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Acceptance of Knowledge Management Concepts in Religious Organizations: The Impacts of Information and Willful Disengagement from Productive Inquiry

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ABSTRACT

This study analyzed how churches create cultures in which the recirculating of the same information is encouraged, or cultures in which new information is introduced regularly. It then analyzed how these cultures impact engagement with important knowledge management (KM) principles. Particular attention was paid to the factors that contribute to a church's decision to engage in a critical questioning of assumed beliefs—productive inquiry (PI)—shown to be an important behavior in successful organizations. In eight, 90-minute focus groups, 28 congregants from Mainline Protestant churches were asked to discuss the information behavior surrounding their religious beliefs. Qualitative coding and analysis revealed that the introduction of shared information produced barriers to PI, and the introduction of unique information encouraged PI. However, congregations were purposive in their decision to either engage or disengage in this inquiry based on organizational goals. Analysis showed that the decision to engage with PI was dependent upon a number of variables. A model is provided that outlines the necessary conditions for a congregation with a goal of either PI, or its conceptual opposite—reaffirmation of existing information and beliefs. This reaffirmation tended to result from a relationship goal, but it is suggested that this relationship goal might be better achieved through PI. This study has important implications for organizations that could benefit from the implementation of KM but are less receptive to its requirements.

Keywords

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Productive inquiry, organizational culture, information behavior, religion, knowledge management.

INTRODUCTION

The information behavior of individuals has important implications for productive inquiry (PI) within organizations. PI—introduced by Saint-Onge and Wallace (2003)—is essential for the collaborative processes that drive the access, exchange, and creation of knowledge necessary in successful organizations. It is “a dynamic questioning and validation process that draws out tacit knowledge to give meaning to explicit knowledge” (Saint-Onge & Wallace, 2003, p. 17). Although the success of PI is outlined in knowledge management (KM) terms, an organization with goals that may seemingly be jeopardized by the introduction of KM processes may decide to knowingly disengage from these processes—even if these processes would be beneficial. For instance, organizations more interested in reaffirming one another in belief and maintaining relationships may find PI too risky. This is particularly relevant in religious organizations with goals that may be quite different from those organizations typically under the inquiry of KM researchers. The current study analyzed engagement with PI in light of a religious organization's goals.

Particular attention was paid to the impact of unique and shared information on PI, i.e. do congregants recirculate the same information or are they encouraged to introduce new information? This was done in the context of Christian churches, and religious beliefs were used as prompts to elicit information from focus groups (FGs) of church attendees. Particular attention was paid first to what types of information—shared or unique—are contributed by individual participants when discussing beliefs. Second, these contributions are categorized in terms of their helpfulness to PI. Finally, attention is paid to cultural elements noted by participants that may make such discussions routine and, on an organizational level, promote or inhibit PI and the introduction of shared or unique information. A model is provided that outlines the

necessary conditions for a congregation with a goal of either PI or reaffirmation and maintained relationship—goals that, in this study, were considered by churches to be conflicting.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Information Type

The *type* of information given by an individual in a group is either shared or unique. *Shared* information is information that most of the group is familiar with; it requires no additional information seeking—separate from the group efforts—for an individual within the group to be aware of and understand it. It tends to be readily available to individuals within an organization. This concept of shared information is aligned with McElroy's (2002) discussion of first-generation KM. *Unique* information is information that only one individual has (Hinsz et al., 1997), and it represents active individual information seeking that is different from the rest of the group (Lehtinen, 2005). It is part of the conceptual definition of PI, and is closely aligned with McElroy's (2002) discussion of second-generation KM. Although unique information often already exists as something held by an individual, it may need to be purposively sought from external sources. This is often in reaction to shared internal information. It thus may not be as readily available as shared information.

Shared Information

First-generation KM environments assume that all knowledge that is needed already exists, and that codification of this knowledge is a main priority (McElroy, 2002). All current knowledge is assumed valid and is not questioned. Thus, first-generation KM would prioritize shared information, as the introduction of new information would complicate the goals of codification of what already exists. First-generation organizations are, therefore, supply oriented—in that answers to new questions are dependent upon the existing, codified information supply. Existing and shared information is considered sufficient.

