L'expérience de recherche d'information des dirigeants d'une Église en transition

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Abstract: What is the experience of information seeking (IS) by leaders of a church in transition, as they seek the will of God for their church? In this ethnographic pilot study, I begin to create a picture of leaders' information seeking, first for personal faith building and then for corporate decision making, and I consider the impact of new technologies on these processes. Religious IS did not differ significantly from other everyday-life information seeking (ELIS) experiences, except when subjects were acting in leadership roles. Prominent themes were theological diversity and prayer.

Keywords: information seeking, leadership, religion

Résumé : Quelle est l'expérience de recherche d'information des dirigeants d'une église en transition, tandis qu'ils sont en quête de la volonté de Dieu pour leur église ? Dans cette étude ethnographique pilote, je tente d'élaborer une image de la recherche d'information des dirigeants, d'abord pour l'édification de leur foi personnelle, puis pour leurs prises de décisions corporatives, et j'examine l'impact des nouvelles technologies sur ces processus. La recherche d'information religieuse ne diffère pas significativement des expériences de recherche d'information de la vie quotidienne, sauf dans les rôles de leadership. Les thèmes importants ont été la diversité théologique et la prière.

Mots-clés : recherche d'information, religion, leadership

Introduction

How can I find the will of God? Where do I seek the divine heart and mind? I have sought to answer those questions personally and as a church leader. In this pilot ethnographic study, I explored how others seek to answer these questions through an examination of their information-seeking behaviour. A survey of Christian pastoral literature in the ATLA Religion Database suggested this is important to many Canadian Christians, particularly evangelicals. Kovach (1999, 2) proposed, "Seeking to know the will of God may reflect a desire to be accountable to Christ with a profound concern to accomplish something significant for Christ and his kingdom." He argued that the wealth of literature on finding the will of God is evidence of a preoccupation dating back to the

1960s. My own survey (conducted January 15–17, 2009) of materials from the last decade on “God’s will” found 60 books published in Canada, 800 videos on the website GodTube, and 150 podcasts on iTunes.

Seeking God’s will can be very personal and, therefore, difficult to study. I chose to study a more public process: the information seeking (IS) of church leaders tasked with seeking the will of God for their churches. I selected leaders of churches in transition, assuming they would be highly motivated. In this study, churches in transition are congregations that are engaged in intentional processes of restructuring or re-visioning. The catalysts for change can be either intrinsic or extrinsic. How these leaders resolve the question of God’s will for their church will ultimately direct the church’s engagement in the public square. The goals of this pilot study were (1) to determine the effectiveness of ethnography for exploring religious IS; (2) to begin to sketch a picture of leadership IS; and (3) to identify themes for exploration in a larger, multi-site ethnographic study of religious IS by church leaders.

Research questions

In creating a preliminary picture of congregational IS, I sought to answer the following question: What is the IS experience like for leaders of churches in transition as they seek to answer the question of what God’s will is for their churches? I explored three sub-questions:

- How do they perceive the information sources they choose to access?
- How do they determine the value and usefulness of information they gather?
- How do they believe technologies have changed the information activities tied to the process of seeking God’s will?

Literature

This study was informed by a constructivist approach and Dervin’s sense-making methodology, which focuses on the individual’s experience of actively constructing meaning (Dervin and Foreman-Wernet 2003). I assumed that sense making is gap bridging; an ongoing process that is both a personal process and a social process occurring within community. I assumed that—in addition to ideas and cognitions—beliefs, feelings, and intuitions play a role in the sense-making process. I also assumed that sense is being made and unmade over time (Dervin and Frenette 2001). I was seeking to describe the true experiences of my respondents rather than assess the validity of those experiences.

This study considered IS within a particular context: non-work or everyday-life information seeking (ELIS) activities, since it has been recognized that information is routinely discovered in the course of daily life (Wilson 1977). Two models of ELIS that I found initially useful were Savolainen’s (1995) about the concepts of “way of life” and “mastery of life.” These leadership activities of my research participants are acted out within the larger context of life, faith, and membership in this religious community. As a new governance team, they are rediscovering their role and learning to be effective leaders, constrained on one

