

# Digital Transformation Strategies Used by Church Leaders to Increase Revenues and Meet Budgetary Goals

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## Abstract

Ineffective strategies to use digital transformation to increase revenues and meet budgetary goals can negatively impact small rural church leadership capabilities. Small rural church leaders who struggle to increase revenues and meet budgetary goals are at high risk of business instability. Grounded in the diffusion of innovations theory, the purpose of this qualitative pragmatic inquiry was to identify and explore effective digital transformation strategies used by small rural church leaders to increase revenues and meet budgetary goals. Participants were eight small rural church leaders who had effectively used digital transformation to increase revenues and meet budgetary goals. Small rural churches are churches that have fewer than 500 members and are not in a metropolitan area. Participants were eight small rural church leaders who had effectively used digital transformation to increase revenues and meet budgetary goals. Data were collected using semistructured interviews, public websites, and current and archival documents. Using thematic analysis, five key themes were identified: leveraging digital platforms, overcoming challenges, leadership and congregational engagement, financial management, and digital presence and visibility. The implications for positive social change include the potential for rural church leaders and nonprofit stakeholders to implement effective digital strategies that foster inclusion, bridge technological divides, and strengthen community resilience in underserved areas.

## Keywords

Digital Transformation, Church Leaders, Revenue Growth, Budgetary Goals, Financial Management, Technology Adoption, Digital Tools, Resource Allocation, Strategic Planning, Organizational Change

## 1. Introduction

Some church leaders do not know how to use digital transformation to increase revenues, which results in not meeting budgetary goals. Many rely on traditional and face-to-face interactions to engage congregants and raise funds. However, these approaches are no longer sufficient in the digital age, and church leaders face challenges adapting to modern community engagement and fundraising tools. Limited access to high-speed internet, advanced technology, and cultural resistance from clergy hinder progress and create barriers to adopting digital tools effectively (Campbell, 2023; Ugboh, 2023). Church leaders risk losing relevance with tech-savvy congregants and hindering financial growth without addressing these barriers.

Economic constraints complicate digital transformation efforts. Limited budgets and reliance on inconsistent donations hinder some small rural churches from investing in technologies and training (Campbell, 2023; Niazi et al., 2024). The COVID-19 pandemic worsened financial vulnerabilities by restricting in-person gatherings, a primary funding source (Niazi et al., 2024). Small rural churches are characterized as having memberships below 500 and being geographically located outside of metropolitan areas. Rural churches were affected by technological and educational barriers, unlike urban churches that adapted quickly to online services and digital giving (Holleman et al., 2022). Small rural church leaders must adopt digital tools strategically to modernize operations and expand their reach to maintain financial stability.

This paper offers three sets of contributions to existing literature. First, I validate the diffusion of innovations (DOI) theory, validating its relevance in digital transformation strategies. Also, the paper expands the theoretical understanding of the DOI in religious organizations. Second, I outline five strategies business leaders may develop to increase revenues and meet budgetary goals. Third, I offer recommendations for future research to enhance business practices by addressing the gaps identified in the paper.

I will proceed as follows. In the following section, I will briefly detail the participant selection criteria, data collection procedures, and the specific steps used to conduct analyses. Next, I will introduce the conceptual framework for developing discussions on the DOI theory in implementing digital transformation strategies in small rural churches in the southeast U.S. Then, I will pose the research question and discuss aspects of the business contributions and recommendations for professional practice, centering on five specific themes and their relevance to the findings. On this basis, I will explore the implications of social change relating to business and organizational leaders and the research-scholar community. Finally, I will identify directions for future research projects related to improved practice in business.

## 2. Methods

The researchers conducted a qualitative pragmatic inquiry to identify effective

digital transformation strategies used by small rural church leaders in the south-east United States to increase revenues and meet budgetary goals. The research approach centered on developing practical, actionable insights for church leaders. The project employed purposive sampling to select eight small rural church leaders from churches with fewer than 500 members in nonmetropolitan areas who had successfully implemented digital transformation strategies. The researchers recruited participants through social media, personal connections, and professional associations. The project reached data saturation after seven interviews, with one additional interview conducted for confirmation.

