

Covid-19 impact on Church Society Ministry

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Abstract

The ongoing COVID-19 pandemic has caused countless impacts and influences on human life. It disturbs the order of life and macro and micro-economics, drastically and radically changes human cultural and behavioral patterns, and greatly impacts the concepts of church theology, pastoring, and ministry. This study is a descriptive qualitative study on the COVID-19 and normal & abnormal reactions & responses to it. Through this article, the authors observed that the COVID-19 existence has transformed and reconnected the Christian paradigm on 1) ecclesiology, which to date exclusively based on building to the real Church, namely God's people in the form of house/"tent" churches; 2) digital media utilization in this Society 5.0 era as God's grace to all humanity. Findings and changes in society through renewable technology are an inseparable part of the pandemic. A dichotomic gap of understanding between science and technology for centuries should be reformulated. New technological inventions and social media created by humans are media in the hands of God that should be utilized by the Church to minister in various categories to improve the quality of ministry and service; and 3) creative and innovative interpretation of threefold responsibilities of the Church: koinonia, diakonia, and martyria.

Keywords:

Covid-19; digital church; Society 5.0.

1 INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic has been going on for quite a long time. It is a global disaster that has a significant impact on human life. In order to break the chain of its spread, there have been many policies enacted, such as social distancing, work from home (WFH), and vaccination efforts to all levels of society. As a whole, the pandemic has impacted the economy, education, social life, and human behavior (Abidah *et al.*, 2020; Bisong, 2020; Onyema *et al.*, 2020; Sumarni & Utomo, 2021). In early 2020, the pandemic has impacted Indonesian society. In 2021, the government has conducted vaccinations to handle the problem (Simon *et al.*, 2021). However, this effort is still not enough to stop the pandemic. Because of this pandemic, human interactions became limited, the economy weakened, and the provision of education services changed. Religious services also take a different form than usual. The Covid-19 pandemic has changed the patterns of life and interaction between community members. These changes, happening at extreme measures, can cause anxiety to those who are not ready (Budiman & Susanto, 2021).

These changes have also occurred in the world of Christianity, either in teaching or service administration. Various dynamics have also grown within Christian theology, including theological teachings related to COVID-19. The pandemic has brought up different theological interpretations and perspectives, which either strengthens the faith or causes confusion to the faithful. This apparently is the negative impact of the pandemic.

Furthermore, these situations have demanded the Church to adjust its ministry. Silitonga (2020) disclosed that the Church is dealing directly with the COVID-19 pandemic. In these situations, the Church is sent to bring the peace of Christ in truth and charity. The Church has responded to the situations caused by the pandemic by holding worship services at home, handing out liturgical rubrics for guidelines, and preaching the Word of God through live streaming or video recording services (Silitonga, 2020). In addition, the ministry of teaching in the Church has also faced challenges. Studies by Karnawati and Mardiharto (2020) show that Sunday School ministry needs adjustment and innovation so that teaching can still be held. The authors observed that the COVID-19 pandemic has impacted society negatively and has also spurred positive changes in church ministry. Every situation is certainly interpreted not only negatively but also positively. Therefore, this study aims to explain the positive impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on church ministry during the pandemic's existence.

2 METHOD

The method consists of design, procedure, and data analysis. This study is a qualitative study with a descriptive approach. The qualitative study refers to the investigation of truth, which is relative in nature. The approach used is also dominated by theoretical analysis. A qualitative study uses descriptive data for its data collection. The study results are then supported by various existing literature and theories (Elliston, 2013; Gilbert, Johnson, & Lewis, 2018; Zaluchu, 2020). This study aims to observe the positive impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic on church ministry. The descriptions in this study related to the positive impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic on church ministry were supported by various literature sources to strengthen the authors' arguments.

