7-23-2024

Effective Strategies for Building Traditional Church Membership

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This is to certify that the doctoral study by

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2024

Abstract

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MBA, American InterContinental University, 2012

MDiv, Andrews University, 1986

Doctoral Study Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

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Abstract

A dwindling number of congregational members poses a significant risk to the continuity of U.S. churches. Leaders in traditional congregations need effective tactics for membership expansion. Drawing upon Bolman and Deal's four-frame theory, the purpose of this qualitative pragmatic inquiry was to explore effective strategies leaders of traditional churches use to build membership. The participants were six leaders from traditional churches situated in the Southern and Eastern parts of the United States. Data were collected by conducting semistructured interviews and archival documents. Thematic analysis of the data revealed four prominent themes: influential leadership, community involvement, use of technology and social media, and leveraging of social connections. A recommendation is for leaders of traditional churches to implement strategy workshops to educate church members about membership expansion. The implication for social change includes the potential for church leaders to create growing churches equipped to address poverty, homelessness, and inequality in their communities, leading to tangible improvements in the lives of marginalized individuals.

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Dedication

This study is dedicated to every church leader committed to enlarging their congregation and effecting meaningful social transformation.

Acknowledgments

I am grateful for the unwavering support and patience of my late father, Carlos Blake Sr., and my resilient 97-year-old mother, Claudia Blake, as I pursued my scholarly aspirations. Additionally, Rose Jones, a cherished friend, played a pivotal role in enabling me to navigate this journey mentally, emotionally, and academically. I sincerely appreciate my doctoral chair, Dr. Franz Michael Gottleib, and second committee member, Dr. Cheryl A. Lentz, for their steadfast dedication to my success. Last, I express profound gratitude to Walden University for providing an exceptional study program that enhances professional growth.

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Section 1: Foundation of the Study

Over the years, churches have left a significant mark on U.S. society. Beyond their spiritual functions, these non-profit organizations often serve as crucial community hubs, offering support and aid to their members and the surrounding areas (Opuni-Frimpong, 2023). This assistance encompasses various activities, including social services, educational initiatives, charitable endeavors, and efforts to promote economic development (English & Dicke, 2020). Concerns regarding the operational efficacy of U.S. churches arise from declining membership rates and instability (Dollhopf, 2021). Although numerous factors contribute to this decline, the strategies adopted by church leaders play a pivotal role in shaping the longevity and success of congregations.

Background of the Problem

Churches stand as foundational pillars of U.S. society. English and Dicke (2020) noted that these non-profit organizations hold sway across multiple domains, including ethics, community unity, civic involvement, spiritual guidance, and economic impact. Yet, a substantial 85% of churches across the United States are witnessing a decline in membership (Brosius, 2021).

U.S. church leaders' reluctance to embrace contemporary methods in their practices has resulted in a decline in membership across numerous congregations. This resistance to change mirrors the challenges encountered by leaders of struggling organizations who acknowledge the need for adaptation but hesitate to overhaul their strategies and acquire the requisite skills for adjustment (James, 2021; Keita & Lao, 2020). Contrary to declining trends in attendance and engagement observed in some U.S.

churches, a subset is experiencing an increase in membership (Wiggins et al., 2021). These thriving congregations have expanded by embracing modern competitive standards and adjusting to the evolving landscape of contemporary society (Keita & Lao, 2020).

Problem and Purpose

The specific business problem was that some leaders of traditional churches lacked effective strategies to build membership. The purpose of this qualitative pragmatic inquiry was to explore effective strategies leaders of traditional churches use to build membership. The targeted population consisted of six leaders of traditional churches who had implemented effective strategies to increase their church membership by 25% over 3 years in the Southern and Eastern regions of the United States.

Population and Sampling

The study's population consisted of leaders of traditional churches in the Eastern and Southern parts of the United States who had employed successful strategies to enhance membership. The sample included six leaders from churches in these regions. The participants had over 5 years of leadership experience and had achieved a 25% increase in membership within 3 years. Purposeful sampling techniques were used to identify leaders of traditional churches. Data collection involved conducting face-to-face semi-structured interviews with the chosen leaders and collecting archival documents, including membership records and growth charts, to confirm the rise in the church. This approach bolstered and authenticated the research findings.

Nature of the Study

Qualitative research allows for a deep understanding of real-world issues—here, the decline in attendance at contemporary traditional churches in the United States. By immersing themselves in participants' natural settings, qualitative researchers can examine the challenges and opportunities leaders of traditional churches encounter in increasing membership (Hendren et al., 2020; Houchins et al., 2023). In contrast, quantitative and mixed methods researchers employ instruments to investigate causality, quantify variables, or test hypotheses, using numerical data (Wambugu & Njoroge, 2022). Although these approaches are valuable in fields where numerical data can elucidate relationships between variables or phenomena, they were deemed unsuitable for this study. The aim was to explore practical strategies leaders of traditional churches employ to enhance membership within a specific context rather than scrutinizing cause-and-effect relationships, quantifying variables, or testing hypotheses under controlled conditions.

In business studies, scholars employ pragmatic inquiry, case studies, phenomenology, and ethnography methodologies to investigate their research inquiries Ramanadhan et al., 2021). I selected a pragmatic inquiry as the preferred approach for this study. A pragmatic qualitative design allows researchers to make practical decisions based on what is most likely effective in achieving their research objectives rather than strictly adhering to theoretical frameworks or methodological principles (Kelly & Cordeiro, 2020). Researchers employing a pragmatic strategy prioritize actionable outcomes and seek to address the needs and challenges individuals or communities face.

This approach can lead to the development of theoretically grounded, practical solutions relevant to the specific context in which they will be implemented. Williams (2023) emphasized the importance of this method in business research, highlighting its effectiveness in addressing complex issues and producing tangible results. Adopting a pragmatic inquiry approach, I aimed to acquire robust knowledge that was directly applicable and valuable in addressing the research question and guiding practical action.

A multiple-case study allows researchers to compare the study phenomenon across cases (Yin, 2018). However, because my intention was not to compare findings across cases to draw general conclusions, I opted against using this approach. Phenomenology is a qualitative research method researchers use to comprehend and illuminate the essence of human experiences as perceived and lived by individuals (Urcia, 2021). However, phenomenology was inappropriate for this study as the goal was to avoid delving into personal or lived experiences. Ethnography research provides a valuable understanding of different social groups' lived experiences and cultural dynamics, shedding light on various perspectives and realities (Danford, 2023). However, ethnography was unsuitable for this study as the objective was to explore something other than individual cultures. I deemed a pragmatic inquiry suitable for this study because the qualitative approach would facilitate the exploration of the complex actions undertaken by church leaders and would offer valuable insights into the factors contributing to membership growth.

Research Question

What effective strategies do leaders of traditional churches use to build membership?

Interview Questions

1. What effective strategies have you used for building membership?

2. What factors are most compelling in attracting members?

3. How does your organizational culture serve to recruit membership?

4. What barriers have you experienced in building membership?

5. How have you responded to those barriers in building membership?

6. What other valuable information would you like to provide about building membership that we might still need to address?

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework chosen for this study was the four-frame model for comprehending organizational dynamics and diagnosing challenges outlined in the seminal work *Reframing Organizations: Artistry, Choice, and Leadership* by Lee Bolman and Terrence Deal (1984). Introduced in 1984, the four-frame model by Bolman and Deal offers leaders a comprehensive view of an organization through four distinct perspectives: structural, human resources, political, and symbolic. By employing these four frames collectively, leaders can attain a more comprehensive understanding of their challenges and formulate more effective strategies to address them. This approach acknowledges the intricacies of organizational functioning and underscores the significance of considering multiple perspectives when identifying and resolving issues.

Bolman and Deal (2017) emphasized that leaders may experience declining performance if they need help determining the underlying causes of problems within their organizations and developing practical solutions. This assertion underscores the pivotal role of leadership in organizational problem-solving and decision-making processes.

The evolving landscape of churches necessitates continuous vigilance, assessment, and adjustment on the part of leaders to effectively fulfill their mission and attain membership growth in an ever-shifting environment. Church leaders can cultivate an atmosphere that appeals to and sustains members by proficiently understanding and overseeing the facets of the structural, human resources, political, and symbolic frames. A well-organized, inclusive, and spiritually meaningful community will likely flourish and expand, drawing in new members who align with its values and mission (Keita & Lao, 2020).

According to Bolman and Deal (2017), the structural frame provides leaders with a valuable framework for evaluating the strengths and weaknesses of the organizational structure, identifying discrepancies between objectives and actions, and proposing essential adjustments to enhance organizational effectiveness. The human resource frame offers leaders a valuable perspective to assess the strengths and weaknesses of the organization's human capital, identify sources of motivation and satisfaction, and suggest changes to promote organizational growth and member satisfaction. The political frame offers leaders a perspective to comprehend, analyze, and influence the intricate interplay of interests, power dynamics, and relationships within their organizations, ultimately leading to more effective governance and strategy. The symbolic frame provides leaders

with a comprehensive framework for understanding and leveraging the symbolic aspects of organizational life to enhance creativity, adaptation, and cohesion. By paying attention to symbols, rituals, and ceremonies, leaders can shape organizational culture and cultivate a sense of meaning and purpose among team members (Bolman & Deal, 2017). Bolman and Deal's (1984) four-frame model was suitable for this study because it allows leaders of traditional churches to comprehensively understand their organizations and develop more effective strategies for problem-solving, change management, and membership building. Each frame offers distinct perspectives and insights that, when combined, can contribute to holistic and sustainable solutions.

Operational Definitions

Attractional churches: Christian leaders who modernize their practices to draw a broader audience by crafting worship services that are engaging and relevant (Resane, 2022).

Congregational growth: A rise in church attendance and active engagement in its activities, signifying the church's prosperity and relevance within its community (Jenssen, 2020).

Declining churches: Churches that are experiencing reduced participation and membership levels (Ferreira & Chipenyu, 2021).

Growth churches: Churches whose leaders prioritize enlarging their membership and often schedule multiple weekend worship services to accommodate a more significant number of attendees (Vermeer &Scheepers, 2021).

Missional churches: Churches whose leaders stress the responsibility of their members to spread God's message throughout society (Cronshaw, 2020; Curtis, 2020).

Traditional churches: Churches that are associated with denominations and that advocate for their distinctive beliefs, operating distinctively from nondenominational organizations (Jentile, 2020; Vester, 2021).

Assumptions, Limitations, and Delimitations

Assumptions

In research, assumptions play a crucial role in shaping the direction and outcomes of a study. Assumptions are conjectures that researchers deem probable despite a potential absence of empirical substantiation. They function as fundamental concepts for investigation or research but necessitate additional empirical validation and lie outside direct manipulation (Levitt, 2021). The initial premise of this study was that all participants would provide truthful responses to the questions. The second presumption was that participants possessed the necessary time and expertise to respond to the interview questions accurately and in detail. The core assumption was that the selected sample size would effectively address the research question.

Limitations

Acknowledging and addressing limitations is essential for upholding transparency and integrity in research. Limitations in research refer to elements or circumstances beyond the researcher's influence that could affect the study's outcomes or how the results are interpreted (Sperling, 2022). The primary constraint of the study arose from the potential impact of participants' expertise and background on the research findings.

The second limitation of the study was the possibility of the assigned interview duration constraining participants' ability to offer thorough responses to the interview inquiries. The third limitation of the study was the choice to focus solely on the Southern and Eastern regions of the United States. This geographic focus potentially restricted the generalizability of the findings to other parts of the United States due to cultural differences.

Delimitations

Setting boundaries is crucial for delineating the extent and specifications of a research endeavor. By establishing these restrictions, researchers can more efficiently concentrate on collecting pertinent data pertinent to their research query (Theofanidis & Fountouki, 2019). The primary delimitation of this study was the restriction of participants to leaders of churches located solely in the Southern or Eastern regions of the United States, who had verifiable records of enhancing membership through personal recruitment efforts. Researchers need to consider their case selection process carefully. They should aim to showcase individual cases' unique characteristics while uncovering overarching patterns with broader relevance. (Staller, 2021; Yin, 2018). The second delimitation pertains to the study's narrow focus on leaders leading churches with at least five years of experience.

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Significance of the Study

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The study's findings provide church leaders nuanced insights into practical approaches to boosting church membership. Additionally, these findings may encourage leaders to engage in self-reflection, fostering an environment of introspective leadership

among congregants. This scholarly inquiry holds promise in equipping leaders with evidence-based strategies to enhance their leadership practices, adapt to shifting demographic trends, and foster a sense of belonging and significance among members, thus addressing the decline in church membership (see Keita & Lao, 2020). The study has the potential to have a substantial societal impact as increased membership and financial resources could empower church leaders to expand their outreach initiatives, offering support to a broader range of marginalized individuals in their communities. These outreach efforts might include establishing food distribution centers, providing temporary housing for the homeless, offering counseling services, conducting educational workshops, and similar endeavors.

Contribution to Business Practice

The findings of this study could hold significant implications for church leaders, especially considering that churches often function as employers and provide financial assistance to individuals and families in need. During challenging times, particular churches may experience declines in membership and financial support due to outdated leadership approaches and ineffective ecclesiastical practices (Keita & Lao, 2020). Therefore, implementing pragmatic leadership strategies during such periods could help mitigate membership loss and cultivate a vibrant and thriving religious community. Furthermore, by embracing effective tactics and continuously assessing and adjusting their methods based on feedback and outcomes, church leaders can enhance their recruitment efforts and strengthen the sustainability and growth of their congregations, as advocated by Brosius (2021).

Implications for Social Change

Churches are complex institutions that profoundly affect individuals, communities, and societies, influencing them spiritually, socially, morally, politically, charitably, culturally, and educationally. As nonprofit entities, they play a crucial role in driving social change by assisting various individuals and communities in diverse ways (English & Dicke, 2020). Insights derived from studies on methods to enhance church membership are invaluable for strengthening the resilience of churches, as the effectiveness of their strategies can significantly shape membership trends. By identifying and implementing successful strategies to bolster church membership, these organizations have the potential to increase their membership numbers, prolong their existence, and exert a positive impact on their communities. Augmenting church membership may contribute to social transformation and improve the well-being of church members and individuals within the community.

<div align="center">A Review of the Professional and Academic Literature</div>

The purpose of this pragmatic inquiry was to explore effective strategies leaders of traditional churches use to build membership. This literature review is grounded in Bolman and Deal's (1984) four-frames theory. Composing the literature review entailed a thorough and systematic examination of academic articles and books covering pertinent theories, emerging knowledge, methodologies, paradigms, gaps in existing literature, and novel theoretical frameworks (Rocco et al., 2023). A literature review is an instrument to compile and analyze historical and contemporary research, contributing to a deeper

comprehension of a given research subject and serving as a springboard for advancing scholarly inquiry and guiding future research efforts (Hiebl, 2021).

I used a variety of Walden University Library databases to find literature, such as *ABI/Inform, Academic Search Complete, Business Source Complete, Emerald Insight, Google, ProQuest Religion Database, SAGE Journal, SAGE Knowledge, Science Direct, and Taylor and Francis Online*. I also used the Google search engine. The primary terms used to find scholarly literature included *attractional, church growth, church leadership, church music, declining churches, four frames, growing churches, leaders, leadership, marketing, mega-churches, missional, religion and technology, religious marketing, small groups, strategic leadership, and worship services.*

This study included 269 cited references, with 263 (97%) of these being peer-reviewed articles. The other sources were four books and two non-peer-reviewed academic articles. Most sources ($n = 261$, 97%) were published between 2019 and 2023. These references provide a comprehensive examination of scholars' and practitioners' findings, perspectives, interpretations, and writings on the research subject.

