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Spiritual Outreach Methods to Support Congregant Mental Wellness

Jacob Aaron Wiley
Walden University

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Walden University

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Jacob Aaron Wiley

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Walden University
2023

Abstract

Spiritual Outreach Methods to Support Congregant Mental Wellness

by

Jacob Wiley

MD, Ross University School of Medicine, 2017

BS, Baylor University, 2009

Doctoral Study Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Psychology in Behavioral Health Leadership

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August 2023

Abstract

This qualitative case study was an exploration of the HOPE organization's communication strategies for supporting its congregants spiritually and emotionally before, during the peak, and after peak of the COVID-19 pandemic. The goal was to understand the effectiveness of these efforts to inform communications strategies in the event of future disasters or other service disruptions given the importance of maintaining congregant's spirituality levels, which are uniquely important for their mental health and sense of well-being. The conceptual framework was the Baldrige framework of excellence. Primary data were collected through semistructured interviews with five key leaders. Secondary data were gathered from financial records, archived videos, and organizational websites. Data were analyzed using manual thematic analysis and NVivo software to assign coding, create word clouds, and develop mind maps. Results showed that optimal practices included using production styles for online service delivery similar to those for in-person services before the pandemic. Also effective were early adoption of small group satellite meetings, hybrid spiritual services delivered in person and virtually, and digital messaging services. Appointing ambassadors and volunteers willing to conduct acts of kindness was another successful outreach approach. This study contributes to positive social change by providing recommendations for delivering virtual spiritual services that can maintain the mental health and well-being of congregants from which organizations can create protocols to help deliver efficient, effective strategic plans of their own.

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Section 1a: The Behavioral Health Organization

Introduction

The HOPE Organization (a pseudonym also referred to as HOPE), the setting for this study, is a religious organization located in the southern region of the United States, along the Mexican-U.S. border in a residential community of a medium-sized metropolitan area. Established in 1996, HOPE serves a primarily Hispanic population. Most HOPE Organization congregants live within a 10-mile radius of the organization. Other congregants include those who periodically or regularly migrate to the region from other cities or states for seasonal work, among other reasons, according to a HOPE leader. Some also visit from other countries or are permanent residents from foreign countries.

According to the organization's website, HOPE holds worship services on Friday evenings and twice on Saturdays. It also holds classes for its leadership throughout the year. The national committee sends leadership initiatives, and trainings and instructions are conducted in the first month of each year on these initiatives. When national committee leadership trainings are not being conducted, local committee leadership classes are conducted on Sundays each week throughout the year. On Saturday mornings, the organization offers classes for children and youth that are tailored to their learning level (age groups 0–4 years, 4–12 years, and 12–17 years). This is also when adults study and learn together in a classroom environment.

According to Leader 2 at HOPE, in addition to religious services, HOPE offers ancillary services that focus on congregants' mental wellness through spiritual support, including marriage counseling, family counseling, addiction counseling, leadership classes, food pantries for the community, sanctuary locations during storms, home stability support, child nutrition support, domestic abuse support, financial education support, housing support for displaced individuals or families, and socioemotional counseling. The organization's overall goal is to provide religious support and healing in times of need to as many people as possible in the community it serves. To accomplish this goal, church leaders intend to continue growing and expanding HOPE's ancillary services.

HOPE's values include always acting with faith and moral guidance to do what is best for individuals and the community at large. Its vision is a faith-driven community with strong support systems that improve congregants' spiritual connections, behavioral health, and overall sense of well-being. The organization's website states that at its core, HOPE is centered on Christian values, including service to others, fellowship, and worship, both locally and as part of the global community.

HOPE is a branch of a national religious organization, which guides its overall mission and goals. The mission and goals are set by a national committee and relayed to HOPE by a regional director, who also leads evangelical services for HOPE. According to Leader 1, HOPE's internal leadership consists of a leadership committee and other stakeholders, including the following individuals:

- A regional director (Leader 1), who oversees 13 regional branches of the national organization, including HOPE. Leader 1 is also HOPE's musical service leader and is responsible for secondary pastoral services.
- The lead pastor (Leader 2), who conducts religious services for congregants and coordinates ancillary services such as counseling, funeral services, weddings, and other ceremonies.
- An educational ministry leader (Leader 3), who is responsible for educating children and adolescents.
- An evangelical outreach ministry leader (Leader 4), who promotes and markets the organization to maintain growth.
- Leader 5, who is the church's treasurer and also provides secretarial services, including coordinating meetings for groups in the church.

Practice Problem

The practice problem that prompted the present study was the diminished spiritual and mental well-being of HOPE's congregation as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic's impact on daily life. Leader 2 noticed changes in the congregation that seem linked to novel communication methodologies implemented for safety reasons during the pandemic. According to Leader 2, specific changes noticed included significant decreases in service attendance and utilization of social and behavioral support services such as counseling, even though demands for the latter were high during the pandemic. Some congregation members also stated that they suffered from a spiritual connection

standpoint as they missed the supportive nature of HOPE's in-person religious services. Leader 2 explained that many churchgoers have reconnected and rekindled their spiritual connection to HOPE, but many others have not.

Because of measures instituted to mitigate exposure risk to COVID-19, HOPE closed its doors in March 2020 and switched to strictly online worship services, which were continued to January 2021. In January 2021, a single in-person service on Saturdays was reinstated. In June 2021, both Saturday services were reinstated, and limited classes were held for various age groups. Leader 1 shared that in March 2022, the remaining service (Friday night) was reinstated. However, COVID-19's effects on the congregation are lingering as the organization has not recovered its regular attendance, in-person donation levels, and ancillary service utilization levels.

HOPE's leaders noticed a distinct change in the congregation's spiritual well-being when new communication technologies were implemented following the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) safety recommendations issued in March 2020. During the height of the pandemic, congregants reported less fulfillment of spiritual needs from having to attend online worship services and frustrations with the technological requirements for doing so. Leader 2 commented that they also reported experiencing a fear of illness associated with in-person gatherings, including counseling and other small group services.

The decision to cancel in-person services during COVID-19 was particularly difficult for HOPE's leaders, who were asked by the national committee to choose

whether HOPE would become a primarily virtual service organization or continue conducting worship and ancillary services in-person. The move to virtual services was not without problems. For one, older congregants were not well prepared to use virtual services. They were frequently unfamiliar with computers and lacked phone access to participate in service offerings. Leader 4 noted that this was particularly difficult for HOPE as its congregants tend to skew older in age, with most regular attendees being 30+ years old. Other barriers included the unwillingness to return to in-person services after the peak pandemic because congregants found it more convenient to not come to HOPE in person. Leader 4 explained that this resulted in fewer financial offerings to the organization and reduced willingness by congregants to come to events or fellowship gatherings that were customary and frequent for the organization before the COVID-19 pandemic.

In general, the loss of spiritual connection can negatively impact mental health. As an example, feeling abandoned by God can lead to an increase in suicidal desire (Fang et al., 2011; Rushing et al., 2013). In contrast, positive spiritual coping behaviors such as looking to God to help with anger or worry can decrease the likelihood of suicidal desire (Shannonhouse et al., 2020). Specific to COVID-19's effect on mental health, Captari et al. (2022) found that churchgoers often struggled with depression and coping associated with such factors such as lockdowns and isolation during this difficult period.

The loss of spiritual connection can have a detrimental impact on churchgoers' ability to cope and deal with stresses that are particularly acute during times of disaster

and that often reflect concurrent loss of support or resources (Haynes et al., 2017).

Therefore, it is important to find ways to maintain strong spiritual connections during disruptive events such as pandemics or other disasters, particularly at the local religious organization level, which is where these connections often come into focus (Zhang et al., 2021). Determining how to better maintain spiritual connection of churchgoers at the local level and producing recommendations on how to maintain this connection when regular services have been disrupted is essential for maintaining individual well-being at the local community level (Captari et al., 2022).

Specifically, a goal for HOPE leaders is to determine the communication methods that worked well before, during peak periods, and after peak periods of the COVID-19 pandemic that could be used to address noted issues in congregants' mental health, wellness, and lack of spiritual connection to HOPE that resulted from the pandemic. Leader 2 emphasized the importance of this exploration for two reasons: First, caring for congregants' mental wellness through spiritual support is foundational to the organization's existence. Second, findings from this investigation could also help to inform communication actions if another pandemic, disaster, or similar disruptive event occurred so that HOPE could be better prepared to support congregants' spiritual connections. Therefore, the research questions that guided the present study are as follows:

- What spiritual outreach methods were most effective before, during, and after peak periods of the COVID-19 pandemic?

- How might HOPE's leaders employ these methods most effectively to address concerns about congregants' mental health, wellness, and lack of spiritual connection to HOPE that resulted from the COVID-19 pandemic?
- How might these findings inform communications protocols that could be used during critical service disruptions in the future to help ensure congregants' spiritual wellness and connection to the organization?

Purpose

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to explore the communication methods HOPE uses to support its congregation spiritually and emotionally. The goal was to gain a better understanding of the effectiveness of these efforts before, during the peak, and after the peak of the pandemic. Findings from this exploration could be used to address ongoing issues with spiritual well-being and connections to the organization. Another goal is to use the findings from this exploration to inform approaches for maintaining and supporting these connections if there are critical service disruptions in the future.

The Baldrige framework (National Institute of Standards and Technology [NIST], 2021) was used to conduct a case study of HOPE's communication strategies and efforts before, during peak periods, and after peak periods of the COVID-19 pandemic. The Baldrige framework consists of seven criteria for assessing organizational effectiveness: leadership; strategy; customers; measurement, analysis, and knowledge management; workforce; operations; and results (NIST, 2021). The framework is used to educate

organization leaders on best practices and empower them to meet goals and expectations, to improve outcomes, and to become more competitive with others in their field.

The main information source for this investigation was interviews with HOPE's senior leadership. This information was obtained in person and telephonically via one-on-one recorded interviews with open-ended questions. Other sources included attendance logs and financial logs from before, during the peak, and after the peak of the pandemic. These logs were considered evidence supporting significant decreases in service attendance and utilization of social support services such as counseling. Senior leadership provided the attendance and financial logs.

Of particular importance for data analysis are video presentations of the communication styles HOPE uses, both for worship services and in other areas, such as delivering motivational messages, which are archived on HOPE's social media and networking sites. These videos were created before the COVID-19 pandemic, during the pandemic's peak, and after its peak. The information available via these videos demonstrated different communication styles (individual, small group, or large group worship services), communication delivery (in person or digital stream), and reactionary data to these styles (emojis, comments, likes, and view counts) when the services were virtual and when they were in person. These videos can be accessed publicly. Data pertaining to the videos were gathered from HOPE's social networking site via administrator access that senior leadership provided.

Significance

Supporting the spiritual life of its congregants and their spiritual connections to HOPE is at the core of the organization's mission, vision, and values. During the COVID-19 pandemic, HOPE's abilities to provide this support were significantly impacted by the disruptions in everyday life caused by the pandemic. According to Leader 2, the organization went through difficult times when it had to adopt new strategies and media for communicating with and supporting its congregants.

Findings from exploring the organization's communication methodologies from before, during peak periods, and after peak periods of the COVID-19 pandemic helped inform efforts to address changes in congregants' spiritual connections to HOPE and helped to inform initiatives to restore their mental wellness through spiritual support. The data from interviews with HOPE's leadership were used as support for effective communication strategies. HOPE would like to communicate more effectively in order to support congregants' spiritual and emotional needs in the event of a pandemic or other disruptive event. In this case, there is qualitative evidence from leaders and archived data suggesting that various communication strategies have different impacts on how congregants feel supported by the organization. HOPE's leadership believed that this evidence, which reflects efforts to support congregants before, during the peak, and after the peak COVID-19 pandemic periods, could help determine best practice recommendations.

Of particular interest were the periods during the height of the pandemic, which included organizational mandates such as social distancing and shelter-in-place orders. Information gathered could be used to address ongoing issues with spiritual well-being and connections to the organization among its congregants in the event of similar disruptive events in the future. HOPE's leaders also believed that analyzing this evidence could help inform efforts to better prepare the organization to serve its congregants should such disasters or disruptive events happen in the future.

Recommendations from this study may be referenced to improve congregants' spiritual connections to HOPE and lead to improved social solidarity, community-based approaches, and overall avoidance of some of the negative impacts of future pandemics, disasters, or other disruptive events on congregants. Leadership in similar organizations may also reference these findings when adopting their own best practices in the event of a pandemic, disaster, or other disruptive event. Knowing more about which communications are more effective, especially during difficult times, can help these organizations better support mental wellness through the spiritual connections of their own congregants.

Summary and Transition

HOPE is a faith-based nonprofit organization located in the southern United States that serves a primarily Hispanic population. Leader 1 described HOPE's service offerings as ranging from church services to counseling in a wide variety of areas, including marriage and family counseling, addiction, counseling, leadership classes, and

home stability and socioeconomic support, all to support the behavioral health and well-being of congregants.

HOPE's leaders noticed a distinct change in their congregation's spiritual well-being when new communication technologies were implemented during the COVID-19 pandemic. Organization leadership has identified ongoing issues with congregants' spiritual well-being and connections to the organization. This study was an exploration of HOPE's communication strategies for supporting its congregants spiritually and emotionally before, during the peak, and after peak of the COVID-19 pandemic. The goal was to gain a better understanding of the effectiveness of these efforts. Findings from this exploration can be used to address ongoing issues with congregants' spiritual well-being and connections to the organization. Another goal was to use the findings from this exploration to inform approaches for maintaining and supporting these connections if there are critical service disruptions in the future.

Section 1b provides additional details on the HOPE Organization, including profile information and organizational key factors. Details on HOPE's environment, structure, and processes are provided. The Baldrige framework (NIST, 2021) was used to help compile this profile.

Section 1b: Organizational Profile

Noticeable changes in congregant behavior that HOPE Organization leadership attributed to COVID-19's impact on daily life was the problem that drove this study. The study purpose was to explore HOPE's communication strategies for supporting its congregants spiritually and emotionally before, during peak periods, and after peak periods of the COVID-19 pandemic. The goal was to gain a better understanding of the effectiveness of these efforts. Findings from this exploration could be used to address ongoing issues with congregants' spiritual well-being and connections to the organization. Another goal is to use the findings from this exploration to inform approaches for maintaining and supporting these connections if there are critical service disruptions in the future.

Section 1b details HOPE's organizational profile and identifies key factors of strategic importance to the organization. HOPE's treatment offerings and services; strategic direction; mission, vision, and values; governance structure, and relationship to the parent organization are also discussed. A concise summary of the need for the study, including evidence supporting the study is then provided. The section ends with a summary and transition to Section 2.

Organizational Profile and Key Factors

HOPE is a religious organization located along the Mexican-U.S. border in a residential community of a medium-size metropolitan area. In addition to church worship services, it offers spiritual and behavioral health counseling in the following areas:

socioemotional, marriage, family, and addiction. Leader 2 detailed HOPE's service offerings as the following: leadership classes, food pantries for the community, sanctuary locations during storms, homes stability support, child nutrition support, domestic abuse support, financial education support, and housing support for displaced individuals.

The organization's mission is to help as many individuals as possible by providing spiritual and emotional support and healing in times of need. According to the HOPE Organization website, its values are to act with kindness, faith, and moral guidance to best help the community. Its vision is a faith-driven community with strong support systems that help congregants with their spiritual sense of well-being.

HOPE's congregants are primarily Hispanic, which is reflected in the fact that its religious services are offered in Spanish only. There are many other churches in HOPE's service area, but what makes HOPE unique is its ability to provide a unique multilanguage environment. Worship services are in Spanish, but ancillary services are offered in both English and Spanish. Leader 2 identified the ability to offer worship services in Spanish and multilanguage ancillary services as a key factor of strategic importance to the organization. HOPE also stands out from its competitors for offering worship services on Saturdays instead of Sundays in addition to leadership training on Sundays and ancillary services Sunday through Thursday.