hand by the history of leadership in the church and challenged on the other hand to explore new models. McKenzie's (2003a) discussion of passive monitoring and active seeking also fit well with an ethnographic approach to studying information behaviour. Given the well-defined congregational environment, Chatman's (1999, 213) "life in the round" theory seemed appropriate, as it suggests that information seekers in a small community can restrict their IS to familiar and safe sources. Research on information behaviour in religious contexts has been limited to two areas. Kari's (2007) review of the literature on spirituality and information considered the individual's IS and the paranormal/spiritual. He included categories like "spiritual," "esoterica," "magic," "mystique," "New Age," "occultism," "paranormal," "supernatural," and "superstition" (938) but argued, "Religion is a concept qualitatively different from the rest, and thus it needs to be demarcated here" (936). The differences he identified were in the categories of leadership structures, sacred literatures, doctrine, and practice—categories essential to the questions examined in my study. Kari's (2001) dissertation work considered IS and the paranormal, and may provide a useful comparative framework for the larger multi-site study.

There have been notable studies of professional religious IS. Wicks (1999) extensively reviewed previous research on clergy's information seeking and use. These studies found that clergy tend to use their own libraries, have personal theological perspectives that influence their choice of sources, have networks of colleagues for information, and have work roles and levels of responsibility that impact what type of information channel is chosen. Allen (1987), for example, found that books were used for theological purposes while interpersonal sources were used for finding local church information. Wicks (1999, 214) found that ministers accessed numerically greater and more diverse information sources in preaching and care-giving roles than in other work roles, such as administration. Ministers were found to have a closed system of information handling in administrative roles.

Roland's (2007) study expanded on these themes with an in-depth case study of one minister's information-seeking behaviour in preparation for preaching. An important theme was the preacher's "collaboration with the Holy Spirit" (136). He wrote, "The Holy Spirit is the active presence of God, mysteriously and tirelessly at work in the world and in the informant's life. . . . The informant prepares himself for the leading of the Holy Spirit by the objective research and by a spiritual world-view that lends itself to sensing the Spirit's guidance" (137). Michels (2006) examined the use of people as information sources by religious studies scholars. He found that people were regularly consulted in the information-gathering process to meet affective needs—both affirmation and assurance that they were on the correct path. Other ELIS research has found that people were selected for social reasons, trustworthiness, convenience, and expertise (Julien and Michels 2004; Agosto and Hughes-Hassell 2005; Solomon 1997; Savolainen 2008).

Surprisingly, there has been little research into religious ELIS. Religious information use has been identified in well-known studies such as Harris and

Dewdney's (1994) study of battered women, and in Chatman's (1992; 1996) studies, where informants used religious books, television, and radio. In their examination of "information grounds," Fisher, Landry, and Naumer (2006) noted that several respondents found church to be an important context for encountering useful information. The absence of this finding from other studies might be explained by Kari and Hartel's (2007) theory that human information behavior (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, and volunteerism.

As HIB research has not yet considered religious contexts in any depth, I drew on sociology of religion, especially the interpretive approaches of Weber (1963) and Geertz (1973), in which religion is seen to give meaning to the experiences of life. I was also cognizant of the role that media and new media play in finding spiritual purpose (Hoover 2003; Hoover, Clark, and Rainie, 2004; Clark 2002; Linderman and Lövheim 2003; 2005). Although research has begun to present a picture of what religious users are doing online (Larsen 2001; Helland 2002; Madden 2003), the perceived significance of these online activities as information-gathering events needs examination. This study also addresses gaps in research on online religion (Campbell 2006) and new questions regarding the changing roles of religious authority (Campbell 2007; 2010).

Research methodology

I used an ethnographic methodology (Spradley 1979; 1980; Hammersley and Atkinson 1995; DuBois 2005) with survey methods (Ammerman 2006) appropriate for the sociological study of religious communities. I became an active participant in the pilot study congregation during the six-month period the data was collected. As a result, I was given access to demographic and historical information compiled during the church restructuring process. Data were coded using HyperResearch software and following Glaser and Strauss's grounded theory approach (1967). HyperResearch was not used for theory building in the pilot. I should note that I share the faith of the pilot congregation. Although the potential for researcher bias is present, being an "insider" allowed me a significant degree of access to the community and its activities. Blogging my research experiences has allowed me to think about and articulate my personal involvement in a context that invites feedback.

