Virtual Pastoral Care for Missionaries of Union of Indonesian Baptist Churches in The Digital Era

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Abstract— **Union of Indonesian Baptist Churches (UIBC) has missionaries who serve in the mission fields in Indonesia and abroad. UIBC cooperates with Indonesian Baptist churches to support the missionaries in finance, supervising, and mentoring. However, specific situations, like the COVID-19 pandemic, cause pastoral care services are not optimal. The purpose of this study is to provide an alternative proposal on virtual pastoral care for the missionaries of the UIBC. This study used the descriptive qualitative method and was based on library research. The conclusion drawn from this study is that UIBC and the sending churches should optimize the utilization of technology to provide virtual pastoral care to their missionaries, which is programmed periodically and intensively. Besides, the strategy to reach the no-internet areas can be realized through partnerships with local churches in the areas closest to the mission fields as extensions to provide the missionaries support and care effectively. Research Contribution: This research contributes to knowledge in pastoral ministry and missiology, in particular, to provide insight into alternative ways for churches and pastors to do pastoral care by utilizing the sophistication of technology in the digital era to missionaries they send to the mission field, which transcends geographic and cultural boundaries.**

Keywords—virtual; pastoral care; missionaries; digital era, baptist churches

I. INTRODUCTION

The welfare of the missionary and his family in the mission field is the responsibility of the sender. There are many sending churches forgetting this responsibility. When sending begins, often the next thing is to get cut off halfway. The sender should provide financial support, regular visits to missionaries' workplaces, prayer together, retreats, and future savings/investments.[1] However, missionaries need comprehensive or holistic pastoral care, namely spiritually, psychologically, socially, emotionally, physically, and professionally.

Today, technology is experiencing rapid development. People use technology in all areas of life. Likewise, the acquisition of information and communication has become much easier with the existence of technology. Telephones, the internet, and social media have colored everyday human life that connects people, even from other parts of the world. In the past year, with the Covid-19 pandemic, people are increasingly trying to optimize the use of information and communication technology to continue relationships constrained by physical and social restrictions. For example, people use the Zoom application in several hours of online meetings. The church should see a need and relevance in using technology to support the work of the missionaries. In the era of digitalization, people should not ideally impose the pattern of the early church on the church today, except for the spirit or dynamics built by the apostles at that time on the mission, witnessing, and winning souls for Christ. However, we must not impose the techniques and mechanisms on the former model but adopt the applicable media today.[2]

Regarding pastoral care for missionaries, there has been a previous study written by John Sherwood and Scott Fisher with the title Pastoral Care for Missionaries. They concluded that missionaries might need counseling to help deal with reactions

to the unique pressures of living and working in another culture as well as re-enter the culture at home. When a missionary cannot survive in the mission field, he will most likely return home. REMAP research found that the percentage of missionary attrition is 5.1% of the mission force globally. It means there would be 7,650 missionaries leaving the field each year.[3] The local church has a role in supporting missionaries in emotional and financial matters to minimize the attrition.[4] Another study conducted by Joanne Schwandt and Glendon Moriarty on missionary member care concluded that regardless of growth and development in the area of member care, there are still gaps in the services provided to missionaries, particularly in the timely provision of necessary resources and services.[5] As for the topic of virtual services in the digital era, several studies have been carried out, including research entitled Pastoral Commission in a Virtual Room by Fredy Simanjuntak, Dewi Lidya Sidabutar, Yudhy Sanjaya,[6] and Shifting Pastoral Theology Perspectives with Virtual Services During the Pandemic Present and Future by Mariani Harmadi and Adi Dharma Budiatman.[7] Both studies concluded that virtual ministry is one way to carry out pastoral care by utilizing technology for those who do not physically attend church. The implementation of pastoral care should be in a new and holistic way to adapt to the times.

By observing the existing researches, the authors find that there is still something that needs to find out; namely virtual pastoral care for missionaries in the digital era. The purpose of this article is to provide an alternative proposal in the form of pastoral care with a virtual system for the missionaries of the Union of Indonesian Baptist Churches.

II. Method

The authors used a descriptive qualitative method in this study. According to Zaluchu, the qualitative approach is deemed suitable for a topic whose truth is relative, hermeneutical, and interpretive.[8] This research is based on library research, using the primary material of literature data, both from books and journals and data obtained from internet links. Library research is a series of data collection activities by reading, taking notes, and processing research materials.[9] By using this method, this research will firstly describe the importance of pastoral care for missionaries. Secondly, observe the Biblical idea of pastoral care for missionaries. Thirdly, relate pastoral care for missionaries in the digital era. Finally, it produces the recommendation of virtual pastoral care for the missionaries of the Union of Indonesian Baptist Churches.