The literature review begins by presenting Bolman and Deal's (1984) four leadership frames, which offer a structure for understanding organizational dynamics, particularly within traditional churches. I will scrutinize this framework to demonstrate its utility in assisting leaders in assessing their churches from diverse perspectives. After discussing an alternative conceptual framework, I will explore different leadership approaches. The review will conclude with a discussion of six causal factors identified in

the literature as distinguishing churches experiencing membership growth from those encountering decline.

Bolman and Deal's Four-Framework Model

The literature on leadership offers a rich tapestry of models and theories that illuminate the complexities of organizational leadership and the dynamics of change within an organization (Alavi et al., 2022; Sokhela & Murhula, 2021). In this literature, I examine Bolman and Deal's (1984) four-frame theory as a conceptual framework for guiding the process of building membership. I will assess the strengths and limitations of Bolman and Deal's four-frame approach compared to Galbraith's (2002) star model theory. For the study's conceptual framework, I preferred Bolman and Deal's four-frame theory, which evaluates organizational challenges and effectiveness from structural, human resource, political, and symbolic perspectives, over Galbraith's star model.

In 1984, Bolman and Deal introduced the four-frame model, a leadership theory aimed at understanding organizations. Each frame is a cognitive tool for leaders to analyze specific situations and determine appropriate actions (Bolman & Deal, 1984). Emphasizing the importance of examining organizations from multiple perspectives, Bolman and Deal coined the term "reframing." Reframing enables leaders to gain clarity, explore new possibilities, and develop strategies for enacting change within organizations, particularly in times of crisis when viable solutions are scarce (Bolman & Deal, 1984). Using Bolman and Deal's framework, leaders can facilitate beneficial organizational transformations to improve their organizations' chances of survival.

Bolman and Deal (1984) introduced a model comprising four frames, each rooted in distinct perceptions and assumptions regarding organizations: (a) structural, (b) human resource, (c) political, and (d) symbolic. Leaders tend to favor specific frames over others based on their unique circumstances or expertise level (Bolman & Deal, 1984; Sintayehu et al., 2022). Although each frame holds its significance, integrating them within a multiframe approach allows leaders to gain a more comprehensive understanding of a situation than examining it from a single perspective (Bolman & Deal, 1984). Leaders within traditional churches could discover utility in Bolman and Deal's four frames for enhancing their understanding of their organizations and guiding their efforts to strengthen church membership, the central focus of this study.

Structural Frame

The structural frame prioritizes tasks over individual considerations, focusing on rules, policies, responsibilities, procedures, technology, goals, timelines, and the overall environment (Bolman & Deal, 2017; Mullins, 2020). Core elements of this frame include organizing, integrating, and executing tasks effectively (Bolman & Deal, 2017). Leaders of traditional churches could use the structural frame to prioritize objectives, implementations, and regulations to advance the church's efforts to increase membership rather than prioritizing individual preferences.

Human Resource Frame

The human resource frame focuses on people rather than tasks. In this perspective, leaders view organizations as communities of individuals with diverse needs, emotions, abilities, biases, aspirations, and limitations (Bolman & Deal, 2017). Within

this frame, the main task for leaders is to align organizations with individuals, ensuring employee satisfaction, motivation, empowerment, productivity, and skill development (Bolman & Deal, 2017; Mullins, 2020). Leaders can employ the human resource frame to reassess strategies, prioritizing fulfilling individuals' personal and professional growth needs to increase the likelihood of membership growth.

Political Frame

The political frame addresses overt and covert conflicts within organizations regarding resource allocation. Conflicts over resources are inevitable in all organizations due to varying needs, perspectives, and interests among individuals and groups (Bolman & Deal, 2017). Within this frame, where politics influences decision-making, the emphasis is on allocating resources efficiently and pragmatically (Bolman & Deal, 2017; Mullins, 2020). Leaders can employ the political frame to engage in bargaining, negotiation, agenda setting, coalition building, and conflict resolution to optimize the use of limited resources in creating, developing, and implementing effective strategies for attracting new members.

Symbolic Frame

The symbolic frame emphasizes the need to cultivate an organizational culture that instills individuals with a sense of purpose, significance, and fulfillment. Organizations express their culture through various symbolic elements, including visions, values, myths, heroes, stories, rituals, ceremonies, play, and humor (Bolman & Deal, 2017). These symbolic components reflect an organization's expressive or spiritual dimension (Bolman & Deal, 2017). Leaders can use this symbolic perspective to foster

and sustain a robust organizational culture driven by symbols, beliefs, and values rather than relying solely on policies, regulations, and managerial authority to attract new members.

Multiframing

Multiframing involves using different perspectives to analyze and address a situation. This concept is crucial because effective leadership and social interactions are not limited to a single viewpoint; instead, they benefit from the simultaneous engagement of multiple frames (Bolman & Deal, 2017). As highlighted in this study, leaders can employ multiframing to assess situations from various angles, using different perspectives to devise innovative problem-solving strategies within organizational contexts, such as the church.

Potential Benefit of the Four-Frames Model for Leaders in the Church Context

Churches, much like businesses, are complex entities characterized by multifaceted dimensions. These nonprofit organizations encompass structural, human resources, political, and symbolic aspects (Magezi et al., 2023). Churches' organizational structures vary widely and are influenced by ecclesiology, polity, and overarching frameworks (White & Pondani, 2022). Many churches adopt a consumer-centric approach, primarily operating from a human resource perspective to meet the diverse needs of current and potential congregants seeking religious goods and services (Mohanty, 2022). Within congregations, dynamics often align with the political frame as church leaders and members vie for authority and scarce resources (Brosius, 2021; Smoyer et al., 2021), occasionally leading to internal challenges within churches (De

Villers, 2020). Furthermore, churches possess symbols, rituals, and ceremonies that foster emotional connections among participants (Howell & Best, 2021). Considering churches as multifaceted organizations and analyzing them through various lenses may contribute to their longevity and adaptability.

Numerous leadership frameworks offer church leaders and organizations valuable insights into the factors impacting their operations. Among these, Bolman and Deal's (1984) four-frame organizational analysis model is particularly noteworthy. Scholars and professionals across various fields have acknowledged the utility of Bolman and Deal's model in aiding leaders to comprehend organizations and adapt effectively to diverse contexts (see Klatt & Fairholm, 2023). Although the model does not include a strategic framework or explicit guidance on selecting the appropriate frame, it still provides valuable information and practical insights. Primarily, the model could assist leaders of traditional churches in formulating strategies to improve membership and community involvement.

Structural Frame

The structural frame highlights the importance of regulations, policies, procedures, task delineation, formal relationships, division of labor, efficiency enhancement, technology integration, and meeting deadlines (Bolman & Deal, 2017). These elements are significant in church settings as leaders and congregations operate within a structural context (Peterson, 2022). Functional structures enhance efficiency and cultivate specialized organizational capabilities (Segev & Strauss, 2020). Many growing churches have undergone organizational restructuring (Peterson, 2022), adopting new

frameworks to support innovative leadership approaches and incorporating advanced technology to provide expanded services to their religious communities.

Leaders within traditional church leadership roles, endeavoring to enhance their religious services for congregants, have undertaken organizational restructuring, refining hierarchies, operational protocols, and procedures to heighten efficiency and efficacy. These leaders recognize the importance of aligning organizational structures with strategies, personnel, and processes to optimize performance and productivity (Botross, 2022; Mullins, 2020). Discrepancies between organizational structure and the surrounding environment can lead to diminished output (Bolman & Deal, 2017; Burch et al., 2022). By integrating elements of this framework, traditional church leaders can craft customer-centric structures tailored to meet the needs of both current and prospective congregants, facilitating well-informed decisions in response to environmental challenges.

Human Resource Frame

The human resource frame places a strong emphasis on catering to individual needs. Churches, often likened to familial units, must strive to address the diverse needs of their congregants (Jibiliza, 2020). Prioritizing the satisfaction of individual needs within the organization is essential for enhancing productivity and maintaining competitive advantages (Widianato & Wilderon, 2022). Organizations prioritizing and meeting individual needs tend to operate more effectively than those that overlook this aspect (Bolman & Deal, 2017). As a result, leaders of traditional churches may benefit

from insights into customizing church services to align with the needs, expectations, and preferences of current and potential congregants and communities.

Conversely, when there is a mismatch between individuals and the organization, both parties experience negative consequences. Therefore, the human resource perspective holds significant value for church leaders seeking to implement changes to fulfill people's needs and maintain their churches' vitality and health (Moro et al., 2021). A warm and inclusive culture that empowers individuals and addresses their needs is characteristic of churches that typically experience growth (Keita & Lao, 2020). Leaders of traditional churches could leverage the principles of this perspective to address people's needs, boost membership, enhance diversity, encourage innovation, and foster creativity, potentially leading to new avenues of growth.

Political Frame

The political structure focuses on navigating competition and the allocation of scarce resources. Whether during a worship service or a church business meeting, interactions among individuals are often influenced by strategic and political considerations (Hodge et al., 2020). Churches encounter political dynamics that may result in conflicts over limited resources. Inadequate management of these conflicts by church leaders can undermine commitment to the organization's values, leading to discord within the group (Bolman & Deal, 2017). Employing a political perspective can assist church leaders in effectively managing resource distribution, as how resources are allocated can either facilitate or hinder an organization's ability to adapt to changing circumstances (Culotta, 2022). Leaders of traditional churches can apply the political

framework to address, negotiate, mitigate, and resolve conflicts and competitions arising from limited resources and power struggles among members.

Churches striving to maintain their vitality and effectiveness should consistently adapt their strategies to manage power struggles among members. A shift in strategy results in a redistribution of power and resources within the organization, with some factions relinquishing control and resources while others gain increased influence (Hunsaker, 2022). Leaders of churches, armed with a deep understanding of the political dynamics, can effectively prepare themselves and their congregations for the power shifts accompanying efforts to implement social change initiatives (Roy & Perrin, 2021). Churches that successfully drive positive social change often benefit their communities, leading to higher church attendance (Greenlee et al., 2020). Thus, leaders of traditional churches can apply the principles of this framework to optimize their congregation's resources, thereby enhancing membership and expanding their capacity for community engagement.

Symbolic Frame

The symbolic viewpoint focuses on the cultural aspects of an organization, driven by symbols, rituals, ceremonies, beliefs, and customary practices. Leaders of rapidly expanding churches actively nurture and uphold a new culture marked by modern rituals, ceremonies, structures, practices, and symbols. In such fast-growing churches, financial contributions are harmonized with the doctrinal emphasis on prosperity and expansion (Kobylinski, 2021; Smith, 2021). The prosperity gospel preached in growth-oriented churches symbolizes authority, status, and affluence, representing triumph over adversity.

The triumph over poverty has prompted numerous churches to transform, with some adopting modern appearances reminiscent of convention centers, sports arenas, or shopping malls rather than traditional church buildings. However, these changes extend beyond mere aesthetics; there is also an evolution in church culture (Keita & Lao, 2020). Today's congregants, both existing and prospective, are attracted to churches that prioritize an organizational culture emphasizing inclusivity and community (Tatugarira & Moyo, 2020). Consequently, this cultural shift highlights the significance of church leaders addressing contemporary worshippers' cultural challenges from various angles, including through the symbolic lens.

Multiframing

Multiframing involves recognizing organizations as complex systems where roles, needs, power dynamics, and symbols interact to generate innovative opportunities, especially when conventional options appear limited (Bolman & Deal, 2017). Numerous traditional churches are witnessing declining attendance due to the reluctance of both leaders and congregants to embrace multi-framing (Keita & Lao, 2020). Many of these declining churches resist change and are hesitant to adopt modern approaches to ministry (Brosius, 2021; Jenssen, 2020). The downward trend in membership within these congregations highlights the need for significant restructuring before effective growth strategies can be formulated.

Traditional churches aiming to improve their chances of survival and increase membership could find value in embracing Bolman and Deal's (2017) multiframing concept. Elements such as the congregation's structure, ability to meet religious

consumers' needs, resource allocation, and organizational culture are decisive in how churches integrate potential members (Brosius, 2021). Thus, incorporating multiframing could provide leaders the adaptability and alternatives needed to devise and execute new strategies that positively influence church membership within traditional congregations.

Use of Bolman and Deal's Four-Frame Model

Several researchers have used Bolman and Deal's (1984) framework, including Tria (2020), who investigated leadership frames at Cantanduanes State University in the Philippines based on Bolman and Deal's framework. Tria's study involved key participants such as the university president; vice president for administrative and financial affairs; vice president for academic affairs; and vice president for research, extension, and production affairs.

Tria's (2020) study findings revealed that the leadership at Cantanduanes State University predominantly operated within the structural and human resource frames. Tria observed that the leadership effectively used the structural frame to adhere to institutional regulations, address conflicts, manage power dynamics, and pursue short-term and long-term objectives. Additionally, the leadership demonstrated adeptness in employing the human resource frame by showing sensitivity to the needs and emotions of their employees. This was accomplished through various strategies such as motivation, mentorship, supporting subordinates, fostering camaraderie, nurturing interpersonal relationships, and promoting teamwork. Tria's research emphasized that leaders who integrate multiple frames from Bolman and Deal's model tend to exhibit effective leadership practices.

Kolomitro et al. (2021) also conducted a study using Bolman and Deal's (1984) framework to explore the perspectives and experiences of faculty development leaders during periods of change. This study investigated the perceptions and experiences of faculty development leaders amidst periods of change. Kolomitro's findings were summarized as follows: (a) from a symbolic perspective, the absence of a clear identity for the faculty development unit was perceived as a threat; (b) from a political standpoint, increased visibility was regarded as a mitigating factor, (c) within the structural framework, an expanded scope of practice was seen as beneficial, and (d) in terms of human resources, instability due to leadership changes and uncertainties regarding human resources were considered threats. Kolomitro et al. highlighted that employing Bolman and Deal's (1984) framework enabled leaders to gain valuable insights into organizational dynamics, thereby enhancing their understanding of how these factors influence the fulfillment of duties and the overall flourishing of followers.

Bolman and Deal's (1984) framework for addressing organizational challenges and driving change is widely recognized by scholars and practitioners alike. The studies by Kolomitro (2021) and Tria (2020) affirm the efficacy of Bolman and Deal's framework, highlighting its ability to help leaders identify, analyze, and address organizational issues. This endorsement from Kolomitro and Tria underscores the potential usefulness of Bolman and Deal's framework for leaders of traditional churches aiming to develop effective strategies for organizational change and bolster church membership.

Galbraith's Star Model

In 2002, Galbraith introduced the star model framework as a refinement of Bolman and Deal's (1984) four-frame model, aiming to aid organizations in achieving their goals. The star model framework positions an organization at the center of five pivotal components: strategy, structure, processes, people, and rewards. These elements, when aligned, form a star shape (Galbraith, 2002). Leaders from various backgrounds have found the star model framework to be beneficial.

The strategy serves as the organization's guiding path toward success, outlining the goals and objectives for the workforce to achieve and the values and missions the organization should uphold (Galbraith, 2002). Structure defines the organization's formal power and authority distribution (Galbraith, 2002). Processes involve interconnected activities facilitating information flow throughout the organization (Galbraith, 2002). People represent the organization's human capital, including the talent, skills, and mindset needed to execute the strategy and achieve organizational goals (Galbraith, 2002). Rewards motivate and incentivize the workforce, aligning their behaviors and performance with organizational objectives (Galbraith, 2002). The Galbraith star model offers an alternative framework that enables leaders to shape workforce behavior, performance, productivity, and satisfaction to achieve favorable organizational outcomes. Leaders within traditional churches could similarly use the star model as an alternative leadership framework to align policies and strategies to enhance church membership.