Unique Information

Unique information is considered an essential part of group collaborative success as it allows for a greater degree of information pooling—a process shown to provide more optimal results in groups (Mojzisch & Schulz-Hardt, 2010; Larson et al., 2002). Unique information falls under second-generation KM, in which organizations subject existing information to a validation process that can fundamentally change this information. New information can be created to address questions. These organizations recognize the importance of producing new knowledge rather than merely managing current knowledge (McElroy, 2002). As distinct from the single-loop learning of first-generation KM, whereby initial rules applying to an action are followed mechanistically and without question (McElroy, 2002), second-generation KM engages primarily in double-loop learning. Here, the rules are not merely referenced, but are

challenged in light of the current situations to which they are applied. If new knowledge is available that leads to a better alternative, current knowledge can be replaced.

Information Type in Religion

A number of studies have shown that shared information is more present than unique information in religious organizations (Lehtinen, 2005). The Bible, religious creeds, and sermons comprise traditional information sources that attendees within a congregation likely share. Todd (2005) noted that proper biblical interpretation is mass distributed in religious books that attendees actively read. Individuals in religious congregations, therefore, tend to use similar metaphors derived from these books to discuss biblical issues. Because they did not receive the theological training of the clergy, these metaphors work as heuristic devices to understand the Bible (Todd, 2005). The Christian church has continually written conversations down as creedal statements that have proven to be powerful indicators of belief long beyond the context in which the original conversations were held. Tiénou and Hiebert (2005) noted that these creeds play the role of statutory law in Christianity in that they provide a manifestation of biblical principles. In addition, sermons can help explain and solidify belief. Pastors can use sermons to introduce ideas to large populations of religious attendees. According to Davenport, Prusak, and Wilson (2003), if these ideas can be maintained over extended periods, they enter the organizational mind as a *perspective*. If the sermon can successfully implant ideas that become part of weekly congregational life, these perspectives can become *pervasive*. This would mean that ideas from the sermon have “gone universal and unconscious” (Davenport et al., 2003, p. 54). These beliefs and ideas, then, are not merely shared; they are institutionalized.

Productive Inquiry

As noted, Saint-Onge and Wallace (2003) introduced the term, *productive inquiry*, in their book, *Leveraging Communities of Practice for Strategic Advantage*. It both engages in second-generation KM principles to question the assumptions of a group and provides the platform for the discussion of alternatives. This first requires that these assumptions—what Senge (1990) referred to as *mental models*—are named and brought to the surface. These models often originate from the individual and impact individual behavior, but when shared and repeated can negatively impact organizational behavior. Dealing with these models “starts with turning the mirror inward; learning to unearth our internal pictures of the world” (Senge, 1990, p. 9). This can often be difficult, as history and tradition is often a constraint on future behavior (Teece, Pisano & Shuen, 1997). When done in teams, it also requires trust that the surfacing of these mental models will be met with respect and not alienation. These shared models represent deep-seated assumptions that undergird organizational behavior. Thus, PI requires a healthy amount of risk within an organization. The results of PI are the

access, exchange, and creation of knowledge—all essential KM objectives (Saint-Onge & Wallace, 2003).

As noted, PI involves risk, as it requires a surfacing of many taken-for-granted—and often deeply held—beliefs of both the individual and the organization. The development of new ideas represented by PI is also inherently risky (Freeman, Wicks & Parmar, 2004). It invites a sense of chaos into a culture that serves the purpose of providing a sense of comfort. KM views this chaos as valuable. Rosen (2007) noted that any measure of collaboration must include some measure of chaos, as chaos is an integral process that supports collaboration. This is why Grove (1999) argued: “Let chaos reign” (p. 130). It is often in the midst of chaos that knowledge is created. Senge (1990) argued that this risk-taking should be encouraged. However, if a church is not comfortable with chaos, and sees this as a barrier to relationship development, they are likely to be less willing to engage in activities that promote it. These churches may be fearful of the debate assumed by the questioning in PI.

Thus, PI is a method for seeking clarification of assumptions by naming them and questioning their relevance and utility. It is a conversational tool for “getting to the core of an experience” (Saint-Onge & Wallace, 2003, p. 67). It is clear, then, that shared information would not be helpful, as it cannot uncover tacit knowledge. Rather, it restates explicit information. This would be akin to a process of *reaffirmation* of existing information. Existing unique information, however, can provide new insights that may contradict the existing shared information. It may also introduce questions that force the seeking of additional unique information. Unique information, then—as an existing and potential entity—introduces both new questions and new answers. Thus, PI has a reciprocal relationship with unique information, as it is both enabled *by* the desire for unique information, and results *in* unique information.

