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Nonprofit Narratives: Faith-Based Organizations, the Gospel Mission, and You

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Abstract

This study involved an in-depth investigation into how overtly Christian 501(c)(3) nonprofit organizations incorporate the use of storytelling into their external communications through the lens of Walter Fisher's narrative paradigm theory. Key theoretical streams examined as a part of the literature review include organizational mission communication with an emphasis in faith-based nonprofits, as well as organizational storytelling. This research study explored the following questions: "How do faith-based nonprofit organizations use narrative storytelling via social media to communicate their organizational missions within their circle of influence?" and "How do faith-based nonprofit organizations use narrative storytelling via social media to invite their audiences to join in taking action to fulfill their organizational missions?" Data gathering occurred through content analysis of organizational communications from five nonprofit organizations' social media channels. All of the organizations advocate for different causes and complete different work, but remain united in the foundation of Christian faith. This textual analysis adds to the body of public relations knowledge regarding organizational mission storytelling as well as audience support motivation. In particular, using Fisher's principles of narrative provides a unique perspective on public relations efforts of faith-based organizations and the role that storytelling plays in the effectiveness of these efforts. Applying and building on Fisher's narrative paradigm, this content analysis explores these issues in the distinct organizational context of overtly Christian nonprofits -- a complex setting that has not yet been studied in all its facets. This study has notable applications for faith-based nonprofit organizations to find ways to further execute their organizational mission through harnessing the power of storytelling. There are also relevant implications for constituents as they consume such stories and choose nonprofits and missions to support.

Nonprofit Narratives: Faith-Based Organizations, the Gospel Mission, and You

In today's digital world, people are constantly bombarded by the stories of nonprofit organizations and calls to take action in making the world a better place. Through a thematic content analysis, this study investigates how faith-based nonprofits use effective storytelling on social media to communicate their missions to external audiences, as well as encourage their involvement. It is the goal that through this analysis, readers can better understand the presence and role of narrative as a form of mission communication. Viewing these stories through the lens of Fisher's (1984) narrative paradigm allows audiences to look for key characteristics of objectively effective narratives. Examining the use of stories from a Christian missional perspective not only has the power to impact how faith-based organizations leverage stories within their mission communication, but also to empower external stakeholders to become more conscious media consumers and make better-informed philanthropic decisions (Sheldon, 2020).

Literature Review

This study drew from research streams of Christian nonprofit organizations and mission communication via social media. Fisher's narrative paradigm provided a lens for analysis.

Faith-Based Nonprofit Organizations

Charity is a mandate for followers of many of the world's major religions. While this often has implications for individual believers, religious convictions are also at the core of many charitable organizations. In 2016, registered religious nonprofits in the United States held over \$37 billion in assets (National Center for Charitable Statistics, 2020). As of 2018, nearly one third of all charitable contributions given in the U.S. were made to religious organizations (National Center for Charitable Statistics, 2020). Most American faith-based nonprofits have roots in Christianity, which will be the focus of this study. In total, GuideStar (n.d), a database of

information about charitable organizations, listed over 84,000 Christian 501(c)3 nonprofits in the U.S., including congregations, humanitarian organizations, apologetics groups, universities, and many more. These organizations make up a large portion of the nonprofit sector and have a great impact on donors and beneficiaries worldwide. It is impossible to estimate all the contributions that faith-based organizations have made around the world, though the stories and data that have been collected indicate that they are plentiful (Deneulin & Rakodi, 2011).

Many times, these nonprofits start as a congregation or gathering of individuals to serve that eventually branch out from their founding churches and become separate entities (Göçmen, 2013, Katapura, 2015). Some Christian nonprofits remain a part of sponsoring faith communities, but more and more nondenominational evangelical organizations are being established and functioning as standalone groups (Göçmen, 2013; Wittberg, 2012).

This mission from Jesus provides a distinction for many faith-based nonprofits as opposed to those which are rooted in different religions or no religion at all. In general, the work carried out by Christian nonprofits comes from a desire to serve who Jesus describes as “the least of these” (*English Standard Bible*, 2001/2016, Matthew 28:40) (Katapura, 2015). These organizations are goal-oriented in meeting a material need, as well as advancing a larger, spiritual cause (Göçmen, 2013; Katapura, 2015; Sheldon, 2020). Despite common values, Christian nonprofits seek to meet many unique needs and advocate on behalf of numerous causes. The never-ending battle for Christian nonprofits, however, is the push and pull between their biblical roots and missional mandate with corporate pressures and the qualities needed to practically function as a money-making organization (Göçmen, 2013; Sheldon, 2020).