Supporting the spiritual, mental, and emotional stability of congregants is a key factor in maintaining HOPE's stability as an organization. Organization leaders strive to achieve this stability by using virtual outreach, phone calls, daily motivational videos,

weekly gatherings, and monthly events with the community. The organizational vision is to have a bigger impact on the spiritual and emotional well-being of individuals in the community it serves and a larger footprint in the community overall by increasing enrollment in weekly gathering attendance and building close affiliations with partners such as local independent school district, city council in its service area, and nonprofit organizations. Leader 2 noted that the organization uses a shared-mission approach to partner with other organizations also trying to address concerns such as food insecurity, socioemotional support, and socioeconomic support. HOPE intends to continue these partnerships and develop additional partners with overlapping missions.

HOPE was established in 1996. Its long-standing existence in the community is a key competitive factor. Leader 2 stated that people in the community see it as a gathering point and have done so for more than 10 years. However, according to Leader 1, these long-standing relationships and loyalty to an organization were eroded by fear or other factors stopping congregants from attending church services during the COVID-19.

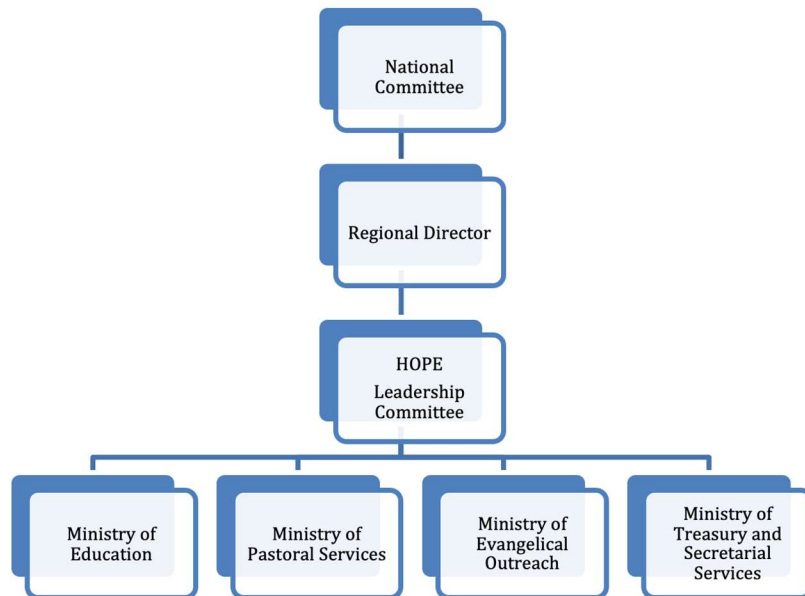
HOPE also provides a unique atmosphere of spiritual celebration that includes music services recorded and provided for free on its social networking sites featuring experienced musicians who play a variety of instruments. Leader 1 noted that other churches from across the country routinely recruit HOPE's leaders for paid guest speaker tours as they are highly respected and have a significant national following, which other churches seek to cultivate in their own local organizations.

Organizational Structure

Figure 1 is HOPE's organizational structure. This figure shows its relationship with the national committee and the regional director. Of note, the regional director is also responsible for evangelical outreach at HOPE and is identified as Leader 1 in this study.

Figure 1

HOPE's Organizational Structure



HOPE is locally governed by a church leadership committee. The committee consists of approximately 10 community members, including local business leaders, nonprofit organization representatives, and church leadership. The number of members fluctuates by one or two community members depending on the time of year. The board is responsible for decision-making on fiscal and regulatory matters and overall

organizational direction. Leader 2 explained that some board members are also responsible for community outreach and creating events to encourage more involvement in the organization.

Other individuals who play key roles in HOPE's organization are as follows. All are responsible for HOPE's overall success. They participate in decision-making and determining the organization's general direction and its individual ministries. As such, they have many overlapping responsibilities and can step into each other's roles when necessary.

- Leader 1 is a regional director for the parent organization and represents a bridge between HOPE and the organization. Leader 1 is also the group leader for music, videography, and secondary pastoral services.
- Leader 2 provides the largest portion of HOPE's worship services and management of ancillary services in the organization. Leader 2 was directly involved with the decisions to change communication styles of worship service offerings at different dates during the pandemic.
- Leader 3 oversees professional development and education and is instrumental in maintaining high teaching standards as the leader of the ministry of education. Leader 3 oversaw classes taught using different communication strategies throughout the pandemic periods.
- Leader 4 leads the ministry of evangelical outreach and oversees events, outreach strategies, and organizational member growth. Leader 4 was an

important intermediary between the leadership and congregants during the pandemic and was particularly vital during peak pandemic and after peak pandemic periods. In conjunction with Leader 3, Leader 4 was pivotal in continuing ancillary services at HOPE, including leadership classes, home stability support, child nutrition support, and socioemotional counseling the organization offers.

- Leader 5 is the organization's treasurer and also provides secretarial support. Leader 5's role in deciding how offerings would be collected during the pandemic was of significant importance. This leader maintained records and helped decide how church service and secondary service processes would be conducted.

Organizational Background and Context

The need to conduct this study was driven by the noticeable drop in church attendance, financial support, and service access among members of HOPE's congregation following the COVID-19 pandemic. Congregants have also reported that they feel less connected to HOPE and that their spiritual well-being has diminished, even though many have resumed in-person attendance at church services and are accessing other organization services.

Organization leaders believe that changes in communication styles, primarily moving from in-person services to online, as a result of COVID-19 social restrictions, are the cause of these changes in congregant behavior and well-being. Evidence supporting

these changes include drops in attendance, increased requests for services, increased calls for spiritual guidance, and variable financial support to the organization. Leader 2 also noted increased incidents of adverse emotional and relational behaviors in congregants such as episodes of anxiety, depression, domestic disputes, and relational conflict, and increased incidents of disruptive life events such as job loss, major illness or injury, death of a loved one, and home relocations among the congregants.

Being of spiritual service to others is the basic premise of religious organizations (Wilhoit, 2022). Significant diminishment in congregant participation can result in church decline and collapse (Packard & Ferguson, 2019). HOPE's leaders specifically wanted recommendations on communication approaches that can best support congregants' mental wellness and spiritual well-being if another pandemic or similar disruptive event were to take place.

In the present study, the term worship services was used to describe all religiously oriented services at HOPE. The term ancillary services was used to describe all other services that focus on congregants' mental wellness through spiritual support, including marriage counseling, family counseling, addiction counseling, leadership classes, food pantries for the community, sanctuary locations during storms, home stability support, child nutrition support, domestic abuse support, financial education support, housing support for displaced individuals or families, and socioemotional counseling

Summary and Transition

HOPE, a faith-based nonprofit organization located in the southern United States, serves a primarily Hispanic population and is a significant source of spiritual, emotional, and behavioral health services and support in the community it serves. Following the COVID-19 pandemic, organization leaders identified a loss of spiritual connection between the organization and congregation members, as reflected by drops in church attendance, congregant financial support, and service access. HOPE's leaders felt it important to address this loss of connection by exploring its communications efforts before, during the peak, and after the peak of the pandemic and to use these findings to address ongoing issues with congregants' spiritual well-being and connectedness to the organization. Another goal is to use the findings from this exploration to inform approaches for supporting the spiritual connection of congregants in the event of another pandemic or similar disruptive event.

Section 2 is a review of the literature that helped to inform this study. Also detailed are the sources of evidence and how HOPE implements strategies to address key strategic challenges. Additional detail on HOPE's congregants is also provided, along with details on how data for this study were gathered and analyzed.

Section 2: Background and Approach—Leadership Strategy and Assessment

The practice problem that was the focus of this study was the loss of spiritual connection between the HOPE Organization and its congregation as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. HOPE's leaders noticed distinct changes in the spiritual well-being of the congregation during the pandemic, and these changes have continued. The leaders specifically noticed these changes when worship and ancillary services delivery was changed from in-person to digital as isolation practices took effect after CDC safety recommendations.

Spiritual connection and support are important for the overall mental health and well-being of churchgoers (Aten et al., 2019; Haynes et al., 2017; Singh & Bandyopadhyay, 2021; Van Tongeren et al., 2019; Zhang et al., 2021). By maintaining spiritual connections during times of disruption, feelings of abandonment, depression, anxiety, isolation, and suicidal desire may be decreased among churchgoers (Captari et al., 2022; Fang et al., 2011; Rushing et al., 2013; Shannonhouse et al., 2020).

The purpose of this study was to explore HOPE's communication strategies for supporting its congregation spiritually and emotionally before, during the peak, and after the peak of the COVID-19 pandemic. The goal was to gain a better understanding of the effectiveness of these efforts. Findings from this exploration could be used to address ongoing issues with congregants' spiritual well-being and connections to the organization. Another goal is to use the findings from this exploration to inform

approaches for maintaining and supporting these connections if there are critical service disruptions in the future.

Section 2 begins with a discussion of the literature that informed this study. Sources of evidence for this study are detailed next, followed by discussions on how HOPE's leaders govern and lead and the organization's congregant population, including how HOPE engages congregants through service and building relationships. The analytical strategy for this is presented next, followed by a section summary and transition to Section 3.

Supporting Literature

Existing literature relevant to this case study's practice problem was gathered by searching multiple databases in Walden University's online library. The primary focus was on peer-reviewed journal articles published between 2017 and 2022. However, the search was expanded to the early 1990s in order to include relevant historical and seminal research. Table 1 shows the search engines, databases, and search terms used.

Much of the research supported spirituality or religion being an important protective factor for mental health and an individual's sense of well-being. The data also provided insights into efforts to maintain people's spirituality and thus maintain their mental health and well-being during service disruptions. Other focuses in the literature identified included virtual communication and social connection that would reinforce the use of virtual communication strategies to maintain social connection to churchgoer's spiritual organizations and potentially mitigate their losses in spiritual connection.

Table 1*Databases and Search Terms*

Search engine or database	Search term
APA PsycArticles Peer-reviewed journals only and full-text articles from 2017–2022	Religion OR spirituality Religious OR church OR organization OR online institution Well-being OR mental health OR psychology AND qualitative OR leadership COVID-19 OR coronavirus OR COVID-19 OR pandemic
Academia.edu	Service AND YouTube AND church
SAGE Journals	Participation decline AND religious OR spiritual
Science Direct	COVID-19 AND impact AND church
Taylor and Francis Online	Spiritual AND leadership AND well-being
ResearchGate	YouTube AND services AND churches Communicate AND faith AND virtual AND COVID OR pandemic

Because leadership interviews were the primary data source in this study, another focus was on identifying literature on leadership communication and its importance to congregants. The literature found supported the importance of leadership communication in general as well as during times of isolation in maintaining membership levels during and after times of service disruption.

Two other important study aspects were COVID-19's effects on churchgoers and how digital communications were adopted during times of restriction from in-person

services. As such, literature on how COVID-19 affected churchgoers and religious leaders and their use of digital communication was also reviewed.

Spirituality, Mental Health, and Well-Being

Both religion and spirituality has been known to promote and sustain individuals' mental health and well-being. Spirituality has many protective mental health benefits, including providing a sense of community and healthy practices for the mind and body such as individuality, mindfulness, and an improved sense of how one fits with the rest of the world (National Alliance on Mental Health, 2016). Spiritual well-being is positively associated with maintaining ones' emotional well-being and psychological stability (Cotton et al., 2009). Spirituality can play a direct role in defining ones' psychological well-being (Božek et al., 2020). Božek et al. (2020) also emphasized the importance of maintaining spirituality and argued that spirituality plays a greater role in influencing psychological well-being than the human mind.

Maintaining Spirituality, Mental Health, and Well-Being During Disasters

Increased incidences of disasters and their severity in today's world have indicated the need for exploring the role of spirituality in mental health and well-being in disaster contexts (Aten et al., 2019). In a systematic review of 51 articles published from 1975 to 2015, Aten et al. (2019) found that, in general, religion/spirituality is a positive resource for helping disaster survivors make sense of and cope with natural and human-made disasters. Negative religious coping and changes in religiosity over time associated with more negative mental, physical, and

spiritual outcomes. Based on their findings, Aten et al. recommended that clinicians should put more emphasis on exploring the role of religion/spirituality in the lives of disaster survivors as a potential resource for recover and should also look for ways in which religiosity/spirituality might hinder disaster resilience.

Van Tongeren et al. (2019) determined that spiritual fortitude is a character trait linked to an individual's ability to adjust to, and often thrive during adversity, suffering, or trauma. These researchers developed a measure of spiritual fortitude, which they defined as a character trait that enables people to ensure and make redemptive meaning from adversity through their sacred connections with God, others, and themselves. In three studies, they provided evidence for a three-factor Spiritual Fortitude Scale, the SFS-9, which contains three subscales: Spiritual Endurance, Spiritual Enterprise, and Redemptive Purpose. Their studies confirmed the SFS-9's validity for measuring meaning in life, spiritual well-being, religious coping, and adversity-related anxiety and suggested additional research in what they described as a new area of inquiry.

Like Van Tongeren et al. (2019) and Aten et al. (2019), findings from a systematic review of the literature by Zhang et al. (2021) further supported the concept of spiritual connection and fortitude as a factor contributing to one's ability to maintain a sense of positive well-being during challenging times. Zhang et al. noted that it is common for traumatic events, including natural disasters, to result in significant resource loss for survivors, and that people in these situations commonly

draw on their religious or spiritual faith to cope with adversities. Suggestions for integrating spiritual fortitude when counseling religious individuals and families included supporting these individuals by helping them explore and reimagine their spiritual lives after the pandemic's height (Zhang et al., 2021).

Finally, Haynes et al. (2017) also supported the concept of spiritual connection and fortitude contributing to maintaining a sense of positive well-being during challenging times in their finding that spiritual meaning during disasters helped buffer from the negative effects of resource loss on overall mental health. These studies serve to reinforce spiritual connection as an important factor that supports peoples' sense of well-being during times of disaster, which directly relates to the study's practice problem of difficulties in maintaining spiritual connection during times of service disruption so that overall mental health and congregant sense of well-being is maintained.

Virtual Communications and Social Connections

Social isolation can worsen the burden of stress on people, which can have a deleterious effect on mental and physical health (Van Bavel et al., 2020). As such, communication modalities to help form social connections are essential. Van Bavel et al. (2020) also emphasized the need to explore both digital and in-person methods of communicating while maintaining physical isolation so as not to spread disease. They emphasized that special attention must be placed on special populations such as the elderly who may be less accepting of or familiar with digital communication.

It is thus important to maximize effectiveness of communication styles when providing spiritual and ancillary services digitally.

Using digital platforms and communications strategies during times of disruptive periods that require isolation was the focus of Hofer et al. (2021), who studied the implementation of online frameworks during COVID-19. Hofer et al. laid out a blueprint for implementing virtual communication. This blueprint, as well as other study findings in Hofer et al., supported Van Bavel et al.'s (2020) findings on using digital platforms to maintain spiritual connection.

Spiritual Leaders' Roles in Mitigating Losses

In a study on the responses of religious communities around the world during the pandemic, Chowdhury (2022) concluded that religious leaders have important roles in messaging for adherence to recommendations that keep illnesses from spreading. While Chowdhury focused on strong messaging of spiritual leaders as it relates to illness-related losses, Fowler et al. (2020) took a different approach that emphasized how religious leadership is paramount at maintaining intraorganizational connection to prevent membership decline. Findings from Fowler et al. underscored that religious leaders are important factors in maintaining sufficient spiritual connections for organizations to not suffer long-term losses in membership.

Igwe et al. (2020) conducted a study similar to Chowdhury (2022), but on a community-based level, to show how leaders in trusted circles impacted the overall

experience of communities in Nigeria dealing with isolation and lockdowns during COVID-19. They concluded that social solidarity and community-based approaches in acts of trust, altruism, and reciprocity during the lockdown helped people cope with lockdown experiences. These studies reinforce the notion of leadership as an important role in mitigating losses in overall connection, which directly related to the focus in this study on how spiritual connections can be maintained by managing the losses suffered by people and organizations alike.