Recruitment of participants

In formulating a recruitment strategy, I developed three screening criteria: (1) the congregation must be actively engaged in a restructuring or re-visioning process; (2) it must be stable enough to ensure that the data collection can be completed; and (3) it must be willing to allow a significant degree of access to congregational and leadership life. I created a list of potential congregations through my own networks and from recommendations of pastors. The congregation that was recruited was in the midst of governance restructuring. In my initial discussions with the governance team's members, their greatest con-

cern about the study was that the readers of this research would dismiss their belief in prayer and divine leading. We discussed how the qualitative perspective of the study would allow readers to see respondents' information behaviour through their eyes and would respect their beliefs.

Data collection

I began with a general survey of the church, gathering community and congregational demographic data, and exploring information resources such as the church library, church bulletins, recorded sermons, church website documents, Facebook posts and Twitter tweets. I recorded field notes of my personal observations of meetings, services, and activities. I conducted individual interviews with each of the five congregational leaders. The interviews consisted of 17 open questions arranged under four topics: everyday-life IS, faith-building IS, leaders' IS in the context of "seeking God's will," and the impact of technology on these leadership activities. I observed and recorded a leadership-team meeting and gathered all documents referenced in the interviews and meeting.

Findings

The study considered a Baptist Christian church of 45 members in suburban Atlantic Canada. It meets in a modern facility wired for sound, video, and wireless Internet. The five participants were all male, ranging in age from twenties to sixties. They had diverse educational backgrounds, from community college to graduate study. Four had home Internet access, and one did not use the Internet. Two respondents had been on the leadership board before a restructuring process that began in November 2008. One had not previously served as a church leader. The participants took their leadership role very seriously. One respondent said, "This is not the Kiwanis club. . . . They do very good things . . . but this is not what this church is about. It has a dealing with God." This observation revealed a significant tension: All the leaders believed God was leading them, yet they felt "it's obviously a difficult thing to do to seek the will of God." The task, one respondent explained, was creating a consensus within the group so that all members would feel peace that it was God's will. The respondents were self-conscious about their roles as leaders and wanted to ensure that they wouldn't "make a mistake."

The findings are organized around three themes below: (1) the IS of the leaders as a personal faith builder; (2) the information behaviour of the leaders in their leadership role; and (3) the impact of technology on the personal and corporate IS processes.

IS as a Personal Faith Builder

All the respondents described themselves as feeling confident in their ability to find answers to their non-religious ELIS problems. When asked about an everyday-life information need, four respondents described using online searches (e.g., Google, Wikipedia), four mentioned consulting knowledgeable people, one cited television programs, and one spoke of using information on hand.

The respondents approached faith-building IS similarly. Respondents identified collectively 36 resources, which were categorized into eight types: four traditional (the Bible, non-fiction and fiction books, prayer, and conversations with other Christians), two media sources (Christian radio programs and television), websites, and social media (YouTube, blogs, and Twitter). All five cited the Bible and prayer as information sources; four identified the Bible as most important, and four identified prayer as important. I had the opportunity to observe three of these leaders in Bible-teaching roles, and personal Bible study was an obvious passion for them. Four respondents described people, partners, or church members as resources, and one identified people as his most important resource as they were important to his understanding of the Bible (“They can show you . . . right where it is in the Bible.”).

Noticeably absent was any reference to the church library. The church maintains a library of approximately 200 volumes, including 62 books on theology, personal growth, and leadership. I rarely observed any members using this collection. When respondents were asked how they had become aware of the resources they selected, three described receiving recommendations from others. One respondent described how an older couple had mentored him, directing him to specific resources. Another respondent described how a campus group had connected him with useful resources. Two respondents had relied on their own ability to locate appropriate resources. Three respondents indicated that online searching and reputable websites offered links to useful resources.

Respondents suggested 16 criteria for selecting their sources. These criteria can be fit into five categories: doctrinally sound (mentioned four times), trusted advice / good reputation (five times), useful (three times), convenient (three times) and divinely lead (one time). One respondent noted, “Criteria number one would be, in my opinion, Is it orthodox? Because there is no point in a resource if I don’t consider the information it’s going to give to be valid to what I believe.” Despite the stated importance of orthodoxy in selecting resources, respondents seemed comfortable selecting resources from outside their theological tradition. I had the opportunity to read, view, or listen to most of the sources that the respondents cited by name. I discovered that they represented a variety of theological traditions, namely, Anglican, Baptist, Pentecostal, Plymouth Brethren, and Presbyterian. These traditions all fall within the Protestant branch of Christianity, but they reflect a broad spectrum of beliefs, practices, and histories, some of which are contradictory to specific beliefs held by this church.