This theological distinction naturally affects the way that such organizations operate and are perceived by stakeholders (Sheldon, 2020). It is also worth considering religion’s effect on

givers' philanthropic decisions. Overall, individuals who profess strong religious affiliations tend to give more generously to charitable organizations, especially those associated with their faith tradition (Katapura, 2015).

Mission Communication

Every organization, whether faith-based or secular, nonprofit or for-profit, needs a mission as the heartbeat behind everything it does (Kopaneva, 2019; Pandey et al. 2017; Macedo et al., 2016). This is generally summed up into a singular mission statement that creates shared values, provides direction, and shapes organizational culture (Fairhurst et al., 1997; Macedo et al., 2016). In contrast to a vision statement, which reveals what an organization wants to see in the world, a mission statement denotes actions that the organization takes, along with its stakeholders, to bring the vision to life (Kopaneva, 2019; Pandey et al. 2017).

Key characteristics of an effective mission include creating a common purpose, providing a scope of organizational operations, establishing performance standards, and offering a place to center around in the midst of change and crisis (Macedo et al., 2016). All of these factors foster a strong sense of organizational identity and commitment (Kopaneva, 2019). A critical function of mission communication is to help people understand what work an organization carries out and why it matters in the bigger picture. This, in turn, creates a mutual understanding for all parties of what it means to be a part of the organization's cause (Fairhurst et al., 1997; Kopaneva, 2019). Sharing with donors how exactly their contributions will impact the greater mission of the organization is proven to be the greatest factor in predicting their trust and satisfaction with the organization, as well as their likelihood of long-term commitment (O'Neil, 2008).

It is not only critical that organizational mission is communicated well internally, but also externally. Stakeholders who are charged with implementing the mission as donors, volunteers,

or other supporters must be informed on what the mission is, how it will benefit the world, and what they can do to help it progress (Fairhurst et al., 1997). Mission statements indicating a sense of change or movement tend to make others want to join in as well (Pandey et al. 2017).

Mission statements must not just be communicated formally, but also integrated into all of the communications (Fairhurst et al., 1997). Because of the nonprofit world's emphasis on social good, branding can and should be focused on the core values and mission of the organization (Keller et al., 2010). Effective mission communication does not just increase engagement with the organization, but data shows that it also establishes trust and facilitates long-term relationships with constituents (O'Neil, 2008). Using strategic phrases from the mission statement and telling stories that exemplify the mission in action through emails, newsletters, social media, and other campaigns are key aspects of this (O'Neil, 2008).

In general, nonprofits follow similar mission communication principles as for-profit entities. The biggest difference is the nonprofit realm's emphasis on social good, which has an immense effect on the content communicated (Souder, 2016). Still, many of the basic channels and best practices of communicating an organization's mission remain the same in both sectors. Much like the for-profit world, the marketing and communication trends around mission communication are constantly evolving (Fort & Price, 2016). Nevertheless, it often takes the form of educating others about the organization's work, fundraising appeals, through influencers, and even sharing research and stories curated by the organization (Fort & Price, 2016). Integration of channels and new abilities to track analytics continue to help organizations evaluate how effectively their mission is being shared (Fort & Price, 2016).

Before a mission can be fulfilled, each organization must first determine the most effective strategy to disseminate the mission to internal and external stakeholders (Fort & Price,

2016). Effective mission communication begins with educating others about a problem and the organization's work to address it. Eventually, this leads to garnering audience interest, provoking commitment to the cause, and inspiring action (Fort & Price, 2016). Communication that raises awareness of the mission is crucial and must be shared in tandem with communication that invites people to make the organization's mission personal and carry it out (Kopaneva, 2019).

Mission Communication via Social Media

Social media is often the fastest way for people to connect, and organizations constantly harness its power to engage stakeholders (Lovejoy & Saxton, 2012; Sommerfeldt et al., 2019). For nonprofits, many have benefited from the simplicity and low cost of social media accounts. With little set-up, free account creation, and organic content sharing among users, social media offers a cost-effective, relevant way to connect nonprofits with constituents (Lovejoy & Saxton, 2012). Social media also offers a rawer view of an organization through sharing live stories and video updates with the lack of gatekeepers that are present in other digital communication mediums. (Díez et al., 2020; Sommerfeldt et al., 2019).

This direct line of communication to audience gives organizations a profound power to use social psychology (and for many nonprofits, donor psychology) to foster connections and create change (Díez et al., 2020). From a big picture perspective, social media allows organizations to convey their values and identities through content, tone, and style through a different types of content on multiple platforms (Díez et al., 2020; Sommerfeldt et al., 2019). For nonprofits, social media posts serve three main purposes: informing audience members, cultivating community among stakeholders, and encouraging action toward a certain cause (Lovejoy & Saxton, 2012). Social media makes all of this communication incredibly accessible

to a wide number of individuals and helps them to foster personal connections with organizations as a two-way channel (Lovejoy & Saxton, 2012; Sommerfeldt et al., 2019).

