

Information-Seeking Behaviors of Faith Leaders

Opportunities for Lifelong Learning

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In 2024, a group of seminary library directors discussed a need to support the information literacy skills of practicing faith leaders. This discussion started with a question: should the group develop a new model of information literacy training for faith leaders in seminary and their supportive faith communities? As discussion continued, the research group decided to take a step back and first learn about the current information behaviors of faith leaders. We envisioned a research project to better illuminate two issues: What past training or teaching related to information literacy had “stuck,” and what new needs have risen since current leaders completed formal ministerial training?

Because we wanted our findings to relate broadly to leaders who completed their seminary education both recently and long ago, we simplified our primary research question: What are the information literacy needs for practicing leaders of faith communities? We also sought to investigate several detailed aspects of leaders’ current information behaviors: behavioral differences by several demographic factors, by religious group, and by levels of training; change in information

behavior in response to technological advancement; and faith leaders' role and competency in teaching or demonstrating information behaviors to parishioners. The research would investigate behaviors and opinions of current faith leaders to better determine the needs of current and future leaders.

Much of the literature relevant to information behaviors of practicing clergy focuses on the skills taught to and demonstrated by ministry students: Lipton and Nyrose (2011) found that undergraduate religious studies students in faith-based and secular institutions seek out information in similar ways, while Lincoln and Lincoln (2011) showed that seminarians often combine several research steps into one, and lacked sophisticated information searching skills. Kamilos and Birch (2014) demonstrated that targeted librarian-led instruction can meaningfully improve doctoral ministry students' information literacy skills. Theologically-aligned frameworks for that instruction have also emerged, with Badke (2015) arguing that the Association of College & Research Libraries (ACRL) Framework (2015) aligns naturally with hermeneutical and interpretive practices central to ministerial formation. As clergy increasingly minister in digital and media-rich environments, scholars have underscored the need for enhanced digital literacy. Oliver et al. (2020) highlight how theological educators are preparing students for new media engagement as a core ministerial competency and created a digital literacies toolkit for theological educators. Gin et al. (2025) reimagine graduate theological education to better prepare clergy for leadership in complex, technologically-mediated, and culturally-diverse contexts.

However, the literature is thin in regard to the information literacy or information-seeking behaviors of active faith leaders. Stephens et al. (2025) described several traditional lifelong learning needs for practicing ministers to improve preaching. Among the skills with greatest clergy interest for self-improvement was “[u]sing resources/commentary representing diverse perspectives to inform my preaching” (Stephens et al. 2025, 5). The need for lifelong learning in information and digital literacy for faith leaders is apparent. In this chapter, I share the results of a study used to begin addressing that need. I begin by introducing the method and process for data collection. The results then follow, with special attention drawn to reported current information behaviors of practicing faith leaders. An interpretation section identifies five noteworthy themes and findings: rootedness in scripture; need for diverse sources; responsibility of leadership; the lack of reference to artificial intelligence; and the lack of reference to

libraries and librarians. Finally, the chapter ends with implications for future research and development of lifelong learning in information literacy for faith leaders.

Description and Methods

The initial research group consisted of five library directors (Karl Stutzman, James Bell, Amy Bryant, Tonya Fawcett, and Roger Peters) from seminaries of different Christian denominations (Szpunar and Bradley 2025, 3). Our goal was to create a cross-denominational approach to information literacy training, not favoring the denomination of one seminary over another. Even so, we were limited to faith leaders educated (at least partially) at seminaries with Protestant Christian traditions: Anabaptist Mennonite, Church of God (Anderson, Ind.), Charis Fellowship, and Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod.

The target demographic for this study consisted of practicing religious leaders, defined broadly as persons “empowered as a recognized representative of a church or other religious organization . . . to provide religious instruction and spiritual guidance to others” (Szpunar and Bradley 2025, 6). As researchers, we hoped to reach leaders who had been in practice for many years as well as those recently entering the profession. We also hoped to reach traditional teaching and preaching ministers as well as those whose primary work extended beyond a pulpit or lectern.

