

# Digital Media and Internet-based Communication in Mission Services during the Pandemic

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**Abstract**—This study describes the difficulties faced in mission services during the COVID-19 pandemic and the solutions for missions during the pandemic. This case study was conducted at Badan Misi GaTe Surabaya with a descriptive qualitative approach. Data were obtained through written interviews which were deepened through virtual discussions with informants. The study concludes that there are obstacles in mission services during the COVID-19 pandemic due to social distancing which resulted in service stagnation. The breakthroughs as a solution are the implementation of digital media-based and social media-based missions combined with platforms that support the continuance mission services amid the COVID-19 pandemic and provide new directions in future mission services. **Research Contribution:** This study encourages missiologists to further explore the mission paradigm in the disruption era due to technological development or a pandemic by utilizing the advanced development of communication technology and the development of internet-based social media.

**Keywords**—mission; COVID-19 pandemic; digital media; social media

## I. INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic is believed to be started in Wuhan City, China, in December 2019. And then quickly spread to many countries, including Indonesia, which resulted in a high death rate [1], economic decline [2], forcing the implementation of teaching and learning process from home [3], socio-political life [4] such as postponement of the Pilkada (regional election) to aspects of religiosity and spirituality [5]. In terms of religiosity and spirituality, this pandemic has obstructed the implementation of various activities in the church due to social restriction policy such as inclusive corporate worship [6]. This social restriction has limited the mission services. Meanwhile, Schnabel [7, p. 3] marked essential factors, namely intentionality and geographical movement, when defining a mission. That mission originates from the authority acting as a messenger

accompanied by a message to another party or place. However, the Great Commission is Jesus Christ's command that should be carried out even if it passes through various challenges and problems. It requires a breakthrough and creativity in implementing the service during the pandemic.

The Great Commission in Matthew 28:18-20 is to make all nations disciples of Jesus Christ. Matthew 28:19 begins with the words "Go," so that the word "go" be the emphasis. In the Greek text, "go" is not a command but a present participle. Wiersbe stated that there is only one word of command in the Great Commission: make all nations my disciples [7]. "Disciple" means to be a disciple of a teacher. So, in this context, it is to be a follower of Jesus Christ. Therefore, the first part of verse 19 can be translated as "Go and make all disciples of all nations..." The word "go" indicates presence among the nations (*ta etne*) [8]. In its context, it means geographical movement (cf. Mark 1:38 means going to another place, crossing). Implicitly, it means cross-cultural because cultural changes will follow regional differences. The next missionary task is to bring the believer into a community by baptism and teach believers to be mature in the faith.

The primary responsibility of the Christian mission is to communicate the Gospel to all people. Therefore, it can be said that the basis of the activity of gospel proclamation is communication. In the communication model, the mission can be summarized by the involvement of several aspects. First, there must be someone who communicates the Gospel (evangelists, missionaries) as the responsibility of all believers who receive the Great Commission [9], then the content of what is spoken (the message of the Gospel), and the recipient of the message in question (the nations). Therefore, one of the mission aspects is the role of the evangelist or missionary as a communicator. The critical purpose of communication is to create an understanding, as summarized by Dr. Donald K. Smith [10]. Acceptance or rejection of the Gospel is not the responsibility of the

evangelist/missionary unless the communicator fails to establish effective communication to generate understanding. When there is an understanding, persuasion to accept the message of salvation conveyed in the Gospel is believed to be the work of the Holy Spirit.

The era of industry 4.0 has allowed humankind to communicate across regions using sophisticated and varied digital media such as gadgets [11]. Each sector of human life cannot be thriving without good communication. Considering communication as a very strategic means to communicate the Gospel, the church has to consider the role of communication, especially internet-based communication, seriously. Communication is no longer seen as media or means only but also as a responsibility. Charles Craft said that communication could be analyzed in two levels: the idea and the actualization [12]. Ideas in touch are principles, but actualizing ideas requires a process. It is undeniable that communication [11] barriers will remain part of the dynamics of communicating. Barriers cannot be removed, so it is crucial to overcome each obstacle in communication. Tara Dixon, in one of the sub-discussions of "the Communication Process" in his entitled "Communication Skills," said that the "channel" (format, model, medium) is in the middle between the "sender" (sender of the message or communicator) and "receiver" (recipient of the message) [13]. The maturity of a communicator in understanding the person or group involved in the communication is very substantial. One of the many "channel" factors that support communication effectiveness is an age group in the period or era in which the communication activity is carried out. If the communication activity involves the era of the millennial generation, then a communicator should adapt the approach to that generation.