Walter Fisher's Narrative Paradigm

Fisher's narrative paradigm suggests that humans are first and foremost narrative beings, meaning people communicate by sharing stories (Fisher, 1984). All communication, according to Fisher, is narration, which he defines as "a theory of symbolic actions — words and/or deeds that have sequence and meaning for those who live, create, or interpret them" (Fisher, 1984, p. 2). Narrative paradigm is not a form of rhetoric, but a framework to interpret and build rhetoric upon that creates order and shared experiences among humanity (Fisher, 1984; Fisher, 1989). This applies to written and oral narratives, and arguably even nonverbal communication can possess narrative elements. To Fisher, stories are not simply a genre of communication, they are the baseline of communication in and of itself (Fisher, 1989). Because of the human propensity toward stories, narrative naturally finds its way into communication in every medium and context (Fisher, 1984; Fisher, 1989).

Fisher elaborates that while people are constantly sharing narratives, not all of them are rational or objectively good. Narratives should share "the fabric of social reality for those who compose them" (Fisher, 1984, p. 7), meaning that they are built upon both facts and personal experience. The first characteristic that Fisher deems necessary to constitute an effective story is known as narrative probability or narrative coherence (Fisher, 1984). This answers the simple question of does the story make sense as a rational story in itself (Barker & Gower, 2010; Fisher, 1984). Consistency and logical flow in characters, plot, and actions all feed into this (Olwig, 2021). This internal consistency gives the story credibility as a story (Stutts & Barker, 1999). Second, Fisher also asserts that stories possess a certain level of narrative fidelity. This is gauged

when someone determines how much a story seems to align with true experiences they have personally felt (Fisher, 1984; Olwig, 2021). While every detail might not have to be the same between individuals and groups, the themes of the story must ring true to their experiences and promote well-shared values of humanity in order to be counted as meaningful (Barker & Gower, 2010; Fisher, 1984). Rationale and values are both key components (Stutts & Barker, 1999). In Fisher's paradigm, everyone has the power to use their own mind and freely interpret narrative rationality for themselves (Barker & Gower, 2010; Fisher, 1984; Fisher, 1989).

Since all humans are natural storytellers, this theory is relevant to all individuals and organizations (Fisher, 1984; Stutts & Barker, 1999). Narrative crosses the boundaries between cultures, geography, history, social class, and other separators of our society (Barker & Gower, 2010; Fisher, 1984). In a digitized, globalized world, this fact is becoming particularly important. This paradigm celebrates humanity as a species of storyteller (Fisher, 1989). Regardless of the context, the fundamental stories that act as a baseline for interaction are the same. Stories build loyalty, commitment, trust, and help others see their place within the organization as a consumer, partner, or other valuable constituent (Stutts & Barker, 1999).

In recent years, organizations have been harnessing the power of the story to connect with their external audiences. Whether or not communication leaders think about this in terms of the narrative paradigm, many organizations intentionally focus on creating coherent and powerful narratives to engage their audiences (Barker & Gower, 2010; Olwig, 2021). Communication specialist Russell (2019) asserts that people are "wired for stories... That's why you should tell stories whenever possible to convey concepts vital to your cause... Story is much easier to hold in memory and retell to others" (p. 12). While facts and figures are obviously important, especially in the professional realm, presenting them as a story has greater power to

engage the audience, promote memory, and provoke organic sharing among audience members (Russell, 2019). Even amid the rapidly changing communication scene, storytelling is more important than ever in maintaining organizational functioning (Barker & Gower, 2010). Storytelling helps create a sense of organizational identity through fostering community and detailing shared experiences (Barker & Gower, 2010; Olwig, 2021).

Oftentimes, the story casts the organization and its supporters as the hero (Olwig, 2021). The way organizations communicate about the problems they are trying to address and their solutions to them is virtually as important as the problems and solutions themselves (Olwig, 2021). In the post-modern world, this need to build rhetoric upon a foundation of both rationality and values is gaining significant traction as a powerful tool (Stutts & Barker, 1999).

Research Questions

To date, scholars have researched the connections between narrative and mission communication, but they have not conducted research tying the two concepts together in the context of faith-based nonprofits. Despite this, the continual prominence of Christian charitable organizations and rise of social media offer plenty of content for examination. Therefore, this study investigated two research questions:

RQ1: How do faith-based nonprofit organizations use narrative storytelling via social media to communicate their organizational missions within their circle of influence?

