Can the Post-COVID-19 Church Thrive Using Pre-COVID-19 Strategic Assumptions?

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Abstract. The COVID-19 pandemic greatly affected traditional church operations and exposed gaps in leadership structures and churches' financial community engagement models. Before the pandemic, churches were primarily based on in-person worship, physical means of giving and human interaction. However, the sudden shift to digital platforms, online giving, and virtual ministry created critical strategic plan gaps that raised the need to evaluate pre-pandemic church models. The study examines whether churches can survive and potentially thrive with pre-COVID-19 strategic frameworks or need new models for long-term sustainability. This paper explores leadership management and financial sustainability or digitalisation after COVID-19. The study used a qualitative research approach; 25 senior pastors and planners were interviewed using structured questions. Thematic analysis was used to extract the patterns of leadership decision-making, crisis management, and adjustments in financial matters. The Findings show that rigid, pre-pandemic leadership and financial structures did not work in handling COVID-19 disruptions. Flexibility in governance, diversity in revenue streams and digitalisation were the main differentiators in the case of churches that were more resilient. Lack of technological implementation and sticking to conventional business models hampered the recovery, whereas innovative financing and social media helped achieve sustainable operations. The study concludes that the previous strategic frameworks before COVID-19 were insufficient. A hybrid model is necessary for churches to convert their traditional values and bring digital innovation together to remain sustainable in the long run.

Keywords: COVID-19 impact, Hybrid church model, Management and Strategy, Post-pandemic adaptation, Strategy, Church leadership.

1. INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic profoundly disrupted church operations, challenging many longstanding strategic assumptions that guided organizational strategy and planning. Before the pandemic, churches primarily relied on in-person worship, physical and financial contributions, and face-to-face community engagement as foundational elements of their operations. However, the global crisis necessitated a shift from physical platforms to online giving and virtual ministries, raising questions about the sustainability of pre-pandemic strategies (Plüss, 2020). In this environment, churches discovered that existing strategic frameworks could not guarantee long-term success. A concerning question regarding religious organisations is the effectiveness of pre-pandemic strategic assumptions in the post-pandemic church. However, many strategic plans built on these models never envisioned disruptions on this scale. The research proposed that when crises occur, they expose the weaknesses of the organisation's strategies and encourage leaders to rethink their foundational assumptions (Macca et al., 2024). The sudden closure of worship spaces, swiftness in adjusting government regulations, and a severe fall in physical attendance came with challenges that required immediate and long-term strategic adjustments (Rainer, 2020).

During the COVID-19 pandemic, weaknesses in church strategic planning were exposed, as many religious organisations attempted to function under pre-pandemic assumptions that were no longer viable. Churches that relied entirely on in-person worship, tangible financial contributions, and conventional leadership structures struggled to change. This difficulty was exacerbated in churches without digital infrastructure. Some churches managed to make the shift to digital platforms and hybrid worship, while others due to financial constraints and technological limitations. The results will add to the conceptual discussion on organizational strategic planning and are practical for church sustainability (Eccles & Pyburn, 1992). These assumptions were primarily not challenged because of historical precedent and organisation (Stephens, 2024). But the pandemic had to break these conventional praxes, and churches had to move fast to adopt new engagement methods. The most significant notable disruption was from in-person to virtual worship service. However, not all churches can make the transition successfully, and the digital divide poses problems for churches, causing them to be unable to overcome technological barriers and a lack of digital infrastructure (Stone et al., 2018). Additionally, the pandemic exposed the financial vulnerability of churches reliant solely on in-person donations, significantly as economic hardships reduced giving. More financially stable than others were churches that had already diversified their revenue streams and were using some digital giving platforms (Moran, 2011).