Trujillo and Tallman (2021) used the Galbraith star model to examine the organizational structure of government information coordination within academic

libraries. Their study encompassed three major regional depository libraries and seven smaller ones deliberately selected for analysis. They identified two notable disparities between the star model and the management practices employed by leaders within these organizations. Galbraith's (2002) framework underscores the importance of an organization's strategic plan, with most employees expected to be acquainted with it, while others may require guidance. Furthermore, the star model emphasizes aligning goals with predetermined assessment metrics. However, the study's participants predominantly highlighted their reliance on traditional assessment approaches like surveys, observations, and statistical analysis rather than embracing newer technological innovations such as electronic communication, website traffic analytics, mixed reality, virtual reality, and augmented reality, which are indicative of the changing digital environment (Trujillo & Tallman, 2021). Church leaders could employ Galbraith's (2002) theory to navigate and comprehend how organizational structures might impact potential members' experience, performance, and satisfaction.

The frameworks advanced by Bolman and Deal (1984) and Galbraith (2002) serve as valuable instruments for dissecting organizational challenges and propelling organizational advancement. Although there are notable similarities between the two frameworks, particularly in their emphasis on human resources and organizational structure (Bolman & Deal, 2017; Galbraith, 2002), each model brings unique components to the table. Despite differences, the strategic and reward frames within the Galbraith star model complement those of Bolman and Deal, offering additional avenues for leaders to pursue organizational visions and strategic objectives effectively (Galbraith, 2002).

The frameworks proposed by Bolman and Deal (1984) and Galbraith (2002) offer significant utility to leaders of traditional churches aiming to shape individual behaviors and enact lasting organizational changes conducive to membership growth. While Galbraith's (2002) star model has been instrumental in organizational analysis, it may not fully align with the objectives of this study. Specifically, its omission of a symbolic dimension, crucial for understanding churches as entities with deeply ingrained cultures shaped by rituals and traditions, limits its suitability (Olivier, 2023). Incorporating a symbolic perspective could empower church leaders to cultivate a cohesive organizational culture that fosters unity and collaboration, thereby mobilizing congregants to bolster and expand church membership collectively.

Bolman and Deal's (1984) four-frame framework has emerged as a valuable tool for comprehending organizational dynamics. Leaders across diverse sectors have highly endorsed the model for enhancing leadership effectiveness (Tria, 2020). The framework serves diagnostic and evaluative purposes (Bolman & Deal, 2017). By grasping all four frames, church leaders can gain deeper insights into their congregants' experiences and perceive their congregations from a multifaceted perspective (Bolman & Deal, 2017). Furthermore, leaders of churches can use multiple lenses to diagnose challenges and develop strategies for guiding their congregations through changes, transformation, and growth.

Leadership Styles

Leadership styles are not innate traits possessed solely by leaders; instead, they encompass the behavioral practices, techniques, and approaches that leaders employ to

influence, inspire, motivate, and guide their followers toward a common goal (Choy-Brown et al., 2020). These styles entail crafting and executing strategies, adapting to changes, promoting team well-being, and driving organizational advancement (Morgan & Zolnikov, 2021; Sizemore, 2022). Therefore, adopting appropriate leadership styles can equip leaders with the skills to thrive in diverse environments, including the church, which is the primary focus of this study.

Many leaders within traditional church settings have encountered challenges engaging with rapidly changing religious demographics, often due to their reliance on outdated and inflexible leadership approaches. In contrast, leaders of attractional churches recognize the significance of adaptability and cognitive flexibility in effective leadership. They acknowledge that influential leaders possess a range of capabilities and can adapt their leadership styles to match their strengths and the specific needs of their circumstances (Andrew, 2023; Smoyer et al., 2021). Drawing inspiration from leadership practices in U.S. corporations, leaders of attractional churches have embraced various leadership styles to effectively guide their congregations and communities (Drovdahl & Jones, 2020). Here is an overview of seven corporate U.S. leadership styles that may resonate with efforts to enhance church membership: transformational, servant, strategic, charismatic, transactional, authentic, and spiritual.

Transformational Leadership

Transformational leadership represents a holistic leadership philosophy deeply rooted in driving organizational change. Leaders employing this approach aim to unlock the full potential of their followers, align them with the organization's overarching vision,

and motivate them to prioritize collective goals over individual interests (Bass, 1997). This leadership style is characterized by four primary behaviors: idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration (Azhar & Yang, 2022; Wilson et al., 2022). Transformational leaders are influential figures who inspire, motivate, engage intellectually, show personal concern, and act as change agents. These agents of change impart innovative knowledge and foster collaborative endeavors to ensure their organizations maintain a competitive edge, demonstrating inspirational motivation.

Transformational leaders advocate for the organization's responsibility to promote continuous learning and development among followers, fostering intellectual stimulation (Afsar & Umrani, 2020; Schmidt & Groeneveld, 2021). They pursue excellence, encouraging followers to embrace creativity and experiment with novel approaches that benefit individuals and the organization in their quest for greatness, embodying individualized consideration (Song et al., 2023; Zaman et al., 2020). Leaders who exhibit transformative behaviors drive organizations to achieve unprecedented outcomes by leveraging idealized influence (Ding & Lin, 2020). However, self-serving transformational leaders have exploited their charismatic persona and influence to manipulate and take advantage of followers for personal gain rather than the group's collective interest (Ruiz-Palomino et al., 2021). Nonetheless, transformational leadership remains a transformative style that leaders of traditional churches could employ to enact enduring and significant changes.

Servant Leadership

Servant leadership goes beyond conventional management strategies, embodying a way of life characterized by serving while leading. Servant leaders adhere to seven core principles: (a) prioritizing the needs of followers, (b) understanding the organization, (c) upholding ethical standards, (d) empowering followers, (e) fostering their development, (f) empathizing with their work demands, and (g) cultivating a sense of community both internally and externally (Meuser & Smallfield, 2023). Leaders embracing servant leadership nurture followers to achieve their fullest potential, including self-motivation, task proficiency, community involvement, and leadership capabilities (Miner & Bickerton, 2020; Ruiz-Palomino et al., 2021). Rooted in altruism, servant leaders prioritize their followers' needs and assist them in attaining personal and organizational goals, potentially contributing to increased church membership.

Servant leaders are motivated by a commitment to serving others rather than pursuing personal advancement. They lead through example, inspiring and encouraging followers to pursue a shared vision (Sun et al., 2021). Additionally, servant leaders empower their followers to provide outstanding service and embrace innovative methods to improve the quality of life for others (Fatima et al., 2023). However, there are two challenges associated with servant leadership: (a) limited experience among leaders employing this style and (b) the necessity for time, effort, and practice to adapt to this leadership approach (Peng et al., 2022). Servant leadership, characterized by a focus on relationships, is a leadership approach that leaders of traditional churches could adopt to

nurture individuals to serve their congregations and communities more effectively, thereby shaping a brighter future.

Strategic Leadership

Strategic leadership primarily involves senior leaders who synthesize the past, present, and future to establish the organization's purpose, significance, and continuity. These leaders prioritize various elements, including formulating and communicating a vision, cultivating dynamic core competencies, leveraging human resources, investing in new technology development, crafting and implementing valuable strategies, fostering influential organizational culture, optimizing balanced control, and demonstrating ethical conduct (Schlosser & Volkova, 2022). Leaders with a strategic orientation encourage innovation in evolving environments and circumstances while emphasizing the development of organizational culture, resources, competencies, and capabilities to achieve sustainable competitive advantages (Samimi et al., 2022; Singh et al., 2023).

Strategic leaders act as catalysts for long-term transformation. They share innovative visions and objectives with their followers to inspire and motivate them to achieve organizational milestones and objectives through exceptional teamwork in stable and challenging times. Strategic leaders within organizations understand that collective accomplishments derive from a shared vision and collaborative effort. Thus, these leaders are firmly dedicated to forward-thinking visions and establishing adaptable organizations, employing flexible decision-making and innovative approaches as needed (Jha et al., 2022). Strategic leadership involves intentional guidance over an extended period, essential for sustaining continual organizational success (Avolio & Drummey, 2023).

However, strategic leadership faces certain constraints. First, predicting and adequately planning for the future pose challenges. Second, it is crucial to balance long-term vision and short-term objectives (Lehto & Limnell, 2021). Strategic leadership embodies a purposeful and adept approach that leaders of traditional churches can employ to ensure cohesive collaboration among congregational groups, adaptation, and practical strategies for enhancing and expanding church membership.

Charismatic Leadership

Charismatic leadership is widely acknowledged as one of the most impactful styles, characterized by outgoing individuals exuding intense passion and contagious energy. This leadership approach profoundly influences organizations by elevating followers' sense of purpose, internal commitment, satisfaction, and performance, resulting in remarkable collective achievements (Nassif et al., 2021). Charismatic leaders harness charm, persuasive communication, and interpersonal connections to inspire, motivate, and influence followers toward ambitious goals (Guarana et al., 2020). They foster strong bonds with their followers, fostering positivity and momentum. Through communication techniques that resonate with followers' beliefs, values, and interests, charismatic leaders shift focus from individual to collective interests, aligning them with organizational goals (Hansen et al., 2020). Employing charismatic leadership can empower leaders of traditional churches to engage and motivate congregants, fostering collaboration on shared initiatives even in challenging circumstances and potentially attracting new members to the church.

Charismatic leaders are driven by a captivating vision of a promising future, employing a three-pronged strategy to rally support and mobilize followers: (a) envisioning, vividly portraying the future, (b) energizing, demonstrating personal passion, vigor, and determination, and (c) enabling, showing empathy, encouragement, and confidence in their followers (Men et al., 2020). Leaders with charismatic qualities help individuals overcome their fears, uncertainties, and limitations, enabling them to unleash their full potential and foster an environment conducive to ongoing creativity and innovation (Le Blanc et al., 2021). However, charismatic leadership has its drawbacks. Organizations may need help when charismatic leaders depart, and this leadership style may need to be more suitable for rigid environments (Behr, 2021). Nonetheless, charismatic leadership embodies a captivating, inspiring, appealing, and future-oriented approach that church leaders could employ to motivate followers and attract new members with an enticing vision of a brighter and more hopeful future.

Transactional Leadership

Transactional leadership involves guiding teams through clear instructions, rules, rewards, and consequences. This leadership style defines the roles of leaders and followers, using both direct and indirect methods to offer rewards or punishments based on individual and team performance (Costa et al., 2023; Sokhela & Murhula, 2022). Transactional leaders focus on exchange-based interactions, prompting followers to adapt to new situations based on the outcomes of their actions and encouraging them to show accountability and reciprocity to meet their needs (Alavi et al., 2022). Transactional leaders use rewards to motivate employees, prioritizing structure, consistency, control,

order, and timeliness. Leaders in traditional churches could use transactional leadership approaches to incentivize and recognize members' participation in spiritual and social activities to attract new members, thereby increasing church membership.

Understanding and following leaders' instructions are crucial in transactional leadership. Leaders use this approach to (a) clarify job expectations, (b) define roles and communicate expectations, and (c) offer rewards for effective performance (Kjeldesen & Andersen, 2023). Transactional leaders use this method to ensure tasks are completed promptly and within budget (Dijk et al., 2021). However, two challenges linked with transactional leadership include an overreliance on transactional leaders and a need for greater focus on overarching goals (Berkovich & Eyal, 2021). Leaders in traditional churches could adopt a transactional approach to closely monitor followers' actions and performance, preventing disruptions to organizational operations and initiatives.

Authentic Leadership

Authentic leaders maintain genuineness and integrity regardless of their circumstances or surroundings. This leadership style is founded on transparency, self-awareness, self-regulation, integrity, and ethical behavior, aiming to influence followers positively for collective benefit (Chandrahaas & Narasimhan, 2022). These leaders prioritize moral values and authenticity, emphasizing transparent relationships and conscientious communication (Hussain et al., 2022). They consider their followers' perspectives and well-being when making decisions (Megheirkouni, 2021). Through authenticity, leaders inspire followers to enhance self-regulation, personal growth, and organizational culture, thereby boosting job satisfaction and productivity (Cortes-Denia et

al., 2023). Authentic leadership involves being genuine, self-aware, and honest with oneself and others, regardless of the situation.

Authentic leaders have a profound understanding of their individual identity, values, and team goals. They prioritize transparent communication and equitable information sharing, employing a genuine approach to nurture growth and trust among all stakeholders involved in organizational pursuits (Ten & Yang, 2022). Authentic leaders nurture the psychological well-being of employees, enhancing their engagement and enabling success in both immediate and enduring work settings (Niswaty et al., 2021). However, one critique of authentic leadership is its recent emergence, which may limit its further development (Du et al., 2020). Authentic leadership presents an intentional style that leaders in traditional churches can use to foster trust and commitment, aligning leaders and followers with the organization's mission and vision statements to promote membership growth, longevity, and prosperity.

Spiritual Leadership

Spiritual leadership serves as a framework leaders employ to elevate employees' experiences of transcendence within the workplace. This style integrates vision, faith/hope, and altruistic love to facilitate followers' meaningful personal and professional growth while driving enduring and purposeful outcomes for organizations (Hsieh et al., 2022). Leaders who adopt spiritual leadership inspire followers to view their work as a calling, enhancing organizational performance (Vedula et al., 2023). Through this approach, leaders foster a sense of belonging, promoting feelings of security and satisfaction among members and boosting group productivity (Abou Zeid et al., 2022).

By intertwining vision and virtues, spiritual leaders aim to provide followers with fulfilling experiences while achieving unprecedented outcomes for organizations, thus contributing to church membership growth.

Spiritual leadership integrates practices into the workplace, emphasizing fairness, honesty, respect, and care for others. Leaders aim to engage followers' spirituality to drive active participation in the organization's vision, benefiting followers and the broader community while enhancing organizational well-being (Low n& Ayoko, 2022). Concerns include potential imposition of religious beliefs and discomfort for non-spiritual individuals (Hunsaker, 2022). Yet, spiritual leadership offers a values-driven approach for traditional church leaders to advance their congregation's goals through dynamic involvement and genuine concern for others' well-being.

Different leadership styles are crucial in guiding how leaders maximize efficiency and inspire followers to achieve collective goals. Some styles are more effective in navigating change and adopting new strategies (Kim et al., 2021; Sizemore, 2022), but it is essential to understand that no single style fits all organizations (Chaman et al., 2021; Thanh & Quang, 2022). Given the dynamic nature of structures, individuals, resources, and cultures (Bolman & Deal, 2017), choosing the right leadership style for the specific context can lead to success and favorable outcomes and facilitate social change in turbulent and stable times.

Causal Factors That Distinguish Growing Churches From Declining Churches

As unique institutions, churches serve spiritual, moral, and sociological purposes, extending beyond barriers of race, gender, age, geography, and socioeconomic status.

However, a declining membership trend persists in numerous traditional churches across the United States (Fowler et al., 2020). According to Brosius (2021), only 15% of churches are experiencing growth in the United States. Over the past 15 years, there has been an increase in the number of individuals not attending church, and approximately three-fourths of established churches in America are either declining or experiencing stagnant growth over the long term (Brosius, 2021). This decline underscores the necessity for revitalization efforts among many traditional churches.

Numerous factors have been implicated in the dwindling membership rates observed in traditional U.S. churches, with church leaders identifying various causes. Some attribute this decline to the rise of secularism and materialism, while others link it to the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown (Fowler et al., 2020; Mahija & Murisi, 2021; Streza, 2023; Watts & Houtman, 2023). Furthermore, la Grange and Dreyer (2022) contend that the advent of postmodernism, which emphasizes subjective experience, has altered perceptions and levels of engagement in church attendance and participation, exacerbating the decline. Despite these challenges, churches continue to provide vital social, educational, emotional, spiritual, and economic support to individuals and society (Smoyer et al., 2021).