The rapid development of technology can be seen from the use of the internet in various fields of life (IoT) [14]. Social media is one of the fields that has experienced extraordinary development because of the internet as reported by Rosarita Niken Widiastuti, the Secretary-General of the Ministry of Communication and Informatics. The conversations per minute data recorded, reached 59 million sent messages for WhatsApp, 4.7 million viewed videos via Youtube, 1.3 million logged in using Facebook, 694 thousand scrolling Instagram, 190 million sending emails, and 4.1 million browsing on Google and others. It is supported by the results of the 2019-2020 Indonesian internet user survey by the Indonesian Internet Service Providers Association (APJII) regarding the penetration of internet users in Indonesia as an essential part of realizing digital transformation. Further, it is in line with Ahmad M. Ramli, the Director-General of the Directorate General of Post and Telecommunication of the Ministry of Communications and Informatics, who supports digital transformation efforts according to behavioral shifts that occur due to changes in digital communication patterns [15]. Citing Repotal data and the results of the GWI (Global Web Index) survey showed a total of 202.6 million internet users in 2021, which increased by 16% from the previous year.

Susanto Dwiraharjo found that the development of the digital era and the impact of this pandemic encouraged the

acceptance of the idea of a digital church. As an ecclesiological reflection in the digital age, it can anticipate all possibilities, including the circumstances caused by COVID-19 [16]. With the digital church model, it is possible to apply technological advances to overcome problems that do not allow face-to-face fellowship of many people in the church building. Further, Abdon stated that digital churches are created as theological ideas to respond to the situation amid this pandemic crisis [17]. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the strengthening digitalization era in which the church cannot be forced to follow the same pattern as before ideally. The zeal of the apostles in the past has been maintained to witness and proclaim the Gospel. Technically, the mechanism cannot follow the past model but can adopt the current applicable media [18], [19]. On this basis, mission services can utilize digital media and internet-based social media to interpret missions during the COVID-19 pandemic as carried out by Badan Misi GaTe GKGA Surabaya, a mission agency under the auspices of Yayasan Pembinaan Kerokhanian Tabernakel (YPKT).

Therefore, this study aims to describe the impact of the pandemic on mission services and the implementation of social media and internet-based communication media at Badan Misi GaTe Surabaya in mission service activities as a breakthrough and solution during the COVID-19 pandemic.

## II. METHODS

This case study was carried out at Badan Misi GaTe GKGA Surabaya with a descriptive qualitative approach. The procedure was adjusted to the pandemic condition, which did not allow face-to-face meetings (onsite). The first step was mapping the problems faced in carrying out mission services during the COVID-19 pandemic through written interviews with informants. The obtained data were then deepened through a virtual discussion [20] (zoom meeting) with the management and members of Badan Misi GaTe GKGA. Inductive analysis was performed throughout the study.

## III. FINDING AND DISCUSSION

### A. *Badan Misi GaTe GKGA*

Badan Misi GaTe (Garam dan Terang), located in Surabaya, was established in 2015. The vision and mission of this agency are to educate the Christians, so its service emphasizes discipleship. The task is interdenominational (serving various church denominations) and cross-cultural service institutions. Different service areas are implemented to achieve the vision, such as informal education in the form of BIMBEL (Learning Guidance) for elementary and junior high school children on Rote Island, Child Evangelization Services, Children's Libraries, Youth Spiritual Development, spiritual development through Spiritual Awakening Services, Sunday School Teacher training, seminars for ecclesiastical activists, and pulpit services in various churches. Service activities are carried out in collaboration with multiple church denominations in the mission areas of Badan Misi GaTe with the current coverage of services including East

Java province, East Nusa Tenggara province (especially Rote-Ndao district), and Central Sulawesi province (especially Banggai Island).

GaTe's missions apply a holistic mission service paradigm that sees people's needs as limited to spiritual and physical needs [21]. Therefore, GaTe's missions carry out various activities to manifest the holistic mission of both proclaiming the Gospel and social services such as providing free medical treatment, health education, and basic needs. The funding is from local churches and donors, in addition to contributions from administrators and members.