Productive Inquiry in Religion

Although considered the preferred model in KM, the introduction of PI into churches may be met with resistance, as subjecting traditional knowledge to the criterion of peer support and usefulness could be seen as heretical. The history of the Christian church provides examples of such cases in which new ideas were labeled heretical, even when this information was useful in answering theological questions. Augustine wrote, “Do not think that heresies could have arisen from a few beggarly little souls. Only great men have brought forth heresies” (Nigg, 1990, p. v). Therefore, it seems that the uniqueness of religion is that even logically sound ideas from idea leaders can be disregarded if found at odds with one document—the Bible.

RQ1: What are the specific factors that impact a church’s decision to engage with unique information and productive inquiry?

Culture

An additional variable to consider regarding the potential barriers to PI represented by shared information is organizational culture. Organizational culture can have a universal impact on one’s willingness to introduce unique information and engage in PI. It can serve an important role in inhibiting the introduction of unique information—and instead supporting reaffirmation of shared information—as it includes elements of social control over beliefs and habits (Dawson & Chatman, 2001). Culture is “the set of shared, taken-for-granted implicit assumptions that a group holds and that determine how it perceives, thinks about, and reacts to its various environments” (Schein, 1996, p. 236). These assumptions are developed from successful problem solving and are sustained through continued use. They are the basis for the mental models noted by Senge (1990) that need to be surfaced by PI.

Culture is formed from success. When a behavior is seen as successful within an organization, it is more likely to be repeated. This repetition creates the culture that reinforces that repetition. If a religious organization sees that agreement and homogeneity of belief increases the sense of relationship, and this relationship is the organization’s primary goal, they are likely to continue behavior that increases this. As noted, PI does not support such homogeneity. Thus, churches with a relationship goal may develop cultures that discourage PI. A primary means of discouraging PI is by restricting the introduction of unique information.

RQ2: To what extent is the contribution of shared and unique information—and the resulting presence or absence of productive inquiry—incorporated into the church’s culture?

METHODS

The current study utilized a Grounded Theory (GT) methodology outlined by Strauss (1987). The primary goal of GT is to develop theory that is “in intimate relationship with data” (Strauss, 1987, p. 6). Focus groups (FGs) were utilized as a primary method, as FGs are used primarily for the generation of data about group norms (Bloor, Frankland, Thomas, & Robson, 2001). This approach is uniquely suited to the current research, as culture is typically an unseen part of an organization. Qualitative methods can bring the researcher closer to the data by reflecting the understanding that culture is idiosyncratic and not well defined (Rousseau, 1990). Schein (2010) went as far as to argue that quantitative assessment of culture is unethical, because it leads to generalizability based on categories not coming from the participants themselves

Sample

FGs were held at two United Church of Christ churches in Ohio. The UCC was chosen for its unique stance on the inclusion of LGBT individuals noted in its Open and Affirming (ONA) declaration. This decision to become ONA is made at the local congregational level. The

presence or absence of this declaration is typically the result of lengthy discussion (Open and Affirming, n.d). Thus, its relevance to the current study is that these churches are assumed to recently have been in positions in which PI would have played a large role. Congregation 1 was ONA, and congregation 2 was not. These congregations had average weekly attendances of 200 and 400, respectively.

Denominational leaders in the Eastern Ohio Association of the UCC were contacted for insight into the best representative congregations for both samples. These leaders then made first contact with the pastors of the congregations to inform them of the study and inquire about their interest in participating. The researcher then contacted these pastors, asking them if they would be willing to participate in the study. After agreement, the researcher met in-person with the pastors of the two participating congregations to explain the study, its requirements, potential risks, and possible benefits.

The pastor of each local congregation was given a list of requirements for the sample group, and was given the responsibility of contacting potential attendees to participate. It was determined that each pastor would know his local congregation better than the researcher, allowing him to target these key culture carriers. This recruitment method is common in GT, as it is necessary to include as participants those individuals best able to express the problem under investigation (Morse, 1991; Jakobsen, 2012).

Each potential participant was sent an email informing him or her about the study, the rights of participants, and the role of participants in the study. A total of 28 church members or attendees participated in the study. The pastor of congregation 1 provided a list of 51 potential participants, and the pastor of congregation 2 provided a list of 18 potential participants. Emails were sent to each potential participant. A total of 15 individuals from congregation 1 participated in the research, and 13 participated from congregation 2. Of these 15 from congregation 1, nine were female and six were male. Of the 13 participants from congregation 2, seven were female and six were male. The differences in potential participants merely reflect the list size given by each pastor.