III. Findings and Discussion

A. *The Importance of Pastoral Care for Missionaries*

Kelly O'Donnell states that in the last twenty years, specialized ministry in the Christian mission/assistance sector, a movement has developed around the world known as member care. He defines member care as a commitment to provide ongoing support resources to further developing mission personnel.[10] Member care plays a vital role in missions, serving the work of Christ by preventing problems, supporting and developing missionary personnel, and restoring those who are no longer capable. It is the key to the strength and effectiveness of missionaries around the world. Member care is a crucial and practical mission strategy that will remain.[11] One of the aspects of member care is pastoral care. Pastoral care for missionaries is nurture by the local church or by sending mission agencies for missionaries in the mission field. Pastoral care is often associated with local churches in the context of mentoring church members. However, this mentoring should include mentoring for missionaries.

A missionary is a Christian who crosses both geographical and cultural boundaries to expand the church of Christ and the kingdom of God, especially in areas where there are few or no Christians.[12] Missionaries are ordinary people who have spiritual problems, and they need pastoral care like members of the church in general. Material and financial support is usually the most vital concern because it is visible. However, missionaries need pastoral care more than ordinary church members for several reasons, namely: cross-cultural stress, transitions and experiences of crises in life, new issues faced, experiences of difficulties on the field such as war, famine, robbery, abuse, and others.[13] Gracia Warda states that most Asian missionaries valued a strong connection with the homme base and express a desire for pastoral care. She lists several issues faced by Asian missionaries in the field: concern for the family, language learning, adjusting to the new culture, collegial relationships, children's education and welfare, leadership styles, and opportunities.[14] Pastoral care is essential and is a lifeline for missionaries if the church is to have ongoing work effectively in carrying out the Great Commission of the Lord Jesus Christ.[15]

Some recommendations for pastoral care for the missionaries are pastoral assistance and help for the family, flexible language program, bonding with the mission team, team building, and boarding school for older children.[14] The church can facilitate pastoral care by providing administrative help to help the missionaries with legal requirements and a myriad of logistical details related to their work overseas. The church also can appoint a pastoral coordinator for regions and large mission communities and teams. The coordinator's job is to oversee and stimulate the functions of pastoral care, which is typically a full-time ministry. Besides, the church can establish a system of small groups throughout the mission community to regularly sharing their needs and praying for one another. Prayer partnership can reduce the counseling loads of leaders and are particularly useful on short term outreach team. The church also needs to encourage their missionaries to build and maintain relationships with the home churches that have sent out and financially support them.[16] The churches should think about what they can do to achieve the objective of caring for their missionaries and see that they are growing in the Lord. And when their missionaries are cared for, they will be more fruitful in their work for the Lord.

B. *Biblical Idea for Pastoral Care for Missionaries*

In Acts 13, the Bible is clear that it was the activity of the Holy Spirit that launched the first mission endeavor. God makes His will known through the prayers and fasting of the sincere hearts of the prophets and teachers in the church of Antioch. The first missionary journey was not just the work of Paul and Barnabas but of the entire church of Antioch that supports the missionaries in prayer and finances. There is no specific account about the pastoral care from the Antioch church for Paul and Barnabas. The possible reason for the pastoral care of missionaries is hard to do: First, those missionaries traveled preaching the Gospel to many places, namely Pisidian Antioch, Iconium, Lystra, and Derbe, before they went back to Antioch. By A.D. 48, seven churches were established during Paul's first missionary journey [17]. They didn't stay for the long term. They left a city when they were rejected. However, in Acts 14:26, after they completed the work, they were eager to tell what God has done to Antioch, as their commissioning church. The church was as eager to hear them tell it since they have supported them to operate full-time on the field.

Now, looking at the apostle Paul. The apostle Paul not only set an excellent example of an effective missionary, but he also set a powerful example of someone who needed someone else to care for him. He repeatedly stated that his pastoral ministry and mission were based on a commission he received directly from the Lord Jesus. It was God who had called him to be an apostle of all nations.[18] This certainty of calling is the basis of Paul's life to serve, accompany, and strengthen his co-workers.[19] In his letters, Paul mentions at least 75 names of certain friends and colleagues. These were important people in his life and ministry, many of whom served him. Apart from Luke, there is no evidence that any of them were professional caregivers. Like Paul, missionaries today need ongoing care right where they live and do the mission work.[17]

In the time of the Apostle Paul, the means of transportation were unsophisticated and limited, while the places where he preached the Gospel were numerous. This fact made it difficult for Paul to arrange a time to visit Timothy and his friends who served in various places. Therefore, Paul uses letters as a means of providing pastoral assistance to each of his co-workers and to represent his presence amidst the believers and his colleagues.[20] Paul used letters not just as means of communication. He used it to address various problems faced by Timothy and his friends, including discussing both spiritual and physical needs. Being an exemplary father was Paul's way of guiding his spiritual children. The commissioning church must be responsible for giving pastoral care to their missionaries although the most effectively provided by one's colleagues.