Many leadership teams also recognize that their strategic plans couldn't manage disruptions over time. Therefore, churches started to prioritize flexibility and adaptability in their decision-making. The pandemic caused significant transformations in the leadership of the Church. In the era of COVID, strategic decisions were still primarily determined by theological and organizational charts developed by leaders at the top – senior pastors and church boards. The pandemic called for a shift to a more dynamic type of leadership that involved merging crisis management with digital engagement strategies. Many churches integrated younger, tech-savvy individuals into leadership roles to facilitate the digital transition (Plüss, 2020). At the same time, the emotional and psychological stress put on the religious leaders as well as the followers gave a new appreciation of mental

health and Pastoral care. At the same time, the emotional and psychological burdens placed on religious leaders increased as they navigated daily uncertainties while supporting their congregations. Therefore, many churches have widened their range of pastoral care, providing counselling services, online support groups, and wellness programmes (Sulkowski & Ignatowski, 2020).

Additionally, church leaders have been focused on creating operational efficiency since the pandemic because of this. In numerous churches, the administrative process has been streamlined to use digital tools when communicating (e.g., Facebook and newsletters), planning events, and managing finances. As a result, many churches have taken to hybrid worship models, which blend in-person service with online service to simultaneously reach local congregations via in-person services and remote service seekers (Sullivan & Stein, 2022). This approach overcomes geographical limitations, and more inclusiveness is introduced in worship. Church sustainability is becoming a factor that depends on digital transformation. The pandemic led to faster technology adoption in religious settings, forcing churches to try new ways of interacting with the congregation. Modern ministry is no longer simply conducting online worship services or virtual Bible studies; developing a ministry focused on social media outreach initiatives has become essential. However, for these digital initiatives to be long-term sustainable, there is a need for strategic planning and resource allocation.

Conversely, churches with constrained financial capacity have faced challenges in adopting these changes. Investment in digital literacy, financial aid for upgrading technology, and collaboration between churches in sharing resources and expertise are needed to bridge this gap (Macca et al., 2024). In other words, digital transformation goes beyond church services. The management and administrative functions of churches are increasingly being used for technology, such as membership management, financial tracking, or event coordination. An effective data-driven decision-making process enables operational efficiency and improves data engagement strategies. Digital tools allow churches to get insights into attendance patterns, donation patterns, and community needs to strengthen the church's strategic plan (Eccles & Pyburn, 1992).

There is existing literature on the elements of digital transformation and how organisations should react to crises, but little is known about how churches specifically evolved their strategic models post-COVID-19. However, most studies evaluated the long-term structural changes in church leadership, financial sustainability, and digital engagement strategies that they have made due to the pandemic. Moreover, there has been very little research on how various churches exist and how churches of different sizes, resource capacities, and states of digital preparedness have implemented this shift. This research fills the gap by providing an empirical analysis of the level of modification of strategic frameworks and the development of best practices for future church resilience.

1.1. Research Questions

This study is primarily guided by the following research question:

- Can the church thrive after the pandemic based on prior pandemic strategic assumptions?

According to this research, the church has failed to answer two fundamental questions.

- What were the teams' strategic assumptions before COVID-19 that were the basis of the teams' plan?
- Are any of those initial assumptions still accurate? Which of them are not viable anymore, and what are the new assumptions to make?

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The strategic planning process in nonprofit organisations, particularly faith-based, is a complex mix of theological principles, good leadership, and sound business operational strategies. According to Vo, strategic planning is establishing long-term objectives for an organisation by identifying the current state and the best way to reach goals (Vo et al., 2023). Structured decision-making aligns an institution's mission and values with its operational capabilities and future aspirations (Porter, 1991). While strategic planning models are used widely in businesses and for-profit organisations, nonprofits, particularly religious institutions, have issues using structured strategic processes. These challenges mainly stem from deeply embedded cultural and theological ideologies influencing decision-making (Moyaert, 2018).