Throughout this chapter, the terms *faith leaders* and *religious leaders* are used interchangeably, often in reference to the broader field of ministry work. The term *respondents* is used exclusively for those who provided data in the study. Likewise, the terms *congregant* and *parishioner* are used in reference to people in a community who would be under the influence of the faith leader as a member or follower of a religious group, church, congregation, or parish. The term *community member* is a broader term, referring to people who live in the relevant geographic area but may not be involved with the religious group or church.

The research project received funding through a grant from the Private Academic Library Network of Indiana (PALNI), a consortium that comprises two dozen college, university and seminary libraries, including those involved in the study. Through the grant, two research consultants, Ruth Szpunar and Eric Bradley, were added to the project

to collect data. These consultants employed two data collection methods in the study. First, they sent a survey to seminary students and graduates. Four institutions, Anabaptist Mennonite Biblical Seminary, Anderson University School of Theology, Grace College & Seminary, and Concordia Theological Seminary each provided email contact for 250 random students or former students. This created a pool of 1,000 potential survey respondents. The 24-question electronic survey included thirteen screening and demographic questions, which might suggest trends among different demographic groups. The questionnaire then included nine questions on respondents' information behavior. These questions included how respondents create information, what type of information and how they take it in, how they cite or reference information, and how they evaluate information. Two final questions invited respondents to participate in a follow up interview.

For the second method of data collection, the consultants conducted videoconference interviews with volunteers. Respondents from the initial survey could signal their willingness to participate in a ten-question live interview in which they would orally respond to information-related scenarios, questions related to their methods of information seeking and evaluation, and behaviors with social media and other information technology. The interviews provided qualitative data to complement the survey data. For the full list of survey and interview questions, see Szpunar and Bradley (2025, 6–9).

Results and Discussion

The final sample of faith leaders was 988, less the expired contacts from the original pool of 1,000. The respondents to the survey totaled 69 for a 6.9% response rate. Among those, 16 respondents did not self-identify as current religious leaders and were dismissed from the rest of the survey. The following demographic and behavioral data is therefore derived from the remaining 53 respondents.

Demographics

Ninety percent of respondents indicated their present religion was Protestant, with the remaining indicating Other. Approximately 74% of respondents self-identified as a Born Again Christian and/or an

Evangelical Christian. When asked for specific group affiliation, the highest number, 15 (28%), reported Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod. The next three highest were Mennonite (11; 21%), Church of God—Anderson, Ind. (7; 13%), and Independent (6; 11%). The remaining 14 (26%) were divided among eight different groups.

Over 50% of respondents reported serving in religious leadership for twenty or more years, the highest option available. The next largest group (25% of respondents) reported 1–5 years of leadership. Related, 33% of respondents reported their religious training ended twenty or more years prior, and another 33% reported their training concluded 1–5 years prior. The third-largest group (22%) reported 11–20 years since their training concluded. The 65+ age group represented the largest number of respondents, with 43%. The remaining respondents were distributed as follows: 25–34 years (11%), 35–44 years (21%), 45–54 (11%), and 55–64 years (13%). Respondents overwhelmingly reported receiving general education in high school (98%), in a bachelor's degree (94%) and in a master's degree (75%). Only 17% of respondents reported general education in a doctoral degree. In contrast, 85% reported religious training in a master's degree, with fewer receiving religious training at other levels: associate's degree (4%), bachelor's degree (23%), and doctoral degree (17%). Taken as a whole, the respondents represent a fairly educated and mature group, including individuals who experienced years of religious leadership prior to the completion of their religious training.

Respondents were disproportionately male (68%), compared to female (30%), with one respondent preferring not to answer (2%). Three final demographic factors signal a fairly homogenous group of respondents: 89% report the United States as their country of origin, 85% currently reside in the United States, and 89% report their ethnic background as White/Caucasian. For complete demographic details, see Szpunar and Bradley (2025, 13–15).

Information Behaviors

Data collected from both the survey and the interviews provides insight into the information behaviors of faith leaders. In this section, most data collected from the survey is noted with percentages of applicable respondents. Additionally, quotations from interview respondents are included throughout. For full survey results and interview report, see Szpunar and Bradley (2025, 16–35).