COVID-19's Effect on Churchgoing

Researchers began focusing on COVID-19's effects on many aspects of everyday life, including churchgoing, soon after its outbreak in 2020. In an article published in 2020, Dein et al. focused on the pandemic's implications for religion and mental health, focusing on religious doctrinal responses, religious behavior, prejudice, and religious struggles. Of particular relevance to this study are Dein et al.'s recommendations for further research, including how virtual religious activities impact mental health when compared to an in-person counterpart, what strategies can be used to enhance preventative behavior in religious groups pertaining to COVID-19, to what extent do pandemics intensify or diminish religious beliefs, and what role religious practices play in the ability to cope with COVID-19, all of which support the present study's relevance.

Bentzen (2021) suggested that increased religiosity might be used to address deteriorating mental well-being associated with stress and losses from the COVID-

19 pandemic. Bentzen also suggested that if religiosity could reduce stress, then economies may also be quicker to recover. Further, in-person services may have exacerbated losses or global religiosity may have been increased, which could have impacts on economic growth, innovation, and gender roles. Bentzen concluded that religiosity around the world has risen as a result of the pandemic and that this rise has potential and direct long-term socioeconomic outcomes.

Church Communications in the Digital Age

Providing spiritual counseling through video recordings can also help to support psychospiritual well-being during stressful times. Howe (2019) suggested using sermon videos on YouTube and other platforms or online religious study sessions as ways a church can leverage the YouTube social platform. Groop (2021) found that using YouTube to stream worship services quickly resulted in more people watching Sunday services than before the pandemic, leading to potentially greater spiritual impact. Singh and Bandyopadhyay (2021) evaluated the effectiveness of a series of 14 video-recorded interventions of Indian spiritual leaders and motivational speakers. Analysis of pre- and postintervention differences showed improvements in mental well-being, general well-being, thriving, and peace of mind in a sample of Indian undergraduate students.

Church Communications During the COVID-19 Pandemic

The unprecedented shift from in-person to online services as a result of social distancing recommendations during COVID-19 significantly impacted many churches' service offerings. Because the pandemic disrupted pastoral ministries,

pastors had to embrace new technology to ensure a digital presence with their congregations through social media (Vanderbloemen, n.d.). Vanderbloemen (n.d.) emphasized focusing on service to the community in messaging during the COVID-19 pandemic and suggested finding ways to incorporate volunteers in meaningful ways when moving services such as bible studies online.

New technologies allowed religious leaders to rapidly shift to digital platforms. Naidoo et al. (2021) explored this shift by studying how pastors engaged in online preaching to meet the spiritual needs of their congregations during the pandemic. Naidoo et al. concluded that online pastoral care and counseling through digital platforms and social media is important to maintaining spiritual support during significant disruptions in normal services.

Haley (2020) emphasized the need to change the ways churches are reaching congregants by both simplifying church messaging and centralizing marketing systems in order to reach them with unified messages and information. Findings from a 2020 Barna study supported Haley in showing that only 35% of member congregants were still only attending their pre-COVID church while 32% had stopped attending church all together during COVID. These findings further support the need for better digital practices in reaching congregations effectively during times of future service disruptions. The Presbyterian Communications Network (2021) also suggested that virtual gatherings and social media interaction are critical for maintaining connections with congregants during times of disruption.

Sulkowski and Ignatowski (2020) explored how churches in Poland adapted to limited continuation of services and adopted digital forms of communication. The researchers identified a gap in literature on whether religious organizations that adopted new modes of communication would continue to adhere to them, revert to previous formats after the peak pandemic period, or retain a mixed approach of reaching churchgoers. Sulkowski and Ignatowski interviewed clergy members responsible for organizing religious life at the parish or congregation level in churches ranging from Catholic and Orthodox to Protestant denominations. The findings showed that regardless of whether the churches had limited or totally suspended how they approached religious life during the pandemic, the church leaders used modern technologies and access to public media to maintain contact with their congregants (Sulkowski & Ignatowski, 2020).

These studies provided insights into the present study's practice problem as their findings showed how organizations similar to HOPE adopted novel forms of procedural practices and communication methodologies to maintain spiritual connection of churchgoers. They also showed how adopting new communication modes, and doing so quickly, helped to maintain connections between churches and congregants and supported congregants' mental wellness through spiritual support.

Sources of Evidence

There were several sources of evidence for this study. The primary data source was one-to-one interviews with five HOPE leaders. The interviews were conducted either

in person or over the phone in order to accommodate personal preferences and schedules. Interview questions were designed to focus on communication strategies that were implemented during the switch to digital-only services, the spiritual connection of congregants at different periods before, during the peak, and after the peak of the pandemic, and any noteworthy experiences related to the organizational problem.

Secondary data sources included video archives, which are available on HOPE's Facebook page. Reviewing these videos provided data on view counts, digital comments, and reactionary data, all in chronological order. Financial information from before, during, and after the pandemic was also reviewed, which provided insights into financial support fluctuations and allowed for secondary discussions regarding strategies for adapting to limited ability to directly collect service offerings. Donation reports from the treasurer demonstrated potential financial impacts of changes in how religious messages were delivered to the congregants. Lastly, HOPE provided compiled data tracked by the organization, which was useful for showing how congregants participated in sermons that were deployed using various communication methodologies.

HOPE's Facebook page provided access to congregants' engagement levels before, throughout the pandemic, and after and comments that provided insights into people's sentiments and acceptance of the different recorded communication styles. Digital comments provided anecdotal evidence from the online communication methods that were used and reinforced or contradicted conclusions drawn from the qualitative analysis of data gathered.

Leadership Strategy and Assessment

HOPE's internal governing structure begins with its leadership committee, which governs by voting on strategies, goals, and directives to be undertaken by the organization. The leadership committee then relays these decisions to the ministry leaders for implementation. It is a nonauthoritarian governing process as the leaders regularly welcome new committee members and address suggestions or concerns presented by ministry leaders. Each leader is then responsible for taking the actions necessary to implement the strategies identified and set by the committee.

According to Leader 4, partnering with other organizations, including local and regional nonprofits, is a key focus of HOPE's leadership strategies. HOPE is unique in that it dissuades accessing mental health care professionals for addressing mental health concerns and instead encourages congregants to rely on spiritual guidance and support systems to address these concerns in themselves and their family members, which aligns with the stigma many U.S. Hispanics hold regarding the use of formal mental health services (Hoskins & Padrón, 2017). Thus, as Leader 5 noted, spiritual connection and counseling is vital for maintaining community mental well-being.

It is important for HOPE to partner with local and regional nonprofit organizations in order to be able to refer individuals in need to additional resources and support systems that are not viewed by the community as mental health facilities. Leader 5 remarked that these partnerships came into focus during the pandemic as individuals in need looked toward HOPE as a primary resource from which to request ancillary services

such as grief, anxiety, and depression counseling. According to Leader 5, when a congregant or community member reached a level where the leaders felt that individual might cause harm to themselves or others, was severe enough to require professional help, or might benefit from medications, they relied on the nonprofit organizations with whom they had historical partnerships.

Leader 4 explained that the leadership committee regularly conducts strategic planning sessions to help the leaders determine how best to partner with other organizations. This includes coordinating community outreach for both intra- and interorganizational events. These efforts are conducted to increase enrollment in weekly service attendance, to build close affiliations with partner organizations to better serve the community, and to have a bigger footprint on the spiritual and emotional well-being of individuals in the local and regional community the HOPE organization serves.

HOPE's organization leaders regularly meet to discuss improvement strategies and how to implement them. They review social network analytics and marketing strategies to compare statistics from before and after implementing strategies or strategic partnerships. This type of strategic planning can help organizations figure out how to best partner with other organizations to create better environments for everyone (Bryson & Slotterback, 2016).

HOPE's leadership implements strategy in a variety of ways. The leadership committee meets to determine general missions or goals they would like to implement. Usually, these directives are decided by the committee members to address certain

problems effecting the organization. Leader 2 explained that the directives are sometimes implemented in response to initiatives delivered by the national committee, which develops its own goals that are to be implemented across all underlying organizations.

Once the national committee determines certain goals or directives for the organization, these goals or directives are assigned to HOPE's stakeholders and leaders, who are responsible for implementing them. The leaders are occasionally provided specific instructions on how to implement strategies to achieve these initiatives; however, they are allowed or expected to come up with these strategies on their own most of the time. In so doing, the national organization gives local leaders flexibility in determining the best ways in which to achieve underlying goals. Flexibility allows for creative approaches to determining how to best accomplish goals. However, this flexibility is not without problems as leaders may prefer having specific instructions rather than developing strategic plans themselves.

Many new initiatives are problematic as the leaders are not provided sufficient human or financial resources to develop and implement them. As such, the leaders sacrifice their own time and energy, including financing some initiatives. Leader 4 reported that the inner drive to do so is fueled by their spiritual evangelism and desire to bring the word of God to more people in the community. Without such financial support, these initiatives could fail.

Financial resource challenges occur frequently with regards to evangelism and outreach. There is regular need for financial resources to support new initiatives in these

areas. Occasionally, the leadership committee considers ideas such as joining community organizations like the Chamber of Commerce to promote events in their business flyers and social media. Many times, initiatives are not implemented and organizational partnerships are denied because of financial resource allocation restrictions. Leader 4 explained that HOPE's leaders prefer to allocate financial resources in other areas of need, which can also limit the ability to recruit new congregation members. Another key barrier in strategic planning for outreach and evangelism is that HOPE's worship services are only offered in Spanish, which makes it difficult to recruit younger congregants as many prefer to attend services in English.

The education ministry works closely with HOPE's committee members to confirm the ministry's direction and initiatives. Most areas of need regarding education are determined by stakeholders, committee members, or leaders and these areas of need are addressed during committee member meetings. The organization purchases much of its educational resource material from the national regulating body in the form of an access license. The leaders themselves are then responsible for printing these materials and purchasing additional resources such as markers or writing utensils for the education ministry.

Clients/Population Served

According to Leader 5, HOPE does not officially collect demographic information on congregants as a way of encouraging both congregants and community members to seek help from the organization without fear of being targeted by

government agencies. The leaders informally gather this information from personal communications in which individuals share their stories confidentially with leaders. Languages spoken by individuals and varying regional language dialects also help leaders discern where members originate from.

HOPE's congregants are primarily Hispanic individuals above 30 years of age living within a 10-mile radius of the organization. This group represents about 50% of HOPE's client base. Another significant percentage comprises migrating individuals and families who spend parts of the year in this region. A minority of individuals are from other countries and either permanently or temporarily visit this region of the United States. Adolescents and children are also a key part of HOPE's congregation, specifically its education services, which offers programs for children 0–4, 4–12, and 12–17 years of age.

HOPE engages congregants through services including marriage counseling, family counseling, addiction counseling, leadership classes, food pantries, child nutrition support, financial education services, and socioemotional counseling among others offered. Leader 2 stated that by offering these services, HOPE's leaders form a close bond with congregants and often develops long-term relationships and trust. There are asylum seekers who have regularly used HOPE's ancillary services. The organization provides resource referrals to congregants or community members who cannot work legally and thus must find ways to support themselves or their families that do not require work visas. HOPE also frequently refers congregants and community members to

organizations they know can help with paperwork to apply for legal residence status or work authorization cards.

Many Hispanics in the United States stigmatize the use of mental health services and rely on health care practices that fall outside of traditional Western practices (Hoskins & Padrón, 2017). Thus, as Leader 5 noted, spiritual connection and counseling is vital for maintaining community mental well-being. HOPE often holds open-closet events and food drives and regularly reaches out to community members who are suffering from illness, desire spiritual connection, or other support services. These individuals are frequently brought to the attention of HOPE's leaders by congregants who refer them. The HOPE organization reaches out to these individuals which has been shown to build long-term relationships that grow the organization.

According to Leader 5, HOPE also schedules regional organizational events that allow congregants from similar organizations to come together in spiritual fellowship. These joint events often lead to enhanced spiritual connection, augments unity in the HOPE organization, and builds extended relationships with those of similar spiritual mindsets.

Analytical Strategy

The study methodology was qualitative case study. Thematic analysis was used to identify key themes from the data gathered. This analysis approach is used to help understand relationships, similarities, and differences in the data (Gibson & Brown, 2009).

Approval from Walden University's institutional review board was obtained prior to conducting this study. Following approval, data on HOPE's communications efforts were gathered. These data reflected archival and operational information and information generated specifically for this study.

Archival and Operational Data

Archival and operational data for this study reflected information available via social media video data that demonstrated different communication styles and delivery as well as viewer reactions to these communications when the services were virtual. These communications before the COVID-19 pandemic and how they changed during and after the pandemic were studied. The specific periods reviewed were designated by important dates, including the date services went entirely virtual. The periods are defined as follows: before the peak pandemic, July 1, 2018, to March 31, 2020; during the pandemic's peak period, April 1, 2020, to December 31, 2021; and after the pandemic's peak, January 1, 2022, to October 31, 2022. The other important date was designated as the day on which in-person services were continued, which, for this study's purpose, signified the time after the pandemic's peak.

The nature of the data was virtual with compiled counts of viewings, comments from those who viewed the services, and reactions from viewers. The data from video on social networks were recorded through the social networking sites' built-in tracking technology. View counts, emotional reaction counts, and comments are automatically compiled by the social network.

HOPE's financial records from before, during the peak of the pandemic, and after the peak of the pandemic will also be reviewed. The focus of this review was to determine the amount of financial support from congregants during these periods and the effect of the transition between in-person and virtual services. The researcher requested permission to access these data from HOPE's leaders, with the provision that the raw data be redacted from numerical analysis and only reported as a coded factor. Levels of financial offering collections from before, during peak, and after peak pandemic periods were compared to look for notable changes that could be attributed to the COVID-19 pandemic. These sources of evidence provided supporting data for determining the most effective communication methods for HOPE to engage its congregants to support their mental wellness and maintain their spiritual connections to the organization.

The study data had limitations as most qualitative studies do in that it was limited in its transferability and generalizability to other contexts or settings. Leadership may not always have been forthright with pertinent information in their interviews, particularly involving information that portrayed congregants or the organization itself in a negative light. It is also possible that transfer errors occurred when the data were manually input for analysis.

The data were limited to the HOPE organization itself. The HOPE organization congregant demographics primarily represent a Hispanic population from the southern United States, which means that findings from this study may not be readily transferrable to other spiritual institutions with different churchgoer demographics.

Furthermore, there were language barriers as some of HOPE's leaders speak Spanish as their primary language. It was difficult to translate some phrases that do not exactly convert into English despite the researcher being fluent in both English and Spanish, bicultural, and raised with both languages in his household. It was also difficult to collect and compile digital interactions and comments. Coding emotional reactions and thematic analysis of comments required using analysis software for certain steps. One positive was that the social network retains posts could be reviewed and analyzed for all time periods of interest for this study.

Evidence Generated for the Doctoral Study

Evidence generated specifically for this study reflected data collected from interviews with five of HOPE's leaders. These individuals represent key leadership roles in the organization that include the main ministry branches as well as connections to both regional and national regulating bodies. They are relevant in that their perspectives during the qualitative interviews provided qualitative data that supported recommendations of best practices for future communications during disruptive events.

One-on-one interviews were conducted with the leaders. The interviews were in person or telephonic per the leader's preference. Interviews were conducted based on leader schedule availability and were between 5 min and 1 hr. The interview protocol included an introduction, the interview topic, a request for allowing recording of the interviews, the interview questions, a wrap-up conclusion statement thanking the leaders

for the interviews, and notification that additional data gathered from them may be necessary. The data collected from these interviews were the primary data for this study.

Secondary data were collected directly from HOPE's Facebook website, which tracked the data over the periods of focus in this study. These data were collected by manual review of each recorded video and associated congregant reactions such as comments and view counts. Other secondary data were collected from HOPE's financial reports, which the leaders provided.

Summary

Loss of spiritual connections between religious organizations and congregants is a problem, especially following the peak of the COVID-19 pandemic. HOPE's leaders identified numerous problems related to this loss they felt could be addressed by exploring the organization's communications approaches.