Assumptions underlying strategic planning plays a critical role in shaping an organisation's culture and decision-making processes. Often, these are implicit beliefs that guide leadership actions but are rarely questioned or documented (Xenikou, 2022). In the context of church leadership, these assumptions influence vision setting, resource allocation, and governance structures. Although some assumptions contribute to organizational stability, others may hinder adaptability, create misalignment with current realities, and contribute to ineffective decision-making (Kakar, 2018). Many faith-based leaders firmly believe that organizational sustainability depends solely on theological guidance. However, research suggests that failure to reassess strategic assumptions can lead to difficulty in adaptation and even organizational decline (Jenssen, 2019).

Historical civilizations such as Egyptians showed exceptional strategic planning in their architectural projects, such as the pyramids, which involved planning and taking up long-term vision (Thum et al.) However, today's nonprofit organisations, including faith-based organisations, do not often operate under structured

strategic planning frameworks. Despite these historical precedents, formalized strategic planning is underutilized in nonprofit organisations, primarily because it is not formalized, nor are methods of formalizing used (Charles et al., 2024). According to studies, many faith-based organisations have informal planning structures that do not follow the data-driven strategic model but rather follow intuition and faith-based decision-making (Schappert, 2019).

Empirical studies indicate that financial and operational constraints confine nonprofit organisations in their ability to implement effective strategic planning. In a qualitative study, nonprofit leaders consider strategic planning costly and time-consuming, making that an expensive process, perhaps from which it is hesitant to adopt a formalized planning structure. Similarly, Theus (2019) examined how nonprofit organisations used strategic processes in the education sector to refine their missions and enhance stakeholder collaboration in decision-making (Theus, 2019). Additionally, according to their findings, strategic planning is for a more precise vision setting, better organizational performance, and better stakeholder engagement. Grandy and Levit expanded on this by exploring nonprofit leadership transitions towards business-oriented models, incorporating shared leadership, flexible decision-making, and organizational learning (Grandy & Levit, 2015).

The COVID-19 pandemic also highlighted why strategic planning is important for nonprofit organisations. The pandemic has disrupted faith-based institutions and, therefore, has forced them to rethink their strategic frameworks. Maher et al. identify financial constraints imposed by COVID-19 on nonprofits, which led to the closure of many institutions and a reduction in community engagement (Maher et al., 2020). As Kim and Mason's research shows, many churches failed to withstand the financial losses due to the shortages in donations and physical attendance (Kim & Mason, 2020). Jefferson predicted that nearly one in five churches would be closed forever because of unstable finances. Several findings underscore the vulnerability of those organisations without contingency planning and any regular reassessment of strategic assumptions (Jefferson, 2020). These findings highlight the sensitivity of organisations that do not have contingency planning nor can re-assess their strategic assumptions.

The pandemic also drove faith organisations to adapt their strategies for remote interaction with congregations. In a recent study of how pastors navigated the transition onto digital platforms, Johnston et al. concluded that many leaders also struggled with keeping community engagement when switching to the online format (Johnston et al., 2022). In a study, Village and Francis also found that clergy well-being increased fatigue and disengagement during the pandemic, which came with the rapid move to get the church down and back online (Village & Francis, 2021). These studies illustrate the importance of strategy flexibility in difficult times. Nevertheless, the research has mainly been concerned with the operational changes that COVID-19 prompted but neglected to examine the strategic premises on which decisions were made before this pandemic.

Strategic planning literature suggests that many organisations fail to periodically reviewing their foundational assumptions, resulting in strategic misalignment and stagnation. This is a crisis of perception, where organisations persist in ignoring external changes and carry on as they used to because assumptions and beliefs are still alive and well. These assumptions manifest in the role of faith, a leader's structure within faith-based organisations, the financial model, and the community engagement strategy. Onyimbo highlights that strategic planning demands continuously reevaluating organizational assumptions to stop strategic failure (Onyimbo, 2018).