3 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The COVID-19 pandemic has caused changes in ministry patterns. Several studies show that worship services should be conducted virtually. Some financially established churches with members with strong economic backgrounds can hold this type of worship service. However, in several other places, the ministry must be held at members' homes. The head of the family then takes the central role in ministry. The Church as an organization provides guidelines to support this ministry, such as Bible study guides designed for simple reading and prayer lists for families (Katarina & Budiman, 2021; Sitorus, 2020). The pandemic becomes a situation in which *koinonia* (fellowship) in small communities of the homes of the faithful becomes alive and runs well. Before the pandemic, family worship rarely happens, but the pandemic enables it to happen regularly. Worship services at home can also comfort family members and create more intimate family relationships (Budiman & Harming, 2021). It is undeniable that backsliding possibilities may happen due to a lack of pastoral care (Widiyanto & Susanto, 2020).

The pandemic cannot only be interpreted as a tribulation happening in this world. Theologically, God is sovereign over human life and the universe (Napitupulu, 2021; Supriadi, Gulo, & Halawa, 2021). Trials and tribulations are God's way of showing His nature and greatness, such as those experienced by Job. In the situations he experienced, God's greatness was shown. In the sickness of common people, God's power in the Person of Jesus Christ is declared by restoring their health. This shows that God works in difficult situations and declares His greatness. In difficult situations, the Early Church grew spiritually. They experienced persecutions but still persevered in fellowship, prayer, and study of the Word. The same situation is happening in the present-time ministry. If some people have monopolized ministry so far, the pandemic has successfully forced each family member to serve their respective families. Dwiraharjo (2020) explained that this condition had created greater congregational involvement in worship services within their homes. Ministry in church buildings is perhaps only felt by some members. There are passive church members who may be less attended. This present situation may make them more drawn to their passiveness, but with the ministry pattern developed by the Church during the pandemic, those neglected can instead be served by the faithful around them.

In the Bible, there are many examples of family-based fellowship and discipleship. In the Old Testament, every single law and commandment of God must be carried out. The implementation and instruction to carry out God's commandments were started from the families of Israel. Since their early days, God used parents to instruct their children's spiritual life (Haryono, 2021) structurally, rigidly, and continuously. This shows that faith-building conducted within a family is no less influential than corporate worship in church buildings. Spirituality and personality of family members are in the majority formed within this small community of family. It is as stated by Saragih and Hasugian that the institution that plays the main role in the growth and instruction of each individual is family, with schools and the Church only support the efforts (Saragih & Hasugian, 2020). This grave period indirectly becomes a moment in which Christian character building and education are applied intensively in the family (Malau, 2021).

The transition of character building and discipleship from church buildings to home is also a manifestation of obedience to the Great Commission by studying the Acts of Paul and the Early Church, who used homes as their place of worship and mission. This transition becomes a strategy to strengthen the spiritual life of Christian families as the smallest units in church congregation and society in general. If these small units are strong, the strength will impact significantly on larger groups. In addition, house churches can also be strategies to reach people around the faithful's homes (C. Widjaja, Marisi, Togatorop, & Hartono, 2020).

However, problems arising from this situation are that perhaps a family member feels unready to take on ministry in this small community. Because of this, the Church still needs to equip its congregation in line with the Great Commission. The faithful needs to be equipped, instructed, and trained to be able to take on the task of ministry (Darmawan, 2019; Widjaja *et al.*, 2021), as Jesus equipped His disciples, who then equipped others (Budiman, Yelicia, & Siswanto, 2021; Katarina & Siswanto, 2018). Local churches need to disciple their members so that members, or heads of the families, can build and equip their families spiritually.

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, the world has faced a change in society's life and entered Society 5.0 era. The Society 5.0 era is one step forward from Society 4.0, which features internet sharing information. The present Society 5.0 era is an era in which each manifestation of technology becomes a part of humans themselves (Puspita *et al.*, 2020). Lumi and Lendoh (2021) stated that various social problems and challenges are solved by technology, such as the internet of things, artificial intelligence, and big data in this era. The development of the Industrial Revolution becomes fast, and humans become a part of it.