The primary data collection method was semistructured interviews, with secondary data supplementing findings from public documents, websites, and social media pages. The researchers audio-recorded all interviews and followed a standardized protocol to ensure consistency and reduce bias. Member-checking sessions verified the interpretation accuracy of participant responses. The interview protocol was used to maintain consistency throughout the data collection process while allowing exploration of unique perspectives and experiences.

The researchers employed thematic analysis to examine patterns and meanings in the dataset. The analytical process involved transcribing interviews, creating codes to categorize data, identifying recurring themes, and consolidating findings to minimize redundancy. The researchers used reflexivity throughout the analysis to account for potential bias from experience as a church administrator. All data was organized using labeled and password-protected files, research logs, and interview transcripts to promote systematic tracking and quality interpretations. The analysis correlated key themes with existing literature and the conceptual framework.

The researchers enhanced reliability through member-checking, consistent interview protocols, and multiple verification steps for transcription accuracy. Further, the researchers ensured validity through credibility via member-checking and data triangulation, transferability through detailed documentation of procedures, confirmability through reflexive analysis and probing questions, and data saturation confirmation. The comprehensive approach to reliability and validity strengthened the project's methodological rigor and trustworthiness of findings.

### **3. The DOI Theory in Digital Transformation**

The DOI theory was developed by Rogers in 1962 and expanded in 1995. The theory gained prominence in the late twentieth century and has been used to understand how new ideas, technologies, and practices spread through social systems (Rogers, 1962, 1995). Rogers described that five key attributes of the DOI determine adoption rate and success: relative advantage, compatibility, complexity, trialability, and observability. Relative advantage referred to the degree to which the innovation was perceived as better than what it replaced, and compatibility referred to how well the innovation aligned with the values, needs, and experi-

ences of potential adopters. Compatibility referred to the ease of understanding and using the innovation, while trialability referred to the ability to test or experiment with the innovation before fully committing to the implementation of the innovation. Observability referred to the extent to which the results of the innovation were visible to others. Rogers (1995) explained that these five attributes correspond with perceptions of innovation, which determine adoption likelihood and speed.

Rogers (1995) categorized adopters into five groups based on their willingness to adopt innovations: innovators, early adopters, early majority, late majority, and laggards. Innovators and early adopters adopt first and influence others, while early and late majorities adopt later cautiously, and laggards often resist change. The five-stage innovation-decision process is the sequence during which an individual first gains knowledge about an innovation to confirming decisions to continue using it (Frei-Landau et al., 2022). The five-stage innovation-decision process for the DOI theory is knowledge, persuasion, decision, implementation, and confirmation. Mass media plays a critical role in innovation adoption. Opinion leaders and change agents serve as important intermediaries by providing information, addressing doubts and encouraging innovation adoption, especially when they share characteristics with potential adopters.

Organizations across diverse sectors actively applied the theory to analyze and facilitate innovation adoption, demonstrating its broad applicability. Healthcare providers implemented telehealth services in rural areas based on competency perceptions and infrastructure capabilities (Yarbrough, 2023). Indian businesses adopted digital communication services by addressing infrastructure, costs, and digital literacy challenges (Asrani & Kar, 2022). The DOI theory emphasizes successful innovation adoption depends on both innovation characteristics and social context. Organizations must consider how innovations align with target population values and needs (Rogers, 1995). The COVID-19 pandemic demonstrated this as organizations rapidly adopted virtual solutions to maintain operations, with educational institutions used virtual learning technologies based on ease of use and perceived usefulness (Nik Azman et al., 2021a). Social systems and communication channels significantly influenced adoption rates, as evidenced by businesses that successfully integrate Internet of Things and artificial intelligence technologies by leveraging existing communication networks (Dymitrowski & Mielcarek, 2021).

Complexity and perceived risks are significant adoption barriers (Huong & Doc, 2023). Organizations overcame these barriers by developing tailored strategies that address technological challenges and foster readiness for change. For instance, multinational corporations' adoption of international financial reporting standards (IFRS) improved capital market performance when organizations carefully considered implementation strategies (Elmghaamez et al., 2022).