RQ2: How do faith-based nonprofit organizations use narrative storytelling via social media to invite their audiences to join in taking action to fulfill their organizational missions?

Organizations to be Examined

To answer these questions, an in-depth review was conducted of five organizations to investigate how they shared their mission and invited others to support it through narrative. All

of the nonprofits featured in this study are considered credible by third-party auditors and have similar religious principles that guide their work (and, in turn, their communication). At the same time, the organizations vary in size, cause, location, and other factors. Furthermore, each of these nonprofits has a strong online presence and ample resources to review, allowing for a sufficient amount of data to collect and analyze.

Agape International Missions (AIM)

For the past 16 years, AIM has provided protection and restoration for those who have been exploited in or are vulnerable to exploitation through human trafficking and actively executes a variety of programs to rescue, heal, empower, and protect those who have been trafficked and those who are at risk, while sharing the Christian gospel as a part of its efforts (Agape International Missions, n.d.-b). Today, 15 other leadership staff and over 400 Cambodian employees carry out AIM's operations (Agape International Missions, n.d.-a). Most of AIM's work takes place in Cambodia, though its U.S. headquarters are located in California and recently launched programming in Belize (Agape International Missions, n.d.-b). AIM generated nearly \$7.6 million in revenue in 2019 (Agape International Missions, 2019).

CURE International

Since 1996, CURE International has provided life-changing medical care to over 5 million children in developing nations (CURE International, n.d.-a). CURE specializes in performing procedures for treatable but serious medical conditions often caused by malnutrition and lack of quality medical care. The surgeries CURE has performed have prevented long-term disabilities, future health complications, chronic pain, and even death for these children (CURE International, n.d.-c.). On top of physical care, CURE staff provide counseling, prayer, and encouragement for families who find their way to the hospitals. CURE also works in partnership

with local churches and other community organizations to advocate for the sick and disabled, reduce cultural stigmas around disabilities, and train new medical professionals (CURE International, n.d.-b). As of 2019, CURE employs almost 1,000 individuals in the U.S. and at clinics around the world and its revenue totaled \$74.7 million (CURE International, 2019).

HOPE International

HOPE International (which is not affiliated with CURE International) was established in 1997 to empower impoverished individuals through microfinance loans. (HOPE International, n.d.-a). HOPE International is based in Lancaster, Pennsylvania, but collaborates with local financial institutions in 16 countries to facilitate microenterprise development and lead savings groups, empowering people to create sustainable, long-term solutions to the problem of poverty. In all of its financial programming, HOPE maintains a focus on collaboration and Christlike stewardship of resources (HOPE International, n.d.-b). HOPE continues to grow in programs, reach, staff, and revenue. It is the second smallest organization based on revenue in this study, totaling just over \$19 million in revenue in 2019 (HOPE International, 2019).

Samaritan's Purse

Led by Franklin Graham, son of the world-famous evangelist Billy Graham, Samaritan's Purse aims to share Jesus' love by meeting physical and spiritual needs in the areas facing great hardship (Samaritan's Purse, n.d.). As of 2021, North Carolina-based Samaritan's Purse is one of the largest Christian relief organizations in the world. Its global programming includes Operation Christmas Child, a Christmas gift initiative directed to children around the world, and relief efforts in crisis zones, especially areas struck by war or natural disaster. In 2019, the organization generated \$734 million in revenue (Samaritan's Purse, 2020).

World Vision

Boasting 34,000 employees and totaling over \$1.2 billion in revenue in 2019, World Vision classifies itself as a worldwide humanitarian nonprofit, dedicated to equipping families to live safe, healthy, Christ-filled lives. Founded in 1950, World Vision partners with local leaders in communities around the world to determine their biggest needs and creates long-term strategic plans to address them (World Vision, n.d.-a). Through child sponsorship, education programs, and community development, World Vision actively aids over 3 million children (World Vision, n.d.-b). Headquartered outside of Seattle, Washington, World Vision directs the vast majority of its funding toward international work, nearly all in developing countries (World Vision 2019).

Methodology

While mission communication occurs internally and externally, the focus of this study remained specifically on external communication via social media. The narratives organizations share on social media not only influence donors, volunteers, beneficiaries, and advocates in their communities, but also affects how individuals perceive the cause itself. These organizations frequently updated social media pages with content, offering ample data to analyze.

Thematic content analysis served as the primary method of data collection. Building upon the literature, emerging themes featured key components of Fisher's narrative paradigm, such as instances of narrative fidelity and coherence. Special consideration was also given to how stories overtly and subtly integrate the mission of the organization and compel readers to take part in the mission through calls to action (CTAs) and stirring of emotions. Content analysis through the lens of Fisher's narrative paradigm determined the link between narrative and mission communication in a Christian organizational context.