This study was conducted to determine the communication methods that worked well for HOPE before, during the peak, and after the peak of the COVID-19 pandemic that could be used to address noted issues in congregants' mental health, wellness, and lack of spiritual connection to HOPE that resulted from the pandemic. Literature reviewed that was relevant to this study supported spirituality or religion being an important protective factor for mental health and an individual's sense of well-being. It also emphasized the importance of leveraging the power of virtual communications and strategies to maintain churchgoers' mental wellness through spiritual support.

Section 3 is an analysis of HOPE. The analysis includes discussions on its workforce and operations. Also covered are measurement, analysis, and knowledge management components of the organization.

Section 3: Measurement, Analysis, and Knowledge Management Components of the Organization

The problem of interest in this qualitative single case study was the diminished spiritual and mental well-being of HOPE's congregation as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic's impact on daily life. HOPE's leaders noticed changes in the congregation that they attributed to communication styles implemented for safety reasons during the pandemic, primarily the shift to online versus in-person services during the height of the pandemic. Leader 2 explained that leaders mentioned noticing decreased spiritual connection of churchgoers, which had secondary effects including decreases in attendance, decreases in direct financial support, and decreased use of social services offered by the organization among other things. The practice-focused questions that guided this study are the following:

- What spiritual outreach methods were most effective before, during, and after peak periods of the COVID-19 pandemic?
- How might HOPE's leaders employ these methods most effectively to address concerns about congregants' mental health, wellness, and lack of spiritual connection to HOPE that resulted from the COVID-19 pandemic?
- How might these findings inform communications protocols that could be used during critical service disruptions in the future to help ensure congregants' spiritual wellness and connection to the organization?

Sources of evidence for this case study included one-to-one interviews with five members of HOPE's leadership regarding their perspectives on communications efforts to maintain congregants' spiritual connections before, during, and after the COVID-19 pandemic. Other sources included HOPE's public Facebook page, which has videos dating to before the pandemic, during the pandemic, and after the pandemic, along with digital comments and other user data that demonstrate the different communication styles used at different times during the COVID-19 pandemic. Reports showing the pandemic's financial impact were another data source and provided secondary support for conclusions drawn from the other data gathered. The financial data were coded to represent a factor of the original amount reported for each month before, during peak periods, and after peak periods of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Analysis of the Organization

With the exception of its leaders, HOPE is primarily volunteer based and relies heavily on motivated individuals who feel rewarded when serving others. Leader 5 described volunteer positions as including greeters, ministry assistants, videography technicians, and food servicers. These individuals are recruited based on their interest in volunteering in these roles. The greeters welcome all attendees, take offerings, and provide resources at request of leaders during worship services. Ministry assistants provide help to leaders during worship services and volunteer to organize or support ancillary services and events. Videography technicians help HOPE's leaders set up and

edit digital services while food service volunteers donate and cook food for after worship services and community events.

HOPE's efforts to build an effective and supportive workforce environment begin with recruiting individuals with strong religious beliefs and ideals consistent with the organization's mission. A key focus is on charismatic individuals who are motivated and driven toward meeting the organization's overall goals. While not explicitly stated in during recruitment, support positions often function along the lines of tryouts for leadership roles as defined in HOPE's organizational chart.

The volunteers form internal groups where they set schedules and coordinate. If they cannot fulfill their volunteer responsibilities at times due to work or family commitments, they recruit others to replace them. Leader 5 shared that volunteers who are successful in their positions and stay in them for certain periods of time may ascend to leadership positions in recognition of their consistent reliability and willingness to sacrifice their own time and resources in service to the HOPE mission.

HOPE does not necessarily vote people into positions as similar organizations might but instead gives individuals who express the interest and abilities to assume leadership roles the opportunities to do so. Many leaders have personal histories of being helped by the organization. Leader 4 commented that in one instance, HOPE supported a leader's family during the death of a sibling and provided continuous support and counseling thereafter.

There is yearly nationally mandated training for all leaders and staff. During this annual training, goals received from national leadership and communicated to its local organizations are established to ensure alignment to the same goals between the national organization and local organizations for the upcoming year. Leaders are also offered weekly leadership training classes as part of a professional development program. Classes are 2 hr in length and are held on Sundays throughout the year. Leader 2 stated that most Sunday trainings are optional, although some are required.

Maintaining effective communications between HOPE's leaders and staff is another element in building an effective and supportive workforce environment. Phone calls, text messaging, email, and WhatsApp messages are all employed as are regular meetings in person. Leaders and staff who have Facebook social pages also connect through them.

Efforts to keep HOPE's leaders and volunteers engaged to achieve a high-performance work environment include allowing the leaders of the different organizational branches to contribute directly to managing and directing the organization's growth. According to Leader 5, the leaders are encouraged to suggest possible goals and focuses for upcoming months by submitting them directly to the leadership committee, which then reviews the suggestions and determines which will be implemented in the coming month. This approach empowers the leaders; they feel heard and become motivated as they are often the ones who determine the upcoming agendas.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, one agenda put forward by some leaders was the initiative to provide food products and financial assistance to those in need throughout the local community. The leaders donated food, money, clothing, and medicine for individuals in the community identified as being in particular need. The drive to help others in need during times when community members and churchgoers were sick served to both keep leaders engaged in a worthwhile mission and allow them to reconnect with many churchgoers and community members. Leader 1 asserted that this form of workforce empowerment has resulted in very motivated volunteers and ministry leaders throughout the organization.

Knowledge Management

HOPE primarily measures organizational performance by monitoring attendance figures, donation levels, and feedback from congregants or leaders. Spreadsheets are maintained to track financial information. The ushers assigned to services take attendance. Attendance figures are kept in journals. There are no mandates for maintaining detailed journals about weekly events.

HOPE's leaders manage the organization's knowledge assets, which include all social media and all organization-related documents. Social media assets include public forums, journals, and email chains. For example, HOPE uses WhatsApp as a forum where congregants can text other congregants to keep in touch, check in on each other, and in general to see what is going on in the congregation. Ushers who take attendance at worship services call people they notice as not being in attendance to see if there is

anything they can do to help or if anything is wrong with these individuals or their families.

Leader 2 keeps all leadership committee meeting minutes in personal journals. Leader 2 also keeps personal journals during meetings to record problem-solving processes and any decisions that are made. Records are also kept for individual groups at HOPE, including the men's and women's groups, which have their own leadership structures. Leaders for both groups are elected in a democratic manner by voting every December. The group leaders are responsible for keeping records of activities in these groups. Leader 5 commented that these records are knowledge assets in the sense that others at HOPE can go through them, share resources and ideas, and gain support for various organization events as well as to benefit themselves, their families, and other community members.

HOPE prides itself on discretion. No personal information is kept that could be used by outside sources against any of its clients or people it provides services for. Thus, it is important for data to be securely stored, both physically at HOPE and online. Secure storage also facilitates using and reviewing this information in the future.

HOPE's knowledge assets include a printing service, which is part of the national committee. This service facilitates downloading and printing lessons, doctrine, and information about following the lessons and doctrines for the time periods specified. This knowledge asset supports local leaders when conducting religious services and when serving the community and congregation as a whole.

Leader 3 primarily manages HOPE's information technology infrastructure. This leader is in charge of coordinating technology setups, videography, and live streaming so that data can be collected through the livestreams and placed on HOPE's social media website. Viewer data, reactions, comments, and digital donation data found on the social media platforms are of particular importance. Leaders 3 and 5 have primary responsibility for managing HOPE's social media database, including all members who are part of the organization and the associated data stored by Facebook. Leader 3 is also responsible for setting up Sunday streaming events, which are offered in series by various presenters. Leader 3's role is to coordinate the events, including assisting people who want to present during these events.

Summary

Section 3 was an overview of HOPE's workforce, including a discussion on how the organization builds an effective and supportive workforce environment and engages staff for high performance in the work environment. Details on how HOPE designs, manages, and improves its services and work processes were also provided. Following this was an analysis of how the organization ensures effective management and operations. Information regarding how the organization measures, analyzes, and improves organizational performance was then synthesized. Lastly, how the organization manages its knowledge assets, information technology, and information technology infrastructure was evaluated.

Section 4 contains a description of the evidence collected and an evaluation of the organization's programs, services, and initiative effectiveness. A detailed evaluation on topics such as the workforce, leadership, governance, financial, and marketplace performance results is provided. The implications of the findings and the potential for positive social change are then described. Lastly, the study strengths and limitations and their potential impact on the overall findings are explained.

Section 4: Results—Analysis, Implications, and Preparation of Findings

The loss of spiritual and mental well-being among members of the HOPE congregation during the COVID-19 pandemic was the practice problem that spurred this study. HOPE's leaders noticed declines in spiritual services attendance and fellowship that they associated with switching from in person to primarily digital communications during the pandemic. They also noted increases in requests for prayer and behavioral health services such as counseling but were less able to provide these services as a result of obstacles created by the pandemic.

The loss of spiritual connection that resulted in subsequent attendance decreases continued even after the peak pandemic period, defined for this study as January 1, 2022, to October 31, 2022. Leader 1 explained that some congregants were still hesitant to go back, and some did not return at all. Others came back to HOPE after in-person services were reinstated, but many still remained outside of the organization at the time of this study and were no longer attending spiritual services or requesting ancillary services.

Given continuing concerns regarding future disasters or service disruptions, HOPE's leaders sought to identify the most effective strategies for communicating with congregants and helping them maintain their spirituality in the event of these challenges. In particular, HOPE's leaders wanted to determine which communication strategies were most effective before the pandemic, defined for this study as from July 1, 2018, to March 31, 2020, during the pandemic's peak period, defined for this study as April 1, 2020, to December 31, 2021, and after the peak pandemic period, defined for this study as January

1, 2022, to October 31, 2022. Their goal was to employ the most effective strategies for communicating with congregants and helping them maintain their spirituality in the case of future events that cause service disruptions or another viral pandemic.

The practice-focused questions in this study are the following:

- What spiritual outreach methods were most effective before, during, and after peak periods of the COVID-19 pandemic?
- How might HOPE's leaders employ these methods most effectively to address concerns about congregants' mental health, wellness, and lack of spiritual connection to HOPE that resulted from the COVID-19 pandemic?
- How might these findings inform communications protocols that could be used during critical service disruptions in the future to help ensure congregants' spiritual wellness and connection to the organization?

Sources of evidence for this study included one-on-one interviews with five of HOPE's leaders. Videos of HOPE's services, which are hosted on the organization's Facebook Live page, were another important information source. The videos provided a visual timeline of the strategies implemented to improve digital communication and provided additional secondary support for determining which communication strategies may have been more effective than others.

The third key information source was financial data detailing donations by month, from before the pandemic to after peak pandemic periods, which were used to show financial support levels during the switches in communication styles and implementation

of novel strategies. These data provided secondary support for the strategies that were best for maintaining financial support levels. The financial data were obtained from the leadership council in a dollar format that was converted to a factor format by dividing by the average intake for the period financial data were provided.

The Baldrige framework consists of seven criteria for assessing organizational effectiveness: leadership; strategy; customers; measurement, analysis, and knowledge management; workforce; operations; and results (NIST, 2021). The framework is used to educate organization leaders on best practices and empower them to meet goals and expectations, to improve outcomes, and to become more competitive with others in their field. This framework was used to assess HOPE's communication strategies and efforts before, during peak periods, and after peak periods of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Analysis, Results, and Implications

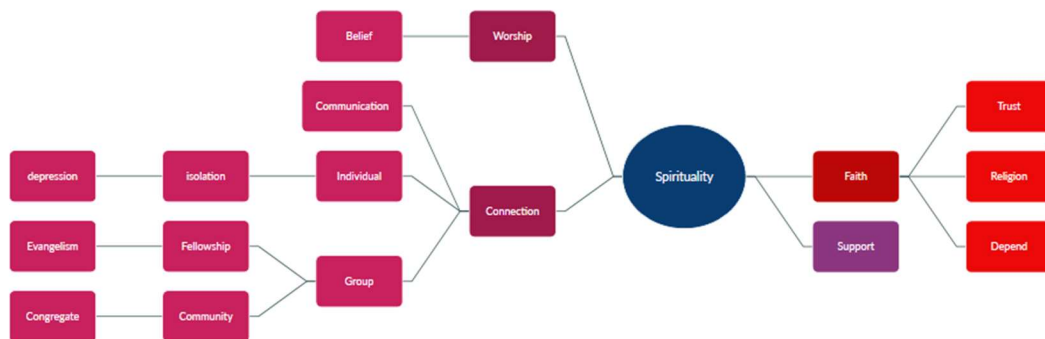
Rev.com was used to transcribe the interviews with HOPE's leaders, after which the text was uploaded to NVivo for coding. NVivo facilitates automated and manual options for coding thematic data. Using NVivo's automated coding function allows creating codes and themes through pattern matching and frequency counts. Figure 2 is a word cloud representing the most frequently used words in the transcripts. Words appearing more frequently are larger than words appearing less frequently.

Figure 2 shows that the most frequently used words or themes were community, spiritual, effective organization, congregation, spiritually, understand, inaudible technology, resources, experience, counseling, and evangelism. Other less frequently recurring but still important topics were fellowship, connection, information, successful challenge, physically, government, available, and streaming and spreading knowledge.

After generating the word cloud, NVivo was used to create mind maps showing the connections between the terms. The mind maps also helped to identify the emergent themes from the leaders' interviews, which are discussed next. Important to note is that a key focus in this analysis was to identify themes that would help answer the three research questions that reflected the practice problem.

Emergent Theme 1: Spirituality

The first emergent theme was spirituality. This theme came to light as it connected most frequently to other words the leaders used in their interviews, such as community, connection, and faith. Figure 3 is the mind map showing spirituality's connection to the other themes in the leaders' comments. The mind maps are of particular importance as they show the connections between most frequent words and thus topics found during interviews with HOPE's leadership. This visual analysis supported findings that helped to answer the study's research questions.

Figure 3*Mind Map of Spirituality*

Maintaining congregant mental health and wellness through spiritual outreach is a cornerstone of HOPE’s mission. The leadership’s efforts in this area are important for helping congregants maintain their mental health as well as their individual sense of well-being. These efforts also are essential for the church’s stability and longevity. As Leader 2 stated,

I think that [when] spiritually they are fine, the church is strong and stable . . . In the middle of very hard times and crises even . . . people get scared. But I return to the same thing, when we have God people seek refuge and security in God and we turn to his word and his response, this brings hope that we can have a better future.

Leader 1 had a similar comment: “When we are prepared spiritually to when we see or we know there’s some disaster is approaching, I think that helps us maintain a balance of our fears and our thoughts.”

Maintaining spiritual connections also pertained to managing congregants’ fears and thoughts and thus their mental health and overall well-being. Leader 2 reinforced this focus in stating that particularly in times of crisis or disaster, the leaders felt that spirituality is vital to maintaining a stable and strong congregation. In particular, maintaining spirituality was referenced as key to managing congregant’ fears and negative thoughts.

HOPE’s leaders frequently referenced spirituality in combination with other terms such as depend, as congregants often depend on some form of daily spiritual relationship for connection and stability. They also frequently noted the importance of helping congregants either maintain their spirituality at high levels or increase their spirituality levels. They emphasized that spiritual practice is essential and identified the need for being aware that people can be deeply affected if their spirituality weakens.

As also shown in the mind map, connection was an important subtheme as it links to other topics such as individual, group, and communication. Each person’s connection to spirituality is unique, individual, and personal. One’s sense of spirituality can vary depending on the feeling of connectedness to others.

Faith in general is important to maintaining spirituality and spiritual connections. During the pandemic, many people associated the loss in spirituality with isolation, which

HOPE's leaders often mentioned. People could not get together and voiced concerns that isolation would lead to negative outcomes for their mental health and well-being. Lack of fellowship was a commonly voiced concern as the congregants could not meet in person. The physical relationships that congregants had by being present together in one setting were lost after the implementation of digital services.