Religious organizations have fundamentally transformed their ministry activities through the strategic adoption of digital tools and platforms, revolutioniz-

ing traditional approaches to worship and community engagement. Digital platforms enabled congregations to transcend physical boundaries, fostering broader engagement and accessibility through live streaming, mobile applications, and social media integration (Roso, 2023; Sadiku et al., 2022). Religious organizations demonstrated the transformation through specific technological implementations. For instance, churches in New York successfully leveraged digital platforms for adult discipleship during the COVID-19 pandemic and maintained robust community engagement despite physical restrictions (Dunlow, 2021). Additionally, mobile applications served as essential tools for younger generations who actively prefer digital modes of interaction and spiritual connection (Roso, 2023).

Implementing digital transformation in religious contexts required organizations to address multiple dimensions simultaneously. Religious leaders navigated technological adoption, organizational change, and evolving user behaviors to create effective transformation strategies (Shi et al., 2022). The dynamic nature of digital tools necessitated continuous learning and innovation within religious organizations, with success depending heavily on leadership's willingness to embrace change and congregations' ability to adapt to new practices (Cooper et al., 2021). Researchers demonstrated how effective digital strategies renovated traditional operational models while successfully integrating digital tools into organizational processes (Correani et al., 2020).

Multifaceted transformation extended beyond mere technological implementation to encompass cultural and structural shifts within religious organizations (Verhoef et al., 2021). Churches navigated the complexities of digital transformation while maintaining their theological and operational values by aligning digital strategies with organizational missions. Successful digital practices required collaboration across different fields of expertise and ensured that technological advancements enhanced rather than diminished spiritual growth and community connections (Cooper et al., 2021). The holistic approach enabled religious organizations to leverage digital transformation effectively while preserving their fundamental mission and values in an increasingly digital world.

The DOI theory continues to guide digital transformation initiatives across various sectors, providing organizations with a structured approach to understand adoption factors and develop effective implementation strategies. For small rural churches in the southeast United States, the theory was used for implementing digital transformation strategies to increase revenues and meet budgetary goals. Organizations can better navigate complexities of technological change and ensure successful adoption by considering innovation characteristics and social dynamics. The DOI intersects with another theoretical framework, the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) (Table 1). Although the TAM offers valuable insights, the DOI theory is a more comprehensive approach to understanding how digital transformation can be applied in small rural churches in the southeast United States.

**Table 1.** Theories used to understand digital transformation.

Theory	Date	Theorist	Summary
DOI	1962	Rogers	Explains how new ideas and technologies spread through social systems over time. It identifies five adopter categories (from innovators to laggards) and key innovation characteristics (e.g., relative advantage, compatibility) that influence the rate of adoption.
TAM	1989	Davis	Predicts technology acceptance based on two key factors: Perceived Usefulness (PU)—the belief that the tech improves performance—and Perceived Ease of Use (PEOU)—the belief that the tech is effortless. These factors shape a user's attitude and intention to use the technology.

### The TAM in Digital Transformation

Davis introduced the technology acceptance model (TAM) as a theoretical framework that strengthens and complements the DOI theory by addressing psychological mechanisms driving technology adoption. The TAM's core constructs, perceived usefulness and perceived ease of use, aligned directly with the DOI theory's emphasis on relative advantage and complexity, creating a robust foundation for understanding individual adoption decisions. Researchers demonstrated this theoretical integration by applying the TAM to examine how users evaluate new technologies while simultaneously employing the DOI theory to analyze how these individual choices catalyze broader diffusion patterns within social networks. Synthesis of theoretical frameworks generated a comprehensive understanding of technology adoption that includes individual cognitive processes and systemic social dynamics. The integration of DOI and TAM enabled organizations to develop more effective strategies addressing psychological barriers to individual adoption and social factors influencing widespread technology diffusion.

## 4. Professional Practice in the Church Setting

This paper presents significant contributions to professional practices in the non-profit organization sector, particularly small rural churches in the southeast United States. Therefore, I pose the central question: What are some effective strategies used by small southeast U.S. rural church leaders to increase revenues and meet budgetary goals? Few scholars, if any, have answered this research question. Five main themes emerged in answering the overarching question using the DOI theory (**Table 2**). Thus, business leaders in professional practice can leverage these insights to increase revenues and meet budgetary goals.