IS of the Church Leaders in their Leadership Role

As noted above, the leaders took their roles very seriously. Prayer for divine leading was described by three respondents as their primary means of preparing for their decision-making roles. One respondent described praying before the meeting, “God don’t let me harm anybody [through my decisions].” Two respondents engaged in Bible study as a means of preparation. Another described talking with people. When asked about their corporate task of seeking God’s will, the

lay respondents' answers indicated they significantly restricted their information sources. They described relying heavily on documentation provided by the minister, who in turn relied on denominational sources, namely, books and people. Other information sources cited were experienced people in the congregation and personal experience.

I attended the governance and congregational business meetings to compare leaders' descriptions of their information behaviours with actual decision making. Thirty minutes of prayer, attended by leaders and congregation members, preceded these meetings. Participants took turns exchanging items for prayer and then took turns praying aloud. Prayers were offered for God's direction of the leadership team; the phrases "direct our paths" and "lean not on our own understandings" were uttered, both allusions to a Biblical prayer for divine leading (Proverbs 3:5–6).

The significance of praying for guidance was highlighted by a story that was recounted to me privately, to the governance team at a meeting, and later in a regular church service. A nearby church had needed to temporarily relocate for several months, and was faced with a choice between using another church on Sunday afternoons and leasing space in a local mall. The church option was in all respects preferable, as the mall would require significant setup and did not look or feel like "church." After a period of prayer, the board felt that God wanted them to move to the mall. This move had a variety of unexpected benefits that became apparent only months later.

The retelling of this story appeared to emphasize both the necessity to follow divine leading and the unforeseen benefits. From the first meeting to the last, prayer was a dominant resource in this study. There were 23 occurrences of the terms "pray," "prayer," or "praying" across all five interviews. The resource I heard overwhelmingly cited in the governance meeting itself was personal experience (10 instances), usually in the form of stories (e.g., "A few years ago..."). There were also references to meetings with political leaders, denominational leaders, church members, and visitors. Only the minister referenced print information sources such as "best practice" documents. A significant barrier or source of frustration discussed in the meeting was "an inability to connect" with visitors and community members. They concluded that they needed to meet with these people and ask them, "Why don't you come here?"

Technology and the search for God's will

From e-mail to worship and teaching software to smartphones and laptops, technology is part of the fabric of church life. The church actively contributes to online resources by web-streaming services and using social-networking applications. Four respondents understood technology to play a role in their personal faith building, and all described an impact on corporate decision making. Several respondents described the wealth of information now accessible as a boon, saying, "You go online . . . and all of a sudden there are 200 persons' opinions on the passage, which is exciting;" and "Google it and you have the whole world open to you." The respondents also valued the speed of online communication

("I mean, we can communicate with missionaries instantaneously!"). In meetings I frequently observed participants using laptops and handheld devices both to take minutes and to access online information. The governance team communicates using e-mail and Google Docs. I also witnessed handheld devices used in church services to access Bible passages and to engage with the service online.

Technology use was not without complications. One respondent does not use e-mail. Three respondents raised concerns that when online tools become the primary means of communicating, some members may be left out. Several members were concerned that the use of technology might be diminishing face-to-face interaction. Technology was also perceived as a potential distraction. One team member observed, "These things are good but sometimes it changes, you know, the times for reflection or meditation on an issue. Sometimes I'll say, 'You know, we can find an answer, I'll just look it up,' as opposed to, 'Our greatest resource is going to have to be study and prayer.'"

Discussion

The findings above suggest that the IS behaviour of the respondents as personal faith builders did not differ in most respects from non-religious ELIS behaviour. Like professional clergy however, they appeared to rely on personal libraries or others recommendations for print resources. When the respondents moved into their roles as leaders, I observed a significant limiting of source use, which echoes Wicks's (1999) conclusions about clergy information use and roles. This overlap in the ELIS and professional IS behaviours suggests that in some respects the volunteer leadership role straddles both worlds. What remains to be clarified is whether this overlap is a consequence of the role itself or an outcome of the leadership group being clergy led, as the minister exercised significant influence on the lay leadership functions. The minister in this study did not limit his information use to the same degree as the lay governance team members when in the leadership role, as he was an information intermediary in this context. It seems reasonable to suggest that some types of ELIS may overlap with work IS, especially in community volunteer roles.

