THE MUTE CHURCH: A QUALITATIVE STUDY OF MEMBER SILENCE AND SPIRITUALITY IN CHURCH DECISION-MAKING

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Can the church function while on "mute?" While there is considerable research literature that explores the presence and function of Abilene paradox theory in organizations, there is limited research that explores Abilene paradox theory in relationship to faith organizations. The issue with this gap is the wealth of information that could be amassed to expand group dynamics as it relates to faith organizations. This study explored whether spirituality contributed to member silence in the decision-making process of faith organizations. Within the study Abilene paradox theory, consensus theory, and spirituality were defined and from the literature of these theories, ten statements of discussion were derived to interview a focus group of seven leaders of the Baptist church, comprised of Pastors, Deacons, and Deaconess. Afterwards, a content analysis approach was used to synthesize the data, conceptually and relationally. The study concluded that Abilene paradox theory, influenced by spirituality, affects the decision-making process of group members in faith organizations. The study hopes to spark further conversation on the impact of spirituality and spiritual leadership on group dynamics in faith organizations.

I.   INTRODUCTION

In the world of telecommunication and social media, one buzzword that has permeated the spaces of virtual culture is the word "mute" (Randall, 2020). Faced with the challenge of staying connected in a world largely impacted by the integration and normalization of social networking in the 21st century, the "mute" button has become a communal prerequisite for a individuals, groups, and organizations to hear and be heard by others (Randall, 2020, Weber, et al., 2016). The "mute" feature used on meeting

forums such as Zoom, Google Meet, Microsoft Teams, and other platforms create a virtual sense of order, especially when decision-making is necessary. As the church has become one of the many entities impacted by the world of telecommunication, the church—like other organizations—have had to adapt to the world of "mute" to hear and to be heard. While silence can bring order and harmony to an organization, silence can also threaten the safety, security, and growth of an organization, especially if silence occurs amongst key leadership during a decision-making process (Donnelly, 2005; Taras, 1991; Wilson & Harrison, 2001). Whereas no organization can afford to function in silence, certainly the Church as a prophetic, unrelenting witness to the world, cannot afford to do ministry on "mute." Yet, if church membership is unable to voice their true feelings to their faith organization, they run the risk of jeopardizing the very spiritual and emotional well-being of the communities they serve. They run the risk of operating as a "mute" church.

If this is the case—if the mute church exists—there must be a contributing factor that causes and reinforces the silence. Thus, the research question is such: Does spirituality contribute to member silence—as a result of Abilene paradox theory—in the decision-making processes of church organizations? The research explores the function of Abilene paradox theory in the decision-making processes of church leadership and explores whether the concept of spirituality additionally contributes to its occurrence. The research also addresses a gap in Abilene paradox theory research and the church, which suggests that a larger gap exists between group dynamics literature and the church, also. Because church organizations vary in group dynamics, yet historically have contributed to group dynamics, a study of this magnitude not only provides more literature for theologians and pastors, but for organizational leaders and researchers (Cafferky, 2007).

Within this study, Abilene paradox theory, consensus theory, and spirituality have been defined and from those definitions, ten statements of discussion were derived to assess a focus group of seven Baptist leaders, male and female, within Pastor and Diaconate leadership. Lastly, this study conducted a content analysis on the data from the interview, specifically analyzing the data conceptually and relationally to determine meaning. The goal of the qualitative study was to (a) provide additional research literature on Abilene paradox theory as it relates to the church, (b) initiate further discussion on the relationship between Abilene paradox theory and Christianity, (c) explore its effect, if any, of Abilene paradox theory on churches versus other organizations, (d) and explore whether the definition of Abilene paradox theory needs to be expanded to include spirituality as a contributing factor. The next section defines Abilene paradox theory, consensus theory, and the concept of spirituality, which will serve as a driving point for the qualitative study.

II.   LITERATURE REVIEW

Abilene Paradox Theory

The background of Abilene paradox theory is derived from a simple suggestion from the father-in-law of Jerry B. Harvey. 104 degrees in Coleman, Texas, the Harvey family is found engaged with a game of dominoes and refreshing, cold lemonade. During the game, Harvey's father-in-law proposed a family trip from Coleman to Abilene, Texas for lunch (Daniel, 2001; Harvey, 1988; Harvey et al., 2004; Wilson & Harrison, 2001). While the suggestion is internally dissented by Harvey's family, the family outwardly agreed to leave behind their lemonade and dominoes to make the hot, 53-mile trip in their 1958 Buick to Abilene (Harvey et al., 2004; Wilson & Harrison, 2001). Having had a horrible time, the Harvey family collectively confessed that none of them honestly wanted to go to Abilene and only agreed as to not disappoint each other (Harvey et al., 2004). Even Harvey's father-in-law, who originally suggested the trip, confessed to never wanting to leave Coleman and only offered the trip under the assumption that the family was bored (Harvey, 1988). Through conversation, the Harvey family discovered that if they would have been honest from the very beginning, the 106-mile roundtrip trek could have been altogether avoided (Harvey, 1988). It is through this event that Harvey developed and published what is known today as the Abilene paradox theory (Harvey et al., 2004; Wilson & Harrison, 2001).