Organizational conflict frequently arises when leadership teams fail to critically examine the underlying assumptions that shape decision-making. Cognitive dissonance occurs when leadership expectations clash with evolving organizational realities. Internal divisions may emerge when churches rely on outdated assumptions about growth, financial sustainability, and outreach. Adler suggests internal conflict is inevitable in a nonlinear organisation with indistinct strategic purposes competing on the mission and priorities. In such cases, diversification stabilises by decreasing the disruption of strategic misalignment. (Adler, 2022). According to Chand et al., the more the difference between leadership expectations and the organisation's reality, the more the conflict would be (Chand et al., 2021).

The COVID-19 crisis also forced organisations to assess their strategic approaches. The pandemic permanently changed how religious landmarks engage with the public. The pandemic should catalyse churches to rethink theological interpretations and organizational structures. Although some organisations try to return to pre-pandemic models, research states that organisations often revert to pre-social strategy when the crisis has subsided, thus sometimes missing the opportunity to adapt strategically long-term (Seetharaman, 2020). It raises concerns regarding the future sustainability of the strategic adaptations during COVID-19. A meta-analysis of strategic planning demonstrated that formalized planning contributed to positive organizational results. However, the main challenge is ensuring that strategic assumptions adapt to changing circumstances.

To address these challenges, researchers have proposed frameworks for enhancing strategic adaptation. These strategic plans advocate for flexibility, stakeholder engagement, and technology integration. However, digital transformation brings a new possibility of modernization of the strategic planning processes for nonprofit organisations, which can encounter significant resistance to change in organisations that have become deeply attached to tradition. The strategic assumptions are often left unchallenged, resulting in inefficient planning and resistance to change. To bridge this gap, further research is necessary to explore systematic methods for

incorporating assumption analysis into the strategic planning processes of faith-based organisations.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1. Research Design

The research used a qualitative approach framed under an interpretive paradigm, which included the church leaders' thoughts on leadership, financial viability, and digital advancement in the post-COVID-19 era. The study also investigates strategic responses taken by enterprises in different contexts to develop emerging themes. An interpretive approach to the research endeavour allows for a rich and holistic exploration of church leadership and strategic management after the pandemic (Barron, 2022).

3.1.1. Data Collection

Semi-structured interviews were selected with 25 senior church leaders as the primary data collection method (refer to Table 1). A structured framework was selected that presents flexibility for participants to elaborate on their experiences. To ensure this balanced understanding of leadership decisions and strategic planning after the pandemic. Semi-structured interviews allow researchers to explore deeper and get a complete idea of the subject matter (Ruslin et al., 2022). The participants in this study were indeed senior church leaders and very actively involved in strategic planning, meaning the insights were based on personal experiences in leading. Three key areas are investigated in the interviews: leadership, financial sustainability, and digital transformation. During the pandemic, participants were asked regarding strategic decision-making and leadership adaptations to changing conditions during, before, during, and after. In addition to social sustainability, financial feasibility was investigated as churches coped with changes in the pattern of donations and economic difficulties arising from the impact of COVID-19. Furthermore, the research examined digital transformation, which is applied explicitly within the worship services, the engagement of the congregants, and the administrative functions.

All interviews were conducted either in person or on Zoom and Facebook Live, all video conference platforms resulting from COVID-19 restrictions based on the preference and availability of each participant. The interview data were systematically analysed in themes to identify trends and strategic responses by church leaders.

Table 1: Demographics of Participants.

Category	Details	Count
Sex	Male	22
	Female	3
Position	Senior Pastors	21
	Strategic Team Members	4
Ethnicity	Black American	25
Age Range	35 – 76	–
Church Size	Under 100 members	5
	100 – 200 members	11
	200 – 500 members	6
	500 – 1,000 members	1
	Over 1,000 members	2
Geographic Location	Alabama	3
	Georgia	18
	Tennessee	2
	South Carolina	1
	New Jersey	1

3.1.2. Data Analysis

Braun and Clark's approach to thematic analysis guided the data analysis process, and data management software NVivo was used to ensure that rigour and methodological rigour were maintained throughout the process (Clarke & Braun, 2013). It started with transcription, multiple readings to familiarize the data, and then key observations in the memo feature on NVivo were noted.