Faith leaders create information. Not surprisingly, 74% of respondents noted they create oral information in the form of both sermons and presentations, with the rest noting they create presentations (17%) or sermons (8%). Some respondents (8%) also noted their creation of oral information in the form of workshops, retreats, consulting, and more. Similarly, respondents create written information in the forms of denominational articles (40%), letters (28%), journal articles (17%), blogs, books and chapters, devotionals, curricula, and more.

Faith leaders consume a variety of information sources. Religious leaders mentioned 146 unique sources that they read or listen to regularly, with thirty sources mentioned more than once; additionally, religious leaders mentioned 93 unique sources that they read or listen to occasionally, with nine sources mentioned more than once. Among the specific sources noted, the vast majority are current or recent within the last forty years. Material types include books, podcasts, magazines, news, and journals. One respondent noted, “So for sermons in particular, [my] primary source is going to be the Bible, obviously, as you mentioned, but then my secondary sources will be usually commentaries on that text, [to] kind of get an idea of what’s going on in the text. And then the majority of my sermon writing [process] is actually reading other sermons.” Approximately a third of the sources noted are by specific individuals, highlighting the respondents’ interest in authorship in addition to format. With news sources specifically, respondents noted a need to engage selectively and to include multiple perspectives. They engage with digital platforms and also personal networks and community discussion.

Faith leaders use a variety of methods in information evaluation. Biblical alignment topped the list of reported evaluation tools used to accept or reject information (51%). This finding is unsurprising for a group of Christian leaders predominantly identifying as Evangelical. However, the long list of other methods demonstrates a wide variety of strategies for source evaluation employed by these religious leaders. Other methods include: consultation with peers, friends, and other individuals (20%); critical thinking based on the source, evidence, or logic (12%); discernment and contemplation, including prompting from the Holy Spirit (12%); further research or cross referencing on the topic (14%); source validity, bias, authorship, and authenticity examination (20%); thorough reading (8%); trusted source of information (8%); and worldview or personal missional alignment (12%). Specifically, respondents’ religious worldview is centered in evaluation of news through application of a long-term perspective (consider historical

and spiritual context); a focus on justice and equity for vulnerable populations; and the elevation of a secondary responsibility to be politically engaged.

Faith leaders respond to questions with a variety of strategies. In response to questions of theology or current events, respondents reported a range of strategies to provide a good response: seeking understanding and clarity of the question or issue; reliance on past theological education or personal research; scriptural alignment and Biblical foundation; intuition; contextual consideration; and presenting multiple perspectives. One respondent noted theological questions need to be directed back to scripture: “If it’s grounded in what the Scriptures actually teach, not something hypothetical, but something that I can prove directly from the Word of God.” Another respondent shared a response strategy of demonstrating openness and interest in parishioners’ interpretation and evaluation before leading to their own: “So I try to determine how much openness is there, and is this a safe place, or is someone like learning to attack or finding a reason to attack me personally? So then after that, I kind of lean in . . . saying, ‘Well, let’s talk about it.’ And usually I ask their point of view first, just to find out where the thin ice is and where the mud or the potholes are, and then I say, ‘Well, I have a perspective. May I share mine with you?’”

Faith leaders cite their sources. Nearly unanimously (98%), respondents reported citing religious texts in their work. Similarly, the vast majority (85%) also claimed to cite other sources in their work. They use a variety of methods in citation. Many include verbal citations during sermons or presentations or use graphics or videos. One respondent noted the use of social and electronic media within their presentations: “My communication background taught me [to] consider your audience . . . like, if I’m talking to high schoolers . . . you got to keep and maintain the students’ attention, so maybe I go to TikTok or Instagram reels . . . I might include some clips of that media in my talk.” Some respondents reported comfort in formal written citations when producing written communication, or even in their personal notes. However, some respondents report that, due to their reliance on scripture, they do not include other sources.