In particular, social media content on the organizations' main Facebook and Instagram pages posted during the month of January 2022 was examined. In total, AIM posted 28 times (14

on Facebook and 14 on Instagram), CURE 93 times (49 on Facebook and 44 on Instagram), HOPE 44 times (23 on Facebook and 21 on Instagram), Samaritan's Purse 64 times (35 on Facebook and 29 on Instagram), and World Vision 113 times (50 on Facebook and 63 on Instagram). Data collection took place in February 2022. Prior to and during data collection and analysis, identified researcher bias was bracketed to minimize potential impact on results.

Results

In total, the five organizations under examination posted on their primary Instagram and Facebook pages 343 times between January 1 and January 31, 2022. Each post was analyzed to determine the presence of organizational mission communicated through elements of Fisher's narrative paradigm. A few significant themes emerged as answers to each research question.

RQ1: Using Narrative via Social Media to Communicate Organizational Missions

Theme 1: Repetition of the Same Narrative with Different Characters

Similar Narrative, Different Characters. Each of the organizations studied told a consistent narrative on its social media channels. Yet, the characters differed. First, the individuals and groups represented within the story changed from post to post. Photos and words from a variety of individual beneficiaries displayed the organization's success in carrying out its mission to many different people. Even if an organization executed its mission through multiple types of programming or in different places around the globe, the success of the mission was still felt by all beneficiaries represented, which reinforced narrative coherence.

In total, nearly half the social content analyzed focused on sharing stories from beneficiaries. Still, each story had unique elements. HOPE International, for instance, shared stories on Facebook and Instagram about the impact its microfinance work had in six different countries. A photo of three women from Malawi and another of a man from Peru both shared that their local HOPE-sponsored savings groups "equipped [them] with financial stewardship

skills” (HOPE International, 2022d) and empowered them to “help each other physically and spiritually” (HOPE International, 2022c). Despite the diverse cultural and geographic contexts represented in the stories, HOPE’s mission remained a central theme.

Some of the larger organizations with broader mission statements posted about unique causes they are supporting. For instance, World Vision shared narratives about its efforts toward global disaster relief, girls’ education, clean water initiatives, and community development. Likewise, Samaritan’s Purse posted stories about providing aid for refugees, disaster cleanup in the U.S., and its Operation Christmas Child campaign. These posts about different beneficiaries from different backgrounds are united by the same positive, life-changing experience as a result of their contact with the organization as it carried out its mission.

Many organizations also shared stories of others who play a role in implementing their missions to further reinforce the narrative, such as volunteers and employees. Many volunteers and staff also described the blessings of working to carry out the mission of their respective organizations, establishing further narrative coherence. For example, Samaritan’s Purse used its large volunteer and employee base to its advantage to regularly provide on-the-ground updates from those working at disaster relief sites around the globe. In fact, this happened 21 times throughout the month of January just on Instagram. One video from the Philippines was narrated by a staff member who described the devastation and relief work that took place there, but also shared “what a joy and privilege it is to be a blessing to this village” (Samaritan’s Purse, 2022c). These narratives did not only share the good that the organization completed for the beneficiaries, but also for those who perform the mission.

Similar Narrative, Different Narrators. On top of featuring a diverse group of characters within the stories, numerous individuals with varying roles in the organizations served

as narrators. Sometimes stories were told from an ambiguous organizational voice or the voice of an executive leader. Beyond these two roles, the most common narrator was that of a beneficiary. Social posts from all five organizations shared quotes and stories told from the perspectives of the ones they seek to aid.

Certain organizations had to handle this more delicately than others. AIM in particular, given the nature of its anti-sex trafficking work and that many of its beneficiaries are minors who have been victims of trafficking, rarely used beneficiary voices (only once in the content evaluated in this study) and kept them anonymous. CURE, in contrast, featured quotes from beneficiaries and their family members sharing parts of their story in over half of its posts, often accompanied by photos or videos of the beneficiary showing the reality of the impact that the organization has had on their life. One such post featured a teenager named Esther, who received surgery from a CURE hospital as a newborn and now “dreams of becoming an accountant so she can help the needy” (CURE International, 2022b).