The Abilene paradox theory is the inability of individuals, groups, or institutions to manage agreement within the decision-making process (Browne et al., 2018; Daniel, 2001; Harvey, 1988; Moosmayer et al., 2018; Rubin & Dierdorff, 2011; Sheingold & Shiengold, 2010; Wilson & Harrison, 2001). Abilene paradox theory occurs when one suppresses or sacrifices their internal wants to satisfy the perceived wants of others. The theory is characterized within group dynamics research as a paradox because it exposes the contradiction between perceived ideas or beliefs that are internal, versus the ideas or beliefs that are expressed (Gillette & McCollom, 1995; Smith & Berg, 1997). Abilene paradox theory has occurred or is occurring when the following five components are present: (a) an expressed public/mutual agreement contradictory to internal dissents, (b) ineffective communication that motivates the suppression or silence of individual dissent, (c) the inability of group members to interpret or name a false or fake consensus, (d) an outward resentment of the decision, the group leader and/or other group members after the decision is made and (e) the failure of a leader to recognize the occurrence of Abilene paradox theory so as to prevent its occurrence again (Harvey et al., 2004, pp. 215-226).

What is interesting to note about Abilene paradox theory is that it is centered around the concept of agreement, not conflict (Browne et al., 2018; Daniel, 2001; Harvey, 1988; Sheingold & Shiengold, 2010; Wilson & Harrison, 2001). Individuals, groups, or institutions that undergo the paradox—who suppress their true wants or silence their dissents in the decision-making process—do so to avoid conflict (Browne et al., 2018; Daniel, 2001; Harvey, 1988; Sheingold & Shiengold, 2010; Wilson & Harrison, 2001). This desire to avoid conflict and to ultimately remain silent stems from

the concepts of action anxiety and/or negative fantasies. Action anxiety is defined as the apprehension felt by members who desire to act but do not because they believe their actions will not be accepted by other group members (Browne et al., 2018). Negative fantasies are defined as the conceptualization of pessimistic thoughts that consume members mentally and emotionally, preventing them from voicing their concerns (Browne et al., 2018). When this occurs, members consumed with negative fantasies will constantly think of the worst that could happen if they express their internal dissents. Thus, when members are tasked to help make decisions and experience such anxiety or fantasy, they remain silent to alleviate their trauma.

Wholly, Abilene paradox poses a risk for managers and organizations in that it masks organizational problems while not providing true support for group leaders and/or other members (Browne et al., 2016; Harvey et al., 2004). Organizations that contain members who silence their internal dissents may do so because of their inability to feel safe or empowered in the organization they serve. When this organizational behavior is normalized, it not only becomes detrimental to the decision-making process of an organization, but detrimental to the organization as a whole (Hannah et al., 2018). Organizations that make decisions with the existence of Abilene paradox, meaning that members are arbitrarily agreeing to decisions they internally disagree with, must question the validity of consensus in the decision-making process. The next section will further define consensus as it relates to Abilene paradox theory.

Consensus

Centrally, consensus is defined as a deliberation that occurs between members of a group to reach a course of action that reflects the opinion of each group member and/or the core values of the organization (Pérez et al., 2018). It is a form of group decision-making where preferences are either consolidated or aggregated to arrive at the best set of alternatives (Zhang et al., 2018). Within this process, members from all backgrounds are invited to share input that aids in the decision-making process (Pérez et al., 2018). While each group member may not necessarily agree with every decision made, a group consensus should be one that all group members can live with and decisions that are absent of oppression (Pérez et al., 2018; Urfalino, 2014). While there is literature that supports group consensus, there is also literature that finds group consensus altogether impossible.

According to Harvey et al. (2004) consensus is an unrealistic dynamic for organizations, as it falsely presumes that all members of an organization are in full support of decisions made, without any reservations. Many times, this is not the case, as group members tend to remain silent in the decision-making process and not voice their true dissention to avoid judgement, alienation, or opposition from the group (Harvey, 1988). Again, when group members are not able to address their true concerns, group consensus will mask organizational problems, which is detrimental to the organization (Harvey et al., 2004). Consensus is also cited as problematic because the true dissention may be hidden behind a traditional voting process (Guan, 2014). While voting may be a helpful tool to make decisions, voting—without true dialogue—

can create a power dynamic that amplifies the voices of the majority, while silencing the voices of the minority. The result is voting that is sloppy, illegitimate and does not bring true but artificial consensus (Guan, 2014). Artificial consensus, or a consensus that appears united, but is truly conflicting then permeates an organizational culture that agrees, but never questions their organization (Roberto, 2005).