**Table 2.** Summary of themes.

	Theme	Summary
1	Leveraging Digital Platforms	Highlights the adoption of digital platforms to enhance accessibility, convenience, and reach in giving and engagement.

**Continued**

2	Overcoming Challenges	Highlights the hurdles faced during the adoption of digital tools and the strategies used to overcome them
3	Leadership and Congregational Engagement	Emphasizes the role of leadership in fostering trust, casting vision, and encouraging adoption of digital tools.
4	Financial Management	Focuses on how digital strategies contributed to increased revenue and financial sustainability.
5	Digital Presence and Visibility	Emphasizes the use of digital tools to enhance community engagement and expand the church's visibility.

Leveraging digital platforms emerged as a theme, as participants stated that implementing digital tools helped create innovative financial solutions to overcome traditional revenue challenges in small rural churches. All (100%) participants confirmed the importance of leveraging digital platforms to increase revenues and meet budgetary goals. Participants relied on digital giving tools as members shifted away from cash and in-person attendance. Participants maintained stable revenue streams and addressed changing congregational needs by leveraging digital platforms.

Religious leaders incorporated digital platforms to sustain religious practices, facilitate online giving, and maintain financial contributions, thereby enhancing accessibility and promoting full engagement among members (Mónika, 2021; Nik Azman et al., 2021b). Integrating digital platforms for donations represented an adaptation to modern financial practices, positioning small rural churches to meet both current and future financial needs. Recent research further underscores that digital platforms serve as vital transformation enablers by providing essential infrastructure for organizations to adapt to evolving stakeholder behaviors (Huang & Tang, 2025). However, empirical evidence shows that the success of digital technology implementation in rural religious institutions varies depending on congregation demographics, technological literacy, and implementation strategies, highlighting the need for tailored approaches rather than uniform solutions (Huang & Tang, 2025). This nuanced understanding aligns with broader digital transformation literature, which emphasizes that successful digital initiatives must consider organizational context and stakeholder readiness rather than adopting one-size-fits-all strategies (Hanelt et al., 2021). Rural church leaders would therefore benefit from developing contextually sensitive digital strategies that address the unique characteristics and needs of their congregations while maintaining alignment with core ministry values.

Interview data highlighted participants' claims about increased donor engagement through multiple digital giving options. Church websites reflected concrete evidence through donation portal screenshots showing various payment methods and donor testimonials praising convenience. Social media posts from congregants sharing positive experiences with digital giving platforms corroborated in-

interview statements about improved donor satisfaction and accessibility. Church livestream archives demonstrated the technical capabilities participants described, showing consistent video quality and interactive features like real-time chat and prayer requests. Online event registration systems displayed on church websites validated claims about streamlined administrative processes and increased participation rates for church activities.

The leveraging digital platforms theme reflected the DOI theory's relative advantage attribute while maintaining compatibility with existing values. The leveraging digital platforms theme also connected to the TAM by demonstrating enhanced perceived usefulness and perceived ease of use among congregants. Rogers (1995) defined relative advantage as the degree to which an innovation is perceived as better than the idea it superseded and explained that adoption increased when users recognized clear benefits. Participants articulated that ministry leaders used digital platforms to support remote contributions as members moved away from cash and in-person attendance. The unanimous confirmation that digital platforms increased revenues and met budgetary goals reflected high perceived usefulness, as congregants recognized clear practical benefits in maintaining stable revenue streams, while the successful shift to digital contributions indicated sufficient perceived ease of use. Small rural church leaders in this project demonstrated that innovations were dispersed most effectively when leaders introduced changes that improved outcomes and respected core values.

Overcoming challenges was a resounding theme. All the project participants (100%) noted how they overcame challenges of implementing digital transformation strategies in their churches. Project participants developed multiple strategies to address implementation challenges, including incremental adoption, educational support, expert consultation, and peer learning. Small rural church leaders in this project demonstrated adaptability by creating customized solutions that responded to their specific congregational needs and technological barriers.