Finally, the mind map for spirituality shows a connection between evangelism, testimonials, relational, and service, supporting evangelism as an important part of the spiritual experience. Leaders and congregants alike found evangelism to be part of their spiritual duties to share with others their spiritual relationship, experience, or willingness to serve. As Leader 4 stated,

With evangelism, it would be to just try to reach other people in the community, whether it's in the park or at work or our family members, and just talk to everyone that we're doing this for the love of God, and also to fulfill the commandment of sharing the gospel with everyone and anyone.

Individual connections to spirituality can be powerful motivators and protective factors during times of disaster and personal crisis, especially when these connections are also associated with groups. Group spiritual attendance can moderate depressive symptoms so well that it has been shown to significantly reduce the associated cognitive decline often seen in those suffering from depressive symptoms such as isolation and anxiety (Reyes-Ortiz et al., 2008). The loss of shared fellowship in group settings that were previously a consistent part of people's lives can lessen connections with spirituality

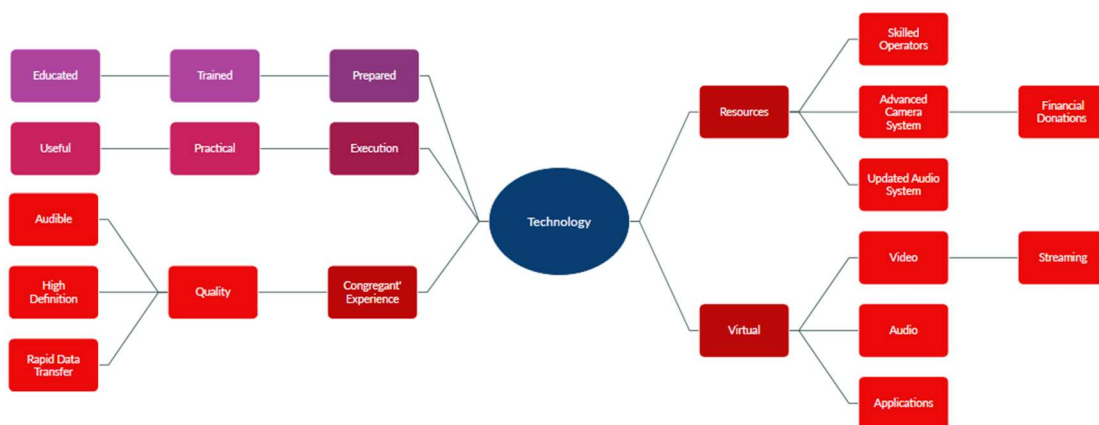
and lead to isolation and depression during times of crisis. The study findings showed the value in spiritual connections, including group settings that link to fellowship, community, congregating, and evangelism.

Emerging Theme 2: Technology

Technology was the second theme to emerge from the analysis conducted for this study. As the mind map in Figure 4 shows, this theme was often linked to resources and streaming videos. As also shown in the mind map, this theme also reflected specific aspects of video production such as overall video quality, including audio and definition, which HOPE's leadership characterized as challenging.

Figure 4

Mind Map of Technology



Technology Resources

Before the pandemic, HOPE's leaders primarily used the organization's digital technology resources to video record worship services, which were then uploaded to

HOPE's Facebook page so congregants and others interested in HOPE's offerings could view the services online. Social distancing necessary during the pandemic's peak necessitated switching entirely to live streaming the services via Facebook Live. As Leader 1 stated, "There was no other way to communicate. This is what we were using the technology . . . to be able to communicate and reach out to the congregation."

This approach aligned with those mounted by other churches, as noted in Naidoo et al. (2021), who found that when governmental social distancing mandates stopped organizations from providing spiritual services to congregants, technology then became the bridge between the clergy and the laity, with online communication of sermons, praise and worship, and broadcasting messages of encouragement of faith and hope have become a common practice among pastors, who took to using social media to connect with their congregations.

Parish (2020) also noted Facebook, WhatsApp, and Instagram becoming particularly important in the transition to digital spiritual platforms during the COVID-19 pandemic. As an example, approximately 18,000,000 viewers watched the Vatican's Facebook streamed live feeds during the pandemic. Congregants could not consummate the spiritual experience in person such as during the taking of communion, but they still attended online, similar to cooking shows that are ever popular despite not being able to physically participate. There is still some humanistic spiritual connection to seeing the familiar even if you cannot touch, feel, or smell the environment.

HOPE's live stream viewers could also post comments and interact with each other during the live streams. However, the ability to connect with HOPE's leaders and other congregants was immaterial for congregants who were unfamiliar with Facebook Live or who did not have Facebook accounts. Some congregants, particularly older individuals, adapted by asking others to help them set up Facebook accounts and teach them how to use them.

A key technology pivot for HOPE during the COVID-19 pandemic was using WhatsApp as a primary communication methodology on a daily basis and as a source for requesting counseling or prayer services. This communications approach was instituted during the pandemic and maintained after the peak pandemic period. WhatsApp allows users to send text and voice messages, make voice and video calls, and share images, documents, user locations, and other content. WhatsApp is downloadable to most cellular devices but can also be accessed via computers. The application is popular worldwide because of its ability to send SMS text messages through the internet rather than through a cellular provider, thus minimizing costs that may be charged for sending text messages (Stegner, 2023).

However, using a primarily telephone-based app also presented some challenges for older congregants. Leader 1 recalled that it was "a little bit rough, I would say, for the older generation, to start getting used to work their phones. If they didn't know how to work their phones, somebody would teach them how to use them and how to connect."

Another key technology pivot was BlueJeans, an app used to facilitate better video conferencing during the pandemic. BlueJeans was designed to streamline video conferencing, screen sharing, and data sharing (Mehta, 2023), which made it an appropriate choice for improving video conferencing transmission. However, many older congregants had trouble installing the app on devices they could access, creating an account, and then learning how to participate during video conferencing. Those who were able to use it and participate noted improved sharing and communication during group services and motivational testimonials.

As the pandemic progressed, spiritual services were partially reopened for in-person services at HOPE. Services were still livestreamed for congregants who could not attend or feared attending in-person services. HOPE's leaders also began posting spiritual motivational videos on Facebook.

HOPE fully reopened in January 2022, after the peak pandemic period. A majority of congregants began to attend services in-person once again without safety protocols or restrictions. Services were still provided digitally as well, including daily spiritual motivational videos.

These findings suggest that the motivational spiritual videos and messages sent via WhatsApp and then later through Facebook were important in keeping members motivated and feeling connected to the organization. Despite the effectiveness of these strategies, some leaders felt that though they resulted in the desired outcome (keeping members motivated and connected to the organization), they could have been improved

by sharing the videos and messages on other digital platforms such as Instagram or through direct text for those who do not use WhatsApp.

One common criticism was that the whole membership team was not always aware of when events were scheduled and services would be broadcast unless they were part of the WhatsApp group where messages are shared. This feedback reflected a communication bottleneck that needed to be resolved. Some interviewees suggested database group messaging that can be used for the entire organization, including previously affiliated individuals, as an effective way to advertise events to members and the community.

Technology Challenges

HOPE's leadership frequently mentioned the technology-related challenges they encountered. Technology-specific training appeared to be a barrier despite the fact that it allowed for convenience of connection and communication. This barrier affected both HOPE's leadership and congregants as leaders struggled to learn how to produce content on new digital platforms while congregants struggled to learn how to use available technology resources to gain access to spiritual services. Another challenge was that the apps and the technology necessary to use them regularly needed updating. Leader 1 said, "We saw we needed improvement . . . maybe with newer technology, using it to do better viewing, better broadcasting, better streaming."

According to HOPE's leadership, congregants frequently criticized the video live streams as lacking in quality. Leader 3 stated, "I think we tried our best. Video

connection was not the best, and is still not the best. Sound still needs to get a little bit better. Somebody could be really preaching but, oh wait, connection lost.” The short daily videos and audios that were used as motivational resources seemed to improve connections overall between HOPE and its congregants and the organization but also needed improvement in quality.

Losing connections and other technology glitches can become barriers in delivering effective spiritual messages to congregants (Lewis, 2018). Groop (2021) stated that high-quality digital worship services require well-trained production personnel in order to best present spiritual messages that provide space where emotions and the mind can interact. Streaming video quality and production value may not be the top priorities in addressing the spiritual connection needs of congregants during times of disaster or service disruption but they are important factors in making congregants feel connected and engaged spiritually.

Technology challenges also highlighted demographic differences in HOPE’s congregation. Older congregants often found it difficult to stay connected with HOPE and with other congregants due to unfamiliarity with digital technology. However, youth in the congregation had better experience with technology and a better understanding of how to adapt to digital service communication.

HOPE’s leaders recognized the youth as possibly playing a key role in the event of a similar future service disruption limiting in-person services. As Leader 2 stated,

We are in a very technology-driven era, very modern, and we have to get with the times. The best way to do that is to understand the youth and work with them.

They dominate the computer programs, the live stream, and they were truly key to make this a successful transition for the congregation from in person to live stream.

Thus, the youth in HOPE's congregation seemed to be a key way to address the gaps in technology knowledge and training that the older congregants demonstrated. The youth can not only make the transition to digital a smoother process but also help prepare and train older congregants on how to get access to digital spiritual services.

Accessibility

Accessibility was the final main subtheme under technology. Older congregants' unfamiliarity with the digital platform was a common complaint HOPE's leaders reported. Leader 2 said, "It was a little bit complicated and a little bit rough for the older generation to start getting used to work their phones . . . Somebody [had to] teach them how to use them and how to connect."

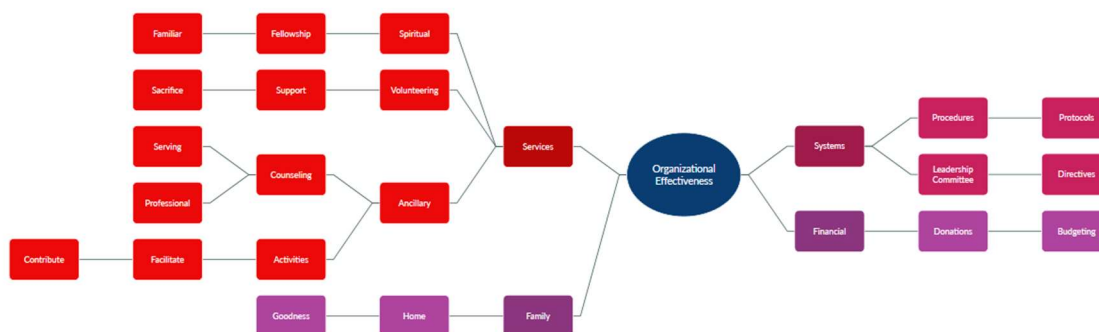
Many congregants also lacked the resource technology requirements necessary to watch and interact with services that were conducted digitally. Age was often a common cofactor associated with the lack of resource technology as many older congregants had never familiarized themselves with computer systems, internet services, or phone applications that were needed to access the spiritual services online. As Leader 2 put it, "[Congregants] had difficulty updating to the technology, especially our older crowd."

Emerging Theme 3: Organizational Effectiveness

Analysis of the interviews with HOPE’s leadership reflected the leadership’s central role in ensuring that HOPE runs smoothly, even during a pandemic. As shown in the mind map in Figure 5, words associated with this theme reflected various aspects of helping such as support, facilitate, assist, or aid. Organizational effectiveness was also associated with models, lessons, and representing.

Figure 5

Mind Map of Organizational Effectiveness



It is important for organizational leaders to create environments for success and focus on action (NIST, 2021). As Leader 4 said,

Once we sign up to be a leader, or accept the position, we know that these responsibilities are laid out. And the good thing is, when you’re a ministry, you have support from people who are pretty much acting as volunteers, or part of that, and that’s how they can help execute the responsibilities.

Organizational effectiveness is often described as how well organizations reach their goals considering the supplies they have. By its nature, it is a complex concept, multifactorial, and difficult to comprehend as the term “effective” is so dynamic in nature (Dhoopar et al., 2023). One characteristic of organizational effectiveness implies being conscious of corporate social responsibility toward both stakeholders and society at large (Podgorodnichenko et al., 2022).

Cameron et al. (2022) stated that when organizations can maintain multiple competing values, they become more effective. HOPE’s leadership struggled with the competing values of financially sustaining the organization and its membership while attempting to minimize the risk for potential illness or death thrust upon them by the COVID-19 pandemic. The decline in financial donations during the peak pandemic period left leadership with the choice of shutting down the organization and its services or risking potential illness of their families or congregant families. Leader 2 stated,

It comes to a point where you have to decide if we want to do this, we’re going to run the risk. And I think that was weighing in our conscious because you have to understand that if you make a decision and something does happen, it’s on you.

Leader 2 also shared that leadership found themselves trying to gauge the level of risk to congregants and themselves of getting sick by conducting small or large group activities versus the risk of having to stop providing some or all of the services they had previously provided.

For HOPE, organizational effectiveness is important for facilitating spiritual and ancillary services, systems, and operational finances. Part of the organization's mission is to help others by being able to produce a valued product (spiritual services) that congregants can receive. As the mind map in Figure 5 shows, there are numerous words associated with organizational effectiveness that illustrate its importance for the HOPE organization such as governing, organizing directives, systems strength, preparedness, help, family, services, giving and being an example.

Organizational effectiveness often implies being holistically aware of its own role in acting with a semblance of organizational social responsibility, but it also represents being effective as an organization. This awareness was reflected in the following comment from Leader 2:

Our mission is to live in out [as a role model] so that other people can learn about God . . . but also the church. We clearly know there's costs that come to keeping the light bill paid and all of those [operational] expenses.

Leadership frequently associated organizational effectiveness with the word "feeding," which was regularly mentioned as a way to represent how a good, "effective" organization should behave. Leaders commonly associated feeding with being devotional and contributing toward a greater spiritual mission. Leader 4 said, "Having the sermon of the pastor is essential, even during the week . . . Nothing wrong with watching TV, but we're trying to feed our souls spiritually."

Feeding came up as a theme in Leader 4's response to how effective HOPE was at switching to digital communication when he responded, "They [digital communications] were effective because we did get a good response when they were transmitting . . . it was our job or their job to keep feeding us." Meanwhile, Leader 3 did not think that the streaming was a high-quality product but found it effective none the less because "it helped, just in the simple fact there was some type of communication [to congregants] in general. Because otherwise there was nothing online, then there just wouldn't be any type of spiritual feeding whatsoever."

Organizational effectiveness from HOPE's leadership and congregant perspectives frequently boiled down to feeding the congregation spiritually. Congregants were essentially forced to sustain themselves with a new type of virtual spiritual feeding. However, as time went on, the desire for in-person spiritual feeding often became too much for congregants to bear. HOPE's leadership was frequently forced to weigh the prospect of losing congregants to other religious institutions against the risk of potential illness and death to congregants, themselves, or their families by conducting in-person services.

In October 2020, the unquenchable need for in-person spiritual feeding for many led to creating a hybrid spiritual sustenance approach consisting of small group in-person, small group virtual, and individual virtual methods. Congregants could access these methods in any way they wished, depending on personal motivation (hunger for in-person spiritual feeding), personal illness (actively sick), or personal illness risk to others

(close contact with sick people). These complex conflicting drives of both wanting to be spiritually fed but also wanting to prevent illness, injury, or death was a very personal and individual experience for each congregant. As Leader 1 stated,

We saw people that were already feeling the effects in a manner that they wanted to go back and be in the church, the actual building . . . They wanted to be at church and worship together like before. But then we also saw that some were still a little bit hesitant to go back. Also, we saw some that did not return at all.

There were individuals who felt that avoiding risk of any kind to themselves or their family was more important than spiritual feeding. Most congregants reacted by initially feeling that the risk of illness or death was too high, but as risk diminished over time, eventually the need to be spiritually fed outweighed that risk in their decision-making, as noted in Leader 4's remarks:

I think that a lot of people, after we went back, were still afraid. They were happy with being back. But still afraid of fellowship, and just being there. It felt like you are risking yourself . . . [It was] the touchy subject or controversial subject because we didn't want anyone to get sick, but on a spiritual sense, we still felt the duty and obligation to maintain that spirituality, even if it cost us death.