Faith leaders continue to develop their information skills. In longer interviews, respondents noted several ways they have gained additional information literacy expertise following their formal seminary education. Some learned to use community, historical, or cross-cultural contexts and verification, while others developed

personal theological frameworks. One respondent shared how they arrived at a scriptural centering:

Well, then I had to kind of figure out some things on my own and patiently and over a journey of a while, I said, okay, all that peripheral stuff is pointless. Maybe it wasn't pointless, but it is now, and then you start over, and then you begin to integrate what is pointed and what is helpful. And part of engaging the scriptures has been that re-engagement and an understanding and appreciation, not of the facts, but the meaning of Scripture and the depth, the many layers of meaning.

Similarly, some respondents develop familiarity with source triangulation or prioritizing primary sources, while others develop awareness of the influence of social media algorithms and individual news institutions.

Additionally, religious leaders use a variety of avenues for growth. They engage with religious texts such as study of the Bible or intentionally broaden their perspectives through reading of diverse sources or engaging in personal reflection or community discussion. They pursue further educational development opportunities and embrace technological advancements. Perhaps as a result of these intentions for growth, and the changing climate of information, respondents also reported changes in their information-seeking behaviors. Some pointed to a shift away from print and toward digital formats, describing an increased ability to multitask while consuming information. One respondent noted the consumption of news media especially supports multitasking: "I can get the *New York Times* headlines and the *Washington Post* . . . in the email . . . when I wake up, that's a change. My father had to . . . get it delivered to his door." This multitasking may be a necessity rather than an option: an increase in available information, both helpful and not, prompts the need for an increased selectivity of news sources, the consultation of more diverse sources, and enhanced fact-checking.

Faith leaders are engaged in social media. This recent communication and information medium has increased immediate access to news and community engagement with information. When asked how social media has changed their information-seeking behavior, one respondent replied: "I might hear about something on social media first, but then corroborate that on the internet, whereas, like ten years ago, it might be you hear about something through a general Google search and then find out more on social media. And now I feel like that

flipped, for better [or] for worse.” Some respondents also reported their increased caution as a response to misinformation delivered through social media. They reported sharing content related to their church or community, their own theological teachings and insights, as well as articles and other positive content. Respondents reported a resistance to sharing personal photos or other self-promotion, controversial opinions, or unverified information.

Faith leaders teach information behaviors to their parishioners. The teaching of good information behaviors happens both directly and indirectly. Respondents reported modeling positive behaviors by providing diverse sources, demonstrating transparency and balanced engagement, and providing access to citations and resources. In one example, a respondent shared how they might promote and provide access to literature from their own collection: “If they see a cool title on a spine, they can just check it out and take it home. So there’s that sort of modeling where I just give them stuff that’s already vetted and kind of build their sense of . . . right and wrong . . . in that way.” Respondents also teach information behaviors directly by using sermons as teaching opportunities, emphasizing critical thinking, teaching source evaluation, and participating in one-on-one mentoring. Further, they reported encouraging parishioners in positive information behaviors through promotion of communal learning and by encouraging primary source consultation and ongoing learning.

Interpretation

Several major themes emerged from the findings on information behaviors of practicing religious leaders. One major theme is their desire to remain grounded in religious texts, particularly scripture. Religious leaders consistently prioritize primary sacred sources as the foundation for teaching, preaching, and decision-making. They turn to scripture not only for theological guidance but also for inspiration and practical solutions, demonstrating a commitment to maintaining authenticity and fidelity to their traditions. Their information-seeking behaviors reflect interpretation, consultation of commentaries, and engagement with historical and cultural contexts to ensure that their messages remain rooted in core beliefs.

Another significant theme is their commitment to including diverse perspectives. At first glance, this second theme could seem contrary to

the first. While scripture remains central, faith leaders actively seek information from a variety of viewpoints to enrich their understanding and connect with the diverse experiences of their congregations. This behavior includes exploring scholarly works, interfaith dialogues, contemporary issues, and traditionally marginalized voices and peoples. By engaging with differing interpretations and global voices, they aim to foster inclusivity, address complex social questions, and remain relevant in a rapidly changing world.