Furthermore, volunteers and global staff served as the storytellers in numerous posts for the organizations. In particular, the two largest organizations in this study (Samaritan’s Purse and World Vision) regularly shared updates from their staff and volunteers around the world. They posted at least once each week about an on-the-ground update from volunteers and staff at a disaster relief site somewhere around the world. Many of these voices are native to the places in which they work, such as World Vision’s Sakipai Onorio, who worked “to beat #hunger and save lives in #SouthSudan’s most dangerous locations” (World Vision International, 2022b). Stories like Onorio’s further solidified the impact of the mission and reliability of the narrative shared by the organization.

The voices often felt inconsistent, but the narrative remained consistent. The use of a consistent narrative established coherence and the multiple voices lead to more relatability and fidelity. The details of the story changed in every post, but the different characters represented within the story and as narrators always pointed back to a repeated, overarching narrative.

Theme 2: Creating Narrative Coherence Through Collaborating with Other Organizations

Highlighting Similar Partner Organizations. Another frequent occurrence within these social media posts involved collaborations with other organizations. Tagging another organization in a story or featuring them as a partner in carrying out the nonprofit's mission was a small act that showed a sense of collaboration and integration of narratives that effectively created greater coherence.

This phenomenon was especially common among the smaller organizations. This is unsurprising, as they generally must work harder to establish narrative coherence and fidelity. In general, the larger organizations were founded earlier and have had more time to build narrative credibility (the only exceptions being CURE and HOPE; CURE is the larger organization, but was founded one year after HOPE). Organizations that are larger in scope and generate more revenue also tend to have greater social media followings (the only exception to this being AIM, which surpasses CURE in follower count and HOPE in follower count and average engagement).

These smaller organizations used collaboration with other similar nonprofit organizations to construct a more coherent narrative. Along with an update from Cambodia, AIM gave a "Special shout out to partners like" Operation Underground Railroad (a larger organization that aids victims of sex trafficking), which collaborated with AIM in a few recent operations (AIM, 2022c). CURE mentioned a local partner organization that provides lodging for patients and families at one of their hospitals and a partnership with another ministry that assisted the hospital

with connecting to local pastors and distributing Bibles in the community. In addition, CURE's hospital in the Philippines, CURE Tebow Hospital, was founded in partnership with the Tim Tebow Foundation. This particular hospital has separate social accounts that highlight this partnership, though several posts referencing the partnership were shared on the main profile too.

Celebrating Endorsement from Outside Organizations. HOPE built up the credibility of its narrative through sharing Facebook a post that announced one of its organizational leaders "was recently nominated as one of Africa's top 10 women to watch in banking and finance" (HOPE International, 2022a). On the same day, hope shared a post announcing it was "featured on this list of best Christian workplaces of 2021" (HOPE International, 2022f).

During the month of content analyzed, CURE and HOPE were also featured by Christianity Today, a faith-based media outlet. They capitalized on this by repeatedly sharing about the articles that Christianity Today published and tagging it in their posts. Even though their missions are wildly different, Christianity Today shares a similar audience to these other faith-based organizations and is well-respected in its field. Displaying this type of feature often suggests an endorsement of the narrative.

This integration of narratives also serves as mode to give greater exposure to the narratives. Social media was used as a tool to encourage organically sharing the organization's mission (via narrative) with other social users. Followers of one organization reposted, shared, tagged others, and engaged with the content in other ways that made it pop up in the feed of their personal audiences. In general, these posts were shown to have greater engagement than others that did not feature collaborations with other organizations. Through collaborations, user-attributed credibility transferred from one organization to the other. This, in turn, leads to even more narrative coherence and fidelity. Additionally, those following along with the narrative of

one organization had the chance to discover a new organization that is carrying out a similar mission (as displayed through their combined narrative) and connect with it.

RQ2: Using Narrative via Social Media to Invite Audiences to Join Missions

Theme 3: Sharing Narratives that Discuss the Audience's Role

Many of the narratives shared on these organizations' social media pages also indicated a role for the audience. CTAs are norms on social media, but these organizations used them to give audiences practical ways to support their missions. By inserting or inviting the audience to participate in the narrative, they built a personal connection to the mission and found fidelity in the story. A key way that many of these organizations invited the audience to engage more deeply with their mission was through giving them an active place in the narrative. CTAs for the audience often included taking simple steps that would allow them to directly influence the organization's ability to carry out its mission. This served as an invitation to move from becoming a spectator to a character within the narrative.

Taking Action Physically. Sometimes, CTAs invited the audience to engage with the mission in a tangible way. CURE repeatedly encouraged audience members to "Send a message of hope and healing to" (CURE International, 2022a) patients after sharing their stories of healing on social media. Samaritan's Purse used CTAs to "get involved" (Samaritan's Purse, 2022a) providing physical help as volunteers at U.S.-based disaster relief sites, and HOPE even welcomed people to participate in the narrative by joining its staff and applying for an open position. CURE and World Vision both included at least one CTA inviting the audience to donate to the organization, but they also provided ample additional ways for audience members to act on the mission and become a part of an effective narrative.