Process

FGs were conducted on-site at each congregation, with four FGs conducted at each congregation for a total of eight FGs. Participants were asked to meet twice over a two-week period to ensure that adequate time could be spent on each section of the FG. In addition to the FGs, the researcher attended three different Sunday morning services at each congregation, for a total of 6 services of approximately one hour each. This participant observation was done to verify data collected from FGs. Effort was made to attend a congregation's service the week of a FG at that congregation. Thus, the participant observations were spaced throughout data collection to ensure that the

researcher attended the congregation of a FG the Sunday prior to meeting with that FG.

A semi-structured FG guide was developed, with a built-in flexibility for additional probing and participant-led discussion. This guide was constructed based on the initial review of the literature and was refined after each FG. It was used loosely to provide some structure to the FG meeting without forcing a rigid structure to how questions were asked or how much time was allocated to each question. This semi-structured approach provided consistency to each FG while giving participants the freedom to discuss other issues that fit with one of the research questions. Participants were asked, in particular, to engage in discussions about their religious beliefs.

Analysis

Analysis was conducted after the first FG and continued through multiple stages throughout the research. Transcripts were formally entered into Nvivo for coding. Analysis of the data from the FGs was conducted methodically, following the 3-step process outlined by GT (Corbin & Strauss, 1990). Based on this constant-comparative method, data was coded and analyzed at every stage of data collection. Coding involves chunking the data into meaningful pieces for analysis (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Videos of the FGs were transferred to transcription software the day after each meeting. This allowed the researcher to watch the FG while transcribing, rather than relying only on audio. Coding concepts and categories developed inductively throughout this process.

RESULTS

To answer RQ1 about how the presence of shared and unique information in a church impacted engagement or disengagement with productive inquiry (PI), FG data was coded for instances of shared and unique information and, then, analyzed for its impact on PI. Discussions surrounding this information provided insight into why the use of a type of information was continued.

Disengagement with PI: Shared Information

Shared information was generally noted as a barrier to productive inquiry. These barriers were noted in both congregations to some extent. With the shared use of information from the pulpit, both congregations developed a standard of welcoming behavior that was not questioned. With the shared use of biblical information, it was indicated that additional information was not needed. In both cases, there was evidence of a willful disengagement with PI, as well as differing reasons for this disengagement.

Shared Pulpit

Shared information in both congregations came to participants through the medium of the Sunday worship service and, in particular, the sermon. Attendees of both congregations were aware of the UCC phrase, "Whoever you are, wherever you are on life's journey, you are

welcome here” (UCC, n.d.). This phrase was spoken every Sunday morning from the pulpit, either by the pastoral staff or a layperson. This was validated by participant observation. Often paraphrased or quoted in part, this was evident throughout the FG discussions. One congregation 2 participant explained the quickness with which other participants recalled this information: “We use that statement a lot here in the church.”

The sermon itself provided context and description of specific behavior attributable to this statement. In particular, it was noted that the pastor often spoke from the pulpit about needing to be more inviting to newcomers by sticking your hand out to say, “Hi.”

One participant noted with some disgust that sitting in the balcony was a sign of regular attendees who do not want to talk to anyone, and who were failing to exemplify this assumed belief. When thinking of the non-ONA congregations, congregation 1 participants struggled to find a means of describing them: “I don’t know if you call it closed and condemning if we’re open and affirming. I don’t know what you call it, but you know, to sort of differentiate.” Another congregation 1 participant juxtaposed openness with the stuffiness of non-open congregations: “Most churches are stuffy sometimes. We are trying to project an open welcoming feel.” Such negative language discourages the presence of PI.

This shared phrase was connected to a general openness in both congregations that was not questioned by any FG participants. The lack of PI surrounding this shared pulpit information was especially noted in discussions of congregation 1’s ONA designation. Participants discussed this belief in much stronger language than any other. The ONA designation is a particular sign of welcoming. PI around this designation in congregation 1 was generally dismissed. Participants expected the congregation to believe in the value of openness and to express it by talking to newcomers and making them feel welcome. Thus, one important reason for the lack of unique information in a church—and the resulting disengagement with PI—is the strength of the belief associated with that information.