Halting and reversing the downward trend in membership and finding avenues to bolster membership in traditional churches are paramount. Typically, churches experiencing an uptick in membership tend to possess more significant financial resources, which they can allocate toward community-driven social and economic initiatives, in contrast to those witnessing a decline (Brown et al., 2022). Furthermore,

congregations with larger memberships often extend more robust spiritual, emotional, economic, and social assistance to members and nonmembers during challenging periods compared to those with diminishing memberships (Brosius, 2021). Churches provide many benefits, spanning physical, social, economic, emotional, and spiritual realms, addressing individuals' current and future needs, impacting both personal and professional aspects, and contributing to broader societal changes (Brosius, 2021).

Although the survival of a church is never assured, identifying effective strategies employed by leaders of traditional churches to increase membership could significantly improve the chances of survival for struggling congregations, bolster membership, address community needs, and promote social change. Several studies have highlighted crucial factors that set leaders of growing churches apart from those of declining ones (Andrews, 2023; Brosius, 2021; Johnsen, 2021; Venter & Hermans, 2020). Following is an exploration of six factors that differentiate leaders of flourishing churches from those of traditional ones facing a decline in membership.

Leadership Style Factors for Growing Churches

Contemporary church leaders predominantly adopt transformative leadership styles, such as transformational, servant, strategic, charismatic, transactional, authentic, and spiritual approaches, to ensure the relevance and adaptability of their churches in evolving social contexts. Drawing from established leadership principles, these leaders shape perspectives that facilitate transformative services (Espedal, 2021; Subedi & Scott, 2021). By employing visionary, transactional, and transformational leadership frameworks, leaders of growing churches effectively articulate a compelling vision for

congregation growth, inspiring members to engage in change initiatives with thoughtfulness and innovation, leading to high productivity and exceptional results (Brosius, 2021; Dollhopf, 2021). Additionally, influential church leaders foster followers' confidence and adaptability while emphasizing the significance of engagement, involvement, and personal development through elements of servant, spiritual, and authentic leadership (Irawati, 2022). These leaders tailor their leadership styles to meet the specific needs of their congregations.

Leaders guiding thriving churches possess charismatic and captivating personalities, excelling in communication with followers through diverse channels, whether in-person, virtual, or a blend of both. Their magnetic presence ignites excitement among followers, cultivating an atmosphere of anticipation for growth and prosperity (Gauthier, 2021; Morehouse & Lemon, 2023). Through their persuasive communication, these leaders empower congregations, recognizing that an empowered community contributes to a flourishing church dedicated to expanding its membership base (Miner & Bickerton, 2020). Contemporary church leaders, advocating for and actively promoting new member recruitment, demonstrate a dual focus on individuals and strategic initiatives to revitalize church membership.

Leaders of flourishing churches, recognized as transformative leaders, markedly differ from traditional leaders of declining churches. Transformative leaders adopt leadership styles tailored to change, such as transformational and charismatic styles (Landova, 2021; Snelgrove et al., 2021). They actively pursue change initiatives and underscore the significance of transformative change in ensuring their organizations'

future success (Komariyah, 2022). Conversely, conventional leaders of churches experiencing stagnant growth resist change, adhering to outdated methods that hinder numerical or financial growth (Keita & Lao, 2020). The interplay between leadership and change is inseparable, with both elements pivotal for achieving favorable outcomes (Momeny & Etzel, 2022). Leaders of churches resistant to change often witness declines in their congregations because embracing change is indispensable for long-term success.

Church leaders who are dynamic and forward-thinking use contemporary strategies such as business models, digital surveys, and inclusive leadership to understand the needs of existing and prospective members. In contrast, leaders of stagnant churches adhere to obsolete methods, impeding their capacity to attract new members (Orogun & Pillay, 2023). Leaders dedicated to increasing membership also emphasize extensive training for religious leaders, offering abundant learning and networking opportunities for those aspiring to serve the church professionally (Nelson, 2020). Leaders focused on expanding membership adopt a forward-looking approach rather than being satisfied with the status quo.

Though transformative leadership styles, which emphasize team-based leadership over traditional hierarchical or solitary approaches, may not be the exclusive solution for membership growth (Venter & Hermans, 2020), the core principles of transformative leadership inherently promote a shared vision of expanding membership (Jentile, 2020). Leaders of thriving churches use transformative leadership to secure the congregation's sustainability and enhance membership and financial stability, embracing a holistic approach to ministry (Ferreira & Chipenyu, 2021; Oliviers, 2023). Confident church

leaders perceive a holistic ministry approach as essential for nurturing and augmenting church membership.

Essentially, leaders of growing and innovative churches exhibit intentionality, focus, and clarity, possessing a well-articulated vision and deep understanding of their congregations. These churches maintain a clear sense of mission, purpose, vision, and strategy, regularly evaluating and adjusting them from diverse perspectives to promote membership growth (Snelgrove et al., 2021). Conversely, leaders of declining traditional churches often lack a multifaceted, forward-thinking approach, opting for a narrow, short-term mindset (Brosius, 2021). Declining congregations typically focus inwardly, grappling with internal conflicts that consume leaders' attention and hinder their ability to implement effective strategies for membership enhancement (Keita & Lao, 2020; Brosius, 2021). However, a comprehensive understanding of how traditional church leaders can foster membership growth remains incomplete.

Worship Services

Thriving churches are renowned for revolutionizing worship services, fundamentally reshaping congregational engagement. These services are dynamic, uplifting, forward-thinking, exuding purpose, hope, and vitality (Brown et al., 2022). They incorporate modern elements like live music performances, state-of-the-art technology, synchronized lighting and sound systems, and captivating worship leaders to create an immersive and impactful experience for attendees (Benjamins, 2021). The emotive music often evokes active participation from worshippers, evident in gestures like raised hands, closed eyes, or swaying to the rhythm, showcasing deep emotional

involvement (Baker, 2023). Intentionally crafted by church leaders, these worship services aim to cultivate spiritual, physical, and emotional engagement, satisfying existing congregants and potentially attracting new members.

Modern worship experiences elicit intense emotions, eliciting deep connections and warmth among participants. This emotional resonance cultivates unity within the congregation, bolstering the church's perception of community and fellowship (Van Cappellen et al., 2022). Church leaders committed to expanding membership prioritize these emotive worship services as integral to their contemporary growth strategy, aligning with the congregation's forward-thinking ethos.

Churches use music to elicit emotional responses in their members and as a means for spiritual development. Vibrant congregations leverage music as a cornerstone for reinforcing Christian beliefs (Van Cappellen et al., 2022). Music is a powerful tool for cultivating connections, fostering community spirit, instilling loyalty, and promoting unity among worshippers (Myrick, 2021; Porter, 2020). Furthermore, contemporary worship spaces employ a variety of musical genres to attract prospective participants.

Thriving churches are characterized by charismatic leaders who deliver pragmatic messages accompanied by well-structured musical arrangements and worship sessions, avoiding sensational or fear-inducing preaching styles. These leaders often embrace the prosperity gospel, reflecting enduring U.S. optimism amidst economic instability and poverty, presenting a positive perspective on faith (Blazer, 2022; Munford, 2020). Appeals hold a central position in the worship experiences of growing churches, acting as emotional high points where pastors encourage potential members to join the

congregation. These charismatic leaders, serving as influential figures within their communities, use their communication prowess and strategic acumen to propagate the prosperity gospel, aiming to attract financially capable newcomers to support their ministry.

Church leaders striving to expand their congregation often provide multiple worship opportunities throughout the weekend, using various venues to accommodate attendees. Typically, these churches schedule services on both Saturday evenings and numerous times on Sundays, tailoring each service to appeal to a diverse audience (Heidi et al., 2020; Steffaniak, 2020). They opt for modern worship spaces featuring contemporary music, advanced technology, and engaging speakers, departing from traditional liturgical practices (Rocha et al., 2022). Additionally, these churches embrace a casual dress code to cultivate a relaxed and inclusive atmosphere during worship (Rocha et al., 2022). The number of weekend services is a critical indicator distinguishing successful churches from declining ones, often reflecting their focus on recruitment, assimilation, and growth strategies.

During the pandemic, churches that successfully adapted shifted from in-person gatherings to online platforms, aiming to maintain membership, stewardship, and relevance (Pace, 2021). Using social media, these churches enhanced their virtual services to inspire and connect with their audience, providing hope and faith during challenging times (Scott, 2020). By embracing social media and mobile technology, forward-thinking churches remained relevant even during restrictions on traditional gatherings (Dollahite et al., 2023). Church leaders used virtual worship services to

engage current members and attract potential congregants beyond physical church boundaries, recognizing the importance of meeting their needs for membership growth.

In analyzing the influence of worship services on attracting and retaining members, successful churches prioritize meeting current and future needs by offering diverse worship styles, programs, and locations to enhance participation and lower entry barriers for newcomers (Royle et al., 2021). These churches excel at creating vibrant and inclusive worship experiences that resonate with individuals from various backgrounds (Brosius, 2021). Leaders of growing churches are often adept at utilizing technology to transform worship into immersive and emotionally engaging experiences, effectively turning religion into a market where services are tailored to attract and retain religious consumers (Kidwell & Boer, 2021). Through innovative strategies, these modernized churches have reshaped America's worship landscape, making in-person and virtual services more enjoyable, accessible, and appealing to contemporary worshippers. Consequently, further research is needed to explore how the successful practices of these churches can be adapted and implemented within traditional church settings.

Growth Techniques

Leaders of churches prioritizing membership growth demonstrate a solid commitment to attracting new individuals, distinguishing themselves from traditional counterparts by embracing growth-oriented theology, worship styles, and organizational structures. These congregations foster a culture of inclusivity, welcoming attendees who may feel marginalized elsewhere while incorporating elements of secular culture into their religious message (Vermeer & Scheepers, 2021). Influential leaders of thriving

churches skillfully use growth strategies to attract and retain members (Christian, 2020; Sensing, 2023). Recognizing the competitive landscape in which they operate, these growth-oriented churches actively engage with religious seekers and newcomers, maximizing interactions to facilitate ongoing expansion and retention efforts.

Social connections are a primary pathway for attracting new members to a congregation. Existing members often use their social networks to introduce friends and family to religious services and social events offered by the church, paving the way for growth (Barclay, 2022). This approach generates a steady influx of newcomers to the church, some of whom may become active participants in the congregation over time (Cincala et al., 2021). Many individuals are drawn to growing contemporary churches due to their social and theological dynamics. Leveraging social networks to complement church growth is a strategy with historical roots, as early Christian leaders relied on solid social bonds to spread the Gospel and attract and retain followers (Barclay, 2022). Despite historical precedent, there is a gap in the literature regarding applying these strategies within contemporary traditional churches, presenting an opportunity for further research and identifying unique practices.

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Growing churches use a variety of strategies, including workgroups, therapy sessions, nurturing programs, parent support groups, and study sessions, to revitalize and expand their congregations (Atkinson & Rose, 2020). Another approach employed by rapidly growing churches involves welcoming newcomers without imposing expectations for participation, donations, or volunteering; these churches intentionally remove barriers to worship involvement, such as complex liturgies, prayers, songs, and cultural membership requirements tied to denominational or congregational familiarity (Rocha et al., 2022). Fast-growing churches have successfully employed self-help groups and minimized worship barriers to increase membership; however, further research remains needed to explore how traditional churches can adapt these strategies to attract new members.

Leaders of rapidly growing churches opt to construct or renovate their buildings with a contemporary architectural style and a neutral, welcoming ambiance tailored to attract newcomers. The physical environment significantly impacts consumer behavior (Khan et al., 2021) and can greatly influence customer satisfaction (Singh & Band, 2021). These thriving churches prioritize functional design elements that cultivate a hospitable

atmosphere, making it convenient for new visitors to attend and encouraging them to return (Olivier, 2023; Watson, 2022). Church leaders embark on redesign or renovation projects of their existing facilities to make a positive impression on nonbelievers, enticing them to attend worship services and participate in other church-related activities, creating new avenues to attract new members.

Leaders of attractional churches employ compelling teaching and personal charisma as crucial strategies to attract and retain members. Dynamic preaching and charisma are key elements that foster church cohesion and encourage active participation in worship (Aghahowa, 2021; Mannerfelt, 2022). Charismatic pastors possess exceptional speaking skills that draw large congregations to their services, creating anticipation and excitement among attendees; these leaders intentionally tailor their teachings to meet the needs of their audience (Rocha et al., 2022). They focus on delivering messages centered on personal growth and development rather than guilt-inducing sermons often found in churches experiencing stagnant growth (Rocha et al., 2022). These growth strategies highlight how thriving or attractional churches attract and retain members. However, a distinction exists between attractional and postmodern churches compared to their more traditional counterparts, where traditional church leaders may face significant challenges related to resources and finances. This gap in the literature emphasizes the need for further research into how traditional churches can adapt or implement strategies employed by attractional churches.

Marketing

Comprehending the preferences and values of their audience is vital for organizations. Satisfied customers contribute to advantages like loyalty, favorable word-of-mouth, competitive edge, and expanded market presence (Rai et al., 2022). Churches achieve member retention and attraction through marketing strategies to enhance attendee satisfaction (Peterson, 2022). There is a growing trend of religious institutions using marketing to shape the beliefs and actions of potential and existing members (Ho, 2021). The efficacy of marketing approaches in driving membership warrants additional exploration.

Congregations actively employ marketing techniques to engage potential members, with the dual goals of increasing active participants and cultivating stronger bonds within the religious community (Sulkowiski et al., 2022). Church leaders are adopting strategies akin to successful businesses to advance their mission, boost attendance, and fulfill societal obligations through enhanced church activities (Adebayo & Govender, 2021). Innovative church leaders use marketing tactics to design websites targeting affluent demographics to attract wealthier individuals and diversify their membership base to strengthen financial resources (Adebayo & Govender, 2021). These leaders harness cutting-edge marketing methods to grow membership and improve their churches' economic viability.

Static and aging congregations often overlook the importance of how young individuals perceive church environments. Many young people hold negative views of churches, deeming them mainly irrelevant due to the physical setting of the services

(Francis et al., 2021). The location where services occur, referred to as the servicescape, plays a pivotal role (Jung, 2022; Kayhan et al., 2021). The servicescape can significantly impact congregants' experiences, encompassing various dimensions such as physical elements and nonphysical factors like music, lighting, and color, collectively shaping consumers' overall impressions of the service (Kandampully et al., 2022). Service providers must offer appropriate stimuli to ensure a positive and comprehensive consumer experience.

Churches have recognized the significance of marketing more prominently, directing their attention toward comprehending and deploying impactful marketing strategies to draw in new members (Jung, 2022). Traditional print methods are no longer sufficient for churches aiming to grow their membership; instead, they must embrace modern marketing approaches tailored to increasing attendance (Adebayo & Govender, 2020). Progressive churches integrate marketing principles into their overall strategy to broaden their outreach and meet the needs of individuals and families (Adebayo & Govender, 2020). Modern marketing techniques have become indispensable tools for the ministries of expanding churches (Peterson, 2022). Leaders of influential churches skillfully employ marketing strategies to address the needs and desires of potential members, thereby extending the church's congregation.

Technology

Technology has brought about profound changes across various aspects of society, the economy, and industries worldwide, and the church is no different. It has transformed how people work, shop, access healthcare, handle finances, and educate

children. This influence also extends to religious practices (Monika, 2021; Orogun &
Pillay, 2022). Historically, churches have used electronic technology to enhance worship
services, streamline daily operations, and expand their membership (Weaver, 2023).
Successful church leaders capitalize on technology to update worship services and
activities, fostering membership growth.