In the analysis of data, I found that despite respondents' concern for doctrinally acceptable materials, there was significant theological diversity in the selected sources. This appeared at odds with Chatman's (1999) findings that members of small communities will restrict themselves to "safe" sources. Since the Internet allows for a greater access to resources outside of the respondents' own doctrinal domain, I initially hypothesized that this was evidence of theological confusion. The minister respondent himself described a church member ordering online a book with questionable theology: "Ten years ago you wouldn't have stumbled across that. . . . It wouldn't have been in your local bookstore." The respondents, however, though not formally theologically trained, appeared doctrinally astute. They believed they were able to determine, as one respondent noted, whether an idea was "valid or snake oil" and whether it "fits with . . . established truths." Elsewhere I have explored the impact of technology

on preaching (Michels 2010a) and congregational life (Michels 2010b). One significant conclusion was that while technology is beginning to reshape traditional activities in the church, I found little evidence that access to theologically diverse new media was resulting in the erosion of faith as some have feared (van der Laan 2009). This accords with Campbell's (2007; 2010, 251) work that explored the popular assumption that the "internet poses a threat to traditional authority." Campbell's (2010, 272) research of Christian bloggers suggested that the Internet might serve as "a realm to affirm offline religious authorities rather than to challenge."

An alternative explanation for this apparent doctrinal/diversity contradiction is the trans-denominational nature of evangelical churches. Stackhouse (2007, 3) proposed, "Evangelicals gladly partner with other Christians who hold these concerns, regardless of theological stripe, in work to advance the Kingdom of God." It may then be acceptable to use material outside of the Baptist tradition yet still within the scope of the evangelical movement. Wicks (1999) found that pastors' information seeking could be either open or closed depending on their work roles. By "open" he meant "a pattern of information-seeking where the individual is not restricted to her or his own world(s)," while in a "closed" pattern "the individual restricts her or his information-seeking to a limited number of communication contacts" (209). I theorize that the open/closed patterns found in Wicks's, Roland's (2007), and my studies may be directly related to the "kaleidoscope" that is evangelicalism (Smith 1986).

This use of perceived experts and trustworthy friends and family in this study closely reflects earlier IS research on the use of people as information sources. The respondents selected trustworthy people both for information and for recommendations of good sources. People in the church were often considered the only appropriate sources of advice about issues within the church.

Prayer played a significant role throughout this study. Prayer was described as meeting cognitive needs (wisdom/direction) and affective needs (peace). Prayer for these respondents was communication with God ("God is there as a resource"). The leaders also believed God brought information to them ("There is [*sic*] just too many times, when Scriptures, sermons, television programs, a piece of music ... they fit what you are looking for to be a coincidence"). Where does prayer fit into present IS models? Is prayer an enabling belief used to bridge a knowledge gap (Dervin and Frenette 2001, 238)? I would propose that prayer, from the perspective of these respondents, is analogous to people sources. Earlier research (Michels 2006) suggested that people provide both affirmation and confirmation in ways similar to how prayer is described. In previous studies, people were found to be trusted information sources (Julien and Michels 2004; Agosto and Hughes-Hassell 2005; Solomon 1997; Savolainen 2008), and the church leaders spoke of prayer in much the same ways that people sources were described in these earlier studies. This poses significant challenges for ELIS models because prayer, as communication, cannot be recorded or externally verified. Respondents nevertheless believed in the reality and effectiveness of prayer. Accordingly, any person-centred description of religious IS must account for this information source / evaluative technique.

Conclusion

This study begins to create a picture of a neglected facet of ELIS: religious IS, both individual and corporate. Ethnographic methods generated excellent data, allowing the researcher to place interview data within the larger context of congregational life through observing meetings and services, and hearing the stories that create and recreate the world-view of this community. I found similarities in non-religious and religious ELIS but also significant differences related to roles. This pilot study raised three areas for deeper exploration in the ongoing multi-site study. Prayer was not the principal focus of this study, and so some new directions are proposed for exploring this phenomenon. First, a discourse analysis should be undertaken of the respondents' talk about prayer, and of prayers themselves, to provide a nuanced picture of how respondents perceive prayer as conversation. Further, recent IS research (McKenzie 2003b; Neal and McKenzie 2011) on cognitive authority and IS suggests valuable avenues for exploring how prayer becomes a valid means of IS. The question of theological diversity needs to be engaged by mapping both the respondents' theological perspectives and the world-views represented in the sources selected.

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