In this era, human life should have the ability to adapt to the fast growth of the digital world. The Church as an organization and the faithful as ecclesia should adapt to face the development. However, the utilization of digital media in the ministry is still very low. The pandemic situation has encouraged the Church to witness in a broader scope. (Le Duc, 2016) shows that before the COVID-19 pandemic, church activists should put much concern into digital ministry. This becomes contextual theology related to the social environment in the digital era.

By utilizing digital media, the martyrria (testimony) responsibility of the Church can be performed more extensively. Social media such as Facebook and YouTube have become wide open means of communication to communicate the Gospel. This did not happen much before the pandemic, even if the community has entered Society 5.0 era. However, the pandemic has encouraged ministry in the digital space. Yuono (2020) and Widjaja *et al.* (2020) stated that the pandemic has successfully directed church ministry to the context of the digital world. The Church is open virtually without being restricted by geographical locations. In this manner, it is apparent that martyrria are performed broadly.

The impact of the pandemic on worship is that worship services and teaching ministries are also held virtually. Dwiraharjo (2020) stated that some church members perceive virtual worship services as not to the same degree as the

actual, in-person ones but are mere “mock-services”. Tambunan (2020) also revealed that virtual services do not have the same degree of sanctity and serenity. However, worship should be unconfined to time and space if theologically worship is interpreted as a personal encounter between God and His people. In addition, God’s presence is not construed as merely a ceremonial atmosphere but the manifestation of the fellowship of the faithful with God. Therefore, virtual worship services should also be construed as fellowship, and by extension, everyone should form a fellowship with God. Hutahaean *et al.* (2020) explained that worship services are held virtually to nurture faith during the pandemic.

In terms of teaching, studies by Berutu and Siahaan (2020) show that the COVID-19 pandemic has stimulated virtual cell group ministry. This shows that the pandemic has encouraged innovation of ministry to become based on digital media. This condition indirectly has changed ministry patterns to become relevant with current development. An interesting description by Afandi (2018) on digital ecclesiology explained that technology should be utilized as high as possible to develop relationships and communities as wide as possible. Through technology utilization, the building of the Body of Christ becomes more extensive and relevant to the current progress. Nevertheless, the Church needs to be wise in utilizing digital technology. Even though the Church is encouraged to subscribe to the current development, her character and characteristics should remain not of this world. Digital technology only becomes a medium used to support the ministry and is not everything.

Regardless of the opportunities and challenges present, the COVID-19 pandemic becomes an encouragement to the Church to subscribe to the current development. Looking forward, the Church as an organization is expected to continue utilizing digital media as post-pandemic ministry media (Sastrohartoyo, Abraham, Haans, & Chandra, 2021). At first, it was apparent that COVID-19 negatively impacted the ministry of many church organizations. Nonetheless, ministry through digital media is gradually able to fulfill church members’ spiritual needs. Sunarto (2021) stated that online worship services post-pandemic is still relevant, in which they answer the church members’ spiritual needs when they face three situations, namely 1) emergencies/abnormalities, 2) sickness, which makes them unable to attend in-person church fellowships either in church buildings or in cell group sessions, and 3) travel. The Church is expected to continue utilizing digital technology after the pandemic ends.

Service (*diakonia*) is the command of Jesus Christ. The term *diakonia* comes from Greek, meaning “service” and “acts of service”. *Diakonia* (service ministry) is understood as the acts of service to others in terms of physical needs, either voluntary or compulsory (Siswanto, 2016). The responsibility of service ministry is directed more at physical needs than spiritual needs. The responsibility of service is one of the Church functions that need to be done. The Church needs to follow Jesus’s example, in which not only did He preach and teach, but also helped those He served by feeding them bread and fish (Nugroho, 2019).