Shared Bible

The Bible represented another primary source of shared information, although this was seen more in congregation 2. Regarding the Bible, one congregation 2 participant noted, “Well you would think over 2,000 years just about all circumstances would have happened and, in that amount of time, it’s been enough.” This text was not open to discussion: “There’re some traditions you just don’t want to mess with, so to speak—the Bible being one.” Not wanting to *mess* with the information from the Bible is a hindrance to PI.

The distinctiveness of the Bible as a shared information source not open to PI was attributed to its authority. Although congregation 2 participants would read other

spiritual or religious texts, they “wouldn’t give [them] the same authority [they] would the Bible.” The unwillingness to engage in PI regarding the Bible was especially noted in the definitive unwillingness by both congregations to open the Bible back up after canonization to add additional texts that participants noted as important. The Bible served a function of tradition, something connecting them to the 2,000-year old faith: “What a group of people say the Holy Bible is, I mean, that is what, you know, was done and I accept that that is the Holy Bible, the primary spiritual text.” One congregation 1 participant noted, in terms of changing the Bible, “Then that seems to water it down.” Thus, a second important reason for the lack of unique information in a church—and the resulting disengagement with PI—is the authoritativeness given to the shared information.

Congregation 2 participants also argued that the history of Christianity is an essential piece of information that must not be disparaged in favor of current trends. In terms of the UCC (n.d.) statement, “Our faith is 2,000 years old, our thinking is not,” participants agreed: “It’s trying to sort of disparage or discount the past and the core of the faith, which I think is probably not the best way to say something like that.” They argued that such a statement favors current thinking over past faith. They overwhelmingly disagreed with this assertion. There was a stronger desire in congregation 2 to attach themselves to the 2,000-year-old faith than was noted in congregation 1. This adds a third reason for the lack of unique information and PI—the strong desire to be a part of something bigger, and the acceptance of shared information from that larger group or tradition without validation.

Engagement with PI: Unique Biblical Information

Whereas congregation 2 viewed the Bible as a source of shared information because of the authority given to it, congregation 1 allowed this biblical information to be subjected to questioning and unique information. Because of the changing nature of divine revelation, attendees of congregation 1 argued that reading the Bible requires critical thought. This requirement was not noted in congregation 2. Congregation 2 noted that, although the context in which it is read changes, the essential text of the Bible itself does not change. This is different from attendees of congregation 1 who noted that the Bible itself changes meaning as theologians understand more about it.

This critical thought was juxtaposed with assumptions that the Bible as written is true, as noted by one congregation 1 participant: “Conscientious critical thinking and looking at different sides of an issue and thinking about it [is needed] instead of just, this is the answer; this was the answer; this will always be the answer.” Because critical thought requires an individual process not held in check by any common authoritative source, it represents a source of unique information.

Because individuals bring different contexts and approaches

to this critical thought, congregation 1 participants thought it impossible—and not desired—that everyone would have the same interpretation of any part of the Bible. The existence of multiple interpretations provides an environment where unique information is heavily present. Congregation 1 participants noted that the choice of what translation of the Bible to use was a personal decision that came down to what was comfortable and easy to read.

Congregation 2 participants tended to reiterate the static nature of biblical meaning in the face of contextual changes, while congregation 1 tended to reiterate the changing nature of biblical meaning in the face of contextual changes. In understanding the Bible as a static text, the context of modern day realities must form to the static meaning of the Bible. In understanding the Bible as a changing text, this modern context has the power to change the meaning of the Bible. The group consensus in congregation 1 was that the UCC (n.d.) commitment to the phrase, “God is still speaking,” required an understanding of the Bible as evolving in some ways. When discussing biblical information, there was a desire to reinforce its relevance. Participants came to an agreement that God is still active in how individuals read the Bible: “You have to read it, and then you have to think about it; you have to digest it and think about it for a little bit.” Thus, an important reason for the inclusion of unique information in a church—and the resulting engagement with PI—is the need to make the information useful and applicable to current situations.

This critical thought was a source of pride in congregation 1. It was juxtaposed with a literalist interpretation of the Bible, which attendees of congregation 1 defined as thinking that everything in the Bible actually happened. Congregation 1 participants argued that the context of the Bible must be understood, rather than using the Bible as a “word-for-word guide.” It was noted that we no longer stone people for doing something wrong, or follow dietary rules and restrictions. Others noted that not everything in the Bible actually happened, but some things are stories to help make theological points. Participants were strongly opposed to the authoritative structure of other religious traditions. This sentiment was highlighted in one participant’s discussion of Catholicism: “You don’t have to think . . . you’re told more of what to think.” This was also noted in subtle disparagements of conservatism in congregation 1. One participant noted how she would discover through conversation that a church attendee was conservative: “Oh, I didn’t know you were one of them.” Others in the group laughed and agreed with this sentiment. Thus, another important reason for the inclusion of unique information in a church—and the resulting engagement with PI—is the desire to be seen as progressive and able to think for one’s self.