Rural church leaders faced significant barriers when adopting digital giving platforms, as the complexity of digital tools and varying levels of technological literacy posed considerable challenges for congregations with limited infrastructure (Agugo & Amodu, 2022; Vogelsang et al., 2021). Smaller religious organizations often struggled to access sufficient technological resources, and digital literacy gaps—especially among clergy and staff—further impeded successful implementation (Agugo & Amodu, 2022; Vogelsang et al., 2021). These challenges were compounded by educational and age demographics, which created additional obstacles to digital adoption in rural settings (Elena-Bucea et al., 2021; Lee, 2024). Despite these difficulties, faith leaders in rural communities demonstrated perseverance by addressing both financial constraints and technological knowledge gaps, implementing support strategies to help members navigate new digital tools. Religious institutions that managed to implement digital giving solutions despite infrastructure limitations often developed stronger operational resilience and expanded their capacity to fulfill their missions within underserved communities.

The overcoming challenges theme aligned with the DOI theory's complexity and compatibility attributes of innovation adoption. The overcoming challenges theme also related to the TAM by demonstrating how church leaders addressed barriers that influence technology acceptance, particularly perceived ease of use and perceived usefulness. Project participants described how they used incremental approaches, educational teams, and expert consultations to reduce complexity and increase compatibility. Church leaders demonstrated Rogers' (1995) principles by creating specialized support systems and gradually introducing changes to help congregants adapt to digital tools. Incremental adoption, educational support, and peer learning strategies specifically targeted perceived ease of use by reducing implementation complexity and effort required from congregants, while personalized training enhanced congregants' confidence and competence with new technologies. Small rural church leaders in this project observed greater acceptance when they provided personalized training and peer learning opportunities, which validated the DOI theory's emphasis on managing complexity and ensuring compatibility for successful innovation adoption. The customized solutions and gradual change introduction improved both perceived usefulness by demonstrating practical benefits and perceived ease of use through reduced complexity, validating TAM's premise that addressing barriers leads to greater technology acceptance and sustained usage.

Leadership and congregational engagement emerged as a theme in this project. All the project participants (100%) mentioned how leadership and congregational engagement helped them implement digital transformation initiatives in their churches. Project participants demonstrated that effective leadership required strategic vision and intentional engagement to build trust during digital transformation. Small rural church leaders in this project recognized that the successful implementation of digital initiatives depended on their ability to guide and connect with congregants throughout the change process.

Leadership and congregational engagement are central to the successful implementation of digital transformation strategies in rural churches. The authors of scholarly literature confirm that leaders who actively support digital initiatives and foster agility and collaboration are primary catalysts for effective digital transformation outcomes (AlNuaimi et al., 2022; Frankowski, 2023). Collaborative leadership practices not only promote engagement and innovation among group members, even in resource-limited settings, but also help congregations adapt to technological changes and maintain strong community connections. Recent research further emphasizes that leadership serves as a crucial mediating factor between digital transformation initiatives and organizational outcomes, with leaders who prioritize collaboration and clear communication strengthening organizational adaptability and supporting successful digital transformation (Qiao et al., 2024; Sacavém et al., 2025). Rural church leaders guide their congregations through smoother transitions to digital practices and reinforce commitment to ongoing innovation, bridging the gap between technological innovation and prac-

tical implementation by emphasizing collaborative leadership.

The leadership and congregational engagement theme aligned with the DOI theory's emphasis on change agents and opinion leaders' influence on innovation adoption. The leadership and congregational engagement theme also aligned with the TAM, as effective church leaders influenced congregants' perceived usefulness and perceived ease of use of digital technologies through strategic communication and trust-building. Project participants demonstrated how church leaders functioned as change agents by strategically communicating digital transformation initiatives to congregations. [Rogers \(1995\)](#) explained that change agents play a crucial role in guiding innovation adoption through strategic communication and implementation. Project participants recognized when congregants needed time to adjust to changes, demonstrating the DOI principle that adoption occurs through a social process influenced by trusted leaders. The leaders' collaborative approach and sensitivity to congregational readiness directly impact congregants' attitudes toward using new technologies, while their guidance in facilitating smoother transitions addresses TAM's perceived ease of use construct by reducing implementation complexity. Small rural church leaders in this project fulfilled the change agent role by guiding congregations through digital transformation while maintaining sensitivity to congregational readiness and acceptance.