Understanding consensus is valuable to this study as the praxis of consensus must be explored as it relates to decision-making. Consensus is not necessarily bad in and of itself and likewise, the concept of consensus is constantly being changed and refined (Guan, 2014). Centrally, its exploration in the study raises the question of how agreement is defined. Whereas true consensus may not ever be possible, false consensuses can presuppose superficial agreement underneath the true feelings of members (Browne et al., 2018; Harvey et al., 2004; Daniel, 2001; Wilson & Harrison, 2001). In the next section, the concept of spirituality will be explored.

Spirituality

Rezaparaghdam et al. (2019) defines spirituality as the reconnection of the inner life, the embracing of values that transcend material and nature laws, and the empathic acceptance of others. Spirituality refers not only to the reconnecting of one person to a spiritual source, but it also encompasses the notion that all human beings are interconnected (Greenman et al., 2010; Hallowell & Thompson, 1993; Howard, 2018; Karakas, 2010). While some researchers cite that spirituality, without reason, can impose challenges to scientific investigation, other researchers cite that spirituality redefines for leaders and followers alike what it means to make meaning out of tasks (Bloomquist, 2014; Karakas, 2010). That is, leaders and followers embrace spirituality because they desire their tasks to serve as more than just an end to themselves, but to in some way impact others and make a difference in the world around them (Ashmos & Duchon, 2000; Karakas, 2010). The concept of spirituality has also found itself welcomed as an important aspect of workplace culture (Ashmos & Duchon, 2000). This is due to the normalization of spirituality language in society, the downsizing of local businesses and organizations, as well as a growing curiosity for the afterlife (Ashmos & Duchon, 2000). When implemented into organizations, workplace spirituality has been proven to enhance employee well-being, create a sense of hospitality and sustainability in the workplace, improve organizational performance, and even influence decision-making (Ashmos & Duchon, 2000; Duchon & Plowman, 2005; Karakas, 2010; Rezaparaghdam et al., 2019).

More than just a concept to be studied, spirituality is engaged through a practice or discipline (Scorgie et al., 2011). For the Christian, as an example, such discipline could look like: a) Baptism (Acts 22: 16), b) The Lord's Supper or Eucharist (1 Cor. 11: 17-34), c) Private devotion (2 Tim. 3:16-17, d) Communal worship (Heb. 10: 25), e) Sabbath, f) Solitude and silence (Gal. 1: 16-17), and/or g) Prayer & fasting (Matt. 6: 5-6; 16-18) (Scorgie et al., 2011). The purpose of these disciplines is not to undertake a quest of morality or to establish a personal sense of piety but rather to develop a deeper relationship with Spirit (Turner, 2013). In establishing this relationship with the Spirit, the

believer is then compelled to also establish a deep relationship with other believers and with the community at large (Howard, 2018). Establishing a deep relationship with community then means being a prophetic witness to the world at large.

Centrally, the concept of spirituality is important for study because though it is facilitated through faith organizations, it can also influence the operation and culture of these same organizations (Fairholm, 1996). This is important because the ways by which individuals engage or mis-engage their spirituality may create unfair or unsafe power dynamics that contribute to how the organization functions. If the paradox of Christian witness rests in its ability to be vocal and prophetic in times of uncertainty and silence, the question becomes whether the very concept that the church facilitates—spirituality—can also work to suppress or silence its very voice (Cafferky, 2007; Malony, 1999). Thus, a qualitative study would be needed to explore spirituality's effect, if any, on church leadership and its implications. If indeed, spirituality can be leveraged within the decision-making process of faith organizations to silence other members, this will expand the classical understanding of Abilene paradox theory. It will also expand the understanding of group dynamics within ecclesial spaces. The next section provides details of the method used to create and institute the qualitative study.

III. METHOD

The qualitative study was completed through the sampling of seven Baptist leaders, male and female, comprised of Pastoral and Diaconate leadership within a focus group. Originally, the goal was to include 3 to 10 individuals within the focus group, which is suggested by scholars (Cozby & Bates, 2018; Kitzinger, 1995). A focus group was chosen to best serve this study because focus groups allow researchers to capitalize on the various forms of communication data, eclectic experiences, and social dynamics that occur in groups which can take the research into new, interesting directions (Kitzinger, 1995; Miles et al., 2020). The participants were obtained through a mixture of convenience sampling and purposive sampling. Because social media has made it easier to connect with the sample needed for the study, an official post went out on Facebook and Instagram social media platforms on November 4th to elicit participant support in the focus group (Weber et al., 2016). This allowed persons to voluntarily choose whether they would like to take part in the study while also reducing any potential bias (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Kitzinger, 1995).

