

The Pastoral Care of Congregations during the Covid-19 Pandemic

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Abstract— Pastoral care during the Covid-19 pandemic is not easy, as the thinking paradigm that has been ingrained in pastors and congregations is an inherent obstacle. Therefore, face-to-face practices in the ministry and pastoral care in church buildings need to immediately change to methods that can be implemented in this pandemic. The results of this research are expected to help optimize and boost the performance of pastoral care for congregations in this pandemic era. The method used is a literature and descriptive approach from various effective published data from churches before and during the Covid-19 pandemic. The results will provide great benefits for churches, especially in caring for their congregations, as the methods to be performed in the Covid-19 era will be elaborated. Also, the services that require improvement and implementation of pastoral care synergy between generations will be explored. **Research Contribution:** This research contributes new ideas to the pastoral ministry of churches via internet-based online media technology and discipleship strategies through the family altar.

Keywords—Pastoral care of congregations; Covid-19; online ministry; young generation *Introduction*

I. INTRODUCTION

The Indonesian government, in March 2020, requested that all worship activities be performed in the members' respective homes to stop the spread of Covid-19 [1]. Almost all Christians in the country had to replace traditional church services with online or virtual worship during the quarantine, as did millions of people in Italy, Ghana, the United States, and Europe [2]. Pope Francis also replaced the method of conducting the traditional Sunday blessings from being performed from the Vatican's window terrace to the internet to avoid large

gatherings and reduce crowds to prevent the virus from spreading [3]. Therefore, there has been a significant change in the worship experience, from face-to-face to online in churches worldwide.

Several Christian leaders consider worshipping from home by following live broadcasted services via the internet as an act of small faith [4]. However, churches around the world, including in Indonesia, are constantly looking for the best ways to continue pastoring their congregations without facilitating disease transmission. Many pastors may not know what to do during this pandemic, as activities like church visits, sorrow services, or counseling do not have a significant impact. Also, problems experienced by members, such as family issues, finances, or other matters that cannot be consulted by phone. [5] Therefore, this has posed a real problem for pastors during this pandemic era.

Furthermore, they are required to prioritize the congregation entrusted to them by God [5], and the performance of pastoral roles and functions is a manifestation of their love for the Father. Jesus equates love for Him with the shepherding of His sheep, as written in John 21: 15-17, 'After breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, "Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these people?" Peter replied to Him, "Yes, Lord, You know how much I love You."' The Lord Jesus asked this question three times, showing His seriousness about the pastoral care task. Jesus dedicated His life to shepherd whom the Father entrusted to Him [6] [7], therefore, the manifestation of a pastor's love will be apparent in his care for the congregation.

The meaning of a shepherd includes Lord Jesus as the great and good shepherd and pastors as shepherds of congregations in churches. It also entails church administrators who assist in serving the members that need to be cared for and shepherd one another. This means that care is not only performed by the pastor as the shepherd of the congregation, especially in large churches. Doing ministry solely by a pastor without the help of others is impossible [8], resulting in the priesthood function of every believer and all Saints' movement. Consequently, the church needs to move from pastor to ministry-centered on lay-leaders equipped by the clergy.

This research is different from previous studies because it examined learning during a pandemic [9], the role of shepherds during the Covid-19 era [5], or the implementation of technology-based services. [10]. Since studies on how to shepherd the congregation during this pandemic are lacking, this research focuses more on care services that can be implemented optimally and effectively during this Covid-19 era. The purpose of this research was to help church leaders perform maximum pastoral care even during a pandemic.

II. METHOD

The research method used was a descriptive-qualitative approach by collecting various data from books and journals [11] related to the pastoral care of congregations, especially during a pandemic. Therefore, the description submitted will be more valid because it comes from published research results. Data related to the pastoral care of congregations before and during the pandemic were collected and sorted to obtain an optimal model. Finally, the results were prepared as a description to answer the problem formulation appropriately. The research flows included an examination of the validity of house churches through stories of the early congregation and Bible testimony. It also entailed the importance of online strategies during the Covid-19 pandemic and the involvement of the young generation in ministry. Therefore, the research results are expected to be useful as an example for pastors in various places.

III. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

A. Holding worship in houses

Worship was centered in the church building and homes, as was the case with the early congregation (Acts 2:46, 5:42). For instance, apostles like Paul did ministries in homes, such as the house of Aquila and Priscilla (1Cor. 16:19), Philemon (Phil. 1: 1-2), and others [12]. Therefore, centers of worship and spiritual formation during the period of the New Testament were in homes and not church buildings. The construction of a building as a place of worship for Christians only began in the 4th century AD, after Emperor Constantine converted to Christianity [13]. Hence, the center of worship exemplified by early congregations was the home.

