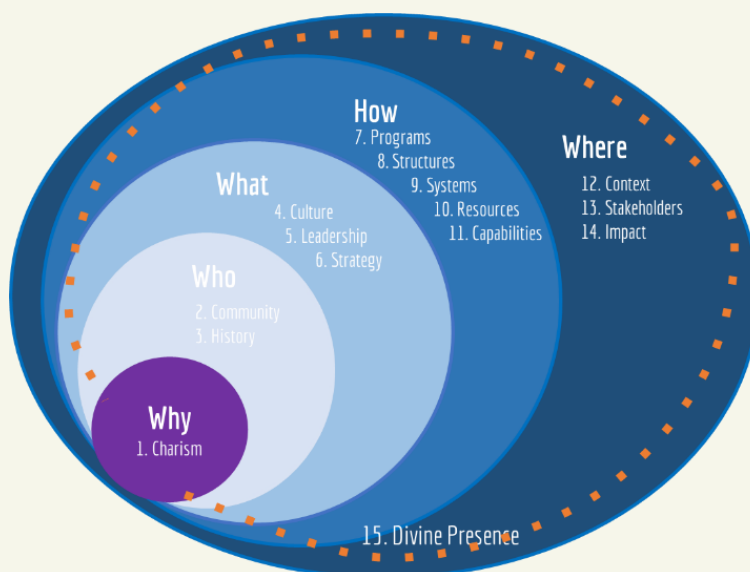


A Theological Model of Organizations



INTRODUCTION

Pastoral leaders who are involved in administration and institutional development often find themselves steeped in the demands of many aspects of organizational life. Sometimes this causes them to lose sight of the forest for the trees. It thus helps to zoom out now and then to see the bigger picture, including the view of the organization in its totality.

Many business models offer frameworks for looking at organizations in their inter-related components but these are often partial in nature or even distorted. They tend to espouse self-referential views of the organization rather than the wider context or the greater good. They also tend to lack historical and eschatological dimensions of reality, and are mostly secular in their worldview. On the other hand, spiritual perspectives of organizations such as religious doctrines about the nature of the Church tend to lack attention to practical details.

AN INTEGRAL VIEW

Here we propose a model that seeks to be as holistic as possible. Our starting point is God's loving action in creating, sustaining, and saving the world. The Gospel of John reminds us that "In the beginning was the Word ... and the Word became flesh and lived among us" (John 1:1, 14). God's loving intent to bring forth life and goodness in the world has been made incarnate in earthly realities since the beginning of time and climaxes in the Christ event. Now the Church continues this divine economy of salvation in which all humankind is called to participate. This work is communal in nature so as to manifest the ultimate communion to which all creation is destined. Yet it occurs through a diversity of persons and groups, each one manifesting the Divine Logos in a unique way while remaining an integral part of the whole. Hence, from a theological basis, an organization can be defined as a community of persons called and committed to collaborate in God's life-giving work through a specific role within a given time and place, bearing fruit from its unique charisms. This general view of organizations can take many specific forms, from religious congregations and schools to healthcare institutions, socio-pastoral centers, parishes, dioceses, and global ecclesial

institutions. It can even be relevant to business enterprises and civic groups. As portrayed in the above diagram, such a model comprises 5 levels with 15 key elements.

The “Why” of an organization

1. **Charism:** This can be considered as an organization’s DNA—its God-seed, a unique manifestation of the divine Logos. The word “charism” has the same meaning as “gift” and “grace”. It comes from God and is often experienced as a coalescence of the organization’s identity, values, purpose, and strengths before the eyes of God. This is the True-North that enables navigation through discernment in uncertain times. Thus, the organization is most fruitful when it is living and contributing from its charism. At the same time, charisms are the true wellsprings of life, energy, meaning, direction, and growth. Although charisms are enduring in essence, they can be re-discovered or re-understood in new ways amidst changing contexts and times, and by new generations. Stewardship of the charism entails keeping its flame alive and relevant in every age.

The “Who” of an organization

2. **Community:** An organization is constituted by a particular community of persons who are called and gifted in its charism. Yet this may be manifest in diverse ways among different members. Care of the community entails caring for each person as a unique subject, fostering his or her holistic well-being, growth, and development. This includes providing adequate welfare, guidance, support, formation, remuneration for work where relevant, and ensuring meaningful participation. The community as a whole also needs to be attended to in terms of nurturing relationships of solidarity, fostering teamwork and collaboration amidst diversity, sharing life together in synodality, and ensuring renewal in the joining of new members or in the inevitable leaving of some present ones.