After the postings went out on both social media pages on a Wednesday afternoon, the participants had until Friday afternoon to respond. Participants that responded after Friday afternoon would be placed on a back-up list in the event any other participants were unable to make the study group. On Saturday, November 7th, all participants that met the eligibility to participate in the study were notified and sent a link via *Zoom.us* to participate. The means of assessing eligibility was created through an intake form created via *SurveyMonkey.com.* On that form, those seeking to participate had to indicate the following: (a) their name, gender, and race, (b) whether they were a member of a Baptist church in the United States, (c) whether they held the title of Pastoral leadership (Senior, Executive, Youth or Children's Pastor), a Diaconate title (Deacon, Deaconess) or the title of a Trustee, (d) whether they were available to

participate on Sunday, November 15th at 3:00pm, (e) whether they would consent to recording and g) consent to confidentiality for the safety of other participants (Surmiak, 2018). From SurveyMonkey, there were nine individuals who responded. Seven of them made the meeting on Sunday, November 15th, and all of them were either a Pastor, Deacon or Deaconess. There were no trustees. Only one of the participants was a female. All participants were of African American descent. The meeting began with a formal greeting and appreciation for the participants willingness to engage in the focus group. Participants were asked to introduce themselves without their title, to keep the space safe, were again asked to consent to recording and to consent to confidentiality (Surmiak, 2018). All participants cooperated with this. Participants were informed that they would be asked ten statements of discussion and were invited to give their reflections on these statements as it related to their experience.

The statements for discussion were all derived from the literature of Abilene paradox theory, consensus theory, and spirituality. They are listed below from A-J, followed by a brief discussion of the specific literature that influenced the statements of discussion:

a) I feel that reaching consensus or unanimous decisions within any organization is possible to do.

b) I feel that reaching consensus or unanimous decisions in my church organization is possible to do.

c) I feel that reaching consensus or unanimous decisions is easier to do in church than in other organizations that I am a part of.

Statements A-C were influenced by consensus theory, causing the participants to think through their personal feelings of the validity and reliability of consensus theory and to think through their experience of group consensus in church organizations and organizations outside of the church (Guan, 2014; Pérez et al. 2018; Roberto, 2005 Urfalino, 2014).

d) I have outwardly agreed to decisions made in my church organization that I inwardly disagreed to, simply because the suggestion came from a pastor or trusted leader.

e) I have thought about the worst thing that could happen if I spoke an opposing or unpopular view of mine at a church meeting, which caused me to remain silent.

Statements D-E were influenced by action anxiety and negative fantasies, which contribute to the silence of members' feelings, therefore leading to Abilene paradox theory (Browne et al., 2018).

    f)   I feel there is a visible or invisible culture at my church that directly or indirectly judges opposing or dissenting decisions, causing people to keep silent, rather than voicing their true sentiments.

Statement F was influenced by Wilson and Harrison's (2001) notion of combating Abilene paradox through the destroying of hierarchical systems that openly or secretly threaten the safety to share freely in organizations.

    g)   I feel there is an invisible or visible "rule" in my church organization that says, "to agree with the decision means to be more spiritual or in tune with God" and "to go against a decision means to be less spiritual or less in tune with God."

    h)   I have felt that people would judge my level of spirituality, question my title or authority as a leader, or my personal relationship with God if I presented an opposing view of thought in a church meeting; as a result, I stayed quiet.

Statements G-H were both influenced from spirituality literature that posits spirituality as not only a reconnection to the inner life but also an interconnection to the world around us, which also influences the decision-making process (Ashmos & Duchon, 2000; Karakas, 2010; Rezaparaghdam et al., 2019).

    i)   I have left my church organization regretting my silence in a meeting because through further discussion, I discovered that others felt the same exact way I did.

    j)   My church organization has faced consequences because of a consensus or unanimous decision, which could have been avoided if I or other members would have not stayed silent.

Statements I-J were influenced from Abilene paradox theory literature where group members, through reflection experience feelings of resentment or regret towards the decision and the group remained silent (Harvey et al., 2004; Harvey, 1988). Again, these statements were utilized to provide open-ended reflection for the participants as ecclesial leaders who engage decision-making in faith organizations (Cozby & Bates, 2018). The conversation was no longer than two hours, which is suitable for a focus group (Cozby & Bates, 2018). All participants again were thanked for their participation. The next section will explore how the data gathered from the group would be processed and analyzed.