Financial management was the fourth theme that emerged in this project. All the project participants (100%) indicated financial management was a component of successfully implementing digital transformation in their congregations. Project participants revealed that strategic financial management enabled them to implement and sustain digital initiatives while measuring tangible results. Small rural church leaders in this project recognized that careful financial oversight and data-driven decision-making contributed to successful digital transformation outcomes.

Church leaders have implemented multiple digital giving options to accommodate varying donor preferences and expand their financial reach beyond the limitations of physical attendance. Effective financial management, supported by digital technology, has become essential for churches seeking to increase accessibility and convenience for donors, resulting in more consistent giving patterns and improved financial outcomes ([Nyarko, 2023](#); [Obaloluwa et al., 2025](#)). Congregations with robust technological and financial infrastructures have adapted more effectively to disruptions, maintaining financial stability through digital giving platforms ([Holleman et al., 2022](#)). Recent research further supports that convenient online donation options significantly increase donors' willingness to contribute to nonprofit organizations, including churches ([Lin & Hsiung, 2024](#)). Leaders who invest in diverse digital giving platforms and leverage digital financial management strategies enable their congregations to remain financially resilient and responsive to changing circumstances. Church leaders have reported increased contributions and revenue growth, demonstrating the critical role of digital financial management in sustaining church operations and engagement by encouraging

donor participation and guiding their congregations through the adoption of digital transformation.

The financial management theme was also substantiated by data from public websites. For instance, one participant discussed how multiple digital giving options helped maintain financial stability during disruptions. The church's quarterly newsletters, available on their website, documented specific instances where online donations sustained operations during periods when in-person attendance was limited, providing concrete evidence of the financial resilience described in interviews. The newsletters also included charts showing donation consistency across different digital platforms, which validated the participant's claims about diversified giving channels reducing financial volatility.

The financial management theme exemplified several key elements of the DOI theory, particularly the trialability and observability attributes of innovation adoption. The financial management theme also related to the TAM by demonstrating how measurable outcomes enhance both perceived usefulness and perceived ease of use of digital financial tools. Rogers (1995) explained that innovations gained acceptance when potential adopters assessed new tools and observed clear benefits. Project participants reported measurable financial improvements after they implemented digital giving platforms. The unanimous recognition that financial management was essential for digital transformation success reflected high perceived usefulness, as leaders observed tangible results, including increased contributions and revenue growth. Small rural church leaders in this project observed that offering multiple digital giving options led to increased contributions, which reflected the observable advantages and successful trials of digital financial tools. Implementing multiple digital giving options to accommodate donor preferences directly addressed perceived ease of use by reducing barriers and increasing convenience, while the emphasis on data-driven decision-making provided clear evidence of digital tools' benefits, reinforcing perceived usefulness. The tangible financial results highlighted Rogers' (1995) assertion that visible benefits and opportunities to assess innovations accelerate adoption within organizations. The reported increase in donors' willingness to contribute through convenient online options validated TAM's premise that ease of use drives behavioral intention and actual system use, leading to sustained technology acceptance among congregants.

Digital presence and community visibility emerged as the fifth theme in this project. Project participants (62.5%) revealed they used digital tools to create and enhance their visibility in the digital space as well as the community. Project participants demonstrated that strategic use of digital platforms and branded materials created multiple pathways for community engagement and church growth. Small rural church leaders in this project recognized that combining digital presence with physical community involvement strengthened organizational identity and expanded opportunities for ministry outreach.

