

Leadership Strategies to Enhance the Sustainability of Virginia United Methodist Churches

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Abstract

Many United Methodist church leaders face challenges to achieve church sustainability. There is limited research that examines the leadership strategies that have been successful in ensuring sustainability. The purpose of this descriptive phenomenological study was to explore the lived experiences of Virginia United Methodist church leaders concerning leadership strategies to enhance church sustainability. The study's conceptual framework consisted of Bass and Avolio's full range leadership model and Lewin's three-stage change model, which were used to interpret leaders' experiences with implementing change by adopting effective leadership styles. The study population comprised United Methodist church leaders who held positions as Virginia Conference bishop, district superintendents, and pastors. Face-to-face, semistructured interviews with 10 participants and subsequent member checking was the data collection method. Thematic analysis of the data enabled the identification of findings that addressed the research questions, which relate to leadership strategies implemented to enhance church sustainability, and their effectiveness. The three themes that emerged from data analysis showed that church leaders used the following strategies to enhance church sustainability: 1) change the leadership culture, 2) encourage youth participation, and 3) develop strong stewardship and capital campaigns. The implication of this study for positive social change is church leaders' greater understanding of effective strategies to enhance church sustainability and how to implement them. Church leaders could contribute to social change by implementing strategies to increase and sustain church membership and attendance, thus improving quality of life and the economy through church sustainability.

Keywords

Strategic Leadership, Church Sustainability, Church Attendance, Church Membership, Phenomenology

1. Introduction

According to D. W. Scott (personal communication, May 9, 2019), throughout the previous decade, United Methodist churches in the United States faced unprecedented challenges, including decreases in membership and church attendance. According to C. Malak (personal communication, February 6, 2020), United Methodist churches today still face challenges of how to increase membership and church attendance to ensure sustainability. C. Malak (personal communication, February 6, 2020) also shared that the sustainability of a United Methodist church includes membership growth and church attendance. The views expressed by these leaders of the United Method Church of Virginia are consistent with the findings of Pillow (2018), who investigated church sustainability and identified a steady decline in Virginia United Methodist church attendance and membership. With the average age of membership continuing to climb, church leadership must evaluate the problems of strategic leadership to provide church sustainability (Pillow, 2018). Undoubtedly, strong strategic leadership will be necessary to achieve church sustainability (Grandy, 2013). However, there is limited research on the leadership strategies that have been applied successfully to churches and other nonprofits (Grandy, 2013).

2. Background of the Study

A significant number of people are leaving the church, challenging church leaders to find ways to enhance church sustainability (Barna Group, 2016; Robert & Scott, 2011). For years, United Methodist church leaders have sought to find out how to increase membership and church attendance (Robert & Scott, 2011). Pastors are key elements in bringing about positive change during church transitions. Responsibilities of pastors include developing strategies for leading change and reducing resistance to change (Pearse, 2011). Engelberg et al. (2016) utilized a human resource database from the Methodist churches of Oklahoma to measure the impact of pastors on attendance growth and success over their careers as pastors. In addition, Engelberg et al. utilized Bayes methodology to assess the pastors' performance contributions in the areas of church growth and furthering the church's mission. Although Engelberg et al.'s findings indicate that the United Methodist Church organization assigns pastors in a manner that is consistent with congregation attendance growth, the authors argued for the need to further study the impact of high performing pastors' strategies in growing church congregations.

Grandy (2013) studied strategic leadership in churches and the changing nature of leadership. In this study, Grandy found that strategic leaders use a model of

shared vision to create a starting point to enhance church survival and growth. [Hussain et al. \(2018\)](#) reviewed [Lewin's \(1947\)](#) change model and used it to assess the role of leadership and employee involvement in organizational change. Hussain et al. provided a critical review of a constructive framework for managing organizational change throughout the different stages of Lewin's process.