<div align="center">IV.   ANALYSIS</div>

After the focus group was completed, a content analysis was implemented to examine and codify the data collected from the interview. Content analysis is a noninvasive approach to the study of human communication (Duriau et al., 2007; Williams & Moser, 2019). Commonly used within qualitative research, the method involves an analysis of texts or interviews, whether articles, interviews, or other sources, with the goal of understanding value, intention, thought, and attitude (Duriau et al., 2007; Williams & Moser, 2019). A content analysis can be performed in both

quantitative and qualitative studies, is relatively low in cost, and can help reduce the bias within a study (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Duriau et al., 2007).

Specific to this study, both a conceptual content analysis, which analyzes the frequency of concepts that appear within a source and a relational analysis, which analyzes the relationship of such concepts was used to extract meaning from the study (Duriau, et al., 2007). To complete the conceptual analysis an audio recording of the interview was downloaded and transcribed into text using Microsoft Office's 365 transcribe feature. After the transcription, keywords or phrases used the most were highlighted, separated, and coded into a chart for further analysis. After this, those words underwent a relational analysis to determine if an underlying theme or relationship exists between the phrases (Flick, 2009; Strauss, 1998). Along with the transcription and the coding, field notes were also taken to ensure the further validity and organization of the data (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The next section will provide a summary of the focus group interview, as well as the results from the conceptual and relational content analysis.

V.   RESULTS

Centrally, all participants thoroughly enjoyed the focus group interview. With many of them not knowing each other, the participants were quick to build rapport with each other through the sharing of common experiences. Much of the conversation was decorated with laughter, even when topics became difficult. At the end of the interview, participants sought networking relationships with others, exchanged contact information on their own, and even suggested having the discussion in the future. Most notable was the female participant, who did not feel as if she had to hold her own dissents or suppress her voice, being the only female in the room. The group appreciated how safe it was to share their experiences. The results will appear as follows: (a) a review of focus group statements A-I and summary of focus group answers to those statements, (b) a conceptual analysis that features the most frequently used words in the interview, and (c) a relational analysis that interprets the relationship between common themes from the interview.

Summary of Focus Group Interview

As a review, statements A-C were as follows:

a) I feel that reaching consensus or unanimous decisions within any organizations is possible to do.

b) I feel that reaching consensus or unanimous decisions in my church organization is possible to do.

c) I feel that reaching consensus or unanimous decisions is easier to do in church than in other organizations that I am a part of.

In response to the first three statements (A-C) that were derived from consensus theory research, all seven participants agreed that reaching consensus within any organization is possible, even if there are challenges within the consensus itself. Multiple participants defined consensus as an agreement that is formed through the majority and even when individuals may disagree in opinion, consensus can still be achieved. Participants went on to discuss that all consensuses may not necessarily be true agreements meaning that sometimes individuals will agree just to comply, even if inward conflict exists. They also mentioned that while agreements can be reached about ideas, consensus can also be reached to not discuss ideas, also. For example, one participant cited that gay marriage is not discussed at their church, due to the many conflicting opinions.

The group concluded that there are two factors that influence decision-making at their respective churches: (a) the history, reputation, and authority of family members and (b) the denominational polity of their churches. The group mentioned that the dynamics of church membership (the original "brick families" of the church and the role they play or played in building or sustaining the church) can create challenging power dynamics that affect group consensus. Some participants mentioned that these families can make voting processes difficult, which can stunt the growth and development of the faith organization. With their reputation, these families have the power to persuade individuals within their own families and/or within their spheres of influence to vote (or not vote) according to the desire of the family. Because these families are so loyal to the faith organization, they will stay despite the conflict and despite how problematic their presence may be for other members.

The group mentioned that denominational polity also influences decision-making in faith organizations, making consensus difficult. The group reasons that this is because though the polity—which is outlined in the church constitution—provides order and direction for the church, this same polity must be constantly reinterpreted and updated. This is because polity does not always evolve and change to fit new contexts. Thus, the church ends up applying old polity to new situations. When this does not work, the church must revise or debate the polity before they can even move forward in deciding anything. Because of how complicated this process can be, one participant offered that reaching consensus within the church is more arduous than reaching consensus in any other organization. When this was stated, the entire group agreed.

As a review, statements D-E were as follows:

d) I have outwardly agreed to decisions made in my church organization that I inwardly disagreed to, simply because the suggestion came from a pastor or trusted leader.

e) I have thought about the worst thing that could happen if I spoke an opposing or unpopular view of mine at a church meeting, which caused me to remain silent.