The COVID-19 pandemic has also made the Church as an organization and individual emphasize service ministry. The weakened economic condition causes fund donors of the ministry to experience difficulty. This certainly has an impact on the ministry of churches, missions, and other social services. Meanwhile, the service ministry still needs to be done. Many church members experience economic downturns; some of them may get furloughed or laid off from work as an effect of the reduction of their company’s economic burden. Others may have declared company bankruptcy since their business did not go well. This, therefore, calls for the Church’s participation in answering her flock’s problems. Weol *et al.* (2020) found that in the middle of the pandemic, churches in Manado conducted *diakonia* caritative (charitable service ministry) and *diakonia* transformative (transformative social change), which answered community problems. The concepts of *diakonia* caritative and *diakonia* transformative were first proposed by Widyatmadja (2010) and has become an important concept in church ministry in Indonesia. Temporary food supply can ease community burden, but forms of help which empower the helped ones are also important to solve economic problems due to the pandemic.

The pandemic has encouraged the Church to rethink the forms of service ministry relevant to the situation. Service ministry needs to be continuously maximized during the pandemic. Regus and Tapung (2020) revealed that service ministry in the middle of the pandemic is the manifestation of the Church’s commitment and consistency in advocating, accommodating, and facilitating the needs of its members. Some churches and individuals have made helping efforts to help community groups, churches, and individuals provide for their economic needs. However, the prolonged pandemic period, in which the end is still a mystery, forces the Church to rethink the service ministry to be provided. Helps in basic supplies are impossible to be organized in the long run, while social restrictions make it difficult for people to do their activities. These conditions certainly become a great challenge. In the findings of Regus and Tapung (2020), it is apparent that besides *diakonia* caritative, *diakonia* transformative needs to be conducted at a maximum during these times. Findings by Weol *et al.* (2020) show that *diakonia* caritative and *diakonia* transformative needs to be implemented during the COVID-19 pandemic. By implementing the two service ministry forms, the faithful can build social solidarity and express God’s love and grace to all.

Besides the two forms above of service ministry, the Church as an organization is also encouraged to apply *diakonia* reformatory (empowerment works), another form of church service ministry in the Indonesian context as proposed by Widyatmadja (2010). *Diakonia* reformatory is a form of empowerment ministry. Manulang (2018) named *diakonia* reformatory as development ministry. Manulang (2018) has revealed that this type of ministry aims to empower the helpless to restore themselves. It also prevents and avoids the formation of “bread Christians” who depend on others. Even though *diakonia* caritative and *diakonia* transformative are greatly needed in this pandemic situation, but these efforts should not be conducted for long. Church organizations can give their congregation “mattocks” and “seeds” to work and develop. Pujiono (2021) explained that related to service ministry activities during the pandemic, church organizations can provide training and, if possible, access capital for their members who were laid off or who own small enterprises. Training to equip and empower church members are more effective and educational to solve economic problems during the pandemic eventually.

The Church's dependence on her clergy is high. Teng and Margareta (2020) explained that the Church's dependence on the clergy's role as professional ministry workers is enormously high. On the one hand, this is considered reasonable, but on the other hand, this phenomenon makes the congregation become consumers and enjoyers, creating a supposed inability to live a spiritual life without the clergy's involvement in ministry (Teng & Margaret, 2020). This is in contrast with God's will. The Church needs to reflect on the lives of the Early Church. The Early Church can be described as the extension of the Apostles themselves. Persecutions that happened to the Early Church had made them spread around various places. It had been observed that the Early Church was disciplined by their group and proclaimed the Gospel wherever they might be (Acts 8:4). The Early Church's dependence on the Apostles was not that significant, but the Apostles made the Early Church congregation involved in the ministry. This shows that the service to God in proclaiming the Gospel and the effort of spiritual growth becomes the responsibility of all members of the Body of Christ (Eph. 4:11-16).