Successful churches have welcomed state-of-the-art technological advancements,
showcasing their ability to adapt and remain pertinent to those searching for new spiritual
communities. Visionary church leaders have seamlessly incorporated digital and social
media tools into their daily operations, nurturing a sense of connection among potential
congregants (Monika, 2021). These leaders engage with prospective attendees outside
traditional worship settings through platforms like Twitter, Facebook, Zoom, YouTube,
and Instagram (Pakpahan et al., 2022). By harnessing technology, church leaders
proactively connect with potential members via social media platforms or direct email,
effectively conveying their message and drawing individuals to their congregations.

Thriving churches consistently pursue growth, often capitalizing on contemporary
consumer trends such as technology (Orogun & Pillay, 2022). Recognizing the
competitive nature of the religious sphere, proactive church leaders grasp the importance
of recruiting and retaining participants to ensure the sustainability of their congregation.
Consequently, these leaders regularly incorporate technology into their worship services,
enhancing the overall experience for worshippers (Mannerfelt, 2022). Flourishing
churches view technology as a vital tool for maximizing their impact despite resource
constraints (Pisarski & Gralczyk, 2021). Church leaders use technology to enhance

various aspects of their religious practices, teachings, and online presence, aiming to attract nonmembers and encourage regular attendance, thereby facilitating church growth.

Small Groups

Small groups are pivotal in thriving churches as they serve as the foundation for spiritual growth, community building, support, and mutual accountability. Usually comprising 7-9 members who share common interests or needs, these groups serve internal and external purposes (Dunaetz et al., 2021; Reddy, 2021). Growing church leaders use small groups to foster deeper connections among existing members and as channels to introduce nonmembers to their congregations, recognizing them as potential pathways to eventual church membership.

In burgeoning churches, small groups hold significant importance, providing members with avenues for personal involvement beyond regular worship gatherings. These groups often originate from discussions on group dynamics and processes, aiming to identify and cater to members' spiritual, emotional, and social needs within the church's framework (Atkinson & Rose, 2020). Moreover, small groups serve as welcoming environments where members can introduce their friends to their faith. They play a crucial role in integrating newcomers into the congregation, increasing attendance rates, and fostering a sense of belonging (Dunaetz et al., 2020). Church leaders strategically use small groups to facilitate the assimilation of newcomers into the church community, encouraging them to become active participants and, eventually, members.

Dynamic churches use small groups to cater to their congregation's spiritual, social, and emotional needs and engage with the broader community. Apart from

activities within the church premises, these small groups actively involve themselves in community engagement initiatives, such as volunteering at shelters, offering educational assistance in schools, and supporting military families, thereby strengthening community ties (Atkinson & Rose, 2020; Shipman & Siemiatycki, 2022).

Small groups are crucial in nurturing a sense of belonging and membership within the church community through interpersonal connections (Krull, 2021). They also alleviate anxiety, promote spiritual growth, and deepen individuals' faith in God. By fostering a sense of unity, small groups create a familial environment that transcends the church's size, providing members and nonmembers with a feeling of familial connection (Atkinson & Rose, 2020). Church leaders harness the potential of small groups to collaborate with other community organizations and orchestrate events to raise awareness and attract new members.

Small groups have been an enduring tradition in churches, tracing back to the era of Jesus and the apostles (Dunaetz et al., 2022). The apostles used small groups to nurture believers' fellowship and draw in new followers (Reddy, 2021). In parallel, modern church leaders acknowledge the importance of small groups in fostering growth within their congregations (Kangamina et al., 2022). These leaders use small groups to expand membership, recognizing their accessibility, inclusive atmosphere, and nonintimidating nature for non-members.

In summary, researchers have identified six key factors that contribute to building membership in churches, helping leaders to counteract the decline in church membership:

- demonstrating influential leadership alongside a well-defined vision (Brosius, 2021; Dollhopf, 2021);

- fostering a festive ambiance during worship services (Benjamins, 2021);

- designing initiatives to draw in and assimilate newcomers (Christian, 2020; Sensing, 2023);

- implementing marketing strategies to expand influence and adhere to contemporary norms. (Peterson, 2022);

- incorporating advanced technology to elevate worship experiences, create inventive approaches to ministry, and expand online outreach efforts (Orogun & Pillay, 2022); and

- using small group structures to facilitate inter-church engagements and attend to spiritual, emotional, and social requirements. (Atkinson & Rose, 2020).

Insights from existing literature suggest that attractional churches have achieved membership increases. However, the motivation behind this study is to determine whether these strategies or methods could apply to leaders of traditional churches.

Contrasting Church Growth Movements

The literature delineates two primary approaches to church growth aimed at increasing membership: attractional, which emphasizes inviting people to come and see, and missional, which emphasizes going and being. The preceding literature review focused on the attractional approach to building membership. This model centers on attracting potential congregants through marketing efforts to attend church or join small groups, thereby integrating them into the existing church community (see Jentile, 2020).

Jentile (2020) suggests that attractional churches adopt Christianity for a postmodern audience, view potential congregants as consumers, and prioritize numerical growth. The attractional model revolves around creating worship environments that cater to people's religious and social needs, increasing the likelihood of their return and potential referral to others, thus expanding the church's membership.

In contrast, the missional model rejects viewing individuals as consumers seeking religious services and products. Instead, missional churches regard their congregants as emissaries of God entrusted with spreading the Word of God across all aspects of society (Jun, 2022; Witoro, 2022). As highlighted by Baron and Maponya (2020), June (2022), and Vester (2021), missional congregations aim to exemplify an alternative community grounded in service and mission, expressing their faith through their daily lives and via digital and virtual religious services and initiatives. Missional congregations are committed to Gospel-centered ministry and values across all aspects of life, distinguishing them from attractional congregations.

The dedicated stance of missional clergy and laypeople has prompted them to challenge the individualistic, consumer-driven, building-centric, therapeutic, business-oriented, and market-focused approach to church growth adopted by attractional churches. Missional church leaders have criticized their attractional counterparts for prioritizing filling pews and accumulating wealth over conveying the sacred message of God (White & Pondani, 2022). They have accused attractional churches of fostering an unhealthy spirit of competition more aligned with capitalism than divine teachings (Udechukwu, 2021). Missional leaders have also argued that the attractional approach

may lead churches to compromise their beliefs and manipulate attendees through coercive tactics and extravagant lifestyles (Harries, 2021). In contrast, the missional model promotes active engagement in *mission dei*, or God's mission, which involves genuine interaction with nonbelievers to invite them into the kingdom of God and grow church membership.

Despite the critiques voiced by missional proponents, Johnsen (2021) and Venter and Hermans (2021) argued that attractional churches remain indispensable in the contemporary U.S. landscape. They assert that a diverse range of churches and ministries is essential to engage with individuals from various backgrounds and address their varied needs. Regardless of their orientation (attractional or missional), churches are responsible for spreading the Gospel, meeting individual needs, and contributing to positive societal change (Brosius, 2012; Eurich, 2020). Existing literature suggests that leaders of attractional churches employ modern techniques such as innovative leadership frameworks, contemporary worship styles, diverse growth strategies, marketing approaches, advanced technology, and small group initiatives to fulfill religious and social needs, significantly impacting church membership growth. Nonetheless, further research is warranted to explore strategies that could aid leaders of traditional churches in enhancing and revitalizing membership, thereby addressing the declining trends in church participation, attendance, and membership.

Transition

Section 1 provided an overview of the study, covering aspects such as the background of the problem, purpose statement, target population, sampling method, study

type, research question, interview inquiries, conceptual framework, operational definitions, assumptions, limitations, delimitations, significance of the study, and literature review. Section 2 will include an outline of the methodology, detailing the researcher's role, participants, research approach, design, ethical considerations, data collection tools, techniques, analysis methods, reliability, and validity. Section 3 will present the findings, their relevance to professional practice, implications for societal change, practical recommendations, suggestions for future research, a reflection on the study process, and concluding remarks.

Section 2: The Project

Section 2 delineates the research methodology employed in this pragmatic inquiry study. It covers the purpose statement, the researcher's responsibilities, participant selection, research approach and structure, ethical considerations, data collection tools and methods, techniques for data organization, data analysis procedures, and measures taken to ensure the reliability and validity of the findings.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this pragmatic inquiry study was to explore effective strategies leaders of traditional churches use to build membership. The targeted population consisted of at least six leaders of traditional churches who have implemented effective strategies to increase their church membership by 25% over 3 years in the Southern and Eastern regions of the United States.

Role of the Researcher

The role of the researcher in qualitative research is of foremost significance, involving relational activities characterized by respectful and ethical interactions with participants to gather, organize, and synthesize data (Collins & Stockton, 2022). The researcher is responsible for accessing participants' insights and perspectives on a phenomenon, analyzing them impartially, and presenting findings without bias. As the primary data collection instrument, the researcher must obtain participants' permission before initiating the research.

In this research, I leveraged 4 decades of practical involvement in the church, assisting churches in their national and international growth initiatives. This background

has given me a deep understanding of the research topic. I enlisted participants from my professional network and pertinent online databases, adhering to Walden University Institutional Review Board (IRB) standards to uphold ethical standards and mitigate conflicts of interest. The study adhered to the interview protocol, conducted member checking, and ensured data saturation to mitigate bias throughout the research process.

The informed consent process followed the core tenets outlined in the *Belmont Report*, emphasizing respect, beneficence, and justice in research ethics (Siddiqui & Sharp, 2021). Respect involves recognizing individuals' autonomy and guaranteeing informed consent (Tsosie et al., 2021). Beneficence consists in minimizing risks and maximizing participant benefits (Redman & Caplan, 2021). Justice necessitates equitable procedures for selecting participants (Lantos, 2020). The informed consent includes an outline of participants' rights, obligations, and study particulars.

In adherence to the principle of respect, each prospective participant received a comprehensive informed consent document containing information to facilitate an informed decision about participation. In accordance with the principle of beneficence, I took measures to protect participants, their families, and society from any potential physical, social, legal, or economic harm throughout the duration of the study. In line with the principle of justice, the study included the use of purposive sampling methods to choose participants with relevant firsthand experience relevant to the research topic. Additionally, I obtained authorization from the IRB to carry out the investigation and followed their directives according to the ethical standards delineated in the *Belmont Report*.

Research bias, which can lead to erroneous research conclusions, arises when there is a systematic distortion in the research process (Roberts, 2020). The study included triangulation techniques and bracketing to address this concern in my study. Triangulation involves integrating diverse perspectives, data sources, theories, and methodologies to deepen the understanding of the studied phenomenon and validate the researcher's findings (Crick, 2021). Through meticulous data collection and cross-validation of results using multiple sources and methods via triangulation, I mitigated biases that stem from reliance on a single observer or method (see Arias Valencia, 2022; Crick, 2021).

In qualitative research, preventing bias is paramount. I used an interview protocol, member checking, and data saturation methods to reduce personal influence during data collection (Yin, 2018). Additionally, I implemented bracketing, which entails setting aside personal beliefs and assumptions (see Qamar, 2021) to ensure that my biases did not distort the participants' viewpoints. This strategy aided in mitigating preconceived notions that might have impacted the study's outcomes.

Interview protocols play a crucial role in qualitative research by facilitating the collection of participants' perspectives and experiences while minimizing bias (see Bergen & Labonté, 2020). A well-structured interview protocol allows researchers to gather comprehensive qualitative data that addresses the research question (see Mitchell et al., 2022). The interview protocol assists interviewers in formulating questions, exploring detailed experiences, and concluding the interview process (as suggested by Yin, 2018). Conducting interviews demands careful planning and clear communication to

obtain detailed information relevant to the research question. I developed an interview protocol (see Appendix) to assist in these efforts. Adhering to the protocol ensured thorough preparation, the development of practical questions, exploration of various formats, rehearsal, bias reduction, and the seeking of appropriate guidance.

Participants

Participants in research studies willingly consent to take part after providing informed consent. In qualitative research, participants are selected based on the research's objective, question, theoretical framework, and evidence guiding the study (Xu et al., 2020). I used purposive sampling to select six leaders from traditional churches in the Southern and Eastern regions of the United States, ensuring they possessed relevant knowledge and could offer valuable insights into church membership growth. Purposive variation sampling was chosen because of allowing for selecting cases that provided the most helpful information to achieve the study's objectives (Frederick et al., 2023). This sampling technique allowed the ability to pinpoint cases abundant in relevant information that effectively address the research question.

Prospective participants demonstrated a tangible 25% increase in church membership within 3 years, showcasing practical approaches to membership expansion. This pragmatic inquiry study prioritized individuals with a proven record of successfully augmenting church membership, primarily targeting leaders in traditional church environments. To locate suitable candidates, I searched online church platforms in the Southern and Eastern regions of the United States and used my professional connections for recruitment.

Fostering a positive relationship with participants is essential in research endeavors. This entails prioritizing their privacy to build trust (Welles et al., 2020). To achieve building trust, I upheld measures to protect participants' privacy and prevent potential breaches (see Siddiqui & Sharp, 2021). Maintaining a professional and approachable demeanor contributed to cultivating credible relationships and ensuring accurate data collection (see Greer et al., 2023). Flexibility in accommodating participants' schedules bolstered trust and cooperation (Xu et al., 2020). Last, I assured participants of a pressure-free environment, emphasizing open communication and attentive listening (Xu et al., 2020). Establishing a constructive relationship fosters mutual respect and facilitates the acquisition of value.

Research Method and Design

Research Method

Researchers can choose from three methodologies: qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods, but selecting the most appropriate one for the study is crucial. The preferred method for this study was qualitative because of effectively addressing the research question through personal interviews and open-ended questions that promote reflection on the phenomenon. Qualitative research is a scientific method that helps to understand a phenomenon within a specific context (Crick, 2021; Yin, 2018). The inductive approach enables researchers to explore how individuals interpret their daily lives and social environments across various contexts (Lester, 2023). Qualitative research gathers participants' perspectives and understanding of a phenomenon.

Qualitative research primarily collects data through conversations, written records, or digital documentation. This methodology focuses on interpretive efforts to understand the contextual significance of behaviors and actions, with the researcher playing a central role in interpreting the data (Ranki et al., 2021). In contrast to quantitative research, qualitative inquiry aims to explore, describe, and comprehend phenomena rather than predict or control them (Asper & Corte, 2021; Yin, 2018). This methodology enables researchers to delve into people's interpretations and experiences within their natural settings rather than relying solely on quantitative data analysis.

Quantitative research, whether descriptive, correlational, or experimental, is a scientific methodology employed to measure phenomena before and after manipulation, aiming to establish relationships between variables and causality (Henson et al., 2020). This approach presents data in numerical format, often breaking down intricate issues into more minor variables (Lund, 2020). Quantitative research entails an inferential process that uses numerical data, calculations, and statistical analysis to examine individuals and phenomena (Duckett, 2021). Quantitative researchers analyze numerical data to make conclusions about individuals and phenomena.

Quantitative research operates in a deductive manner, with researchers employing this method to validate cause-and-effect relationships through scientific techniques and controlled experiments (McDermott, 2023; Kwok et al., 2022). In contrast, qualitative research is inductive, seeking to derive general principles from specific observations rather than testing hypotheses (Asper & Corte, 2021; McDermott, 2023). Given the

nature of my study, which did not entail hypothesis testing or variable manipulation in controlled environments, I chose a qualitative approach.