Statements D-E, which were derived from action anxiety and negative fantasy literature, further revealed that church protocol and church culture further influenced decision-making in the respective churches of the participants. When faced with a decision that they internally opposed, the group participants only expressed their dissenting views within their ministry and not to the larger congregation. Per church protocol and culture, this method is intended to allow ministry leaders to express their concerns only within a sub-group in the organization so that the individual ministries may appear united in the larger congregation. Additionally, the goal of this approach is for individual ministry leaders to not appear divisive due to their level of influence. Some participants believed that because of how influential their role is in their faith organization, this method is effective and can help to move the decision-making process forward, despite their own personal dissension. Another participant expressed that they preferred to silence their dissension because their dissension will not affect the decision-making process in their faith organization any differently. While many of the participants cited that they have no problem with speaking up, they also agreed that when speaking up, their views can fall on deaf ears. Some participants felt this way especially when the church has made up its mind regarding its stance on a decision.

As a review, statement F was as follows:

f) I feel there is a visible or invisible culture at my church that directly or indirectly judges opposing or dissenting decisions, causing people to keep silent, rather than voicing their true sentiments.

Statement F was derived from Abilene paradox literature and specifically on the need to address systems or power dynamics that silence decision-makers' voices. To this statement, all group participants agreed and reiterated that family dynamics within faith organizations can create cultures of power that can suppress the voices of others. All participants but one agreed that this culture is both visible and invisible at their respective churches. A visible display of such culture means that the oppressive system is overt, combative, and obvious. An invisible display of this culture means that the oppressive system may be more secretive, tactful, and done out of the public eye. The invisible culture of oppression may be just as damaging, if not more damaging, than the visible culture of oppression. Altogether, the feelings from statement F heavily correlate to the reflections from statements A-C.

As a review, statements G-H were as follows:

g) I feel there is an invisible or visible "rule" in my church organization that says, "to agree with the decision means to be more spiritual or in tune with God" and "to go against a decision means to be less spiritual or less in tune with God."

h) I have felt that people would judge my level of spirituality, question my title or authority as a leader, or my personal relationship with God if I presented an opposing view of thought in a church meeting; as a result, I stayed quiet.

Statements G-H were derived from spirituality literature. Here, most of the participants agreed that while it's not verbally expressed, there exists an underlying assumption of one's level of spirituality based upon the decisions they make in a faith organization. Conversely, all participants cited that they have not experienced other members judging their level of spirituality based upon a decision they made (or did not make) within their faith organization. The participants that agreed with statement G reasoned that in faith organizations, to be "spiritual" or to have a higher level of "spirituality" is to be right, or at the very least, to be on the right side of God. Thus, participants are prone to make decisions based upon what it means to be "right" or "righteous" even if they disagree with the decision internally. Some participants mentioned that members will even arbitrarily agree with a spiritual leader, simply because they assume that the spiritual leader is more spiritual or is more "right with God." Thus, members are caused to wrestle between what it means to be right with God and what it means to be real with oneself, and whether the two can coexist.

Further, the participants also agreed that within the protocol and culture of their faith organization, their respective pastors are heavily influential in the decision-making process. Succinctly, the participants shared experiences where the church made decisions purely based upon the suggestion of their pastor or spiritual leader. Even when individual or group dissensions were felt, because the pastor is the "seated authority" of the organization, members were compelled to "fall in line" to the pastor's suggestion. "Falling in line," cited by one of the participants is a means of agreeing—even if internally disagreeing—to bestow a level of respect to the organization, to the pastor, or even to God. Another participant cited that when a "falling in line" happens, the protocol of voting only becomes a formality that solidifies what a spiritual leader has already decided without the input of its members.

As a review, statements I-J were as follows:

i)   I have left my church organization regretting my silence in a meeting because through further discussion, I discovered that others felt the same exact way I did.

j)   My church organization has faced consequences because of a consensus or unanimous decision, which could have been avoided if I or other members would have not stayed silent.

With statements I-J, which pulled from Abilene paradox theory, none of the group participants cited a sense of resentment for holding their silence within their faith organization. Though the participants have experienced moments where they held their dissension, most participants noted that they generally do not have a problem with being vocal in their faith organization. Additionally, participants who have held their dissension did not feel as if the holding of their dissension negatively impacted the church in its decision-making. This may be because the participants express their dissents in their sub-groups or because the role these faith leaders play in their organization requires them to be vocal. Still, the participants believe that spirituality

plays a role in decision-making in faith organizations and can also create member silence for others within faith organizations.