Cultural Variables

An analysis of cultural variables helps answer RQ2 about

the incorporation of PI into a church’s culture. Both congregations showed evidence of the impact of culture on their behavior. Congregation 1 noted the presence of long-standing participants within the congregation. These participants were attributed with ownership of the congregation and greatly influenced behavior: “This is *their* church, they grew up in this church, they raised their kids in this church. Maybe they raised their grandkids at this church.” Congregation 2 noted that these individuals influenced a well-entrenched culture: “You’ve got people that have been here a long time, so you’ve got long established relationships, which I think [is] generally welcoming [to] new people, but it can be intimidating, too.”

Risk

The definition of PI assumes a healthy level of risk preference. The primary means of identifying a congregation’s risk preference was through discussions of ONA designation. This is not to conflate ONA with PI, or suggest that ONA is the necessary product of PI. Rather, the FG discussions of ONA indicated that this designation represented a risk. Thus, discussions of ONA provide insight into a group’s risk preference.

When asked about becoming ONA, congregation 2 was very concerned about the other churches that had split over the decision to become ONA. They argued against becoming ONA out of a desire to avoid the conflict: “I think that we would have our own version of an internecine war or struggle.” They noted that they already are open, so the step to become ONA was an unnecessary distraction that could cause division. Congregation 1, however, saw the ONA designation as a necessary step toward what they saw as true inclusion and openness. One congregation 1 participant argued that the reason a former congregation was not ONA was because they were “closed-minded.” Congregation 1 was aware of the division caused by this designation, but was willing to take the risk. Participants agreed that those not accepting the ONA message would choose on their own to leave. Newcomers must decide personally “whether they want to be part of that or not.” Thus, congregation 1 showed a higher risk preference in their decision to designate themselves as something seen by other congregations as controversial. This led to increased engagement with PI.

Debate

One important component of risk was willingness to engage in debate. The very presence of unique information assumes that, at some point, one’s information will be at odds with another within the church. Congregation 2 was not comfortable with this, as they viewed the purpose of the church as serving a relational *family* function: “You’ve got long established relationships [here].” Congregation 1, on the other hand, celebrated this debate as they approached disagreement directly. Loss of relationship due to a newcomer’s disagreement with ONA, for instance, was not a concern: “I’m not sure they’d be here or stay here.”

This is closely aligned with risk—in that debate could result in hurt feelings and possible membership losses—but it also shows a different view of the function of the church. So, in addition to higher levels of unique information and risk preference, congregation 1 showed a greater desire for debate. This led to increased engagement with PI.

Diversity

The presence of unique information leads to a diversity of opinions, as the overall number of opinions increases. The response to this diversity was different in the two congregations. Participants of congregation 1 agreed that beliefs are highly personal, mostly because no one individual can be confident enough of what is right to force a belief on an entire group. The group, as one congregation 1 participant noted, celebrated diversity of belief: “It’s a personal relationship; my relationship with Jesus or God or whoever you want to call him isn’t the same as [others], and it’s not supposed to be.” Another participant noted this value of diversity: “None of us is completely all one thing. You know, we all have these beautiful variances.”

Whereas congregation 1 celebrated the diversity of beliefs that come from an understanding of belief as personal, congregation 2 viewed the personal nature of belief as the starting point for conflict. In discussing a hypothetical island in which they would be responsible for establishing a civilization, participants agreed that peace required a lack of communication about personal beliefs and an agreement that participants are free to believe whatever they want: “I’m going to respect you for your beliefs; hopefully you can respect me for mine, and we can live peacefully and everything’s fine.” So, when diverse opinions come together in one group, congregation 2 was afraid that this would lead to conflict. This conflict came as participants viewed the personal expression of belief as forcing them into something: “I really feel like I’m learning to be a good Christian because I want to be a good Christian—not because somebody’s telling me this is the way to be that way.” This discomfort with expressed diversity led to decreased engagement with PI, as they decided to remain silent about their diverse opinions.