Taking Action Digitally. Another common way that the organizations leveraged their social media was by using it as a tool to encourage the audience to follow along with the mission narrative in real time. AIM capitalized on this in the month of January for a Human Trafficking Awareness Month campaign, inviting the audience to “follow along to learn more” (AIM, 2022a) about the problem of trafficking. In the midst of this, AIM also introduced itself as a solution and invited the audience to take action without ever leaving the social platform by “[sharing] this post and [inviting] a friend into this fight!” (AIM, 2022b). Even inviting the audience to share a post, like a video, or tag a friend (all of which were common CTAs for AIM and CURE) who would take an interest in the content had benefits beyond greater social media engagement. The audience could take an action (even if it is simply tapping a button on their phones) to become an active participant in the narrative, as well as ask others to do the same. The organization was no longer the only one inviting people into the narrative – others began to do it organically as well. This was particularly common among the smaller organizations.

Taking Action Spiritually. A common CTA for these Christian organizations involved asking the audience to join in praying for certain aspects of the organizational mission. This CTA certainly cannot be used by all organizations, but faith-based nonprofits likely found it beneficial in connecting with their audiences, integrating a common spirituality, and ensuring prayer support for their missions. AIM requested prayers “that justice and fairness prevail against the evils of this world” (AIM, 2022d), which is a key part of its mission. HOPE International shared about the growth of its financial training programming in Malawi and invited the audience to pray for programs based on needs shared by the country director. Across platforms, Samaritan’s Purse made a prayer CTA six times in the content studied. In a New Year’s Day post, Samaritan’s Purse even asked the audience “How can we pray for you during this year to come?”

(Samaritan's Purse, 2022b). This connection to the Christian faith also built greater narrative fidelity among audience members who also often hold similar religious beliefs.

Theme 4: Integration of the Organization's Mission with the Larger Biblical Narrative

A final theme was a clear integration of the organizations' mission narrative with the biblical narrative as a whole. These organizations did not just use faith as a foundation for their missions, but integrated Christian stories and practices throughout their narratives across social media. In essence, this integration made the mission of the organization a part of God's mission; the audience was not simply participating in *a* story, but *God's* story. This connection helped Christian audience members build narrative coherence and fidelity, as well as demonstrated the significance of the organization's mission in light of transcendent, biblical ideas.

The simplest way that these organizations integrated the biblical narrative into their content was through posting strategic Bible verses. Oftentimes, the verses selected resonated with the mission. AIM, for instance, posted Amos 5:24, a verse about craving justice and fairness, which deeply aligned with its mission. World Vision, similarly, shared a photo of three children (presumably sponsored or otherwise aided by the organization) along with Mark 10:16: "And He took the children in His arms, placed His hands on them and blessed them" (World Vision International, 2022a), suggesting that World Vision, like Jesus, blesses children such as the ones in the photo. Many times, these organizations also posted sections from the biblical texts that show the organizations' missions as mandates from God. AIM shared Psalm 82:3-4, a biblical mandate to assist those in need. Images added to this power, such as when CURE posted an image of a child with a cleft palate and Proverbs 3:27 (a command to do good to those in need whenever possible) and a group of medical staff with Matthew 18:20 (suggesting that God was present with the group). Samaritan's Purse opened a video about its efforts to provide water to

refugees with a Proverb about water. These little allusions built trust with Christian audience members by connecting the organization's specific mission to a larger biblical mission.

These posts also showed how the organizations analyzed not only met physical needs, but also spiritual needs. CURE, for instance, regularly featured images of hospital staff praying for patients and families, showing an emphasis on spiritual healing in the narrative, as well as physical. AIM's Instagram page featured a video of a general beneficiary narrative that featured allusions to biblical texts and the spiritual components of its mission. A HOPE country director also shared in a post about the ultimate purpose of the savings groups the organization hosts around the world: "The saving ministry is really not about saving money... It's bigger than that. It's about developing a Christian mind" (HOPE International, 2022e).

Sometimes integration of biblical mandates with the organizations' missions occurred in more overt theological reflections. In a staff recruiting post, for example, HOPE shared, "Discipleship is at the heart of who we are. We're committed to the spiritual growth of our team—because healthy, sustainable ministry comes from deepening our own faith... you walk out what it means to respond to these issues as a member of Christ's Body" (HOPE International, 2022b). In essence, HOPE did not just refer to itself as a nonprofit, but as a part of the Church, which is commanded to care for and build up those within it.