In the Old Testament, worship was performed by individuals who were members of a family, such as Abraham

(Gen. 18: 1-15) and Job (Job 1: 5). Even Joshua expressed commitment to the God of Israel by stating, "All my family and I will worship God" (Josh. 24:15). This was like the experience of the Southern Israelites of Judah after being taken captive to Babylon. The worship, which was originally centered in the Jerusalem Temple, now needs to be redefined by no longer focusing on the ritual offering of sacrifices but having a heart of obedience to God's commands. This also needs to be implemented by the church during the Covid-19 pandemic, where worship on a large scale needs to move to smaller places, particularly houses. [14] In the Old Testament, worship in houses was a way of life for God's people, hence, this is an impetus for the church to apply it to the congregation in this pandemic era.

Meanwhile, many church services focus on the clergy and do not involve the congregation as members of Christ's body. Although the clergy continues to make sermons, seminars, and other services, many members feel that the ministry is less personal because they are not greeted personally [15]. Consequently, this pandemic has proven that spiritual growth is the responsibility of all believers and that the involvement of the laity is very important. Therefore, the clergy needs to equip and train their members properly so that they are empowered to serve other congregations.

Worship in houses, which is a form of family discipleship, was mandated by Jesus before His ascension to heaven and aimed at ensuring each member performs all the commandments. The family is a goal of Christ's great commission that needs to be reached (Matt. 28: 19-20). [16], meaning it is the first and closest church to be disciplined.

In Matthew 22: 37-39, Jesus stated that the greatest law is to love God and your neighbor, of which the closest is certainly family. Also, Rienow declared that God created the family to be a center for discipleship and spiritual transformation. The family is the most powerful "small group" of discipleship in the world, where "spiritual growth takes place within the context of family relationships" [17]. Furthermore, Larry Christenson stated that the Christian family was created to bring glory and honor to God, while the blessing or happiness received by humans is only a byproduct [18]. Therefore, the most effective discipleship in this pandemic is to start with the family, which will make it stronger and live according to God's will.

Meanwhile, the most important factor in home worship is holding a family altar, which is made by all members spending time worshipping God at home in the morning, afternoon, or evening, depending on the agreement made. Activities include singing songs of praise to God, reading a Bible passage, sharing spiritual blessings, and testimonies from the verses, and offering intercessory prayers. Through this altar, a close fellowship is promoted between each family member with God and each other [19], and Biblical values that are believed and lived can be shared with all.

Therefore, the church should equip all congregational members to hold a family altar in their homes, teach fathers to act as priests, and wives as helpers. This implementation in the

field of discipleship will ensure all church families are still ministered to. Hence, continuous training, mentoring, and exemplary activities should be performed for all congregations to hold this altar and form a family that remains spiritually strong even during the pandemic.

B. Improving online ministry

During a pandemic that limits in-person encounters, developing an online ministry is imperative. However, this should not end after the congregation can attend worship again in the church building but improved, with the purpose of broadcasting Sunday worship and increasing the reach of the gospel being preached [20]. In this case, the formation of a special service team during the worship that can be contacted to provide explanations, counsel, prayer for the sick [21], and help the "online congregation" grow spiritually is necessary. Consequently, God's kingdom will be expanded because the gospel of Jesus "invaded" homes. This pandemic has made many people aware of how fragile human life is, leading them to start looking for God, even though they may not want to be tied to certain church institutions. Also, discussions about spiritual matters can be performed through social media, which is not hindered by distance [5]. Pastoral care becomes very important at this stage, as the congregation watches service broadcasts via YouTube and gets this personal touch.

Unfortunately, several churches are not ready for this technological advance because some cannot hold worship online due to a lack of adequate equipment and digital resources, and many others are not serious about working on this digital ministry. Therefore, an adequate allocation of funds is needed for the implementation, as changes due to this pandemic will cause those that lack or are unable to use communication tools or social media to feel marginalized and disconnected from others [22]. This means that the church should be ready to change and pay the ensuing price.

Meanwhile, many churches have paid attention to the needs of their congregations or community through the deacon's ministry, for example, by supplying groceries. This is also done by the government and other communities, which provide financial assistance. However, the majority needs more attention than this via communication with others [5]. Everyone needs social and emotional support; therefore, churches and congregations need to stay connected while undergoing isolation due to Covid-19. The church is called to answer the isolated, lonely, and deprived, and during this pandemic, pastoral ministries can run, albeit virtually, by visiting and praying for the sick, counseling, prayer meetings, Bible studies, and others.