As a result of investigating church sustainability, [Pillow \(2018\)](#) generated statistics on the steady decline in Virginia United Methodist church attendance and membership. With the average age of membership continuing to climb, church leadership must evaluate the problems of strategic leadership to provide church sustainability ([Pillow, 2018](#)). As [Pillow \(2018\)](#) discovered by examining Virginia United Methodist churches, the growth of the United Methodist church worldwide has occurred at a slower pace than for other denominations ([Wellings, 2014](#)). The investigation of approaches to leadership strategies for the purpose of addressing the direction of Methodist church membership and attendance growth go back to the 1950s and 1960s ([Wellings, 2014](#)). During this time period, Wellings found published statistics showing a decline in Methodist membership by more than 10,000 members from 744,326 to 733,658 in a decade.

[Wellings \(2014\)](#) identified three strategies (i.e., revival, renewal, and reunion) that church leaders used to address the concerns of membership and attendance decline. The discovery of effective leadership strategies used by the British Methodist Church leaders to address declines in church membership and attendance led to a leadership strategy to provide reform, renewal, and reunion to counteract Methodist membership and attendance declines ([Wellings, 2014](#)). These studies may assist church leaders to better understand the challenges of how to sustain Methodist church membership and attendance to ensure church survival. However, research into leadership strategies to enhance church sustainability is limited ([Grandy, 2013](#)).

3. Conceptual Framework

The concepts that grounded this study included two models that form the conceptual framework for the study: 1) the full range leadership (FRL) model developed by [Bass and Avolio \(1994\)](#) and 2) [Lewin's \(1947\)](#) three-stage change model. Bass and Avolio examined the leadership styles of organizational leaders. The FRL model includes leadership styles ranging from passive to active (i.e., from laissez-faire to transactional to transformational leadership).

When society transforms, organizational leaders find themselves asking what it will take to make the changes necessitated by the transformations ([Shin et al., 2012](#)). [Ingen and Moor \(2015\)](#) argued that to be successful, church leaders must develop better strategies to enhance church sustainability. Strategic leadership is about developing strategies and transforming them into concrete actions ([Mintzberg et al., 2003](#)). Organizational leaders use the concepts of strategy, vision, and goals to enhance sustainability ([Yukl, 2013](#)). [Yukl's \(2013\)](#) perspectives of strategic leadership in organizational leaders could help gain greater insights of

church leaders' strategic leadership styles to ensure church sustainability. Another key element to strategic leadership is implementing change in the organization (Pearse, 2011). Many church leaders use leadership and change management models to enhance church sustainability (Tjosvold, 2014). The FRL model enabled a focus on the behavior of church leaders, such as those with a transformational leadership style aimed at inspiring followers and motivating them to innovate and create change that helps sustain future organizational success (see Arenas et al., 2018).

Lewin's (1947) change model involves three sequential stages: unfreezing, changing, and refreezing. According to Hussain et al. (2018), Lewin recognized that change is a process where leaders perceive that organizational change is necessary and then 1) engage their followers in developing a planned, collaborative set of actions to unfreeze the status quo, 2) lead the organization through a period of planned transition during which they implement the needed changes; and 3) take actions necessary to ensure the sustainability of the new state, which Lewin called refreezing. The design of the study and the interpretation of the findings was based on Bass and Avolio's FRL model and the principles of collaborative, planned change that underlie Lewin's three-stage change model.

4. Leadership Strategies and Sustainability in Church Organizations

Leadership is an essential component of the sustainability of organizations and churches (Hall & Rowland, 2016). Magezi et al. (2024) argued that the acquisition of leadership skills is an essential component for the success and accomplishment of the church leadership's objectives and goals. According to Magezi et al., training and development opportunities for church leaders are essential for ensuring the longevity of the church. When church leaders are not adequately trained, it hinders the opportunity to achieve the goals of the church. Basford et al. (2014) suggested having leaders who possess qualities of care and concern and have high moral values is a strategy for enhancing the sustainability of the organization and the church.