Culture of Productive Inquiry

Although congregation 1 showed high amounts of shared information regarding belief in openness, their discussion of belief showed greater overall amounts of unique information. Congregation 1 participants noted, in informal discussions of hobbies, a heavy interest in non-biblical reading, e.g. *Game of Thrones* and a biography of JFK. The openness to this unique information—and subsequent desire and willingness to share this in group discussions in the congregation—was noted by another in reaction to hearing God referred to as a woman: “[It] kind of turns it on its ear and you have to look at it from different perspectives.” This is significant given the finding that congregation 1 also had a greater risk preference and desire for debate and controversy than congregation 2. This shows a reciprocal

relationship between information type and a culture of PI. Unique information about the Bible—especially as it related to LGBT individuals—led to the discussion of new ideas, which led to inevitable debate. This debate was repeated and the culture became comfortable with it. Thus, debate was something the culture wanted to keep. In order to feed this debate, attendees needed to engage in higher levels of information seeking for unique information. This led to increases in productive inquiry.

On the other hand, shared information in congregation 2 led to a lack of debate, as there was nothing to debate. Congregants wanted to keep unique information hidden and personal, as a means of promoting relationship. This lack of debate was repeated, and the culture became comfortable with it. Because debate is the result of unique information, unique information was itself discouraged. This became a cultural barrier to unique information and debate—both definitional components of PI.

DISCUSSION

Parallel Information Goals Model

A congregation can decide what its goal is regarding PI. The current study found certain variables that are predicted to lead to PI, as well as variables predicted to lead to reaffirmation. It is important to note that the current study does not label these organizations as successful or unsuccessful. The literature suggests PI leads to success, but this was not within the limits of the current study. Rather, these organizations are labeled as prioritizing a goal of knowledge exchange and access or a goal of relationship and congeniality. Further research is suggested into the actual benefits of PI in churches.

Although relationship is by no means the opposite of knowledge exchange and access through PI, it is clear from the current study that this is the *perception* in churches. Future research is needed into the place of such PI within religious organizations, and its impact on relationships. Figure 1 shows the path toward PI and reaffirmation. This is a reflection of the findings of the current research. Congregation 1 tended to follow path one, while congregation 2 tended to follow path two.

Congregations, through the presence of unique or shared information, will enter either path one or path two. From the research, a congregation that shows evidence of all of a certain path’s variables when discussing beliefs will engage in the eventual goals of that path. It is important to note that congregations may show a mix of path one and path two variables when discussing belief. Although it is assumed that evidence of another path’s variables will distract from the goals of the primary path, further research is needed to determine if these goals are still met.

If a congregation’s goal is PI—noted in congregation 1—a high presence of unique information is necessary. Because any church’s culture will have a heavy emphasis on religious belief, the appraisal of this belief is an important

variable. A weaker tie to belief allowed for second-generation KM inquiry of that belief and related information in congregation 1. In addition, this related information was viewed as imperfect in order to keep it open to inquiry. An assumption of authoritativeness and infallibility in the information—noted in congregation 2— inoculated this information against inquiry. A congregation must then decide how it wants to be viewed by others. If the congregation desires to be a part of the in-group of tradition—like congregation 2—it will be more likely to follow the assumed beliefs of this tradition. However, if the congregation prides itself on its individuality outside of a given group—like congregation 1—questioning the assumptions of any tradition would be a mark of this pride.

A congregation must then decide what the purpose of its information is. Challenging or new information within the congregation may be viewed as discomforting and, therefore, unwelcomed—as with congregation 2. But, if a congregation’s purpose for the information is to maintain relevancy—as with congregation 1—it will be engaged actively in critically evaluating that information to suit this purpose. These information preferences are then combined with the cultural behavioral elements of interpersonal diversity associated with risk. The desire for debate—noted in congregation 1—combined with an acknowledgment and knowledge of diversity, will lead to an environment suited for the questioning of information required by PI. However, if a congregation subsumes diversity in order to maintain an agreement that is viewed as a precursor to relationship—like congregation 2—PI will be discouraged. This relationship focus is similar to *groupthink*, whereby groups ignore certain pieces of contradictory information due to pressures to maintain uniformity (Janis, 1982). The current study adds additional KM-specific factors that lead to this phenomenon. It also outlines the conditions for avoiding groupthink.