Mixed methods research provides a comprehensive understanding by integrating quantitative and qualitative data, revealing insights that a single approach might overlook (Wang et al., 2023). Combining the strengths of both methods, mixed methods studies address research questions that neither approach alone can fully illuminate while mitigating their respective weaknesses (Boontantrapiwat & Kitcharoen, 2022). However, a mixed methods approach was not used for this study, as quantitative data was not collected.

Research Design

A research design functions as a strategy for addressing research inquiries, with qualitative research designs differing in their objectives, data collection methods, and analytical approaches (Danford, 2023). For this study, I opted for a pragmatic inquiry design. This design allows researchers to employ diverse methods for exploring real-world situations, using multiple data sources and perspectives to inform research questions (Ramanadhan et al., 2021). Pragmatic inquiry aims to generate practical and valuable insights to tackle real-life issues (Kelly & Cordeiro, 2020). Unlike approaches focused on absolute truths, pragmatic inquiry emphasizes exploring human experiences as a direct path to understanding the world (Stacks, 2022). A qualitative pragmatic inquiry design was chosen as it facilitated the acquisition of valuable insights from various sources to enhance church membership.

Phenomenological research is a qualitative methodology that seeks to explore and comprehend the fundamental essence of phenomena. Researchers employing this approach typically conduct face-to-face interviews to explore participants' experiences (Thomas, 2020). Unlike seeking intellectual interpretations or opinions, phenomenological research gathers descriptive accounts of experiences (Danford, 2023). Phenomenologists aim to go beyond participants' verbal descriptions of experiences to uncover deeper insights revealed through storytelling (Shorey & Ng, 2022). However, a phenomenological design was unsuitable for this study as the goal was not to describe participants' lived experiences but rather to explore strategies used by church leaders to build church membership.

Grounded theory, a qualitative research approach, emphasizes theory development rather than theory verification. Researchers employing grounded theory strive to generate theories through systematic data collection, analysis, and conceptualization, aiming to elucidate interactions, processes, and strategies (Urcia, 2021). Unlike other methods, grounded theory researchers do not begin with a predetermined framework but instead aim to develop one during the study (Bonfim, 2020). However, for this research, which focused on analyzing church leaders' strategies for increasing church membership, a qualitative grounded theory design was inappropriate as the objective was not theory construction but rather detailed analysis.

Data saturation is a critical element of any research endeavor, marking the point where no further information or insights emerge from the collected data (Fofana et al., 2020). This occurs when all relevant concepts, themes, or findings have been thoroughly

explored, resulting in redundancy in the data (Alam, 2020). To ensure data saturation in this study, I employed two primary strategies: purposive sampling and triangulation. Purposive sampling facilitates data saturation by enabling researchers to start with a set number of participants and add more until saturation is achieved (Sarfo et al., 2021). The procedure ended with the sixth participant, as no new insights or information surfaced, indicating saturation had been reached.

The study employed triangulation as a methodological strategy to reach data saturation. Triangulation acts as a validation method in research, comparing diverse data sources and collection methods to confirm evidence convergence (Alam, 2020). This approach offered two key benefits: validating data accuracy and ensuring completeness (Farguhar et al., 2020). Employing triangulation allowed me to assess various datasets to ensure data saturation.

Population and Sampling

In qualitative research, sampling is intentional, not random. I used purposive sampling to identify six church leaders from the Southern and Eastern regions of the United States who had achieved a 25% increase in church membership over 3 years, ensuring that each participant meets specific criteria for inclusion. Purposive sampling involves systematically organizing the number of participants, interviews per participant, and interview duration (Yu et al., 2023). Researchers use purposive sampling to choose participants who can offer valuable insights into the studied phenomenon (Crick, 2021). This approach is used in qualitative research to focus on a particular group of individuals capable of effectively addressing the research question.

Unlike statistical sampling methods, no set rules determine the minimum or maximum number of cases to include in a pragmatic inquiry study. The sample size is influenced by factors such as the research purpose, the researcher's proficiency, time and resource constraints, and the goal of achieving data saturation (Crick, 2021). The ideal sample size effectively addresses the research question (Crick, 2021; Hennink & Kaiser, 2022). Inappropriate sample sizes are typically those that are excessively small or large. Sarfo (2021) suggests that data saturation can occur with as many as six interviews with six participants, leading to redundancy in information. Following Sarfo et al.'s (2021) recommendation, the selection included six participants as the sample for this study.

Data saturation marks the conclusion of data collection in qualitative research, indicating that researchers have exhausted discovering new information pertinent to the study's scope. Achieving data saturation relies on effective sampling methods and interview protocols (Arias Valencia, 2022), signifying the point at which further data collection or analysis fails to yield additional insights into the investigated phenomenon (Hennink & Kaiser, 2022). Data saturation is obtained when new data are collected that offer few or no new perspectives. I met data saturation with six participants. All participants in this pragmatic inquiry study met the following specific criteria:

- They were church leaders who had accomplished a 25% growth in membership within 3 years.

- They needed adequate experience to provide valuable insights into achieving a 25% growth in church membership within 3 years.

- Participants were from the Southern and Eastern regions of the United States for easy accessibility.

All interviews followed a semistructured format, conducted over Zoom, and recorded to ensure data reliability and validity (see Orr et al., 2020). Semistructured interviews provided advantages in capturing participants' perspectives and enhancing comprehension of the research topic (Howerton-Fox & Kretchmer, 2023). Each interview session, conducted via Zoom, lasted 35–57 min.

Ethical Research

Adhering to ethical standards is crucial in research to safeguard the rights and welfare of participants. Researchers must strictly follow these standards throughout the research process to prevent harm to those involved (Putra, 2023). Each potential participant received an informed consent form, requiring their signature before proceeding with the study and ensuring ethical compliance. The consent form outlined vital aspects such as the research topic overview, voluntary participation, withdrawal procedures, and measures for safeguarding participants' rights (Putra, 2023; Xu et al., 2020). It also contained specifics regarding interview guidelines, recording procedures, participants' rights to interview transcripts and analyses, researchers' publishing rights, and contact information for the faculty advisor. Participants had the autonomy to withdraw from the study at any point without facing repercussions, either by submitting a written request or verbally contacting me (see Yin, 2018). Ethical research principles form the cornerstone guiding the study's design and execution. I obtained approval from

the Walden University IRB for the proposed study prior to collecting any data. The IRB approval number for this study is 01-19-24-0392750.

The study included adherence to ethical principles and standards throughout the research study to safeguard participants' protection, well-being, and equitable treatment. These principles encompass respect for participants, beneficence (avoiding harm), and justice (fair treatment) (Siddiqui & Sharp, 2021). Upholding these principles ensures the ethical conduct of the research (Tsosie et al., 2021) and fosters trust and confidence with participants, facilitating the establishment of robust relationships. I executed each stage of the data collection process, prioritizing confidentiality and addressing moral considerations with sensitivity. Moreover, an audit trail was maintained to enable external validation of procedures and interpretations (see Yin, 2018). Research ethics ensure that participation is voluntary, informed, and safeguarded.

In qualitative research, participants are often anonymized using pseudonyms or codes to protect their identities (Ge et al., 2021). Each participant in this study was assigned a numerical code, such as P1, P2, P3, P4, P5, and P6, to maintain confidentiality during interviews. Church names were also anonymized. An identification list linking participants to confidential information will be securely stored separately from recordings, transcriptions, and field notes, all kept in locked drawers (see Yin, 2018). Digital information will be securely stored on my computer and USB drive, with password protection for enhanced security. Upon completion of the study, all electronic data, transcriptions, field notes, and identification lists will be securely destroyed after 5 years.

Data Collection Instruments

The researcher plays a central role in data collection, serving as the primary conduit for gathering information in the study. Interviews were the primary data collection method, incredibly potent in qualitative research, providing rich information and enabling nuanced conclusions (Fang et al., 2022). Through interviews, participants can express their direct experiences and perspectives on various phenomena (Thunberg & Arnell, 2022). Interviewing is a fundamental qualitative research technique, harnessing participants' insights to address the research question effectively. An interview protocol structured the interview process (see Appendix).

All interviews followed a semistructured format, incorporating open-ended inquiries. Unlike closed-ended queries, which elicit brief or single-word replies, open-ended questions are crafted to prompt substantive responses drawn from participants' insights and expertise (Scholz et al., 2022). By using open-ended questions, researchers aim to encourage participants to freely articulate their perspectives on the research topic, fostering detailed and personalized answers (Roberts, 2020). Through semistructured interviews centered on open-ended prompts, participants and practitioners in their respective fields can share their experiential knowledge about the phenomenon under investigation (Yin, 2018). This approach facilitates the emergence of insightful and impactful information during the interview process, contributing to the study's overarching research inquiry.

Data collection encompassed diverse sources, including interviews, and document analysis. Furthermore, I used analytical memos as a reflective mechanism to examine the

convergence or disparity between interview and archival data (see von Unger et al., 2022). It is imperative to gather data from multiple origins and verify its accuracy and reliability (Espedal, 2021). This validation process involves assessing the certainty and quality of the data before its utilization and analysis (Mwita, 2022). Employing data source triangulation, I cross-referenced interview findings with document analysis to ensure robustness and reliability.

All interviews featured open-ended inquiries aimed at fostering dialogue rather than defensiveness. For consistency and easy tracking, every participant responded to identical questions arranged in the same order (see Yin, 2018). Typically, interviews commence with broad queries and progressively delve into more specific and probing topics as the discussion unfolds (Yin, 2018). Interviews allow participants the liberty and ease of sharing their narratives (Roberts, 2020). The data collected from interviews and document analysis underwent bracketing, coding, cross-referencing, and validation processes to identify the strategies leaders of traditional churches used to enhance membership.

Researchers employ member checking to bolster the credibility of their qualitative research findings, which is fundamental for its strength. This method involves validating the reliability and accuracy of data collection (Alkaabi, 2021). Additionally, member checking enables participants to review the transcription of their interviews, ensuring their accuracy and fidelity (Motulsky, 2021). Also termed as participants' validation, member checking allows participants to confirm, adjust, or refute the accuracy and interpretations of gathered data (González-Salgado et al., 2022). I used member checking

to share a summary review with participants to fortify the reliability and validity of data collection before drafting the findings, followed by expressing gratitude to the participants. Each participant validated the member checks without objection.

Data Collection Technique

Data collection involves a structured approach to acquiring information to address a specific research inquiry. Researchers use various techniques to collect and analyze diverse data forms (Ehrmin & Pierce, 2021). Data were gathered from multiple sources, including semistructured interviews and archival records in this study. Drawing from various sources enhanced the depth of my dataset, providing a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon under investigation (see Lupo & Stroman, 2020; Mwita, 2022). Obtaining data from diverse sources facilitated a more profound exploration of the research question.

The study included the use of an interview protocol to guide the interview proceedings. The interview protocol encompassed rapport building, confidentiality assurances, withdrawal procedures, and a review of interview mechanics. After asking the interview questions, participants could offer additional remarks before concluding the interview.

Qualitative research commonly relies on interviews as a primary means of data collection. Interviews involve face-to-face verbal exchanges, allowing researchers to extract information from participants firsthand (Fang et al., 2022). As assessment tools, interviews enable participants to convey their real-life experiences and insights on the research topic in their own words and perspectives (Roberts, 2020). Interviews offer

several advantages, including gaining firsthand insights into phenomena, providing detailed narrative accounts, and capturing diverse perspectives (Yin, 2018). However, interviews can be time-intensive and prone to bias (Yin, 2018). Despite these challenges, using interviews as a data collection method facilitates the acquisition of comprehensive data that sheds light on participants' understandings and interpretations of the research phenomenon.

Document analysis involves systematically reviewing printed and electronic documents to understand the phenomenon's significance. One advantage of document analysis is its capacity to support or challenge interview data, providing researchers with evidence to validate or question the information gathered (Dalglish et al., 2020). However, document analysis can be time-intensive, and printed materials may exhibit bias as they are often tailored for specific audiences (Yin, 2018). Integrating document analysis with interview data enables triangulation from multiple sources, mitigating the impact of biases on the research process and outcomes (Crick, 2021). Document analysis yields valuable insights that complement interview findings. Before conducting interviews, I requested relevant documents from participants, including church membership rosters and statistical records, to corroborate claims of increased church membership. The review also included the church's website for information on membership growth to identify documents aligned with the interview questions.

In qualitative research, member checking is a validation technique participants and researchers use. This technique acts as a quality assurance process, allowing researchers to enhance the accuracy, credibility, and validity of the information gathered

during research interviews (Busetto et al., 2020). To ensure the robustness of my approach, I implemented member checking, allowing participants to validate or challenge my interpretations of their interviews and assess the accuracy of preliminary results. Participants offered no objection to the member checks. This method was crucial for guaranteeing that participants' viewpoints and interpretations are faithfully represented and remain unaffected by researcher bias (see Motulsky, 2021). Furthermore, member checking was a critical factor in enhancing the credibility of the research and establishing its trustworthiness (González-Salgado et al., 2022). In essence, member checking verified, reinforced, and validated the research findings acquired from participants.

Data Organization Technique

Data organization encompasses arranging gathered data in a structured manner to enhance understanding and facilitate analysis. This technique allows researchers to classify raw data into coherent groups, making it easier to access and analyze (Ehrmin & Pierce, 2021). To manage tangible and digital data, the organization included tangible material in physical folders and stored records in digital folders for archival records with analytical memos stored securely on password-protected thumb drives, as Yin (2018) outlined. The memos contained reflections and interpretations of the collected data. Additionally, narrative and coded data were stored in separate folders within a Microsoft 10 filing system, ensuring systematic organization and easy access. Efficient data organization enhances data presentation and storage capacities, facilitating research.

Ethical research protocols dictate the procedures for all data collection activities. Hence, researchers must adhere to ethical standards throughout the data collection phase

to uphold the integrity and credibility of their study. In line with ethical guidelines, participant data were coded, with each participant assigned a unique alphanumeric identifier within their respective files (Ge et al., 2021). These files were securely stored on a password-protected thumb drive, and regular updates and backups were conducted. Additionally, raw data is securely stored in a locked filing cabinet and will be maintained for 5 years. To further bolster the reliability of the pragmatic inquiry, I established a chain of evidence comprising study questions, the study database, specific references, the study protocol, and analytical memos (see Yin, 2018). This chain of evidence enabled a data trace, strengthening validity through interconnected links between research inquiries and findings that can be followed in both directions.

Data Analysis

Data analysis involves scrutinizing, transforming, and processing raw data to understand the phenomenon comprehensively. Researchers use an exploratory process approach to extract insightful information relevant to the research question (Alkaabi, 2021). Triangulation, which integrates various data sources to understand the phenomenon comprehensively, encompasses four forms: data, methodological, investigator, and theoretical (Cañado, 2020). Methodological and data source triangulation was used in this study. Methodological triangulation involves using various research strategies to investigate the same question, enhancing reliability and validity by leveraging the strengths of each method while compensating for their weaknesses (Arias Valencia, 2022). Data source triangulation combines different methods, such as interviews and archival data, to deeply understand the phenomenon (Hanson-Defuesco,

2023). Pragmatic inquiry research, which employs multiple data sources, strengthens data credibility (Kelly & Cordeiro, 2020). Researchers use triangulation to validate and reinforce data reliability (Yin, 2018). Yin's (2018) five-step data analysis method, comprising compilation, disassembly, reassembly, interpretation, and conclusion, ensures comprehensive analysis alongside data and methodological triangulation.