Leadership creates plans and strategies to ensure that execution of the goals and visions are in line for sustainability in an organization (Lourenco et al., 2014). Adu-Gyamfi (2025) argued that the church in Africa has a duty to learn from pre-Christian African communities to help sustain the environment. When African Christians change their hearts and promote environmental awareness, change negative attitudes towards African environmental taboos, and leave behind traditional African beliefs and practices, environmental sustainability can be achieved.

Davis (2021), who explored effective financial decision-making strategies in nondenominational churches, argued that ineffective financial decisions-making in the nondenominational churches has often led to church failures. Four themes emerged from the research as critical to support long term church sustainability: budgeting and financial management, leadership development, mission focus,

and community trust. Davis recommended these four themes be used in effective decision-making strategies to support long-term church sustainability.

Finally, [Kroeck \(2023\)](#) argued that the current ecological crisis has created major challenges for humanity. In an online survey of congregational members of the Evangelical Church of Germany, the Free Evangelical Church, and the Gnadau movement, Kroeck studied how Protestant congregations in Germany deal with this issue of mobilizing towards environmental sustainability. Creation care was identified as the bridge to the community to allow the congregation members to engage with people outside the church. Many of the respondents in the survey agreed that Christians should care about nature conservation and ecological sustainability. As a result, Kroeck advocated that local congregations play a stronger role in creation care and in promoting the transformation of society.

5. Research Methodology

The purpose of this study was to explore the lived experiences of the Virginia United Methodist church leaders concerning leadership strategies that could be used to enhance church sustainability. A descriptive phenomenological design (see [Kiger & Varpio, 2020](#)) was used to address the research questions in this qualitative study. The study participants were from different Virginia United Methodist churches who met the selection criteria and agreed to participate—the bishop, three district superintendents, and six pastors. These participants described their experiences of strategically leading members to enhance church sustainability in face-to-face, semistructured interviews, the results of which constituted the study data.

The central research question of the study was:

What are the lived experiences of Virginia United Methodist church leaders concerning leadership strategies and church sustainability?

The following subquestions enabled the gathering of the information needed to answer the central research question:

- 1) What leadership strategies have Virginia United Methodist church leaders implemented to enhance church sustainability?
- 2) How did they implement those strategies?
- 3) In what ways have those implemented strategies been effective in enhancing church sustainability?

6. Results

Ten Virginia Methodist church leaders participated in semistructured interviews which lasted between 30 minutes and one hour. All 10 participants provided detailed responses to open-ended interview questions. Data collection was stopped at this point as no new themes emerged from the interviews, which indicated that data saturation had been achieved (see [Mwita, 2022](#)).

The thematic analysis of the semistructured interview data gleaned from the study participants regarding leadership strategies to enhance church sustainability

based on their lived experiences resulted in the identification of three primary themes:

- 1) Change the leadership culture.
- 2) Encourage youth participation.
- 3) Develop strong stewardship and capital campaign.

6.1. Theme 1: Change the Leadership Culture

Ninety percent of the study participants reported that changing the leadership culture is a major leadership strategy that leads to church sustainability. Participant 1 indicated that the pessimistic leadership must be changed into joyful and life-giving leadership. In addition, participant 8 indicated that leaders must build a culture of directing the way, driving people to the way, and building a systemic and endemic change in the church. Participant 5 indicated that a change to a leadership culture is evident when a change in leadership takes place and the successor gets the church moving in a sustainable direction.

6.2. Theme 2: Encourage Youth Participation

Seventy percent of the study participants reported that encouraging youth participation is a major leadership strategy that leads to church sustainability. Participant 3 indicated that many parents said that they came to church because of programs and activities for kids: “We found 76% of people came into the church because of their kids and support programs. That was a huge part of mutual sustainability in the church.” Participant 4 indicated that they assign youths to every table of projects with other young people and older adults because the inclusion of youths and young adults into leadership positions is a vital part of the church’s sustainability. According to Participant 3, “You need to have the emerging voices of people who are actively growing; hopefully, everybody in the church is actively growing. These young people are still figuring out who they are going to be. Finding ways to integrate young people into leadership positions is important.” It is noteworthy that this finding that children and youths should be more active participants in church activities was absent from the literature reviewed.