Analysis and Implications

NVivo was also used to create a project map, shown in Figure 6, to show the nodes that were most commonly associated with the combined leadership interview transcripts. The map supports some common themes that were discussed, including

services, leaders, spirituality, and videos. The project map provided secondary support that the communications methods HOPE's leadership employed during the pandemic were essential elements in maintaining spiritual and ancillary services.

These visual representations helped guide the following discussions by identifying key trends and themes from the participant interviews. In order to best present analysis and implications reflecting HOPE's overall operations and its efforts during the COVID-19 pandemic, the following discussion first details efforts in these areas. Analysis and implications in each area as well as for financial and marketplace performance are then presented.

Client Programs and Services

HOPE's overall goal is to provide religious support and healing in times of need to as many people as possible in the community it serves. This support primarily takes two forms: worship and ancillary services. Each area is discussed in more detail next.

Worship Services

During the COVID-19 pandemic, HOPE's leadership had to quickly pivot from primarily providing these services in person to virtually. As the pandemic progressed, HOPE's leadership also used in-person, small group spiritual services to maintain connections with its congregation. This approach was effective in many ways, particularly as a model for family spirituality. Leader 1 said,

At the beginning it was just the same persons conducting the service, so we felt more people needed to start helping. That's why you started seeing families with the men leading the services and the family joining in for songs.

This format demonstrated how families could motivate others through spiritual devotionals and encourage families participating in services digitally to also bring their families members to join in fellowship.

HOPE also reached out to young member leaders and leader families and invited them to lead regular spiritual service sessions. These sessions supplemented the spiritual services conducted by HOPE's pastor and evangelical team. Sessions were often conducted via video format at the host leader's home and streamed for congregants to watch but neighborhood congregants and family members were also allowed to attend in

person if they preferred. As Leader 4 stated, “It involved that sense of community . . . to see the family come together.” This small group in-person spiritual connection was a less risky form of the larger in-person spiritual services previously conducted at the church.

Using musician-directed services for entertainment and evangelical worship during and after services was also an important element in HOPE’s client services and programs during the pandemic. The musicians played basic popular songs that encouraged people to join in fellowship, not just through sermons and preaching but also through other forms of fellowship such as singing and dancing. The music was uplifting and invigorating to the congregants; it both bolstered the congregants spiritually and provided another way to connect with each other and the organization. As Leader 4 said, “Sometimes we just needed to share that aspect of fellowship being with the music . . . it was effective in maintaining the spirituality [of the congregation] in the sense of bringing more joy.”

HOPE’s leadership relied heavily on congregant families that were anchor points for the organization before the pandemic. Leadership sought to maintain these relationships and use these groups to help support continued spirituality of those with whom anchor members had close personal or familial connections to in the congregation. According to Leader 4, “By working with family groups, we’re able to maybe invite our family and friends into our homes and just ask questions, share about the gospel.” Thus, HOPE’s leadership would focus their attention on the individuals who needed the most spiritual or secondary ancillary services support during the time of isolation by using

ambassadors to reach out to these individuals. Leader 1 explained, “[If] they were not showing up to in-person services, then they would visit them at their home. If they felt that they needed to do that, they would go and visit them.”

Ambassadors could be anybody who supported HOPE and who had a connection with the individuals they thought were in the most need of spiritual connection or secondary ancillary services. Leadership would often ask these ambassadors to reach out to congregants via phone calls, messaging, or sometimes by leaving thoughtful gifts at the individual’s home. Leader 4 mentioned that “What [the pandemic] opened my eyes to was that we needed to reach out different to those who were not interested in going back.”

An organizational strength for HOPE was often the passion and commitment toward spiritual connection, particularly among the leadership and some of the youth. But the strategic obstacles that the COVID-19 pandemic presented revealed systems and structures that needed improvement. Unrefined and untested systems affected congregants’ abilities to maintain spiritual connection because of pandemic-related obstacles.

Building connections by using host families in close proximity to one another made a significant impact on maintaining a sense of shared fellowship and connection during times of isolation for the organization. Empowering individuals in these groups to lead spiritual services and help facilitate secondary ancillary services was crucial for

maintaining congregants' overall well-being and sense of spiritual connection. Leader 2 identified this system of forming cohesive proximal and familial teams as a success.

HOPE's leadership relied on self-evaluation to determine how they were performing. They used self-evaluation to track donation levels, service participation levels, and secondary services usage. Findings such as lower donation levels, less participating during services, and less use of secondary services made leadership try different approaches in response. These different approaches were primarily anecdotal based on feedback leaders received from individual congregants who expressed the desire or need for more spiritual secondary service support.

Self-evaluation and feedback responses led to initiatives such as the daily spiritual motivation videos being implemented as well as creating host families for spiritual services as supportive groups that could be there for HOPE's congregants without access to digital communication methodologies. Self-evaluation and feedback also led to using different communication styles such as going from individually directed spiritual services to group-directed spiritual services to musician-led spiritual services. It resulted in data about what communication styles were more effective than others and led to empowering the youth as ambassadors who developed their own youth spiritual services. It not only empowered the individuals conducting the services but also led to more participation and enthusiasm from the youth in the congregation and served a good marketing tool to recruit young individuals looking for a place for spiritual fellowship.

Ancillary Services

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, in addition to religious services, HOPE offered ancillary services that focused on congregants' mental wellness through spiritual support. These services included marriage counseling, family counseling, addiction counseling, leadership classes. Leader 2 identified other ancillary services as food pantries for the community, sanctuary locations during storms, home stability support, child nutrition support, domestic abuse support, financial education support, housing support for displaced individuals or families, and socioemotional counseling.

Ancillary services were more difficult to maintain during the peak pandemic period. The organization slowed down its availability to have events. There was a regular fellowship and spiritual motivation monthly gathering that occurred in person before the pandemic that was halted during the peak pandemic period. Instead, Leader 1 stated that HOPE's lead pastor made in-person visits when necessary, and other ministry leaders would facilitate more personal outreach than just through the daily message that was sent.

Many counseling services went from being conducted in person by HOPE's leadership in their offices to being done virtually over communication modalities such as WhatsApp or BlueJeans. On occasion, leadership would go to the homes of individuals in need who requested prayer or counseling while following safety protocols, including social distancing and wearing a face mask to conduct such services.

Although there was an increase in requests for both prayer and counseling services, HOPE's leaders found it difficult to safely provide these services during the

peak pandemic period. The leaders who previously provided these services feared spreading the illness or getting sick themselves. Leader 1 explained that the philosophy was “Let’s take care of each other, remember the protocols we need to follow to try to keep us from getting infected with the virus or infecting other if we were to contract it.” The fear was not solely among leadership but also from congregants who may have wanted help but feared getting sick by a visitor or unknowingly spreading the illness to visitors.

Services such as weddings and domestic or familial counseling were significantly limited. For example, a wedding for a congregant member that was supposed to have 200 invitees was limited to only 30 members because of 6-foot distancing safety protocols. That situation caused much distress and complaints from congregants, family, and friends expecting to be able to attend the event.

Workforce

As previously discussed in Section 3, and according to Leader 5, with the exception of its leaders, HOPE is primarily volunteer based and relies heavily on motivated individuals who feel rewarded when serving others. Maintaining personal connections with congregants became more of a responsibility for HOPE’s leaders and volunteers during the pandemic. The shuttering of in-person worship and ancillary services during the COVID-19 pandemic significantly impacted HOPE’s leaders. While the leaders perceived their efforts to maintain congregant spirituality as relatively good

for the task at hand, they also felt they were technologically and digitally unprepared to do so, which placed a significant burden on them.

HOPE's leaders were used to preparing to teach classes or giving spiritual services, but they now also had to focus on addressing the void in communications between the organization and its congregants. Instead of preparing worksheets, pamphlets, or practicing their lessons, the leaders now had to learn how to use new digital software, upload files, operate audio and recording devices, troubleshoot problems with the streams, and teach others how to mute or unmute their microphones. They had to learn to stream spiritual services digitally and develop skills on how to share them on different communication platforms such as Facebook and WhatsApp.

The leaders made substantial efforts to reach out to congregants who needed help or requested aid, whether for illness or for spiritual connection. Leader 1 commented that HOPE would send baskets of vegetables and other thoughtful gifts to help these individuals stay connected to the organization: "It was done taking some basic groceries . . . dropped off at the doorstep and just left with a note." These efforts were essential for maintaining the higher than average return of membership after the peak pandemic period when compared to other studies that surveyed membership retention, as HOPE had about a 90% membership return rate according to leadership.

While taking safety precautions, the leaders would often make in-person house calls to those in need who wanted spiritual support or were ill in order to maintain their important roles as leaders and spiritual advisors to these congregants. HOPE's leaders felt

these efforts were successful overall. However, they also felt they could have done a better job of reaching out to all previous members who had any type of connection with the organization because the pandemic was a good reason to try to reconnect and form these bonds again with those individuals.

Leadership and Governance

HOPE's national leadership had instructed its member churches to obey all local and regional restrictions but also to decide on their own whether they would move to primarily virtual service provision or not. HOPE's leadership prioritized congregant safety during the COVID-19 pandemic. The leadership's decision to switch to primarily digital modality at the beginning of the pandemic was with this in mind. The organization sought to minimize the spread of COVID-19 and associated illnesses or deaths that could potentially impact the organization in a devastating manner. As Leader 1 stated, "We were effectively trying to send out that message to be cautious, to take care of ourselves. But while we took care of ourselves, we're also taking care of others that are around us."

Thus, HOPE's leaders focused their attention on the individuals who needed the most spiritual or secondary ancillary services support during the time of isolation by using ambassadors to reach out to these individuals. According to Leader 1, "[If] they were not showing up to in-person services, then they would visit them at their home. If they felt that they needed to do that, they would go and visit them."

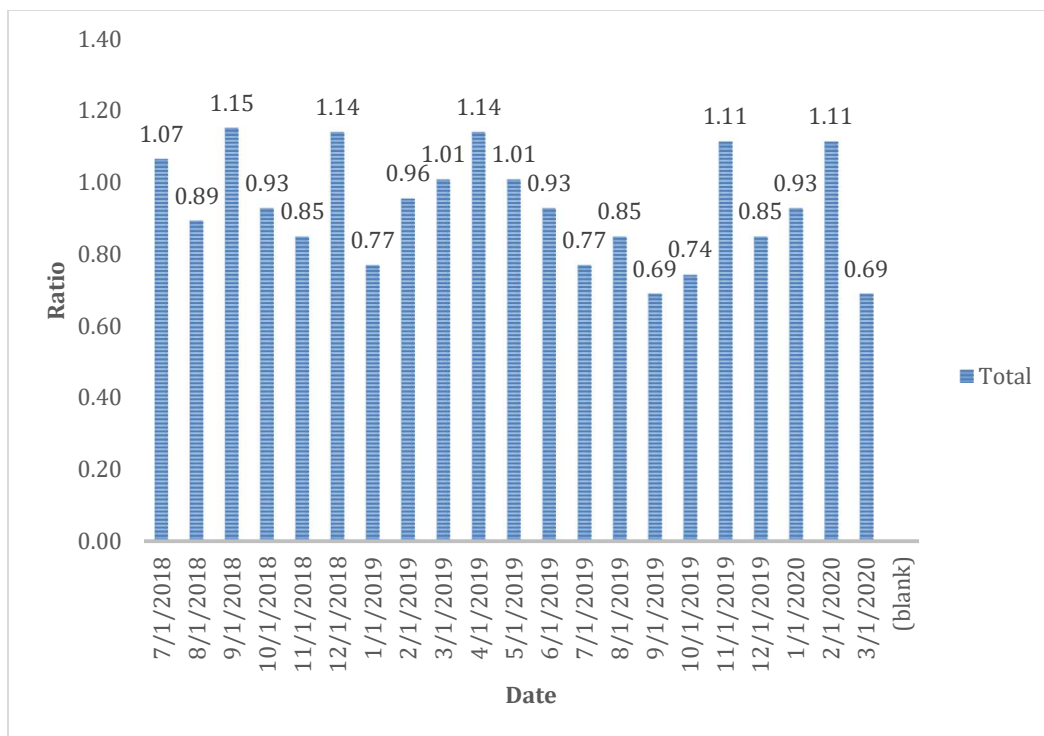
HOPE's leaders did feel that they struggled to find ways for congregants to make in-person donations during the pandemic. Most of the time, Leader 2 would schedule a 5-

hr window on Mondays during which congregants could drop off donations. However, the leaders felt they could have created small teams of individuals responsible for collecting donations from congregants. There was a significant drop in donation levels during the first 6 months of the peak pandemic period. It was not until there was a partial in-person service reopening on Saturday evenings that donation levels really grew. Organized pick-up schedules and having individuals in regular communication regarding donations may have led to higher during the peak pandemic period.

There was an interesting phenomenon of the attendance level dropping by about 10% during the partial reopening period while there was a concurrent increase in donation levels that exceeded even prepandemic period donations. HOPE's leaders had difficulty explaining why this occurred but suggested that the congregants who returned seemed to be more committed and spiritual than before the prepandemic period. Leader 4 recalled some congregants stating that they wanted to return, were eager to do so, and that the pandemic caused them to experience things they never thought they would.

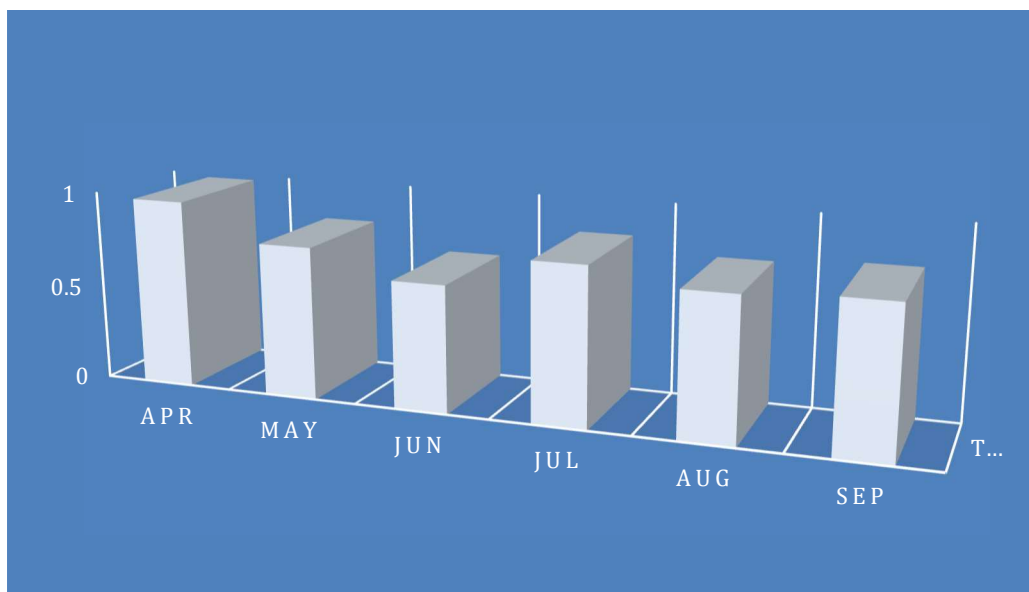
Financial and Marketplace Performance

Analysis of the financial data gathered for this study showed that, overall, HOPE's finances ran below the organization's 4-year average (from July 1, 2018, to October 1, 2022), at 0.92 or 92% of the average donation level (see Figure 7).