3. **History:** Every organization travels an on-going journey where the past, present, and future all need to be taken into account. Its unique story shapes its present identity especially through the enduring influence of its genesis, the significant times of crises and re-births, and the impact of legendary figures. These powerful narratives further elucidate the charism of the organization and often form part of the lenses with which organizational members see themselves and interpret their contexts. They also shape organizational culture and paradigms, including the goals deemed to be desirable, the traditions deemed vital to preserve, the risks deemed necessary to avoid. History can play both an enabling and debilitating role, and whilst memories of the past can be recalled to provide courage and direction for the present, they also need to be healed where necessary to create genuine freedom for the road ahead.

The “What” of an organization

4. **Culture:** Organizational culture is the confluence of paradigms, mindsets, beliefs, and attitudes that influence behaviors, decisions, actions, and practices in organizational life. It emerges from the “Why” and “Who” of the organization but can also be shaped by current contexts and activities. Culture is sometimes manifested in the present “spirit” or collective affectivity of members, whether positive or negative. In large organizations, a general culture often exists alongside several sub-cultures. Though it is not easy to change, culture can nevertheless evolve through new experiences and new members.

5. **Leadership:** Leadership plays an important role in shaping culture even as it is influenced by it. Leadership can be regarded as the exercise of influence, power, and authority to steer the organization and guide its members along a desired path. It includes the task of governance and its associated systems, structures, and policies. Sometimes formal leadership exists alongside informal leadership in the form of spontaneous acts of influence and the exercise of non-formal power by certain members. This is not necessarily something to be suppressed. Synodality calls for all forms of leadership to collaborate synergistically in openness to the Holy Spirit which blows where it wills, so that the organization can better navigate its history and remain true to its vocation. Whether formal or informal, good leadership is exercised in collegiality, humility, dialogue, and service, reflecting the trinitarian activity of salvation in the world.

6. **Strategy:** Ensuring a clear and relevant strategy is one of the tasks of leadership. Strategy refers to the areas of focus or key objectives by which an organization achieves its purpose and mission in a specific context. They are usually relevant for a limited period of time, after which new strategies—or “strategic priorities”—to suit new contexts must be discerned. Strategies can pertain to specific types of programs, specific target groups, certain issues of pastoral concern, new ways and approaches of doing things, or even specific areas of organizational transformation. They represent the best ways in which an organization can offer the gift of its charism to the world, given its present resources, personnel, capabilities, and contexts. A communal discernment approach is essential in determining the strategy of the organization so that everyone is involved in listening, dialoguing, determining, and carrying out the will of God for the road ahead.

The “How” of an organization

7. **Programs:** Strategies are incarnated through specific programs, which are actual services, ministries, and other apostolic works of the organization. These works can range from large educational institutions and global social advocacy programs to grassroots-level ministries and pastoral services for specific groups.

8. **Structures:** In order for programs to operate effectively, suitable structures are needed in terms of how people and units are organized relative to one another, what roles and responsibilities are assigned to each one, and what rules and regulations are to be observed. There are also structures in terms of how the workplace or community house is organized, including working and living arrangements, whether physical or online.

9. **Systems:** Alongside these structures, various organizational systems ensure smooth and productive routine processes in the programs and in community life. These include liturgical and community routines and program operations that are run regularly, as well as general organizational systems for collaboration, decision-making, personnel care and development, finance, resource and facility management, fund-raising, information management, internal and external communication, planning and evaluation, compliance with ecclesial or civil requirements, and safeguarding of vulnerable persons. It is useful to document these systems in writing so as to ensure continuity and to improve upon them when necessary.

10. **Resources:** Resources are needed to implement each program and to sustain the community. These include material resources such as funds, land, facilities, equipment, and relevant physical infrastructure as well as non-material resources such as networks, information, technologies, legitimacy, and even goodwill.

11. Capabilities: Enabling all these to work well are the capabilities of the personnel. These refer to the specific competencies that the organization requires in order to do its work, whether in education, social ministry, advocacy, spiritual formation, or pastoral care, etc. Certain competencies are particularly important in the organization's charism and their continuity needs to be ensured.

The "Where" of an organization

12. Context: Context refers to the surrounding environment of the organization, including the social, economic, cultural, religious, political, ecological, and technological realities at the local level and even beyond. These exert an influence on the organization to varying degrees, and are in turn impacted by the organization's actions. Hence it is important to regularly discern the "signs of the times" so as to adopt the appropriate strategic priorities in line with how the Spirit is leading.

13: Stakeholders: Just as important is the organization's relationship with stakeholders, which refer to the groups of people who are relevant to its life and mission in varying degrees. These may include students and their parents, beneficiaries, partners, donors, ecclesial and civil organizations, potential new members, organizations in related fields of work, and communities affected by or affecting the organization.