6.3. Theme 3: Develop a Strong Stewardship and Capital Campaign

Sixty percent of the study participants reported that developing a strong stewardship and capital campaign is a major leadership strategy that leads to church sustainability. Participant 5 indicated that the church needs to have a major capital campaign to reduce debt. Participants 8 and 9 said that the church must conduct a strong stewardship campaign to create sustainability.

7. Discussions

The purpose of this descriptive phenomenological study was to explore the lived experiences of Virginia United Methodist church leaders concerning leadership strategies to enhance church sustainability based on data collected from inter-

views with 10 leaders who hold leadership positions in the Virginia United Methodist Church Conference. These leaders represent the leadership positions of bishop, district superintendents, and pastors. The three themes that emerged from data analysis show that church leaders used the following strategies to enhance church sustainability: 1) change the leadership culture 2) encourage youth participation, and 3) develop strong stewardship and capital campaigns. To create a sustainable organization, leaders in church organizations have developed programs to 1) determine and share the purpose and vision of the organization (Asumeng, 2014), 2) measure financial performance (Jimenez, 2013), 3) create relationships with the community (Hayek et al., 2015), and 4) foster membership growth and attendance (Zampelli & Yen, 2017). The concepts that ground this study are 1) the FRL model developed by Bass and Avolio (1994) and 2) Lewin's (1947) three stage change model. The theme of changing the leadership culture relates directly to the transformational leadership component of the FRL model and to the three stages of Lewin's model, as a key element to strategic leadership is implementing change in the organization (Pearse, 2011). Lewin's (1947) change model involves three stages—unfreezing, changing, and refreezing. According to Hussain et al. (2018), Lewin recognized that change is a process where leaders perceive that organizational change is necessary and then 1) engage their followers in developing a planned, collaborative set of actions to unfreeze the status quo, 2) lead the organization through a period of planned transition during which they implement the needed changes, and 3) take actions necessary to ensure the sustainability of the new state, which Lewin called refreezing. Participants noted that a change in church leadership culture specifically involves changing pessimistic leadership into joyful and life giving leadership to develop church sustainability.

8. Implications

The results of this study have the potential to contribute to social change in leaders of United Methodist churches and denominational church organizations in the various diverse communities. Church leaders have advocated the need for and importance of sustainability of United Methodist churches. The focus of this study was to research the successful leadership strategies used to enhance church sustainability and allow the churches to continue to meet the needs of the community.

A leader's ability to inspire and help others in the organization to achieve the vision and mission of the organization could be a leadership strategy (Schoemake et al., 2018). According to Paulen (2021), from a nonprofit perspective, the focus of the prioritized leader framework is to invest resources and programs in the community. Successful leaders in an NPO create a vision of making a social difference in a community and motivate others to attract, inspire, and retain as much talent as possible. The community needs strong leaders who can make a difference and provide successful financial performance. To see positive financial results, the first step is to implement leadership programs, educating management team members on operating based on budget and organizational funding.

The results of this study can provide a framework that other church leaders could apply in their quest for developing strategies to enhance church sustainability. These leadership strategies could be used to benefit social programs in the churches and help people in the local communities. Many church leaders influence the ability to work in groups and encourage members to conduct programs to assist the community with food banks, youth counseling, rehabilitation centers for people suffering from drug and alcohol addictions, and senior centers. The sustainable framework for NPOs is to be able to provide continued community services (Bergman et al., 2017; Ceptureanu et al., 2018). To maintain these programs and serve their local communities, church leaders must focus on the survivability approach for church sustainability.

9. Recommendations

These are some recommendations for research and practices based on the study findings:

1) Researchers should conduct similar studies in the United Methodist churches in other areas, and for other denominations, to explore the leadership strategies that other church leaders use to sustain church sustainability.