Scholarly literature highlights that church leaders use digital media to enhance community engagement and public presence (Campbell, 2020). Leaders who de-

velop comprehensive digital strategies increase organizational visibility and strengthen connections with both members and the broader public (Suhner, 2024). By building a strong digital presence and adapting to new communication methods, church leaders expand their reach and foster greater engagement. Recent research confirms that social media serves as a powerful tool for advancing church missions and facilitating connections, proving effective for evangelization and community outreach (Galang & Galang, 2022). A robust digital presence and positive brand image in faith-based organizations are linked to higher donor commitment and participation (D'Souza et al., 2023). Church leaders maintain relevance and accessibility, reaching wider audiences and building stronger relationships in a rapidly evolving communication landscape by prioritizing digital platforms.

Interview data emphasized the strategic use of social media and online platforms for community engagement. Church websites displayed professional branding, regular content updates, and integrated social media feeds that reflected the digital presence strategies described by participants. One church's collaboration with local nonprofits to facilitate a yearly youth football camp was featured on the local news station, with the coverage highlighting how the church used digital platforms to coordinate volunteers, register participants, and promote the event across multiple social media channels. Online event listings, community partnership announcements, and this type of local news coverage provided external validation of the visibility and community impact claimed by participants.

The digital presence and visibility theme exemplified the DOI theory's key element of communication channels. The digital presence and visibility theme also related to the TAM by demonstrating how strategic digital engagement influenced perceived usefulness and perceived ease of use through enhanced community connections and organizational outcomes. Rogers (1995) explained that innovation diffusion depends on effective communication through multiple channels to reach potential adopters. Project participants described how they utilized digital platforms, branded materials, and community partnerships to communicate their church identity and mission. Using social media and digital channels addressed perceived ease of use by providing accessible methods for congregants to connect with the church, while participants recognized that digital platforms provided perceived usefulness by expanding reach, strengthening community engagement, and increasing donor commitment. Church leaders created connections through social media, live streaming, and branded merchandise, which demonstrated Rogers' (1995) principle that diverse communication channels enhance innovation diffusion. Small rural church leaders in this project observed increased engagement and revenue when they combined digital outreach with physical community presence, which supported the DOI theory's emphasis on utilizing varied channels to spread innovations throughout social systems. The reported increased engagement and revenue validated TAM's premise that perceived usefulness and ease of use lead to greater behavioral intention and actual system use, ultimately facilitat-

ing sustained technology acceptance and enhanced community engagement.

## 5. Social Change in the Business and Scholar Community

The findings from this paper reveal significant implications for positive social change in rural communities through the digital transformation of small rural churches. Small rural church leaders who implement effective digital transformation strategies create more inclusive and financially sustainable faith communities that better serve their members and broader society. Church leaders enable broader participation and strengthen community connections that extend beyond physical limitations when they successfully integrate digital platforms with traditional ministry practices.

Digital transformation in rural churches contributes to positive social change by empowering congregations to overcome geographic and technological barriers. Church leaders who provide digital literacy training and support help bridge technological divides, particularly among older congregants who might otherwise face exclusion from digital ministry initiatives. [Holleman et al. \(2022\)](#) found that church leaders who developed comprehensive digital engagement strategies enabled broader participation from previously underserved populations, including elderly, disabled, and geographically distant members. The educational teams and personalized training described by participants demonstrate how rural churches serve as catalysts for digital inclusion and community empowerment.

Small rural church leaders who implement digital transformation strategies while maintaining transparency and trust contribute to stronger, more resilient communities. [Nik Azman et al. \(2021b\)](#) demonstrated that church leaders who provided easy access to digital platforms experienced significantly higher engagement, which enabled enhanced ministry impact and community service. Church leaders who combine digital outreach with strategic community partnerships create more connected and supportive local environments. [Campbell \(2020\)](#) noted that church leaders who developed comprehensive digital strategies increased their organizations' visibility and strengthened connections with members and the broader public, which fostered positive social change through expanded community service and support programs. Small rural church leaders who prioritized transparency, digital access, and community collaboration created lasting benefits for their congregations and the wider society.

Small rural church leaders who embrace digital transformation foster inclusive communities and bridge technological gaps. Leaders strengthen connections within their congregations and with the broader community by integrating digital tools with traditional ministry. Strategic investments in digital literacy and local partnerships drive meaningful social change. Church leaders who prioritize digital innovation, education, and collaboration remain relevant and resilient in an evolving world.