C. *Pastoral Care for Missionaries in the Digital Era*

Pastoral care for missionaries can be complicated in mission settings, where there is no church, where workers are isolated, or where conflict is common. Churches need to find some creative ways to support their missionaries in such situations. Regular field visits from pastoral people are beneficial, as missionaries need to have opportunities for rest and renewal.[16] However, there are situations where people cannot leave their place due to a particular case, like the COVID-19 pandemic. The churches should consider the best ways to keep doing pastoral care for their missionaries. The church needs to open up to things related to digital media in the era of industrial revolution 4.0. Through the media, the church can connect with missionaries in different locations and times, speeding up information and facilitating communication.[21] The church needs to reorganize its mission to answer the needs of this generation by following the challenges of the contemporary era.[22]

In the digital era, virtual communities have become a vibrant and global public space. Virtual communities such as electronic cafes, mailing lists, blogs, interactive personal web forums, virtual social networks are now new hope for the availability of public spaces that can provide a communication situation without dominance.[23] Technology is a resource where the church must wisely take on the role of capable stewards for the sake of carrying out the preaching of the Great Commission in the digital era. Within the framework of understanding "Digital Ecclesiology," the author borrows Stedzer's term "Technologicalification of the church" or the technology of the church is a challenge as well as a huge opportunity, where each congregation of Word ministers needs to utilize technology to enable the implementation of the church's mission.[24] The rapid pace of digital technology of information and communication is increasingly global,[25] permeating all aspects of human life,[26] opening spaces for interaction with interconnection and communication methods between groups.[27] Communication media, especially the advancement of civilization in the digital era, can help unite humans in a close relationship and thus also promote humans to work together for the salvation of all.[28]

The church should try to answer the challenges of the rapid development of this all-digital technology.[29] The church should be flexible and open,[27] by utilizing technology to develop the digitalization of services,[30] because advance in communication technology is a gift from God.[28] The church should be wise in responding to the challenge of digitalization. Responding to technological advances must still match the concept of service and its development biblically.[30] In the field of church missions, the reach of the internet, which has penetrated difficult-to-reach barriers,[26] must be maximized, not only for evangelism but also for efforts to improve mentoring services or pastoral care for missionaries sent to various regions. Nichols, in his dissertation, suggested that sending churches work together to form online communities for their missionaries. There, missionary groups and sending churches can meet together and interact with each other online through Zoom, Google Meet, and other virtual applications.[31]

D. Virtual Pastoral Care for Missionaries as a Recommendation to Union of Indonesian Baptist Churches

Virtual space is present as a product of digital technology, which is created and simultaneously consumed by postmodern humans.[32] Access to all places is no longer as difficult as in the past, where people had to be there. People can visit remote areas with the help of technology through internet services.[26] Union of Indonesian Baptist Churches (UIBC) and the sending churches should optimize the utilization of technology to provide virtual pastoral care to their missionaries. Virtual community-based pastoral care is pastoral care activities that help others and maintain virtual community-centered communication relationships available in computer-technological socialite communication vehicles, in the form of conversations between mentors and clients in the context of friendship, containing greetings, discussions or exchange ideas, moral, inspirational, spiritual and spiritual messages. Partner churches and the Evangelism Department of UIBC should also optimize the use of information and communication technology as an opportunity and means of providing pastoral assistance to missionaries. Thus, the sending churches keep their missionaries physically and spiritually doing well.

UIBC can form a pastoral coordinator team for missionaries involving the sending church and the local church closest to the missionaries' field. The pastoral coordinator team is under and responsible to the Head of Evangelism Department. The pastoral coordinator team needs to hold regular and scheduled meetings using online applications, such as Zoom Meetings. The team leader who serves for a certain period is responsible for the realization of the meetings. Through those meetings, they may provide various kinds of information that equip, encourage, and strengthen the missionaries in carrying out their work in the mission field. In addition, they can divide meeting into break-out rooms, which provide an opportunity for each sending church and its missionaries to have personal conversations regarding the direction of the sending church and the specific missionary needs.

Some UIBC's missionaries serve in areas where there is no internet connection. In this case, members of the pastoral coordinator team who stay in the closest area to the mission field can be extensions of the sending church to provide pastoral care for those missionaries. This way, they can still receive the attention they need. The pastoral coordinator team can also take advantage of advanced technology to promote churches to support the ministry of UIBC's missionaries in prayer, power, and funding. UIBC can also create virtual accounts to receive financial support from churches for the missionaries. The collected money is for the families' welfare, including paying the tuition of their children. As the first mission endeavor was not only the work of Paul and Barnabas, so UIBC's missionary work is not just the work of their missionaries but of the entire churches that are parts of the UIBC extended family.

IV. CONCLUSION

Virtual contact or even by telephone as a greeting is the hope of UIBC's missionaries in the mission field, which far away, and they are apart from their families and the sending churches. Pastoral care is a need for continuous support to achieve the sustainability of their ministry. The developed communication technology can be a means for the manifestation of proactive pastoral care during times of limited physical contact during this pandemic, even though network disruptions and budget constraints can hinder intensive contact, so the initiative from the church or sending agency is needed. In addition to the commissioning parties, they can also cooperate with the local churches closest to the fields of the missionaries as mentoring partners who are extensions of the sending party for the effectiveness of the support provided.

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