2) Researchers should further substantiate and analyze the issues on leadership strategies to enhance church sustainability by looking into the effectiveness of being team driven and by partnering like-minded, complementary-skilled people to work in groups. Paulen (2021) argued that collaboration between leaders in the churches helps to implement a decision making process necessary to provide benefits to church members.

3) Researchers should study the emerging role of youth participation in ensuring the church sustainability.

4) Church leaders should use strategies such as setting goals, mission statements, and core values to create a shared vision for the organization. According to Phipps and Burbach (2010), an effective nonprofit strategic leadership strategy is determining the organization's purpose or vision. The participants in this study indicated that if church leaders want sustainability, the church members must understand the church's visionary words and interpret them in a way to create a mission statement that is sustainable.

5) Church leaders should communicate effectively with church members to establish trust. The participants in this study noted that building trust is an important tactic and to build trust it is important to understand the current church population. Although participants identified effective communication to build trust with church members, these findings were not mentioned in the literature reviewed for the study.

6) Paulen (2021) indicated nonprofits should develop programs to create relationships with the community. According to Luederitz et al. (2021), small business owners develop their strategic orientation through relationships with the community and commitments to peer-to-peer support as well as personal values and

emotional connections with other people. Participants in the study described several sponsored activities with other community organizations, such as working with the school, working with the senior community center, working with various youth organizations, and working with other faith leaders in the community. The recommendation is that church leaders find ways like these to build relationships with the community to help create sustainability.

7) The review of the literature did not reveal anything related to the finding of the study that children and youths should be more active participants in church activities. Based on the participants' input, however, another recommendation is that church leaders find ways to have the children and youths more involved in church activities. The participants in this study noted that the church leaders should consider hiring a full time youth director as a leadership strategy. Having a youth director can help bring in younger families, thus creating new life and energy in the church.

8) To establish financial sustainability, church leaders should inspire members to contribute through tithes and offerings towards the church's vision and mission. Leadership creates plans and strategies to ensure that execution of the goals and visions are in line for sustainability in an organization (Lourenco et al., 2014). Basford et al. (2014) suggested that leaders who possess qualities of care and concern and high moral values are a strategy for sustainability of the organization and church.

9) Church leaders should develop a strong stewardship and capital campaign program. Financial sustainability in churches is dependent upon leadership strategies and how successful churches can operate at a profitable level (Tauni et al., 2017). According to De Baerdemaeker and Bruggeman (2015), strategic leadership is important in instituting long-term sustainability. In alignment with church sustainability, an organization is financially sustainable to the extent that leadership manages the organization through effectively managing the budget, membership attendance, and various mission programs (Jimenez, 2013). Membership growth and attendance are critical components for financial sustainability (Zampelli & Yen, 2017). The participants in this study noted that it is important to have a good budget and to have an appropriate amount of cash flow to cover the church's expenses.

10) Church leaders should use church space for fundraising activities to increase income. For example, the participants described modifying their structures and using the church building for wedding events, local community sporting events, and partnering with other organizations to increase investments. Slappy (2019) discussed the need for church leaders to develop fundraising strategies such as these.

10. Conclusion

From this study, which involved interviewing 10 church leaders who serve in the Virginia United Methodist Conference, the three themes that emerged from data

analysis showed that church leaders used the following strategies to enhance church sustainability: 1) change the leadership culture, 2) encourage youth participation, and 3) develop a strong stewardship and capital campaign. While the church has focused primarily on leader strategies for developing purpose and vision, measuring financial performance, creating relationships with the community, and fostering youths' membership growth and attendance, there is an opportunity for church leaders to learn other strategies to achieve sustainability from the strategies employed by for-profits and other NPOs. Furthermore, additional research is necessary to explore the leadership strategies used effectively by church leaders to enhance sustainability, such as that proposed in this study. Church organizations need leaders who focus on these identified strategies to ensure church sustainability so they can become strong, sustainable organizations in their communities.

Conflicts of Interest

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

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