As the ministry transition from church buildings to homes has occurred, church ministry has indirectly involved lay clergy. Studies by Hutahaean *et al.* (2020) on house church ministry found that 82% of 100 respondents answered that fellowship held at home adds more warmth to the family and spiritual growth by caring and praying for each other. Furthermore, Widjaja *et al.* (2021) explained that worship service at home has been widely applied and is being worked on by many church organizations. The head of the family is indirectly forced to become the family's priest and be responsible for the faith of his/her family members and the worship service at home. Even though it sounds urgent but less effective, this pattern of worship has formed many lay clergies who greatly help the ministry of ordained clergies so that the dependence on the role of ordained clergy is reduced. The Church should show the involvement of all members of the Body of Christ in ministry. Quoting the statement of Ronda (2020) in SAAT Southeast Asia Bible Seminary National Conference, in rural settings, the number of clergies is very minimal. Therefore, lay ministries need to be empowered for ministry, especially in preaching and discipling. This pandemic situation becomes the appropriate moment for church organizations to equip their congregation, at least the head of the families, to serve their group. Not only in the pandemic, the post-pandemic family-based ministry is also central and important (Teng & Margaret, 2020).

The younger generation is an important group of people, either to the nation or, more importantly, to the Church. The role of youth in developing church ministry is greatly needed. Their creativity and effectiveness in church ministry needs development and guidance so that their potentials can be utilized to God's glory. The youth is the Church's future. Januari (2016) revealed that the Church in the future belongs to the youth of today. This statement encourages the Church to be able to understand the true identity of its youth members. However, it is not unusual that the youth become those neglected in the Church. Youth involvement in church ministry may seem necessary at first glance, but sometimes their opinions are sidelined due to the supposed lack of solid basis in their opinion and their supposed inexperience. Telaumbanua (2020) stated that many youths leave the Church and fellowship because their opinions are not accepted, disregarded, ignored, neglected, and not provided with opportunities and because the Church feels rigid and does not meet and answer their needs. This makes the youths rarely involved in the ministry, even refusing participation. Youths need mentoring and guidance by adult church activists to find their calling and ability in the ministry according to their potentials (Heryanto, 2020).

The pandemic situation has forced the discussion of opinions between generations. Considering the existence of change in the ministry model, which presently emphasizes digital media utilization, the youth's native to digital media play an important role. The Indonesian Internet Service Provider Association (APJII) survey showed that internet use in Indonesia is dominated by youths (Telaumbanua, 2020). This confirms the fact that youths master digital technology media. The younger generation becomes greatly needed, especially in managing digital media ministry such as virtual worship service. The condition and situation of this COVID-19 pandemic is a moment of intergenerational cooperation to develop church ministry. Changing ministry patterns to become digitally based makes the younger generation play a central role in church ministry. Therefore, dialogues and discussions between the younger and the older generations can build and develop ministry further. The adult generation should mentor, train, guide, and advise youths. It also acts as an effort of regeneration to the youths to become present and future leaders, so they do not get surprised and confused when entering adult age and carrying on ministry.

4 CONCLUSION

It is undeniable that the negative impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic are great and complex since it impacts church activists, members, and ministry in their relation, mental state, spirituality, economic state, social life, and other aspects. The pandemic has changed patterns, characters, approaches, cultures, and other aspects in understanding the true Church. A majority of the congregation tends to assess the situation very negatively. On the other hand, it is necessary to have logical awareness that the existence of COVID-19 has positive value and meaning. Therefore, the situation should be assessed with an open and positive view. Through the Bible, God awakens His people that nothing new happens under the sun, meaning that this situation has happened before in history. Pandemic experiences have been told many times in the Bible, although with different contexts. There have also been plagues engulfing the world, such as bubonic plague, cholera, Spanish flu, Asian flu, and Hongkong flu, which have caused billions of deaths. In this manner, the COVID-19 is not a new situation and should not be feared; only the advancement of world civilization and the ever-existing human stubbornness that quickened its spread. Concerning the pandemic's impacts, God has promised that He works for the good in all things. The presence of this goodness certainly becomes the responsibility of each home. The COVID-19 pandemic will become a distinctive blessing if viewed as God's grace that needs to be responded in a new, creative, innovative, and solutional manner.

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