The logical and sequential process for the data analysis followed the five phases Yin (2018) recommended. Compiling information was the first phase. As Yin described, data transcription involves converting collected information into textual form to facilitate researchers' comprehension and analysis. This process ensures accuracy and integrity (Ningi, 2022). To assist in organizing interviews and archival data for better familiarity before data disassembly, the study included the use of Microsoft and Dedoose software. Disassembling the collected information was the second phase. Data disassembly involves breaking down and segmenting collected data for categorization and coding purposes, as described by Yin. Coding is the process of converting raw data into understandable information, aiding in extracting themes relevant to the research inquiry (Giesen & Roeser, 2020). Four sequential steps were used to group and code the data:

1. Arrange and structure the data.

2. Assess and investigate the data.

3. Compile a catalog of qualitative data using words or concise phrases to arrange the data into themes.

4. Identify similarities and differences and assign definitions to each code during the research process before data reassembly.

The third phase involved information reassembling: Data disassembly consists in breaking down and segmenting collected data for categorization and coding purposes, as Yin (2018) described. Coding is the process of converting raw data into understandable information, aiding in extracting themes relevant to the research inquiry (Giesen & Roeser, 2020). The fourth phase involved interpretation of information. Data disassembly encompasses the fragmentation and segmentation of gathered data to facilitate categorization and coding, as Yin (2018) outlined. Coding involves transforming raw data into comprehensible information and assisting in extracting themes pertinent to the research inquiry (Giesen & Roeser, 2020).

The focus of the fifth concluding phase was finalizing data analysis by identifying the predominant themes, marking the culmination of the data analytic process (Yin, 2018). Conclusions were drawn to address the research question using thematic analysis to scrutinize the data and extract findings. Acknowledging that conclusions derived from qualitative research may sometimes have broader applicability beyond the immediate study context was essential. The sixth and final phase, data analysis, involved extracting insight from data to answer the research question.

Researchers employ computer-assisted software to facilitate data analysis instead of relying solely on traditional methods like pen and paper. Computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software (Dedoose) has gained popularity in social research, aiding in the systematic management of the research process and enhancing overall research credibility and trustworthiness (Mitchell & Schmitz, 2023). Dedoose offers flexibility in generating visual representations of data, such as graphs, charts, and trees, which assists researchers

in analysis and enhances readers' comprehension of the researcher's interpretations (Vignato et al., 2022). In this study, Dedoose software was used to analyze data, identify patterns, and uncover themes aligned with the analytical framework discussed in the literature review and resonant with Bolman and Deal's (1984) four constituents.

Reliability and Validity

Reliability and validity constitute essential aspects of qualitative inquiry. These criteria are foundational in ensuring qualitative investigations' credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Facchinetti et al., 2021Without reliability and validity, the integrity of research is jeopardized, undermining its significance (Quintão et al., 2020). Therefore, it was crucial to establish, maintain, and achieve reliability and validity throughout the research process.

Reliability

In qualitative research, reliability refers to the consistency and replicability of the research process and findings. Its purpose is to reduce biases and errors, thus upholding the integrity and validity of the study (Yin, 2018). Reliability assesses the research's credibility, allowing readers to evaluate the researcher's methods and procedures for conclusions (Quintão et al., 2020; Rose & Johnson, 2020). Researchers use a pragmatic inquiry protocol to ensure research reliability (Ramanadhan et al., 2021). To maintain research reliability, I implemented a pragmatic inquiry study protocol previously employed by Ramanadhan et al. (2021).

1. Establish connections among research objectives, analytical methods, results, and literature.

2. Maintain transparency and clarity throughout the process of analyzing data.

3. Incorporate reflexivity into the research process.

4. Employ data triangulation.

5. Use member validation.

6. Consider divergent cases.

Adhering to Ramanadhan et al.'s protocol will bolster the study's findings, ensuring their credibility, trustworthiness, and validity.

Dependability

In qualitative research, dependability refers to the researcher's consistency in collecting, analyzing, and interpreting data. This benchmark underscores the auditability of the research process, delineating each step from inception to the conclusion (Rose & Johnson, 2020). Ensuring dependability guarantees comparability of results if the research were replicated under similar conditions with the same methods and participants (Janis, 2022). Researchers showcase the robustness of their research methodology by implementing dependability.

In qualitative research, researchers use member checking to enhance the dependability of their findings. I used member checking to ascertain the study's dependability. Member checking is a technique researchers use to improve the accuracy, credibility, validity, and transferability of the study's outcomes (Motulsky, 2021). Qualitative researchers have recognized member checking as a potent tool for validating or challenging the researcher's data interpretation by participants (González-Salgado et al., 2022). Member checking confirmed the research findings regarding participants'

perspectives on church leaders' strategies to augment church membership. Every participant confirmed the member checks without raising any objections.

Validity

In qualitative research, validity encompasses appropriateness, validating the research study's credibility, transferability, and confirmability. Qualitative researchers recognize that validity necessitates a self-critical approach to safeguard the integrity of their findings (Palmér et al., 2022). Validity encompasses the instruments, processes, and data researchers used to obtain their results (Quintão et al., 2020). Researchers use techniques like member checking and methodological triangulation to ensure the validity of their research. I ensured research validity using methodological triangulation and various data collection and analysis methods to maintain coherence with the findings.

Credibility

Credibility pertains to the internal validity of research and assesses the alignment between the researcher's findings and participants' viewpoints. It serves as a criterion for evaluating the value and believability of the researcher's conclusions as perceived by study participants (Stahl & King, 2020). Qualitative researchers use credibility to ascertain the consistency of their analyses and interpretations with the original data (Morris & Parris, 2022). Credibility is a benchmark for determining whether the study effectively explored or identified the intended phenomenon.

Researchers use member checking to ensure credibility, fostering trust in the researcher and enhancing the study's overall credibility (Stahl & King, 2020). This practice also improves the research's thoroughness by confirming the collected data's

relevance (Muldoon et al., 2022). Member checking serves as a strategy to validate data collection and analysis through participant confirmation (Stahl & King, 2020). To ensure the credibility of the study findings, I used member checking to substantiate data collection and analysis through participants' confirmation and validation.

Triangulation is a technique used by researchers to deepen comprehension of phenomena. Its purpose is to mitigate biases, thereby safeguarding the validity of research findings (Yin, 2018). This approach entails incorporating various sources, enabling researchers to determine whether reliability checks yield similar or divergent results (Hanson-DeFusco, 2023). To uphold the validity and credibility of the study, I implemented methodological and data triangulation, cross-referencing data quantity and quality from archival and interview data.

Transferability

In qualitative research, transferability evaluates how findings can be applied to other contexts. Comparable to qualitative external validity and generalizability, transferability pertains to the potential applicability of findings to different participants, groups, and scenarios (Levitt, 2021). The readers, not researchers, determine the relevance of findings across various temporal, contextual, and demographic settings (Tuval-Mashiach, 2021). Researchers enhance transferability in qualitative studies by gathering comprehensive and detailed participant information to produce replicable results (Makel et al., 2022). To facilitate the evaluation of the study's transferability to diverse settings, I provided a documented chain of evidence outlining data collection,

analysis, and saturation achieved through semistructured interviews and archival documents related to the examined phenomenon.

Confirmability

Confirmability mitigates researchers' biases, ensuring that findings are solely of the participants' views and conditions of the research and not of researchers' motivation, perceptions, and biases. This criterion demonstrates rigor in data analysis, rendering findings verifiable and consistent with other researchers' interpretations (McGinley et al., 2020). Researchers use confirmability to reduce the impact of biases on data analysis, thus enhancing the reliability of their findings (Singh et al., 2021). I ensured research confirmability by using multiple data sources such as interviews and document reviews to gather comprehensive data addressing the research question and implement member checking to counteract biases, affirming that findings authentically originate from participants' experiences and viewpoints.

Data Saturation

Saturation marks the culmination of data collection, analysis, and interpretation processes. Researchers reach data saturation when no new information, patterns, or themes emerge from data collection and analysis (Alam, 2020). Data saturation is crucial as it confirms the study's conclusions (Fofana et al., 2020). Yin (2018) noted that saturation can be reached with as few as two participants, emphasizing the importance of collecting comprehensive and rich data rather than solely focusing on participant numbers. I used the interview protocol (see Appendix) to conduct semistructured

interviews with six leaders of churches until no new information evolved and no new codes and themes emerged to achieve the data saturation point of this study.

Transition and Summary

The purpose of this qualitative pragmatic inquiry was to explore effective strategies leaders of churches use to build membership. In Section 2, I outlined the researcher's responsibilities and reiterated the research goals, addressing critical aspects such as participants, methodology, design, population, sampling, ethical considerations, instruments, techniques, analysis, reliability, and validity. Section 3 reveals the results, their practical and societal implications, actionable suggestions, potential directions for future research, reflections on the study process, and a concluding overview.

Section 3: Application to Professional Practice and Implications for Change

The purpose of this qualitative pragmatic study was to explore strategies leaders of churches use to build membership. I explored the successful approaches employed by traditional church leaders to enhance membership within diverse congregations located in the Southern and Eastern regions of the United States. Semistructured interviews were conducted with six church leaders to gather data, which was analyzed thematically using Dedoose qualitative software. Additionally, archival data were collected regarding each participant's membership growth, with church records and membership statistical analysis indicating that each participant experienced a membership increase exceeding the 25% benchmark within a span of 3 years. The church leaders were assigned identification codes P1 through P6. Discoveries included the leaders of churches primarily using (a) influential leadership, (b) community involvement, (c) the use of technology and social media, and (d) the leveraging of social connections to foster membership growth.

Church leaders employed four themes and eight subthemes as part of their approach to address the challenge of increasing membership. The primary themes aligned with the conceptual framework of Bolman and Deal's (1987) four-frame model. The main themes correspond with this investigation's goals and overarching research query. In this section, the purpose is to expound upon the discoveries and examine the implementation of efficient tactics church leaders employ to enhance membership within professional practice. Moreover, I delineate implications for societal transformation,

provide practical recommendations, suggest directions for further research, offer reflections, and ultimately bring the study to a close.

Presentation of the Findings

The research question for this study was, What effective strategies do leaders of churches use to build membership? Semistructured interviews were undertaken, and archival data were collected to explore this question; perspectives were obtained from the responses of church leaders. The interview data unveiled four primary themes— influential leadership, community involvement, technology and social media usage, and leveraging social connections—with eight subthemes emerging within these categories. Table 1 includes the number of occurrences of each theme in the interview transcripts. All six participants identified each theme in their interview responses.

Table 1

Frequency of Themes

Theme	Number of occurrences in interview responses
Influential leadership	67
Community involvement	61
Technology and social media	58
Leveraging of social connection	52

Retrieved archival data served primarily as a means to substantiate the church leaders' participation criteria. However, organizational materials and websites provided supplementary evidence, enriching the depth and breadth of data collected through interviews. The archival data substantiated the criteria of a 25% increase in membership within 3 years for each participant. Church digital records highlighted the use of

technology and social media to draw in and retain newcomers, offering online services and products tailored to their requirements. P1's digital media showed an online food bank offering to meet community members' needs. P3's online worship services attracted over 5000 viewers weekly. P6's website showcased community social services and upcoming spiritual and social events to attract newcomers. The synthesis of both interview and archival data reinforced the findings of this qualitative pragmatic inquiry.

Theme 1: Influential Leadership

The data revealed that church leaders employ impactful leadership to foster membership growth. All six participants emphasized the significance of influential leadership as a pivotal strategy for increasing membership. Existing literature supported this finding, highlighting the crucial role of impactful leadership in promoting membership expansion. Miner and Bickerton (2020) observed that influential leaders empower congregations, acknowledging the importance of an empowered assembly in membership expansion. Such leaders typically possess practical communication abilities, charisma, vision, and the capacity to impact their followers, thereby fostering organizational advancement positively (Chiu et al., 2024). From the data, four noteworthy subthemes emerged: (a) contemporary leadership, (b) a shared vision, (c) inclusive environment, and (d) celebratory worship services.

Contemporary Leadership Style

Church leaders employ diverse contemporary leadership methodologies to promote the development of their congregations. The findings of this study align with Brosius (2021) and Dollhop (2022), who argued that present-day church leaders employ

visionary, charismatic, and transformational leadership practices to enhance effectiveness and achieve remarkable results. P2 described herself as forward-thinking, introducing fresh initiatives to involve and incorporate those not previously affiliated with her church community. P3 expressed, "I seek to exude a transformative style to carry out the mission to show the people who congregate with us a standard generally not seen among ministers today." P4 remarked that while some attribute his success in increasing membership to his practical communication abilities, he attributes his accomplishments to his charisma and genuine concern for others. P4 stated, "I am charismatic and care about others."

Shared Vision

A collective vision has the potential to facilitate organizational expansion. The study's findings harmonize with Bass's (1997) assertion that leaders who use elements of transformational leadership can unlock the full potential of their followers, aligning them with the organization's overarching vision and motivating them to prioritize common objectives over personal concerns. When queried about the most effective strategies for increasing membership, P4 acknowledged the significance of establishing a shared vision. P4 expressed, "I influenced them (my church) not to have an individual purpose but to rally around a vision that had a common goal, which is to carry out the mission." P6 also acknowledged, "When we started, there was a limited number of individuals, so the vision was mine, and to each person who wanted to unite with our ministry, I would share the vision they caught the vision and embraced." When discussing the challenges faced in implementing a shared vision for membership expansion, P4 emphasized, "Most

of your membership is not interested in doing any soul winning." Yet, P4 credited attaining heightened membership to establishing and pursuing a shared vision that was collectively embraced and championed.

Inclusive Environment

Participants depicted establishing an environment where newcomers feel embraced, valued, and cherished. The study's findings correspond to Bolman and Deal's assertion that leaders should foster an organizational culture that imbues individuals with purpose, significance, and fulfillment. Veermer and Scheeper (2021) noted that leaders in expanding churches cultivate an inclusive culture, welcoming attendees who may feel marginalized elsewhere. When the query was asked, how does your organizational culture serve to recruit members? P1 responded, "We don't marginalize people and make them feel different because they are a different race, socioeconomic, or financial status." P4 noted, "I am a pastor for everybody, and whosoever walks through the door, whether with alcohol on their breath or gold tooth in their mouth, whoever they were, they were okay. Everybody will know the pastor loves them." P6 answered, "We create a culture and atmosphere where it's warm and welcoming, and we connect our visitors with someone in the church."

Celebratory Worship Services

Celebratory worship services have revolutionized the church worship environment. The study's findings concur with Brown et al. (2022), who asserted that celebratory worship services are dynamic and uplifting and exude purpose, optimism, and vitality (Brown et al., 2022) and Benjamins (2021), who noted that celebration services

incorporate modern elements like live music, advanced technology, synchronized lighting and sound systems, and charismatic worship leaders to create an immersive and impactful experience for attendees. Participants described their utilization of celebratory worship services to allure new members. P2's celebratory worship services encompass a variety of musical styles, spanning from "classical to reggae," with a live band performing keyboards, drums, bass guitars, bongos, and tambourines, complemented by dynamic preaching to enhance the worship experience. P4, when discussing his celebratory worship services, commented, "It has to be the hottest thing in town that you want to come there." P6 stressed that his worship services are designed to attract youth and college students, consistently incorporating a live band, resulting in "a deeply passionate worship experience."

Theme 2: Community Involvement

The emphasis on community involvement corresponds closely with existing literature. Influential churches engage in community outreach activities such as volunteering at shelters, providing educational support in schools, distributing food, and supporting military families, thereby bolstering community bonds (Atkinson & Rose, 2020; Shipman & Siemiatycki, 2022). Prioritizing community initiatives to improve non-church members' well-being frequently increases membership (Brosius, 2021). As per participants, community involvement is a crucial aspect of church leaders' duties concerning community well-being, which includes their involvement in charitable activities, outreach initiatives, and building relationships. Two primary subthemes

regarding community involvement emerged: (a) addressing social needs and (b) indoor and outdoor initiatives.