When the discussion was complete, the participants each commented on the organization of the focus group interview. They were especially intrigued with how clear and engaging the statements were. One participant volunteered to do a future study if the same format was included and would even be willing to give up watching football to engage in such conversation. Other participants cited that the focus group conversation inspired them to pay more attention to what occurs during their church's decision-making process and even to how they function in that process. The participants lastly mentioned that the lessons gained through the discussion could be transferred across faith organizations and into other workplace settings. The next subsection will explore the results from the conceptual analysis.

Conceptual Analysis of Focus Group Interview

Table 1
A list of words used repeatedly from transcribed audio of group interview, ranging from greatest to least.

Key Words Captured from Transcribed Video	Repetition of Word Used in the Video
Church	156
Agree/Agreement	66
People	49
God	30
Pastor	29
Speak	29
Spirit/Spiritual	26
Decision	18
Disagree/Disagreement	13

The above table (table 1) presents a list of commonly used words transcribed from the focus group interview. It is important to note that Table 1 is presented here as original research. Likewise, Table 1 does not take any information from other authors or researchers. The analysis of word repetition is essential to conceptual content analysis because it causes the researcher to pay attention to the way language is utilized and articulated in the data, especially when specific words are repeated throughout the data (Dariau et al., 2007; Flick, 2009; Strauss, 1998; Williams & Moser, 2019). From this table, there are several observations that are noteworthy that will be presented in this section, with formal conclusions being drawn in the relational analysis section.

What is important to note about the results of Table 1 are the following: (a) The word "church" and the words "disagree" and "disagreement" are the most used and least used words from the focus group interview; (b) the words "agree" or "agreement" and the word "decision" are the second most used and unused words in the focus

group; (c) the words "God," "spirit" or "spiritual" are used as just as many times together as the words "agree" or "agreement;" (d) The words "Pastor," "God," "Spirit" and "Spiritual" are used more times than the word "agree" or "agreement;" and (e) the words "God" and "Pastor" are used more times than the word "people" and more times than the word "speak." These are noteworthy observations which will be explored in the relational analysis, found in the next section.

Relational Analysis of Focus Group Interview

The relational analysis component of content analysis attempts to explore central themes from the data and arrive at conclusions based upon the relationships found from the study (Duriau et al., 2007; Williams & Moser, 2019). In this section, the frequently used terms will be analyzed to determine what relationships may exist between them. It is through relational analysis that meaning is revealed and theories can be created (Williams & Moser, 2019). A brief review of items A-E will also be featured in this section. After this will follow a brief reflection of each item.

To review, item A concluded: The word "church" and the words "disagree", or "disagreement" are the most used and least used words from the focus group interview. The data found from item A in the previous section indicates a tense relationship between faith organizations and the concept of disagreement. Though Abilene paradox theory was never defined nor explained in the interview, the underutilization of "disagreement" in the interview suggests that in relation to faith organizations, "disagreement" is a taboo term. While astonishing, this is problematic in that it either suggests that disagreement within church settings has a negative connotation or that individuals are hesitant to disagree due to a perceived evaluation of their spirituality. This could also be due to the oppression experienced from other members. Either way, this is not to say disagreements do not happen within the faith organizations. Rather, it does call into question the degree of false consensuses that may occur within faith organizations and how many of those false consensuses may go under-addressed.

Item B concluded: The words "agree", or "agreement" and the word "decision" are the second most used and unused words in the focus group. For "agree" or "agreement" to be used over the word "decision," this could presuppose that agreement within faith organizations is necessary in the decision-making process. While agreement is important in essence, this notion would imply that the concept or the goal of agreement, itself, is the central goal in the decision-making process. Conversely, it also implies that disagreement is not beneficial to the decision-making process and should not occur within faith organizations. If this is the case, the question—again—becomes whether members agree because they truly believe a decision is right or whether they agree only to satisfy other members or even to "be right with" God.

Because items C, D, and E are all related to spirituality, they will be explored together. Item C concluded: The words "God," "spirit" or "spiritual" are used just as many times together as the words "agree" or "agreement." Item D concluded: The words "Pastor," "God," "Spirit" and "Spiritual" are used more times than the word "agree" or

"agreement." Item E concluded: The words "God" and "Pastor" are used more times than the word "people" and more times than the word "speak."

The data found in the items C, D, and E collectively suggest that spirituality not only plays a role in decision-making, but individuals who represent spirituality, such as a pastor, are also influential in the decision-making process (Ashmos & Duchon, 2000; Duchon & Plowman, 2005; Karakas, 2010; Rezaparaghdam et al., 2019). The correlation in item C suggests that spirituality and agreement are synonymous concepts. While spirituality may entail some level of agreement with Spirit, the data could imply that within faith organizations one's capacity to agree also indicates one's level of spirituality. If this is the case, item D would then expand this definition to include pastors as leaders with a higher level of spirituality than others, and thus leaders to be obeyed regardless of personal dissension. The implication of items C and D result in item E. If the words "Pastor" and "God" are used more times than "people" and "speak," this connotes that spirituality can be used as power dynamic that contributes to member silence and even diminishes the humanity of its group members. If not checked, item E is problematic on a theological, ethical, and organizational level. The nature of these levels will be explored in the discussion section.