A systematic initial coding was conducted, on which relevant phrases, sentences, and paragraphs were mapped to leadership, financial sustainability, and digital transformation. Thus, these codes were grouped into broader thematic clusters congruent with the research questions.

A cross-case analysis was performed to find patterns and variations across interviews to ensure thematic exclusivity and consistency. Data saturation was established using NVivo tools like word frequency queries or tree maps. Themes were revised and improved when necessary to make the expressions more straightforward and closer to the critical concepts. Open-ended interviews were conducted to enrich the study about the economic and social outcomes of strategic adaptation in the context of the pandemic (Table 2).

Table 2: Thematic Analysis Summary: Key Themes, Sub-Themes, and Participant Contributions

Main Theme	Sub-Theme	Participant No.
Strategic Leadership Structure	Pastor as Sole Visionary	1, 3, 7, 24
	Strategic Teams as Implementers	2, 4, 8, 25
	Criteria for Strategic Team Selection	5, 6, 9, 23
Strategic Assumptions and COVID-19 Impact	Disrupted Assumptions	10, 11, 12
	Leadership Response and Crisis Adaptation	13, 14, 15
Strategic Readiness and Risk Orientation	Unpreparedness and Crisis Management	16, 17, 18
	Stability Seekers vs. Risk Takers	19, 20, 21
Strategic Navigation and Innovation	Adoption of Flexible and Adaptive Methodologies	3, 5, 8, 20
	Internal and External Influences on Decision-Making	4, 6, 9. 22
Strategic Innovation and Technological Advancements	Integration of Digital Tools	7, 10, 12
	Growth through Social Media and Technology	11, 13, 15
Financial Sustainability and Operational Adjustments	Financial Impact and Alternative Revenue Streams	2, 5, 9, 25
	Optimizing Church Facilities	1, 8, 14
Leadership Reflection and Future Strategies	Key Lessons from the Pandemic	6, 11, 16
	Post-Pandemic Church Strategy	3, 12, 18

3.2. Ethical consideration

Such ethical measures were implemented to ensure the confidentiality of participant data. All participants provided informed consent; data was fully anonymized on the organizational level to maximize privacy and ethical research practices. Furthermore, the relevant research complies with the ethical principles for research ethics on projects involving human participants.

4. RESULTS

The qualitative analysis of semi-structured interview findings has yielded key themes about strategic leadership, crisis management, innovation, financial sustainability, and post-pan standard church strategies. The study aimed to see how churches could survive utilizing pre-COVID-19 strategic assumptions. The seven main themes show how church leaders navigated opportunities to address problems and find ways of addressing change.

4.1. Theme 1: Strategic Leadership Structure

The church governance followed a theocratic model as it primarily adopted a vision from the senior pastor. The majority of the participants in the interview agreed that vision setting was a non-collective task given to the pastor alone (Peyton, 2023). This governance model further reinforced the pastorate's authority as divinely appointed; the strategic teams were mainly implementers rather than decision-makers. As per the respondents, Leadership selection within churches differed from selecting leaders in secular organisations. Selection criteria for leadership roles were more often not based on qualifications and experience but on loyalty to the pastor, financial generosity, and commitment to service. Also, as per the respondents, dissenting opinions were discouraged, and this could lead to groupthink and strategic stagnation possibility.

The findings included that long-serving leadership teams were more resistant to change, making adapting to crises such as COVID-19 more challenging (Merricks II, 2022). On the other hand, the lack of diversity in decision-making reduced the strategic adaptability that ushered churches into reacting well to disruptions.

4.2. Theme 2: Strategic Assumptions and COVID-19 Impact

The COVID-19 crisis revealed some strategic assumptions deeply rooted in the management of churches. Church leaders assumed that physical attendance would always be the chief and principal way of worship, the financial contribution would be constant without fluctuations, and the members would continue serving in physical services. However, COVID-19 restrictions impacted these assumptions, and churches had to reconsider their ways of functioning (Whiteway, 2022).