## 6. Directions for Future Research

Small rural church leaders who seek to implement digital transformation strategies would benefit from expanded research addressing the current project's limitations regarding sample size, data verification, and implementation assessment. Small rural church leaders who adopt digital platforms need more comprehensive evidence from diverse congregational contexts to guide their strategic decisions.

Future researchers should expand beyond eight participants to better represent the diverse population of small rural church leaders in the southeast US. [Nik Azman et al. \(2021b\)](#) found that church leaders who provided easy access to digital platforms experienced significantly higher engagement when studied across multiple congregational contexts. Researchers who include a broader range of church sizes, denominations, and geographic locations could better capture the full spectrum of digital transformation experiences and strategies. Church leaders would benefit from studies that combine interviews with quantitative financial records, platform analytics, and direct observation to validate implementation strategies.

Future researchers should conduct longitudinal studies tracking digital transformation implementation over time to address discrepancies between described and implemented strategies. [Campbell \(2020\)](#) noted that church leaders who developed comprehensive digital strategies increased their organizations' visibility and strengthened connections with members when observed over extended periods. Researchers who follow churches through their digital transformation journey could better identify gaps between planned and actual implementation while documenting factors that influence success rates. Findings from future research can help small rural church leaders gain more knowledge to develop more effective digital strategies while maintaining their core mission and values by offering more generalizable and in-depth insights.

Previous research indicates that organizational support structures can help address resource constraints in digital transformation, though the role of denominational affiliation remains underexplored. Resource constraints posed challenges to implementing digital transformation strategies, particularly for smaller or rural congregations in previous studies ([Francis et al., 2024](#); [McKenna, 2024](#)). Leaders addressed challenges using active support from denominational leaders and policymakers, including targeted initiatives like training, resource allocation, and infrastructure development ([Francis et al., 2024](#); [McKenna, 2024](#)). Most participants in this project were independent of denominational affiliation; however, several participants were part of small fellowships and reformations, which provided a sense of community and support. The variation in organizational structures among participants highlights the need to examine how different forms of institutional support influence digital transformation outcomes. Future researchers could explore the potential influence of denominational affiliation on a church's ability to implement digital transformation, as this could be a key external factor affecting resources and strategies.

## 7. Conclusion

Small rural church leadership capabilities can be negatively impacted because of ineffective strategies to use digital transformation to increase revenues and meet budgetary goals. The project involved semi-structured interviews with eight participants, all leaders of small rural churches located in the southeast United States. Data collection also included information from four church websites and social media sites. Braun and Clarke's (2022) thematic analysis was used to identify five major themes: (a) leveraging digital platforms, (b) overcoming challenges, (c) leadership and congregational engagement, (d) financial management, and (e) digital presence and visibility. The five major themes aligned with the DOI theory's attributes of innovation, implementation stages, and communication channels.

Key findings revealed that small southeast United States rural church leaders who adopted digital platforms and integrated them with financial management practices increased revenues, sustained ministry operations, and expanded opportunities for giving. Leaders overcame significant barriers, including generational resistance and digital literacy gaps, by providing incremental training, seeking peer support, and maintaining transparent communication. Project participants reported they built trust and achieved greater buy-in for digital initiatives by fostering collaborative decision-making and engaging congregational input. Small rural church leaders in this project also reported that building a strong digital presence and forming community partnerships expanded their reach, strengthened organizational identity, and increased both engagement and financial contributions.

The findings extend the current understanding of innovation diffusion and digital transformation in resource-constrained, faith-based settings. The findings also reveal theoretical insight and actionable guidance for practitioners by linking practical strategies to the DOI theory. Small rural church leaders who implement research-supported practices, such as systematic cost-benefit analysis, transparent leadership, and strategic digital outreach, can successfully guide their congregations through digital transformation while preserving core values and mission. Future researchers should build on the findings by expanding sample diversity, verifying self-reported data, and tracking long-term implementation outcomes to further strengthen the evidence base for digital innovation in organizational contexts. Small rural church leaders can leverage digital transformation to achieve financial health, community impact, and enduring relevance in a rapidly evolving environment through continued research and practice.

## Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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