As these decisions and behaviors are repeated across the congregation, they become part of the overall

organizational culture. As such, they impact the future presence of unique or shared information. In a PI culture like congregation 1, individuals will want to seek out information that allows them to participate in debate. As noted, this information is unique information. Thus, the desire to be part of the culture—one created by the presence of unique information—reinforces this very culture through the continued introduction of unique information.

CONCLUSION

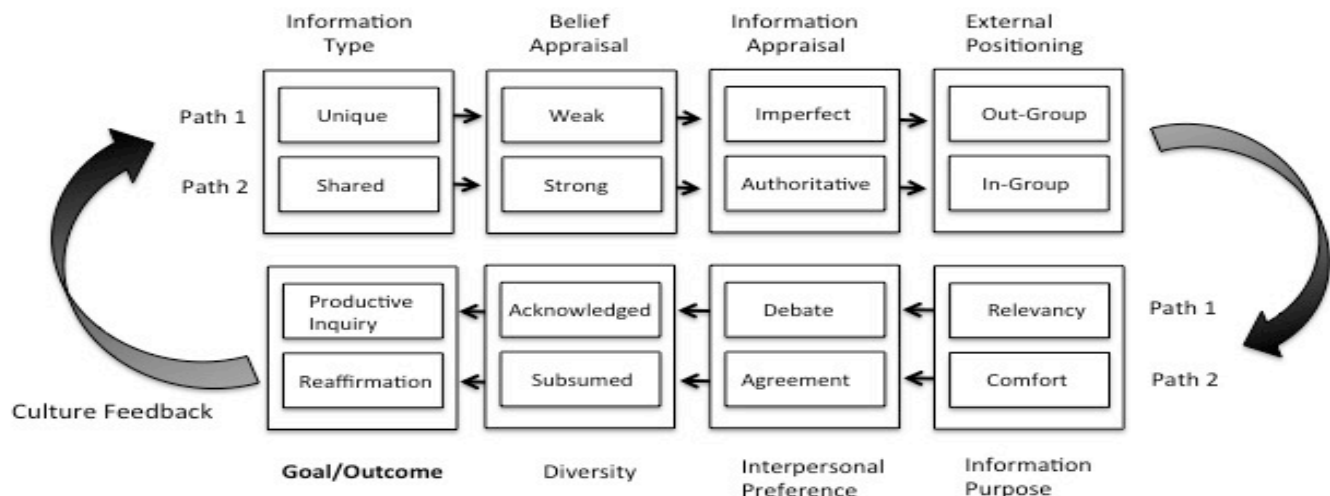
Although these results can only be linked directly to the two churches that participated, they provide important insight into the complexities of introducing unique information into a church, as well as the cultural conditions that create environments suitable for one information type over another. It will be necessary to extend this methodology to other congregations with other beliefs to determine if the patterns remain.

The current study provided a more nuanced look at the impact unique and shared information has on productive inquiry—especially as it relates to the use of the Bible. In these churches, shared information was a dramatic barrier to productive inquiry. However, the approach to the Bible is a key indicator of the presence of unique information. If a congregation views the Bible as something not to be messed with and capable of answering all current questions, it becomes impossible to engage in productive inquiry of the contents in it. However, if a congregation views the Bible as inherently fallible, it can be subjected to productive inquiry in the form of critical thought.

The current study also has important implications for the institutionalization of norms of information behavior and engagement. Congregations develop levels of comfort with debate that influence their willingness to introduce new information that may cause debate, which is closely tied to risk preference.

The literature suggests that unique information tends to lead to PI and that shared information tends to be a barrier to PI.

Figure 1. Parallel information goals model.



This study confirms that the conditions for productive inquiry include the presence of unique information combined with a healthy risk preference. However, the study adds important cultural variables that reinforce and promote the environment for PI. It was found that some organizations may willfully engage in activities that discourage PI if they view PI as a threat to the development of relationships—a development the congregation views as possible only through reaffirmation.

Because KM systems and processes have shown positive results in many organizations—and there are many reasons to expect that churches in particular would benefit from KM—it is important to understand the variables that may prevent its implementation. It is possible that these are not true barriers but, rather, misunderstood means of attaining certain goals. It is suggested that the relationship goals of churches desiring reaffirmation could actually be achieved more successfully through PI, as debate and discussion are inherently relational. It is possible that organizations that appear to not value KM may recognize its value if introduced in a context-specific and goals-oriented way.

Religion has a rich history, and productive inquiry may be seen as heretical. It is important for KM practitioners to understand these potential barriers to engagement with KM before introducing KM processes.

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