Figure 7*Donations Before Peak Pandemic Period*

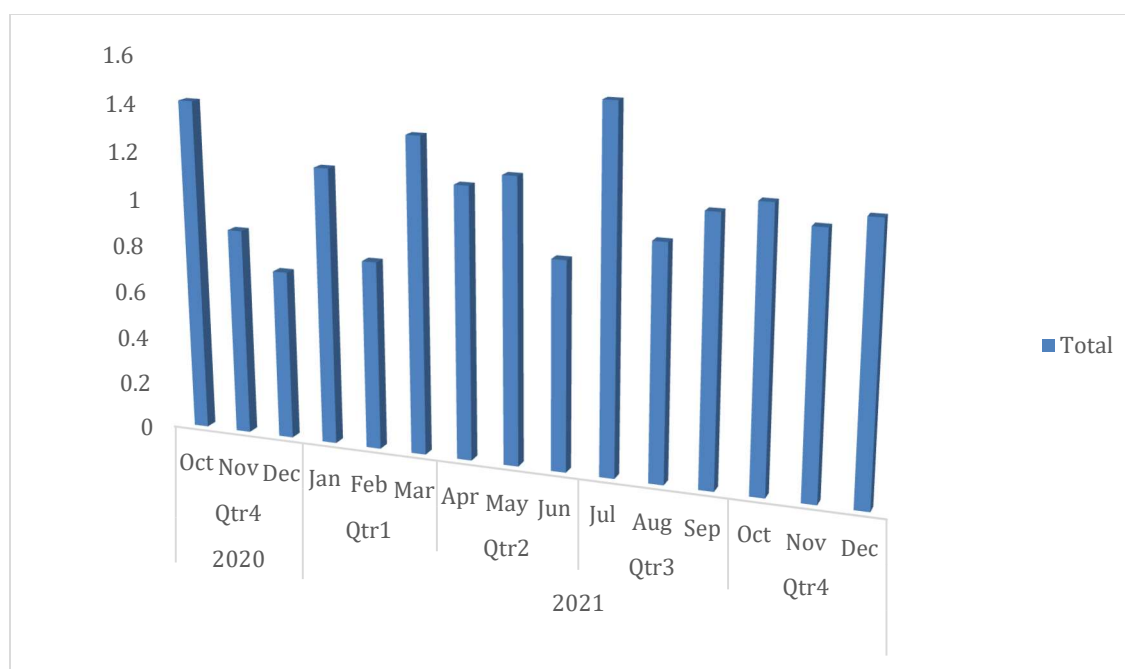
Note. The average donation was 0.92. This figure was calculated by dividing the donation dollar amount by the average donation dollar amount between July 1, 2018, and October 31, 2022.

Figure 8 shows that during the peak pandemic period, there was a 13% drop in donation levels when compared to the before peak pandemic period at 0.80 or 80% of the average donation level.

Figure 8*Donations During Peak Pandemic Period*

Note. The average donation was 0.80. This figure was calculated by dividing donation dollar amount by the average donation dollar amount between July 1, 2018, and October 31, 2022.

The data showed that when HOPE's leadership instituted a hybrid in-person and digital access spiritual service option, there was a 37.5% increase in financial donations, at 1.1 or 110% of the average donation level (see Figure 9). This increase could be attributed to what leaders referred to as congregants coming back to realize how much the church had meant to them. They were willing to sacrifice more of their time and finances to aiding the organization.

Figure 9*Hybrid Format Donations During Peak Pandemic Period*

Note. The average donation was 1.10, calculated by dividing donation dollar amount by the average donation dollar amount between July 1, 2018 and October 31, 2022.

The after peak pandemic period allowed for large group in-person spiritual services similar to what were conducted before the peak pandemic period. During the after peak pandemic period, donations averaged 114% of the average donation level despite only a reported 90% return of congregants to in-person services (see Figure 10). Leaders attributed this phenomenon as the congregants who returned realizing how much they valued the organization when it was not available to them and being more committed to giving their time and finances. The leaders also reported that many

congregants felt guilty after learning that HOPE had struggled, and they tried making up for it. Leader 2 stated,

I think the congregation just started to understand that even though we were not wholly in person at the church, the building needed maintenance to keep going. I think they understood the message. They started to contribute on a regular basis [compared to] when the pandemic started.

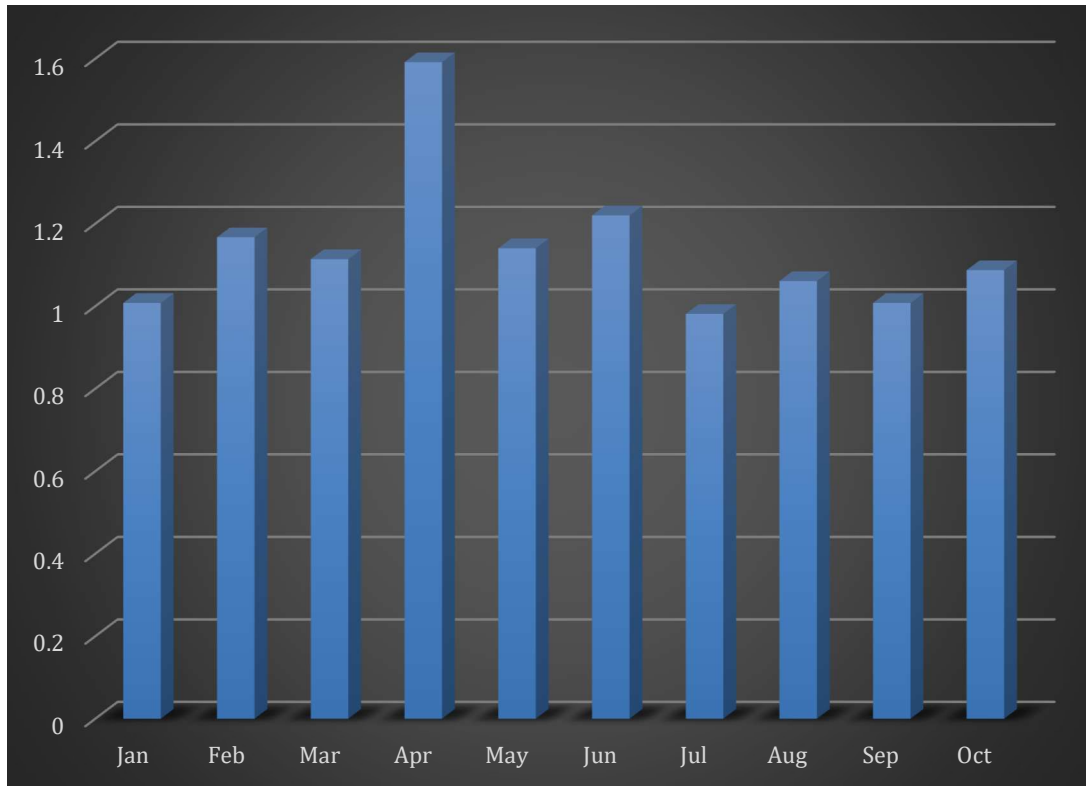
When HOPE started the hybrid format of small group in-person services, similar to normal church services but with limits to how many could attend, donations significantly increased. Leader 2 attributed the increase to the hybrid format:

I think after a couple of months, they [the congregants] started understanding that the church was still keeping the services [running]. It was live stream and the church [still] needed to be maintained, but some of them just felt that they need to be there [in-person] to be able to give. That was always a fear because we were not in person, that the congregation was not able to give, even though we would use the available platforms or applications to send money.

Part of the reason for the increase in donations, even after the peak pandemic period, likely reflects the discovery of online strategies for holding fund raisers. HOPE's leaders found new ways in which to receive money efficiently from congregants, including the use of several money transferring applications such as CashApp, Zelle, and Venmo.

Figure 10

Donations After Peak Pandemic Period



Note. The average donation was 1.14, calculated by dividing donation dollar amount by the average donation dollar amount between July 1, 2018, and October 31, 2022.

Strengths and Limitations of the Study

The most prominent strength in this study was the high level of participation among HOPE's leadership. All agreed to multiple semistructured interviews and provided insightful data that formed the backbone of the recommendations and suggestions. Another benefit was that one leader who participated in the study had a dual role that allowed him insights into the national level's decision-making process when

recommendations or mandates for different protocols throughout the COVID-19 pandemic were handed down.

Having access to an extensive archive of videos produced before, during, and after the COVID-19 pandemic was another study strength. HOPE is unique in that its leaders often use digital technology to provide training videos for a local college's master's-level pastoral program and therefore were already actively recording and archiving videos on HOPE's Facebook page before the pandemic, which served as somewhat of a baseline for determining how communication styles and platforms would need to be adjusted to maximize their effectiveness and overcome obstacles during the peak pandemic and after peak pandemic periods. Accessing this archival material gave me a broader understanding of the procedures, communication styles, production formats, and platforms that the organization adopted and used to meet the needs of having to conduct live virtual spiritual services.

The third study strength was having access to many years of financial records data. These data were analyzed to provide secondary evidence for how effective certain communication strategies and procedures were at maintaining spirituality as changes in financial donations can be a strong indicator of spiritual connection and participation levels.

As with most qualitative studies, transferability or generalizability to other contexts or settings is a study limitation. While the sample size of five organization leaders was not small for studies of behavioral health organization practice problems,

limited sample sizes often lead to insufficient evidence to make overall findings generalizable and thus transferable.

Another limitation was that the organization primarily serves a minority Hispanic population in the southern United States, which means that study findings are not easily transferable to other similar institutions in the United States with different congregant demographics. It is nonetheless important research as it can be useful as a resource for future pandemics or similar disasters when managing the spiritual connection levels of congregants and thus their mental health and well-being. Though these challenges may be present, the qualitative findings can still be meaningful and thus useful.

There were also some language barriers as the local church leaders spoke in both English and Spanish, but services were conducted primarily in Spanish. Some common phrases for the region were difficult for them to explain in English during interviews as language does not always allow for exact translations of certain phrases and idioms. In the researcher's case, he is fluent in both English and Spanish, being culturally mixed and raised with both languages, and did his best to prompt further explanation when phrases or idioms provided in English seemed unclear or incorrect.

Section 5: Recommendations and Conclusions

The practice problem that prompted the present study was the diminished spiritual and mental well-being of HOPE's congregation as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic's impact on daily life. HOPE's leadership noticed changes in the congregation that seemed linked to novel communication methodologies implemented for safety reasons during the pandemic. Leader 2 commented that specific changes noticed were significant decreases in service attendance and in utilization of social and behavioral support services such as counseling, even though demands for the latter were high during the pandemic.

Specifically, a goal for HOPE leaders was to determine the communication methods that worked well before, during peak periods, and after peak periods of the COVID-19 pandemic that could be used to address noted issues in congregants' mental health, wellness, and lack of spiritual connection to HOPE that resulted from the pandemic. This investigation was important for two reasons: First, caring for congregants' mental wellness through spiritual support is foundational to HOPE's existence. Second, findings from this investigation can inform communication actions if another pandemic, disaster, or similar disruptive event occurred so that HOPE could be better prepared to support congregants' spiritual connections.

Analysis of interviews with five of HOPE's leaders showed that overall, the leaders responded quickly to the need to become a digital spiritual service product provider during the COVID-19 pandemic. The existing video production infrastructure allowed them to quickly move to a primary digital format. However, the production

quality for these services was limited because of technological resources and lack of knowledge on how to produce high-quality production videos for a congregation.

As the pandemic continued, two other communications approaches evolved: holding small group meetings in key congregants' homes and using ambassadors and volunteers to provide ancillary services. The following recommendations reflect all three approaches that were employed during the peak of the COVID-19 pandemic and after it. These recommendations on communication styles, strategies, resource improvements, strategies to keep the congregants involved and connected to hope will lead to improved spiritual connections overall and better mental health and well-being outcomes for congregants.

Recommendations

Analysis of the data gathered for this study reflected important implications for HOPE's future and for initiatives in both worship services and ancillary services during the event of future service disruptions. These recommendations encompass three key areas: holding small group meetings in key congregants' homes, using ambassadors and volunteers for providing ancillary services, and refinements in digital communications. Recommendations for each area are discussed in more detail next.

Holding Small Group Meetings

A common communication strategy suggestion by congregants was to have the performance part of the spiritual services broadcast digitally with five or fewer members hosting at their homes and all taking safety precautions. In this format, congregants can

still enjoy some fellowship during spiritual services despite not being able to meet in larger groups. During the pandemic, using host families to represent certain neighborhoods or sections of the congregations where they could attend in-person spiritual services was very effective at increasing and motivating spiritual gathering and fellowship on a smaller, safer scale. As such, continuing this approach in the case of future service disruptions is warranted.

HOPE's leadership also encouraged youth to host their own small-group worship sessions during certain times scheduled weekly. The young leaders took ownership and responsibility for these sessions and continued these supplementary services even after the peak pandemic period, for which other congregants expressed appreciation. Leader 4 stated, "I recently heard someone say, 'I really appreciate young people working for the Lord because it helps me understand that I need to do the same.'" Leader 4 also noted that the youth had successfully created interest and spiritual connections with the congregation at large. People on Facebook not affiliated with HOPE (often friends of the youth) would sometimes see the young, spirited members leading services and seek more information on HOPE or ask to get involved with the organization in some way.

HOPE's leadership found that congregants frequently adapted to the loss of in-person services by creating small groups for watching spiritual services together. These groups were often formed from existing friendships or familial bonds. In the future, it would likely be more efficient to designate certain congregants or leaders as hosts who are willing to serve as small group leaders for at home in-person spiritual service viewing

in the event of a service disruption. This would be a sort of hybrid model where there is some in-person connection with congregants who want or need this type of fellowship for their spiritual connection while watching spiritual services. Those who fear the risk of illness or do not feel the need for this type of in-person fellowship could still watch services virtually in the privacy of their home.

Using Volunteer Ambassadors to Provide Ancillary Services

HOPE's leadership adapted to congregants' needs with various ancillary service strategies. At first, fear restricted these services in a very significant way, but over time, the leaders became more comfortable. HOPE's leaders also assigned volunteer ambassadors to reach congregants who may have needed ancillary support services and other types of interactions such as visiting with congregants in their homes, bringing them gifts/donations, gathering donations for others, and other acts of kindness that helped prevent congregants from feeling isolated or alone.

To continue this initiative during future service disruptions, it is recommended that the leadership committee appoint multiple strategic ambassadors or anchors who can then be organized based on a map of where congregants live and be used as anchor points for smaller group meetings during times of service disruption when the larger group cannot meet. These individuals will be responsible for reaching out and learning more about members who may require ancillary services and then coordinating the services provided. Volunteer ambassadors could be based on geographical proximity, family relationships, or personalities in the organization who would likely be best suited for

handling this kind of role as a volunteer. Using ambassadors who can create in-person connections in a safe manner is recommended so as not to lose the effect of direct in-person connection while still maintaining safety protocols necessary when large groups are meeting.

These ambassadors are paramount as they can make in-person gestures or connections with congregants during service disruptions. These gestures and connections are especially important in times when congregants may become isolated, depressed, or ill and have a subsequent drop in their sense of well-being. It is important for HOPE ambassadors to be available to reach out to see how congregants are doing and offer resources or other acts of goodwill to help potentially vulnerable congregants get through tough times.

HOPE's livestreams would display a CashApp tag during the offerings portion of its services, but the tag to donate is difficult to find unless it is seen during live streaming. Increasing the payment methods options by allowing for using direct credit card payments as well as Zelle, Venmo, PayPal, Facebook Payment, and others is recommended. HOPE should display these payment methods at all times during streaming or have captioning with directions where this information can be found so that congregants or viewers can more easily find this information when they feel inclined to donate. Congregants were used to donating in person before the pandemic. Having to go online and use a card to donate or make a trip to HOPE's facility during the week to

donate is inefficient and often burdensome on those members. As such, they are less likely to donate when these are the only options for doing so.

The ambassadors or anchor point families can also collect donations as part of their work with the congregant community. These donations can then be brought to HOPE's pastor or another designated leader for collection and documentation. That would likely offset the initial decrease in financial donations seen during the peak pandemic period that was secondary to loss of ability or knowing how to donate. Having HOPE's pastor continue receiving financial donations every Monday during 5-hr windows is recommended. During this time, those who have volunteered to collect donations can drop off any funds collected.

Refinements in Digital Communications

HOPE's service delivery format at the beginning of the pandemic was limited as it primarily focused on WhatsApp messaging and Facebook Live streaming. Leader 5 recalled, "We were not very well prepared with the technology, so we had to use what we had like our cell phones . . . they were not so professional." Organization leaders also did not quickly access available government resources that could have benefited the organization and congregants at large. However, HOPE's leaders adapted as they self-analyzed and developed a greater sense of what strategies were effective and ineffective during the process of converting to primarily digital spiritual services.