This online ministry needs to be used as an evangelism tool for non-churchgoers to help them feel God's presence and understand the Word that is relevant to their needs. The very rapid development of information technology has caused billions of people to require the internet in their daily activities by communicating through social media and becoming netizens or internet citizens. It has also impacted church ministries, as many Christians that are reluctant to attend

church in person chooses to join digital worship at their homes or in other places via gadgets, such as smartphones. Furthermore, with the emergence of the Covid-19 pandemic, where church buildings were closed, people could only attend online services [23]. Hence, the trend to follow online is likely to continue even as the pandemic passes.

Meanwhile, church leaders cannot be indifferent to this change, as, while an online church may not be ideal, it is better than no attendance at all, and hearing God's Word through a smartphone is better than not listening at all. Broadcasting worship via live streaming from the church building is not enough or effective [24], as the online ministry needs to be considered a separate place of worship with interactive chat. It should involve Pastors and God's servants, such as counselors and intercessors, who take turns serving 24 hours a day throughout the week [25]. Also, an online church should have a large capacity to build good relationships with the congregation, function more broadly, and be impactful.

Furthermore, the Bible mandates the task of preaching God's Word to all nations (Matt. 28: 19-20), hence, the online ministry is an effective tool used personally by every believer and within the church's framework. The Holy Spirit can use any means, including advances in internet technology, to reach those inaccessible through classical methods, i.e., via the physical church. Therefore, the purpose of an online church is not to replace the conventional one but to expand the ministry's reach [26], which is why churches need to take advantage of this pandemic as momentum to expand their reach.

After the pandemic, churches should focus on the sending rather than the seating capacity [23]. God's Kingdom is global and not solely in the local dimension, and benchmarks can no longer be measured from attendance, building, and cash but through the capacity to send congregations as servants into the world (16). Therefore, believers are sent into the world and do not serve within the walls of the church alone. Also, congregations become missionaries in work, family, environment, digital world, or those specifically called to build a new church in a new place.

Gospel preaching and pastoral ministry can use the internet through various social media platforms, such as Instagram, Facebook, and YouTube. All these media can be used at any time, and pastors will no longer be required to wait for a sermon invitation from a particular church to preach. Therefore, God's Word will not be confined to the four walls of the church but can extend to communities around the world. Another online service is daily devotionals via Instagram, YouTube, and Facebook, and for more personal interactions, Zoom or group video calls can be used to hold cell communities. Consequently, various pastoral ministries can be performed online with several existing social media platforms.

C. Involving the young generation in ministry

The 2020 Indonesian census showed that around 65% or 175 million out of 270 million people are under 40 years of age [27]. Supposing 10% are Christians, then about 17.5 million

young people need to be served and pastored. Therefore, they should be the object and subject of care to ensure they can impact society and become the light of the world [28] [29]. Also, millennial groups that are well pastored can be the motor for implementing various church activities, and young Christians can become the generation that serves and preaches the good news to the next generation.

The Industrial Revolution 4.0 is a time marked by the emergence of computer technology and automation, or an era that combines automation with cyber technology. Subsequently, the younger generations are generally more familiar with this, meaning the involvement of church ministries digitally will be very effective during this pandemic. Generations Y (millennial) and Z should be involved in the ministry within church buildings and outside. Currently, ministries should not be "church-centered" or focused on the pulpit but extend to society to be relevant [23], as time has come for people to be sent out to the world and not just called into the building. Hence, the church is not exclusive and only a "master at home" but should be recognized in society and has a positive impact on the surrounding community as the salt and light of the world.

Furthermore, the outreach and involvement of the young generation are very important, for example, young servants of God should be allowed to take strategic roles in ministry while the seniors can act as mentors and trainers. The young generation is entirely dependent on the internet of things; therefore, online media services can be delegated to ensure they are actively involved to take over the service. Young servants can participate as ideators, decision-makers, and part of the leadership team, not just actors or assistants of adults [30]. Consequently, inter-generational ministry needs to be performed immediately by empowering Generations Y and Z in pastoral services, especially those related to social media. Meanwhile, the previous generation should continue to provide mentoring by giving greater trust to the young generation, based on the belief that all church members, regardless of age, are equally important in the unity of Christ's body.

IV. CONCLUSION

The pastoral care of the congregation should be maximized and effective during this Covid-19 pandemic. This requires a change in the church's paradigm, which formerly prioritized worship in buildings, to becoming more focused on developing small community worship and family altars. Maximum and effective care during this pandemic includes the development of small group worship, family altars, holistic online services, and synergy between generations in pastoring congregations online and offline.

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