Church leadership initially found it challenging to handle the crisis precisely because it assumed the pandemic would be short-lived and would not necessitate a contingency plan. This created immediate challenges of financial insecurity, declining attendance, and operational disruption. As per respondents, many church leaders were not ready to make quick adjustments because of a lack of digital preparedness and relying too much on the traditional operational model.

This paper also reveals that churches that were effective in adopting the online approach fared well in managing the crisis. New operations patterns such as remote services, online giving platforms, and online outreach became the new normal. It would be impossible for those with the pre-Covid mindset to maintain engagement and be financially viable during its circulation. According to respondents, those churches that involved their congregations through digital platforms had better retention and continued financial contributions than those that opposed the move online.

4.3. Theme 3: Strategic Readiness and Risk Orientation

One of the most important observations from the interviews was that church leaders were unprepared when the pandemic started. The participants also stated that they expected the crisis to be short; therefore, their responses were slow and failed to handle it efficiently. As per the respondents, many churches were only planning in a reactive manner aimed at survival instead of strategic planning.

The study identified two leadership style types: stability seekers and risk takers. According to the respondents, Risk takers joined innovation and financial adaptation with the organizational structure change, whereas stability seekers focused on traditional structures (Ni et al., 2020). Churches led by risk-takers achieved higher levels of a shift to digital communication, financial innovation and organizational sustainability.

The attitude of some highly experienced leadership teams towards change was one of the major highlighted concerns. It was challenging to make the changes because many churches had leadership structures that were not open to change (Jenssen, 2020). As per the respondents, this research reveals that young and experienced leaders of the churches use modern technologies and solutions to solve the problem.

4.4. Theme 4: Strategic Navigation and Innovation

Church leadership teams who adapted through the crises demonstrated flexible and adaptable approaches. As per the respondents, these churches shifted from programme-centred strategic planning to strategic organizational development. Leadership teams had no option but to review their old paradigms and adopt new ones to enhance staff and ministry continuity (Mukhama, 2023).

It was evident from the conducted research that internal and external pressures had a significant influence on decision-making. Within the church, factors such as members' fears, the declining number of attendees, and issues with financial instability contributed to what the leaders did (Singh et al., 2021). Among these, the most prominent external factors included government restrictions, public health limitations to society, and changes in policies and demographics.

Respondents said that the COVID-19 crisis made them rethink priorities about church management. Many shifted their attention to a hybrid model that involved in-person attendance, digital outreach, financial sustainability and community engagement.

4.5. Theme 5: Strategic Innovation and Technological Advancements

The study shows the importance of information technology in the continuity of operations in the church during the COVID-19 pandemic. According to the respondents, Churches that had not embraced digital technology earlier had to shift to virtual means to conduct their business (Cooper, Laato, et al., 2021). This also included live streaming services, conducting prayer meetings, and offering online offerings.

The study confirmed that social media and online platforms played a key role in church expansion, allowing congregations to grow beyond local communities and attract global participants.

While there was some opposition initially, the church leaders could not deny that using such tools outweighed their disadvantages. As a result, it became the new norm to switch to hybrid models that entail face-to-face and online service delivery (Singh et al., 2022). Also, according to the participants, churches must own technology to remain relevant in a rapidly changing society.

4.6. Theme 6: Financial Sustainability and Operational Adjustments

The primary concern was the financial situation of the companies, which was an essential element due to the COVID-19 pandemic. As per the respondents, those churches that relied so much on door collections suffered many effects from limitations on the physical meetings (Mahiya & Murisi, 2022). However, the study revealed that organisations adopting online giving solutions were not significantly affected financially.