An overall recommendation is that streaming platforms that HOPE's leaders established during the pandemic should continue as part of the organization's basic

communications strategy. The leaders should continue streaming all services on Facebook Live. The services should also be streamed on YouTube Live and saved on YouTube in a channel specific to HOPE. Leaders at HOPE with technological knowledge can set up the channel, which will also allow them to monitor viewership and institute times where donations can be made in the event of service disruptions or when the organization is struggling at other times. Having such a digital infrastructure in place will allow for the organization to have international impact and others from around the world to view and receive the spiritual messaging as well as congregant members.

Other recommendations for refining digital communications fall into three areas: improving production quality, diversifying communications technologies, and revising how the services themselves are conducted. Each is discussed in more detail next.

Improving Production Quality

While the production levels were adequate during the peak pandemic period for general broadcasting to congregants, there could be technological and production-level upgrades. It is recommended that HOPE's leaders who handle technology be given a model based on other similar organizations that have streamed media and use the model to guide technology purchases such as up-to-date cameras, lighting systems, and sound systems that will facilitate producing and delivering higher quality visual products. The better the quality of product that congregants view, the more congregants will perceive what they see as being similar to regular in-service spiritual services that they are used to and appreciate. The model can be developed by the committee members or a

subcommittee can be created in order to develop a model framework that can be distributed to leadership who manage the technological production of the streaming videos.

The recommendations are to first create a more high-quality format of recording and delivering the spiritual services so that they are more interactive and of higher quality. Both aspects will give congregants better viewing experiences and will likely lead to increased viewership and digital interactions such as comments and clicks. HOPE's leadership can create higher quality recording and delivery by upgrading the current technology they use and increase production value by integrating multiple cameras, viewing perspectives, and lighting for the stage area. In the event of another service disruption that restricts in-person services, HOPE will be able to produce a polished product with the best chance of engaging congregants. By increasing engagement, the congregants will be more likely to maintain spiritual connection with HOPE and thus more likely to maintain overall mental health and wellbeing.

Organizations like HOPE often use multiple cameras to show the spiritual messages being delivered by worship leaders and the support and motivation being provided by church musicians. HOPE could adopt this approach along with improving the lighting in its primary building and other streaming locations at the facility. These adjustments would improve the video quality and allow for a more interactive and powerful experience during spiritual services.

HOPE's leaders also found that encouraging the youth to conduct their own digital spiritual motivation services was both effective and powerful at energizing congregants. In the event of a future service disruption, it is recommended that HOPE's leaders should be ready to use those most skilled at digital media creating, production, and streaming. In this case, youth members of HOPE's congregation had the most experience, and it is appropriate to encourage these young leaders to create content and digital media. Doing so can not only build them up as leaders but also allow more viewing options by fresh presenters, which could lead to improved spiritual connections among congregants, particular in younger generations who are already a part of HOPE's congregation or wish to be.

Diversifying Communications Technologies

Additionally, the organization should develop multiple platforms in which to make the streamed videos accessible to congregants. The more access, the more ability for the congregants to receive the spiritual services and keeps their spiritual connection high. Initiatives such as such as the use of WhatsApp as a primarily communication methodology on a daily basis and as a source for requesting counseling or prayer services were instituted and maintained during the post peak pandemic period. The spiritual guidance messages that were implemented via WhatsApp should also be implemented on YouTube and Facebook immediately when there's a service disruption. These services were very effective in messaging and motivating congregants and thus should be continued, but used on multiple platforms, as many platforms as functionally possible by

the organization. HOPE's leaders could also find congregants who have access to paid services such as Blue Jeans or Zoom and request that they share their login information in order to be able to use these services. If this not possible, then HOPE should purchase one of these services (or both) to facilitate virtual meetings with multiple members interacting simultaneously. For adult meetings or group meetings such as small group motivational services that are not delivering primary spiritual services, using BlueJeans or Zoom would facilitate interactions in a format that is similar to how it they would take place in person.

HOPE's leaders should also use multiple media outlets that are free and easily accessible to congregants such as YouTube and Instagram. Doing so will allow for increased spiritual connection and more options for viewing by members who may prefer other types of digital access than WhatsApp and Facebook Live.

Messaging apps were a vital part of HOPE's maintaining contact with congregants during the COVID-19 pandemic. Using these apps during emergencies or service disruptions could be a first line of defense to keep contact with congregants. Instituting well-known messaging apps such as WhatsApp, SMS texting Zoom, Bluejeans, and any other apps popular during the times of service disruption as part of plans for messaging directly after disruptions in service is recommended. WhatsApp is of particular importance for HOPE, which has an international congregant following. WhatsApp messaging facilitates group creation and easy messaging and does not have fees for text messaging, as apps in many countries do have.

Revising How Services Are Delivered

HOPE's leaders said that congregants preferred the spiritual service communication style of a group format with leaders speaking while musician members performed in concert streaming from the church itself. This format seemed to remind congregants of previous in-person church services. According to Leader 3, "[The congregation preferred] when there was a person doing worship and another doing preaching because it resembles what was done in person. They seemed to prefer the nostalgia of . . . it's almost like we're in-person, even though we can't be." Conducting digital spiritual services with formats that resemble normal service activities (in HOPE's case, primary service providers along with musicians and other ancillary support) is recommended based on the congregants' feedback.

The leaders found that the most effect way to deliver digital spiritual services was by formatting them similar to how these services were held in person. Thus, it is recommended that HOPE's leaders continue using a spiritual service digital delivery format that models in-person services. This means using the primary pastor or primary spiritual service leader who delivers the service message on stage, behind a podium, with musicians and other spiritual motivation service providers on the sides.

Many of HOPE's leaders commented that the spiritual services should also be offered in English. Currently, the organization skews to older congregants, who primarily speak Spanish. However, the leaders felt that also offering services in English limits the number of younger people who want to attend services at HOPE.

Action Plan and Implementation

The following action plan reflects the recommendations drawn from the study findings and is recommended for addressing the ongoing need for HOPE's leaders to both address the issue of topic of declining spiritual connection with the organization and its congregants during times of normal in-person service disruption. It reflects an implementation period of 1 year and prioritizes initiatives reflecting what was identified as most important in HOPE's efforts to be more prepared and effective in their actions to maintain spiritual connection with congregants during challenging times when pandemics, world events, or other disasters cause service disruptions: maintaining small groups, using ambassadors and volunteers to provide ancillary services, and refining HOPE's overall communications technologies and delivery platforms.

Table 2*Implementation Phases and Timeline*

Phase	Description	Timeline
1	Identify the strategic small group leaders who will host spiritual services during times of disruption.	Month 1
2	Identify the strategic ambassadors who go to homes during time of normal in-person service disruption	Month 2
3	Create a technology subcommittee to develop recommendations for high-quality viewing experiences by upgrading digital technology resources.	Months 3–4
4	Create procedures and protocols on how to best produce a high-quality video experience based on technology subcommittee recommendations.	Month 5
5	Develop a strategic plan for streaming distribution through multiple media platforms recommended by technology subcommittee.	Month 6
6	Implementation of procedures, protocols, and recommendations, including the execution of the strategic plan for high-quality video production streaming, the appointment of small group leader assignments, and strategic ambassadors.	Month 8
7	3-month assessment/evaluation of all implemented procedures, protocols, recommendations, and plans	Month 10
8	Adjust by changing to address limitations of strategy	Month 11
9	Reevaluate using strategic meetings to adjust for overall needs	Quarterly, after 1 year

In Phase 1, HOPE's leaders will identify congregation members who will host small group spiritual services in their homes in the event of a service disruption that prevents in-person services. These individuals will ideally be located in areas where large numbers of congregants live or in areas that are easy for congregants to travel to when these leaders are hosting spiritual services. The small group leaders might also be

members of HOPE's leadership, although efforts will be made to recruit congregants who provided these services during the pandemic in recognition of their previous experience and their willingness to volunteer their times and their homes.

These hosts would provide access to the streamed spiritual services in small group sittings where congregants can celebrate, talk, and have some in-person contact in less-risky settings than large group services. They will also be used to collect donations that can be delivered directly to the pastor or treasurer, who will accept donations for those weeks.

The small group leaders will report directly to the leadership committee, even if they are part of it. The leadership committee will provide them guidance and resources so they can have good events every week for congregants desiring in-person contact.

Phase 2 is to identify ambassadors who will go to congregants' homes during times of disruption to minister to individuals in need. Again, a key focus will be on recruiting congregants who provided these services during the pandemic. The ambassadors would reach out to those in need during the times of service disruption, those who become ill or are identified as in particular need of spiritual support or just needing physical or emotional support from other congregants that they cannot receive because of disruptions in in-person services. The ambassadors will be given resources and education supplied by the organization and will report on a regular basis, possibly once weekly during service disruptions and once monthly, or as deemed necessary by the leadership committee, during times of normal operations.

In Phase 3, HOPE's leadership committee will appoint a technology subcommittee of individuals with the most technological experience, whose focus will be on creating high-quality visual experiences for digital delivery of spiritual services. They will do so by researching and identifying which technological resources are the best fit for creating the type of high-quality product that they want their congregants to receive. They will be responsible for allocating funds and fundraising in order to obtain the resources necessary to produce a higher-quality product.

Phase 4 will focus on developing procedures and protocols for creating high-quality video experiences. Organization leaders will need to put protocols in place that identify the best communication style forms, such as speaking in front of the congregation as would be done during in-person services. Protocols must be in place for setting up cameras in a manner that allows the production value to mimic that of in-person services. The protocol will also identify how to best use the resources that were gathered in Phase 3 in order to put best practices for achieving a high-quality video experience into place.

A strategic plan for streaming distribution through various media platforms, including YouTube, Instagram, Facebook Live, and others, will be developed in Phase 5. The technological subcommittee members previously identified will oversee this phase. They will be responsible for determining which platforms should be used in the event of loss of in-person services. The subcommittee members should allocate responsibilities based on their levels of expertise or experience. It is recommended that HOPE put these

platforms in place for regular services and also for use in the event that the organization must go fully digital. The assigned leaders will create a high-quality, well-functioning profile and platform on the different targeted media sites and begin using them to gain experience, to familiarize the congregants with their availability, and to be ready in the event of another in-person service disruption were to take place in the future.

The protocols will be implemented in Phase 6. This process will begin by having the technology subcommittee put protocols into effect and start fundraising for any required resource purchases. The HOPE leadership committee will vote to implement formal procedures and protocols for times of service disruption in the future. The committee will then begin the process of implementing the small group satellite hosts and create a resource map demonstrating meeting locations and contact information for use by the congregation. The leadership will also begin training the appointed ambassadors for their roles and schedule professional development for best practices for communication and visitation of congregants. HOPE's leadership and congregants will both be vital in the action plan. Many congregants may have necessary expertise for subcommittees or be good candidates for the role of ambassador.

Phase 7 will consist of assessment and evaluation of how the action plan has been implemented, what was successful, and where it needs additional support or additional remediation. After this evaluation has been conducted, Phase 8 will consist of adjusting the implementation to address any concerns that were found, limitations, or overall shortfalls identified.

In Phase 9, the leadership committee and technology subcommittee will reevaluate the plan at Months 6 and 9 and then quarterly, review the plan's effectiveness, and continue to adapt it during the implementation process. These reevaluations and reviews will be key for the plan's long-term success.

Potential Future Research

Analyzing the information gathered from the interviews with HOPE's leaders and the organization's financial information resulted in identifying several areas for future research. First, based on limited leadership sampling in qualitative research, studying what other religious organizations did to keep in touch with their congregants during the pandemic and the leaders' thoughts on what did or did not work is recommended. The present study's scope was limited; expanding research efforts to other organizations would broaden the perspective.

Another approach would be to research preferred media platforms for livestream distribution and also participatory communication technologies. HOPE primarily used WhatsApp and Facebook Live. Exploring other digital technologies could enhance the understanding of congregant preferences for service delivery and provide insights into which messaging services used on a daily basis could be more effective.

Future studies should include how to best give donations to spiritual service organizations during times of disruption where in-person services are no longer available. This study was limited as HOPE used a very limited approach to online donations, and

the leaders quickly realized that some form of in-person accommodation to donating was necessary.

Information on ways to avoid necessitating in-person contact by using digital donation technologies would be insightful. Best practices on how to collect donations, which are vital for the survival of spiritual service organizations, would be enlightening and valuable for church leaders as well as leaders of similar nonprofit organizations. Such a study might identify multiple donation options that could be displayed during live stream spiritual services. Data on congregants' preferences and the ease of use of various donation options could be gathered via surveys or brief interviews.

Another important study is on the types of digital settings or styles that are most effective at maintaining viewership and spiritual connection with the congregations, as there are so many multiple styles available and there were limited examples of them in this study. The present study's findings showed that group formats that modeled the original in-person setting was best for HOPE's congregants, but this might not be the case with all organizations. Researchers could explore digital streaming presentations of other organizations, particularly those who successfully managed significant followings through live streaming spiritual services.

Dissemination of Findings

The study findings will be disseminated to HOPE's leaders by providing a detailed outline to the leadership committee and explaining the recommendations, how they were arrived at, and what the potential benefits would be in implementing them.

This dissemination will be facilitated by developing a PowerPoint presentation for the leaders who participated in this study.

Conclusion

The problem of loss of spiritual and mental well-being in HOPE's congregation associated with the service disruptions caused by the global COVID-19 pandemic was addressed in this study. This loss of spiritual connection was associated with changes in communication methodology; specifically, going from in-person to digital communications and different communication styles that were implemented during this process. Study findings showed that HOPE's leaders did their best to meet their congregants' needs but struggled along the way at times. However, the leaders adapted well by employing different communication styles and strategies, the effectiveness of which were analyzed for this study.

Analysis of the study findings suggested three practice areas that HOPE's leadership could focus on in the event of future service disruptions: creating more robust and more technologically advanced digital communications, including having access to digital communications that are not just limited to Facebook and WhatsApp messaging, but also has as many platforms as possible in which they can connect to view the spiritual services and interact with others while doing that virtually, having smaller satellite in-person units that can be used in order to minimize risk of large in-person groups while maintaining some semblance of in-person connection was important and valuable for maintaining spiritual connection of congregants. Ambassadors are leaders or volunteers

from the congregation who are willing to conduct acts of kindness for those in need who may suffer from illness, disaster, loss, or isolation after an extended time apart from their spiritual families.

The study findings illustrated the importance of providing local congregations with strong support systems that improve congregants' spiritual connections, behavioral health, and overall sense of well-being. The study showed the value of using motivational messages, short motivational audio or audio and video messages that could be used to keep spirits high and give hope and resurgence of joy to congregants even when the congregants cannot meet in fellowship in person. HOPE can use the findings to better provide spiritual support and healing in times of need to as many people as possible in the congregation and community at large that it serves.

The findings also suggested ways on how to best conduct high-quality media presentations. Digital platforms often rely on the quality in which they are produced. Having higher quality productions can produce higher engagement from congregant viewers and have higher levels of impact.

The findings show that small acts of kindness, such as doing small favors and providing small gifts during times of need for congregants who are suffering from isolation or illness and do not have access to in-person spiritual services to help them feel connected and supported, can go a long way. Having intentional ways to show congregant members that they are important, valued, and loved is important for keeping

spiritual connections high and allowing members to have higher rates of return with spiritual organizations.

A better understanding of the effectiveness of communication strategies for supporting congregants spiritually and emotionally was gained through conducting this study. In the event of future disasters or other service disruptions, HOPE's leaders will be better prepared and more effective at keeping congregants' spiritual connections with the organization high. The study findings provided the foundation for developing an action plan that HOPE's leaders can implement and thus improve their organizational effectiveness for future disasters or other times of service disruption. With organization-wide involvement and support of this action plan, HOPE will be better prepared for an event in the future when in-person services are not available.

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