VI.   DISCUSSION

This study sought to explore whether spirituality could be an additional contributing factor to Abilene paradox theory in faith organizations. The goal of the qualitative study was to (a) provide additional research literature on Abilene paradox theory as it relates to the church, (b) initiate further discussion on the relationship between Abilene paradox theory and Christianity, (c) explore its effect, if any, of Abilene paradox theory on churches versus other organizations, (d) and explore whether the definition of Abilene paradox theory needs to be expanded to include spirituality as a contributing factor. To assess this research question further, a qualitative study was created and conducted through a virtual focus group of seven Baptist leaders, male and female, who led within the Pastorate or the Diaconate ministry. From the transcription, a summary of the interview was provided, and a content analysis was performed to assess the data from a conceptual and relational perspective. Based upon this data, it can be concluded that within faith organizations, spirituality is another component that can contribute to Abilene paradox theory. Largely, this means that spirituality, when leveraged within faith organizations, has the capacity to create a "mute" church or a church that operates based upon false consensuses.

This is not to say that leaders and members should not seek agreement within their faith organization. Rather, it is to say that leaders and members should not dismiss disagreement, see disagreement as inherently sinful, or even leverage faith or spirituality to alleviate disagreement. Spiritually, this behavior disconnects the Body of Christ, more than it unifies it. The Body of Christ can disagree and still be in community. Disagreement does not necessarily sin, but rather—when facilitated appropriately—can provide new viewpoints to faith organizations. When faith organizations avoid

disagreement, they limit their possibilities and even limit God's ability to work within those possibilities. They create ethical, theological, and organizational problems.

Ethically, this behavior diminishes the humanity of a person. When spirituality is leveraged to persuade decision-makers, this is no different from "brick families" that leverage their reputation to do the same. Both influence group members to just "fall in line" which deprives members of their own social agency. This is also a problem theologically: If God—with all sovereignty—does not deprive men and women of their social agency, why should we? Leveraging spirituality within decision-making theologically contradicts the goal of spirituality. It creates a power dynamic that makes men and women into gods, versus teaching them how to become like Christ. While spirituality is necessary to consider when making decisions, believers must remember that even the most unfavorable decisions do not limit the favor of a sovereign God. This understanding calls the faith community to trust God's help in making the best of decisions, and to trust God's heart concerning us when we have made the worst of the decisions.

Organizationally, when Abilene paradox theory occurs in faith organizations, it contradicts the core values of Christian organizations in ways unlike other organizations. The core value of faith organizations is the Commission to be prophetic. That is, to be a voice to the voiceless (Prov. 31: 8), a cry in the wilderness (Jn. 1: 23), and a witness to the world (Acts 1: 18). Literally, the Church exists to speak, to cry loud and spare not (Isa. 58: 1). Without a mouth, there is no ministry. Thus, for the Church to function on "mute" is a direct contradiction not only to its values, but also to its very existence.

For Future Research

There are five ideas for future research. The first is to study the impact of spiritual leadership on decision-making within the church. According to Chen and Yang (2012), spiritual leadership is the approach of creating consensus within an organization, guided by a leader's values and beliefs. Spiritual leadership advocates that individuals can become a part of the organization through the agreement of those values and beliefs. It would be notable to evaluate the intersection of spirituality and spiritual leadership as it relates to group dynamics. Secondly, another idea is to duplicate the study with the presence of associate ministers since they traditionally work closely with pastoral leadership. This could also intersect with the concept of spiritual leadership. The third idea is to duplicate the study using a focus group of either more women or all women to see if the dynamic would change through gender.

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Wayne E. Credle, Jr., is pursuing a Ph.D. in Organizational Leadership at the School of Business and Leadership at Regent University. His Master of Divinity was obtained from Duke Divinity School and his Bachelor of Sociology & Religious Studies was obtained from Virginia Wesleyan University. Wayne is the first African American graduate of the African Leadership Institute for Community Transformation in Wellington, South Africa, where he obtained a certificate in Transformational Leadership & Facilitation. Wayne is a former pastor of the Bahamas Methodist Conference and has served several other churches and institutions, locally and internationally. Wayne and his wife, Passion, currently serve at Divine Unity Community Church RVA and they own C.R.E.D.L.E. LLC, a leadership development and consulting firm for churches and small businesses.

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