Additionally, faith leaders recognize their leadership responsibility in guiding their communities. Most faith leaders approach information gathering with an acute awareness that their choices influence not only individual spiritual growth but also the values and actions of their parishioners, and thereby the direction of the broader community. This sense of accountability drives them to verify sources, balance tradition with innovation, and communicate clearly and ethically. Their leadership role demands ongoing learning, critical reflection, and the ability to translate complex information into meaningful, accessible teachings. Together, these themes highlight faith leaders as intentional, reflective information users who balance reverence for sacred texts with openness to diverse knowledge and a deep sense of duty to those they serve.

Noteworthy is what is missing among the responses. No faith leaders mentioned use of artificial intelligence (AI) tools or resources in their information gathering, evaluation, or dissemination. This omission is possibly tied to framing or phrasing of interview questions (while open-ended, no questions specifically addressed AI) but is still surprising considering multiple questions on technology, evaluation of information, and modeling behaviors. It is likely that AI will have an increasingly integrated relationship with information in the future and that faith leaders will engage with it regardless of their current level of comfort.

Another surprising finding was the minimal reference to other information experts. Respondents seldom mentioned the availability of the expansive resources and expertise of libraries and librarians when describing their information behaviors. It is possible that some respondents were no longer in geographic proximity to a physical academic or public library they valued, but considering the large number of recent seminary students, a lack of reference to the seminary library resources was surprising. In contrast, some responses indicated a desire or intention by faith leaders to curate their own smaller information collections (for example, to develop a small parish library collection)

for themselves or their congregants. While many faith leaders noted the massive corpus of information now available, some seemed to suggest a solution is to restrict their attention to a small subsection rather than to develop or utilize search and evaluation strategies to get through the multitude.

Implications

A review of the study responses necessitated a shift of focus. We originally expected to discover what religious leaders know about information literacy and how they behave with information needs or utilize their information literacy skills. Instead, we discovered an acknowledged need for support in modeling, or perhaps even teaching, of information literacy concepts and behaviors for their parishioners and in their communities. This need progresses naturally from their recognized responsibility as noted in the themes above. When challenged in their information behaviors, religious leaders noted their comfort areas and also areas of struggle.

This shift of focus is important as educators focused on information literacy consider how and when information literacy skills and concepts can better be taught or reinforced. This is the lifelong learning component. Perhaps information literacy teaching in undergraduate or seminary study is satisfactory, or perhaps it needs bolstering. In either case, faith leaders that emerge without these educational backgrounds will need support in their own skills and in their guidance of others.

Proponents of information literacy education for religious leaders need to examine what should and can be done during traditional education (secondary, undergraduate, and graduate or seminary), what can be supported in continuing education opportunities, and what will be left to the self-motivated lifelong learning of practicing religious leaders. These different avenues for information literacy training and support need to be considered distinct, perhaps non-sequential, knowing that practicing faith leaders emerge from different educational backgrounds and at different stages of post-education career turns.

Data from the interviewees can be a starting place as educators look to support faith leaders in this way. Faith leaders provided a handful of ideas for their own information literacy needs: a toolkit for media interaction; a guide for assessing credible primary sources; workshops or other training on current information environments. They

also provided ideas for faith leaders to convey information literacy development to their community: easily digestible information for faith leaders to pass on to congregants; critical thinking exercises and case studies to use in teaching; digital literacy and news evaluation resources for use in teaching parishioners. Faith leaders also asked that these resources include diverse perspectives and marginalized voices.

Librarians and educators should take these ideas seriously and work to provide tools and resources for lifelong learning in information literacy for faith leaders. Seminary librarians might look to build or fortify networks with faith leaders in their geographic communities and the community of their faith tradition. Providing and promoting library resources, and similar quality resources available on the open web, might reduce faith leaders' desire to shun broadly available information while building a limited parish library collection. The future of religious information literacy learning lies in some combination of training modules for current religious leaders, teach-the-teacher resources to pass information down the funnel to parishioners, and resources built directly for community members to be offered up through the faith community.

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