Discussion

This study introduced a new application of Fisher's narrative paradigm in mission communication via social media. Social media revolves around sharing stories through visuals and brief captions. The immense reach of such platforms proves the power of sharing a good story and how wide it can spread. Nonetheless, the audience ultimately had the agency to interpret and respond to these narratives as they wished. In this case, they chose whether to

engage with the social media posts (as the medium delivering the narrative) and whether to carry out their roles within the narrative (Fisher, 1984; Fisher, 1989).

Fisher's narrative paradigm was also enhanced in the context of religious nonprofits. Because most of the religious audience members viewed the story of the Bible as having narrative coherence and fidelity, these organizations were able to insert themselves into this transcendent story as a means of sharing a more effective narrative.

This research provided a very practical example of formal and informal mission communication; both are critical and must be well-balanced (Fairhurst et al., 1997). Some posts shared overt reminders of what an organization's specific mission entailed, sometimes borrowing language, or even directly quoting its mission statement. Other times, the communication was subtle, describing how a volunteer put the mission in action or how a beneficiary saw it fulfilled in their own life. This integration effectively educated audience members on the issue, the solution, and how they could take action (Kopaneva, 2019).

Furthermore, this study demonstrated that social media has opened new ways for audiences to engage with organizational missions. As a tool, social media showed how a mission changed lives in the field. Thousands of miles away, people received real-time updates on how an organization helped in a crisis, hearing stories of exactly who donor funds benefitted. Not only did this show specific stories of the mission in action, but mission communication via social media also reminded audiences of the big picture: making the world a better place through sharing Christ's love to those in need (Fairhurst et al., 1997). When consumers constantly saw new stories of missions in action, they were also presented with opportunities to get involved.

This study also demonstrated that the religious foundations of faith-based nonprofits affected not only their missions, but the way that they communicated. Because these

organizations work to meet spiritual needs, their storytelling often dipped into the spiritual realm as well (Göçmen, 2013; Sheldon, 2020). Regardless of the different physical needs they met, every nonprofit examined in this study purposefully placed narratives sharing its mission in the context of faith. This created a new sense of connection to the mission for audience members who share similar religious beliefs, as well as provided a deeper significance to the mission.

The organization's uniquely Christian CTAs were also deeply informed by religious roots. Calls to prayer empowered Christians in any place, of any status to join in the mission, confident that they could make an impact on solving a physical issue through a spiritual means. For the highly religious individuals who are most likely to share money and time with such organizations, this means a great deal (Katapura, 2015). Ultimately, faith-based nonprofits shared their missions, demonstrated their significance, and welcomed the audience to join the cause by connecting their work to the larger biblical narrative through social media.

Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research

Although this study's unique perspective fills a research gap, it does face some limitations. This qualitative research only took five organizations into account, when in reality there are over 1.5 million nonprofits in the U.S. (National Center for Charitable Statistics, 2020), over 84,000 of which are Christian-based (GuideStar, n.d.). As much bias as possible was removed from this project, but the work of a single researcher can still only represent a limited viewpoint. Furthermore, no representatives from the organizations in this study were contacted.

Future research should examine whether similar conclusions can be drawn for nonprofits based in religions other than Christianity or not based in any faith at all. Additionally, future research on this topic should examine the presence of narrative in content on additional social channels, such as business-to-business focused content on LinkedIn or other platforms like Tik

Tok or Twitter. Forthcoming studies could also take a more longitudinal approach by accounting for changes in narratives presented as circumstances and seasons change throughout the year.

Conclusion

The results of this study boast several implications for faith-based nonprofits. Telling a consistent narrative from a variety of voices could greatly enhance organizational credibility. Similarly, seeking out and highlighting organizations with a similar mission to share a consistent narrative across platforms could help bolster a nonprofit's reputation among other organizations and individual constituents. To create greater engagement with audience members, these organizations should integrate calls to action that invite audience members to play an active role in the mission through donating, praying, volunteering, or other means. Lastly, faith-based nonprofits should harness the personal and organic sharing on social media to develop a narrative that is personally significant to audience members. In this instance, connecting the organization's narratives with external narratives that are deeply connected to the audience's own faith.


This research also shows some implications for all constituents. It is critical for all media consumers to be aware of the roles that they play in such organizational narratives. Whether or not they realize it, beneficiaries, donors, spectators, influencers, and many others all play a part in the success or failure of an organization's mission. Often, people have a choice of whether to participate in a narrative and, if so, how. As constituents surrounded by countless nonprofit narratives, some of them are bound to resonate. It is critical for everyone to not merely evaluate such narratives, but also to seek to get involved with such stories as change-makers.

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