14: Impact: Through its being and doing, the organization makes an impact upon the world. Though this is often tangible and intangible, it is helpful to discern and evaluate regularly whether this impact is aligned with the organization's charism and strategic priorities. This can be done by observing some visible signs and by attentive listening to the context and the stakeholders, thus discerning the presence of God's Spirit working through the organization.

The Divine Presence

15. God works actively with the organization and is present in all realms of organizational life. Collaboration with God entails an attentive disposition on the part of everyone such that the community exercises habitual discernment at all times and is responsive to the presence of God's Spirit. This is facilitated by a culture of contemplation, hospitality, openness, and generosity.

CONCLUSION

The theological model of organizations presented here highlights that the Divine Logos unfolds in the world through human collaboration in an ordered manner. Thus, organizational leadership and administration are not outside religious work but are very much a part of it, and no less sacred and holy. All 15 elements of the organization are inter-dependent and integral. Their mutual coherence results in fruitfulness and flourishing whilst their incoherence leads to aridity and even deterioration. This theological model also shows that organizations are not static entities but frequently undergo development, sometimes passing through "growing pains" in the form of temporary disequilibria and tensions. Organizations thus need to remain open and responsive to change whilst deepening in the roots of their charisms. The model can serve as a guide to ensure that all aspects of the organization are attended to, whether in stable or turbulent times. Each element can be appreciated and leveraged upon for its strengths, or more closely reviewed and redressed where there are areas for improvement.

In summary...

God's on-going creation and salvation of the world takes place through a multitude of **charisms**, each one manifesting the Divine Logos in a unique way. God calls human persons to collaborate in the divine enterprise as **communities**, and this Call has an unfolding **history** which becomes an integral part of the community's life and identity. The exercise of **leadership** enables the community to navigate this history so as to remain true to God's Call. At the same time, these experiences result in a certain **culture** which evolves gradually as the community and the historical context change. In each milieu, the charism needs to be gifted to the world through appropriate **strategies** and their associated **programs**. And all these have to be enabled and sustained through suitable **structures, systems, resources, and capabilities**. The signs of the times in the wider **context** demand that strategies be kept relevant, and carried out in interaction with a wide variety of **stakeholders**. In this way, the community makes an **impact** on the world. Through all this, the **Divine Presence** continues to animate the community, whose flourishing flows from a close relationship with God in all things.

SOME PRACTICAL APPLICATIONS OF THE FRAMEWORK

The framework can be used for problem diagnosis. If there is a particular issue confronting an organization, its leaders and members can try to identify which of the 15 elements it pertains to. For example, in the case of diminishing participation in a previously popular program, the locus of the immediate problem is associated with item 7. Consequently, the framework can help to elucidate the possible loci of underlying causes. For example, perhaps the context has changed (item 12), or the capabilities (item 11) have changed such that the program is no longer as effective as it used to be.

Another use of the framework is in change management. For example, if there is an intention to adopt new strategies (item 6), then these have to be evaluated against all of the aspects of the organization to ensure alignment, address possible tensions, and leverage on positive influences. For instance, are the new strategies in line with the charism? Do they enjoy a strong sense of ownership by the community? What new programs, resources, structures, and capabilities are entailed? Or, if there is an inevitable change in personnel composition (item 2), how will this affect culture, leadership, strategies, capabilities, etc? What guidance can be obtained from the organization's charism and history?

A third application of the framework is in regular organizational evaluation. The "health" of each dimension can be assessed, as well as the overall coherence among all dimensions. A fourth application is that the framework shows where specific organizational tools can be applied. For instance, context analysis and stakeholder mapping would be beneficial for items 12 and 13 respectively, whilst team-building and personnel performance management tools would be relevant for item 2. Finally, leaders can note where they spend most of their time and energy - at which level and on which item and why. They can then endeavor to strike a balance.

Some questions for reflection based on the model:

1. Looking at all these aspects of organization, where do you feel a pull? Where do you feel an aversion? What does that tell you about your work? Or about yourself?
2. As a leader, where have you been spending most of your attention and energies? Why? Which elements have you paid relatively less attention to? Which elements might have been neglected or were in your blind spot? Why?
3. Where in the framework do you think your strengths and weaknesses lie? Where do you need better know-how, tools, or deeper understanding?
4. To what extent is there coherence among all these elements in your organization? Where are the incoherencies, if any? Where do you see links and relationships between the elements? How are these impacting your change management endeavors?
5. Overall, what transformations do you hope for in the organization? Where in the framework is this change located? Which elements in the framework call for the necessity of this change? Which elements can you leverage upon? Where might there be hindrances? What concurrent or consequential changes need to be made?