However, 80% of the participants stated that they experienced an increase in donations. Some of the key reasons for this include stimulus payments from the government, contributions from philanthropic organisations, and new funding sources from virtual markets (Van Steenburg et al., 2022). According to the respondents, some churches realized they could sustain their operations by selling products online, applying for grants, or leasing church facilities. Such improvements prevented risky operations that accumulated high losses, leading to the company's instability (Obrenovic et al., 2020).

4.7. Theme 7: Leadership Reflection and Future Strategies

The last theme concerns leadership navigations and strategic implications realized during the pandemic. As per the respondents, leaders in the church admitted that pre-COVID-19 models were insufficient to help manage the church in the current world. It was stated that in the future, church leaders should focus on flexibility, integration of technology, and finances (Pillay, 2020).

Several respondents were enlightened that success is not performance based on physical turnout or presence. However, the churches must pay attention to engagement, influence, and access. This change in focus is beginning to influence the strategies of post-pandemic churches to incorporate distance ministry, outreach programmes, and multiple sources of income streams (Whiteman, 2023).

Some respondents pointed out that seeking guidance from best practices facilitated the development of lasting agendas. To remain relevant in a changing world, churches must promptly start strategic planning, building creativity, and looking for ways to engage with the youth.

5. DISCUSSION

This study explored how church leadership worked through challenges presented during the COVID-19 pandemic through making decisions, financial stability, technological change, and engaging strategies. The study aimed to compare pre-and post-pandemic approaches to determine differences in leadership style and strategic effectiveness. The research shows that some churches had made the adjustments while others had not, with their rigid structure and resistance to change being the reason behind their failure.

Before COVID, church leadership appointments heavily depended on senior pastors' appointments for loyalty, contributions, and long-term service, not qualifications or experience (Thornhill, 2023). The structure then limited diversity in decision-making, especially excluding younger generations, leading to a lack of innovation (Djamaluddin et al., 2023).

However, many church leaders initially underestimated the long-term impact of COVID-19 and thought it would be a temporary interruption. Therefore, early decision-making was wrong but logical. However, the loss of several key leadership figures as the crisis progressed exposed weaknesses in adaptation strategies, rendering the churches helpless in the face of the crisis, prompting them to take prompt action (Kuenzi et al., 2021). Strategic planning during uncertain times of public health guidelines, government mandates, and social restrictions presented unexplored challenges. In reaction, some churches proactively protected their staff and congregants, but the degree of precaution varied based on local policies and the amount of digital tools at hand. The early months were often marked by denial and confusion for interview participants who could not be decisive.

The study also shows how innovation is part of crisis management. The sudden pressure for churches to adopt digital tools, even if they had not previously embraced them, and start offering online services was a process that churches must do quickly (Van der Westhuizen & Swart, 2015). Initially, some churches used telephone conference calls and later adopted a more high-tech live streaming. At first, some leaders refused these changes, but later, they accepted the benefits of digital outreach. This study proved that church expansion on social media and online platforms served through the ability for congregations to extend far beyond local communities and draw global participants (Cooper, Jormanainen, et al., 2021).

Furthermore, some churches redirected their attention to serving their communities and began to provide food, financial aid, and essential supplies to those in need. The strengthening of congregational ties and increased donations resulted from instances when the church engaged with real-world issues, which were a universal result of these efforts. The findings show that churches' focus on community service over classic in-person attendance leads to better engagement survival.

Financial sustainability was another critical concern. Lockdowns and attendance restrictions made it beyond financially unviable for churches to rely on in-person offerings. Organizations were more likely to survive the crisis if they had preceded it by having online giving options. Interestingly, 80% of respondents experienced increased donations due to the pandemic, such as government stimulus payments, philanthropic gifts, and virtual market discounting. However, some churches increased their income by selling their products online, applying for grants, or leasing church facilities to other entities (Stein, 2024). Financial adaptability helped avoid severe losses in the short term and provided stability in the long term.