Fulfillment of Social Needs

The collected data indicated that the rise of church leaders addressing societal needs to enhance membership was a significant subtheme within community involvement. The study's findings align with Dunaetz (2020), who confirmed that meeting social needs significantly attracts newcomers, increases attendance, and expands membership. P1 noted that meeting people's food needs through an online food bank service has led to membership growth. P2 shared that creating a welcoming environment for millennials in her church has boosted her membership. P4 addressed societal needs by conducting ceremonies such as weddings, baby dedications, and funerals for nonmembers, increasing membership. P4 expressed, "Do you realize how many individuals I've baptized after they attended baby dedications in my church?"

Indoor and Outdoor Initiatives

Each participant emphasized the significance of both indoor and outdoor initiatives in bolstering membership. The study's findings integrate with Reddy (2021), who opined that churches arrange indoor and outdoor events to attract new adherents. P2 shared,

> We launch programs to reach those who do not usually attend church. An effective strategy was to launch a weekly Sunday complimentary McDonald's breakfast for those within the church and the community. The results included more church members coming earlier and bringing new relatives to enjoy Sunday

breakfast. The results also included new individuals from the neighborhood coming for breakfast and, later, joining the church.

P4 stated, "A year does not go by, and I do not have a major public evangelism effort outdoors. I have baptized many people from those campaigns who have become church members."

Theme 3: The Use of Technology and Social Media

The data showed that technology and social media are crucial in church expansion. Monika (2021) suggested that churches may face challenges operating efficiently without clearly understanding the significance of technology and social media. Participants acknowledged technology and social media as valuable resources for augmenting membership. Two prominent subthemes regarding technology and social media surfaced from the dataset, underscoring their notable influence and importance: (a) technology integration for modernization, and (b) utilization of social media.

Technology Integration for Modernization

The dataset highlighted this subtheme as a pivotal factor influencing membership expansion. The study's findings align with Bolman and Deal (2017), who suggested that leaders should incorporate technology to improve customer service, and Weaver (2023), who asserted that contemporary churches employ electronic technology to enhance worship experiences, streamline administrative tasks, and bolster membership. In discussing the use of technology to promote church growth, P2 stated, "I use technology to attract people and make my services accessible to them." P3 affirmed, "We use technology to increase our online presence, which has gone worldwide and caused

tremendous organizational growth to where once we had a few." Additionally, P3's website is tailored to cater to the needs of online congregants by offering various services and products. P5 disclosed that leveraging technology has aided in building church membership. "I now use Zoom to connect with members and newcomers."

Use of Social Media

From the dataset, this subtheme emerged as a critical factor in increasing membership. The participants emphasized social media as a powerful strategy for membership expansion, emphasizing its effectiveness and strength. The study's findings closely resonated with previous research. Dollahite (2023) argued that social media profoundly impacted the church, enhancing connectivity, supporting outreach initiatives, and disseminating religious messages. P2 remarked that following the pandemic, "We switched to Facebook and YouTube live to gain newcomers and stay in touch with them." Speaking about the use of social media, P3 expressed: "We have seen the growth, not only in our membership but also our tithe base. We have hit the $1,000,000 mark." P5 shared, "Our social media was more than a bulletin board. It was a community space. We use it to connect with community members and gain new members for the church."

Theme 4: Leveraging of Social Connections

In the dataset, social connections emerged as a strategy implemented by church leaders to augment membership. The study's findings align with Barclay (2022), who posited that existing members often leverage their social networks to introduce associates to religious services and social events organized by the church, thus aiding in membership growth. All participants acknowledged social ties as a pivotal strategy for

expanding membership. During one of P1's publicly held meetings, the community service leader of his church personally invited most of the individuals who were baptized and who subsequently became church members. P2 noted that her congregation invited their relatives for the complimentary breakfast, leading to the recruitment of numerous new members. P3 stated, "I encourage my members, and they encourage their friends to attend church physically or virtually, boosting membership." P4 observed that by inviting visitors to sit with him at the fellowship dinners and fostering connections, many of the visitors who sat with him subsequently joined his church. P5 mentioned that several of his congregants bring their family members to the church, and it is from this group that he recruits new members. P6 articulated,

> I love dedicating babies, so he encourages members to invite their families and friends with babies to bring them to be dedicated. This provides an opportunity to attract newcomers to the church who otherwise would not come, allowing him to minister to the newcomers and make them members of his church.

Leaders of churches have identified social bonds as an efficient approach to cultivating church membership.

Relevance of the Findings to the Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework of this study is based on Bolman and Deal's (1984) four-frame model. Bolman and Deal introduced a theoretical structure for examining organizations and leadership approaches, comprising four perspectives or frames that illuminate organizational dynamics:

- Structural frame: Organizations are perceived as rational entities with well-defined structures, objectives, roles, and procedures. Leaders prioritize efficiency, organizational design, and role definition.

- Human resource frame: Organizations are perceived as familial or communal settings where individuals' needs, emotions, and motivations are considered. Leaders prioritize empowerment, participation, and nurturing a positive organizational culture.

- Political frame: Organizations are seen as battlegrounds where various factions vie for resources, power, and influence. Leaders in this lens manage power struggles, conflicts, and alliances to achieve goals.

- Symbolic frame: Organizations are viewed as cultural platforms where symbols, rituals, and stories shape identity and meaning. Leaders focus on vision creation, inspiration, and fostering belonging.

I use the four-frame model to examine the interactions and strategies employed by church leaders to improve membership. The results indicated that each participant used strategies rooted in the four-frame model to strengthen membership. Advocates of the four-frame model emphasized its efficacy in thoroughly analyzing organizational and leadership dynamics (Bolman & Deal, 2017; Tria, 2020). Participants emphasized using impactful leadership, a unified vision, an inclusive atmosphere, fostering joyful worship services, addressing individuals' needs, and having indoor and outdoor initiatives alongside technology, social media, and social connections to cultivate membership expansion. P2 underscored that advancing a collective vision to engage the unchurched

notably boosted her membership. P3 mentioned, "Online technology has helped to increase our membership. Now, we have thousands attending our services in person and online." Further, participants unanimously agreed that membership grows when churches are warm, welcoming, and engaging.

The crucial relevance of the findings to the conceptual framework resides in aligning the four primary themes derived from the data—namely, influential leadership, community involvement, technology and social media, and social ties—with the core principles of the four-frame model. The results indicated that membership growth occurs when church leaders adopt an influential leadership style to implement and pursue a shared vision for expansion. The notion of influential leaders implementing a shared vision primarily corresponds to Bolman and Deal's (1984) symbolic frame. Within this framework, leaders play a pivotal role in articulating and personifying the organization's vision. They serve as symbolic figures who inspire and energize others through vision, charisma, and narrative. Implementing a shared vision entails leaders proficiently conveying the organization's mission and principles, garnering stakeholder backing, and harmonizing endeavors toward shared objectives.

The results showed that participants emphasized community involvement to boost membership. Typically, community involvement aligns with Bolman and Deal's (1984) political frame. This framework highlights the significance of power dynamics, conflict resolution, and competition within organizations and the necessity to involve diverse stakeholders, including the community, to attain organizational objectives. In this frame, leaders reflected an objective to integrate their churches into the more extensive social-

political community network, seeking an advantage in perhaps establishing or enhancing their reputation.

The results demonstrated that using technology and social media aided church leaders in boosting membership. Participants emphasized the use of technology to (a) enrich worship experiences using audiovisual aids, projection screens, sound systems, and online streaming platforms to reach a wider audience and (b) engage with their community through online forums, virtual events, and social media platforms, fostering connections and outreach beyond the physical church building. In this context, the use of technology corresponded to Bolman and Deal's (1984) quadruple frames.

- Structural frame: In this frame, technology is often seen as a tool for organizing and optimizing organizational processes. It involves how technology can streamline workflows, improve efficiency, and enhance communication channels.

- Human resource frame: Here, technology is viewed in terms of its impact on people within the organization. This includes considering how technology affects individuals' satisfaction, preferences, and expectations.

- Symbolic frame: Technology can also be seen as a symbol of progress and innovation within the organization. Its use may represent the organization's commitment to staying current and adapting to changes in the external environment.

- Political frame: In this frame, the use of technology may be analyzed in terms of power dynamics and resource allocation. Technology can be considered a

rigid communication device that dictates the boundary of the message and

how its implementation may influence organizational relationships and

alliances.

The results illustrated unanimous agreement among all participants regarding the positive

impact of social connections on membership building. Social ties align with Bolman and

Deal's human resource frame. This frame emphasizes the importance of human

relationships, interpersonal dynamics, and the well-being of individuals within the

organization. Leaders in this frame prioritize followers' well-being, motivation, and

satisfaction, recognizing that motivated and engaged followers are essential for

organizational success. The participants' collective use of (a) influential leadership, (b)

community involvement, (c) the use of technology and social media, and (d) leveraging

social connections to foster membership growth corresponds with the tenets of the four-

frame model as delineated in the existing literature.

Applications to Professional Practice

The results of this qualitative pragmatic inquiry study may help leaders of

traditional churches identify strategies to bolster membership, reduce membership drain,

and increase the survival rate. Primarily, leaders of churches are responsible for their

church's success or demise. However, this study could help leaders of churches who

provide services and products develop and sharpen their leadership skills. This study may

challenge leaders of churches to seek leadership education, learn church management

competencies, find or become a mentor, become more involved in their community, and

strategically develop approaches to grow their membership. All participants contributed

valuable information that could help novice church leaders formulate and execute strategic church practices, strategic planning, community initiatives, professional development, and engaging others, which are essential strategies for church leaders. Leaders of churches may find these strategies beneficial when halting and reversing membership decline. Findings showed that strategies like influential leadership, community involvement, using technology and social media, and leveraging social connections can effectively build membership. Brosius (2021) found that leaders who employ impactful leadership styles and tailor strategies to address the needs of individuals and align with contemporary societal trends tend to boost church membership.

Implications for Social Change

The potential implications for societal transformation encompass various societal affect opportunities, including (a) empowerment and leadership, (b) community involvement, and (c) addressing societal challenges. Equipping church leaders with evidence-based approaches for membership expansion can empower them to enhance their leadership capabilities and guide their congregations effectively toward endeavors aimed at positive social transformation. Effective strategies for augmenting membership can foster increased engagement in church communities, leading to enhanced participation in community service, advocacy, and support initiatives, thereby contributing to positive societal changes. Churches experiencing membership growth bolster their capacity to address prevalent social issues such as poverty, homelessness,

and inequality within their localities, potentially resulting in tangible enhancements in the well-being of marginalized groups.

Recommendations for Action

Aspiring and seasoned traditional church leaders might consider the findings of this study. Applying the strategies outlined in this research can assist traditional church leaders in bridging the divide between their current status and their desired congregational objectives. Church leaders must equip themselves to confront and persevere through challenges due to the intricate nature of membership growth (Brosius, 2012). A recommendation is for church leaders to employ a transformative leadership style that allows leaders to articulate a compelling vision that motivates and inspires followers to work towards common goals.

A second recommendation is for leaders to prioritize community involvement to build meaningful relationships with residents, other community organizations, and local leaders to enhance the church's reputation and credibility within the local area, which might lead to increased membership. A third recommendation is for leaders to incorporate technology and social media into church practices because technology and social media platforms provide efficient channels for communication between church leaders, members, and the community and facilitate the sharing of information about events, services, and essential announcements in real time. The final recommendation is for church leaders to leverage social ties because solid social relations within the congregation create a sense of belonging and loyalty, encouraging existing members to invite others to join the church.

I plan to promote the study findings among church leaders, congregations, and theological students through conferences, seminars, publications, online resources, and local church programs. Additionally, I aim to share the results directly with study participants to foster social change.

Recommendations for Further Research

The first suggested avenue for future research is for researchers to identify alternative criteria for the study, including leadership attributes and competencies necessary for implementing strategies for fostering church growth. A second avenue for future research entails exploring the impact of community involvement and partnership on membership-building endeavors. A third avenue for future research involves examining approaches to engage and incorporate millennials into church communities. By addressing these areas in future research, scholars can deepen their comprehension of membership-building dynamics in churches and offer actionable insights for church leaders aiming to fortify their congregations.

In the initial phase of the study, I outlined three anticipated research limitations: (a) the potential influence of participants' expertise and backgrounds on the research outcomes, (b) the likelihood of the allotted interview duration restricting participants' ability to provide comprehensive responses to the interview questions, and (c) the decision to concentrate solely on the Southern and Eastern regions of the United States, which might limit the generalizability of the findings due to cultural variation. The limitation of participant expertise can be mitigated with alternative participation criteria. The potential for time allocated for interviews was not instrumental. Researching church

leaders in the Northern and Western regions of the United States might yield different perspectives.

Reflections

Completing my doctoral studies has been immensely fulfilling and free of regrets. I made numerous sacrifices along the way in pursuit of this significant milestone. As I reach the culmination of this program with a terminal degree, I am dedicated to continuing my lifelong pursuit of knowledge. I am thankful for the opportunity to earn a Doctor of Business Administration focusing on leadership from Walden University. This journey has equipped me with practical insights that greatly benefit church administration and leadership. The courses and residencies were thoughtfully designed to prepare me for success. I am grateful for the guidance of my doctoral chair, whose expertise was invaluable, and my second chair, who demonstrated solid scholarly capabilities. Engaging with research participants through interviews to explore my research phenomenon was a rewarding and enlightening experience. I take solace in the potential of my research to support church leaders in addressing membership decline and fostering growth, thereby contributing to significant social change.

Conclusion

In this qualitative pragmatic inquiry, the goal was to delve into the effective strategies church leaders use to cultivate membership—a crucial endeavor in the face of prevailing challenges. Statistics indicate that approximately 15% of churches in the United States are experiencing growth. In contrast, many established churches have declined or stagnated in membership over the past 15 years (Brosius, 2021). Researchers

attribute this trend primarily to leadership strategies. To reverse this decline, church leaders must glean actionable insights to implement effective strategies promoting substantial and sustainable membership growth.

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Appendix: Interview Protocol

Study: Effective Strategies for Building Church Membership

Preparing for Interviews: After obtaining approval from the Walden University IRB, I contacted potential participants via social media using an approved introduction letter. Once a participant expressed interest in the interview, I asked them to provide a suitable date and time for the Zoom interview.

Informed Consent: Participants returned their signed informed consent before the interview. I told them that the interview would be audio recorded. Then, I initiated the recording, noting the time, date, participant's name, and numeric code to access the interview.

Opening Interviews: I began each interview by greeting the participant, introducing myself, and outlining the study's purpose and advantages. After expressing gratitude for their participation, I ensured their comfort before confirming their readiness to proceed.

Conducting Interviews: I conducted semi-structured interviews using the following six open-ended questions:

1. What strategies have you used for building membership?

2. What factors are most compelling in attracting members?

3. How does your organizational culture serve to recruit membership?

4. What barriers have you experienced in building membership?

5. How have you responded to those barriers in building membership?

6. What other valuable information would you like to provide about and membership that we might still need to address?

I ensured participants had ample time to provide detailed responses to each question and posed additional probing questions for clarification.

Recording reflective notes: Throughout the interview, I made notes to record any noteworthy observations, thoughts, or potential follow-up questions.

Member Checking: I inquired about the main themes discussed during the interview to ensure an accurate interpretation of the participant's responses. Additionally, I offered the participant the opportunity to review and validate the interview transcript afterward.

Closing Interviews: After the interview, I expressed gratitude for the participant's time and information, mentioning that I would reach out later to confirm the transcript's accuracy and gather additional insights. I assured the participants of confidentiality and anonymity in the published study.