The most important theme that came out of the study was its increased competition for digital engagement. Many churches solved the problems associated with online platforms, while others lost foot traffic when people turned toward more prominent, better-equipped churches with improved technology and production (Towns & Mullins, 2022). This contradicts the notion that members would be devoted to their home churches out of tradition. Therefore, the outcomes highlight that digital engagement does not just happen; instead, it needs intentional strategy, not the availability of online services. Those churches that have proactively adopted digital tools developed online communities. They changed communication methods and were far more successful in holding on to members than those who were slow to change.

A second important insight was the transition in strategic priorities. Findings from the study included that churches that failed to adjust their operational models to incorporate technology, financial diversification, and new outreach vehicles were at far risk (Godswill Agu & Margaça, 2024). Respondents reported that people used physical church buildings less on weekdays as people engaged remotely. With a more extensive societal shift toward digital interactions, churches were influenced by the same (Antonacopoulou & Georgiadou, 2021). Some churches had reported an increase in membership after they started allowing people to pay online, proving that digital platforms indeed have financial potential.

The literature supports this finding; digital tools can extend organizational efficiency and member engagement as outlined in the literature (Martínez-Caro et al., 2020). Additionally, churches are seeing financial transactions change as increasingly more significant percentages of contributions are being made via online giving platforms. It is reported that today, 60% of church donations occur through technology, which significantly emphasises digital payment systems to secure financial health.

The study eventually concluded that the church can no longer function as before the COVID-19 pandemic. In light of these facts, long-term existence can be achieved using strategic flexibility, technologies, financial risks, and effective community relations. The religious factions that refused to conform to these changes suffered, while those that adapted profited. The study also depicts the problem of centralization, a problem that, if not addressed, will own creativity and involve other people in decision-making. The COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted how congregations engage with their churches in a manner that has made strategic nimbleness more crucial than it has ever been (Crumpton, 2018). The conclusions provide important recommendations for religious organisations on adapting to the realities of the post-COVID-19 world, stressing that innovation will be a key driver for development.

6. CONCLUSION

This study aimed to determine whether post-COVID-19 churches can be successful using pre-pandemic assumptions. The findings suggest that quite a few churches remain to be run along legacy strategies-nonetheless unfulfilling in delivering the evolving needs of churches and the communities they service. The COVID-19 crisis, however, disturbed the usual planning framework and required church leaders to reconsider their fundamental assumptions and take a new strategic route. Some key findings include the need for area leaders to cultivate essential leadership pursuits, empower strategic groups to utilize digital resources, find innovative means of generating revenue, and look at environmental scanning to ensure expansion amid military, political, and technological changes. Churches must regularly update their strategic approaches and objectives and ensure that all stated goals correspond to the church's purpose and beliefs. Future research can compare the strategic planning effort in religious versus secular organisations and the impact of professional strategic leaders in a theocratic environment.

7. LIMITATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Limited Sample Size and Scope: The relatively small sample size of the study's qualitative design, as well as the 25 senior pastors and planners who were interviewed structured the study, and the generalizability potential of the study's findings, is further limited by potential bias in self-reporting.

Geographical and Denominational Constraints: The nature of the sample is confined, it is concentrated in certain geographic areas and denominations and, thus, does not reveal the conclusions to a wider sample.

Retrospective Data Collection: it is difficult to prove definitively the causal link between leadership adaptations, digital innovation, and financial sustainability, Despite the use of retrospective accounts.

Advocacy for Mixed-Methods Research: Future studies are suggested integrating quantitative information with qualitative insights to improve the robust and holistic picture of digitalisation's influence on church operations.

Adoption of a Hybrid Strategic Framework: Church leadership should resort to adopting a hybrid model of a strategic framework that will combine traditional values into digital innovation to offer flexible governance as well as diversified sources of revenue.

Investment in Technological Infrastructure and Leadership Development: The study emphasizes the need to invest in modern technological solutions and leaders' professional development for improvement of crisis management and long-term operational sustainability.

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