#### *B. The Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on the Mission Services of Badan Misi GaTe*

Mission services indicate face-to-face meetings and gatherings which invite large crowds. During the pandemic, it is not possible to do, especially in the yellow and red zones. The government has issued social restriction policies and regulations to prevent the spread of the COVID-19 virus, such as PSBB (Large-Scale Social Restrictions) to PPKM (Enforcement of Community Activity Restrictions), which also affect the mission service program of Badan Misi GaTe [1].

Implementing a social distancing policy to prevent the spread of the virus has made Badan Misi GaTe limit its activities involving the large crowd. Many programs that have been arranged in the annual work program have to be postponed or even canceled. Badan Misi GaTe must stop its routine activities such as the distribution of necessities, regular weekly meetings of members and administrators, pulpit services between churches. Badan Misi GaTe has also postponed the launch of Mission House on Peling Island - Banggai Island which was previously planned for April 2020. The target islands were affected by COVID-19, especially East Java which becomes the red zone for the spread of the virus. But apparently, not all mission service areas were affected by COVID-19, so some programs can still be implemented; for example, the situation in Rote Island is not as bad as on Java. Indeed, at the beginning of the pandemic, Badan Misi GaTe on Rote Island was stopped during the implementation of the PSBB policy.[2] Missionaries need to stay in the mission area, for example, in Rote Island, which was then declared a green zone so that mission service activities can be carried out again by complying with health protocols. The activities that can be carried out were learning guidance or tutoring, children's reading park services, Youth GaTe activities, an interdenominational church pulpit service. The absence of the missionaries in Banggai Island has stopped the mission program, which was served directly by the Surabaya Mission team. The vacuum in the activities of Misi GaTe Surabaya as the head office had an impact on the Mission House of GaTe Rote team as they did not get maximum support from the management in Surabaya.

#### *C. Implementation of Mission using Digital Media and Internet-Based Communication Media*

The long period of this pandemic has trained the patience of the members of Badan Misi Gate [3]. However, the challenges in carrying out a mission during the pandemic require breakthroughs to continue the service. As for Badan Misi Gate, mission services are the Great Commission to continue even during a pandemic. Rini Utami, a Secretary of Badan Misi GaTe, stated it is the command of Jesus Christ to spread the Gospel both in good and bad times [4]. The breakthrough is the use of digital media and the internet-based communication media [22].

The implementation of social media and internet-based communication media has opened up new services such as Weekly Regular Virtual Meetings held by Badan Misi GaTe, allowing the Surabaya Mission Team to meet virtually with the Rote Island Mission Team. Being in a green zone area it is possible to carry out onsite services on Rote Island in compliance with the health protocol. The activities on Rote Island were then uploaded into the Facebook of Rumis GaTe Rote and the GKGA Surabaya Youtube channel to raise the spirit of the community. In addition, during this pandemic, Badan Misi GaTe has carried out webinars with more and diverse participants from various regions in Indonesia.

The social media platforms used by Badan Misi GaTe to support its mission services are Facebook, Instagram, and WhatsApp for the communication media, which features voice call, text, video call, and WAG (WhatsApp Group), and Zoom. Implementing social media and internet-based communication media can be a breakthrough amid social restrictions during the pandemic. It overcomes distance problems between Rote and Surabaya through holding virtual meetings for members and board regularly that have not been done before. Through this regular meeting, it is possible to conduct joint worship, briefing, coordination, and reporting. Online media have become a new service platform for Badan Misi GaTe in the new standard era. Team members who previously were not proficient in operating internet-based communication media such as zoom meetings were motivated to learn to run online meetings. In carrying out official travel during the virus's high potential spread, such as in May 2021 during the Eid al-Fitr holiday, Badan Misi GaTe found obstacles to go to Rote Island as there was no flight due to regional isolation policy. The postponement of the disaster aid program on Rote Island could not be delayed any longer. The management is required to delegate their authority such as negotiating with the local government, agreeing on cooperation with third parties, and providing logistical needs for mission services, to be able to run the mission services in the green zone.

In mission service activities, social media become a medium for information on activities and services. And the Internet-based communication media become a medium for coordination. Even, Zoom apps become virtual meetings for spiritual growth and team briefing. WhatsApp has become a communication medium between members to build relationships among fellow members. This digital media-based service and internet-based social media have offered

an alternative for future mission services in the disruption era by creating a practical alternative approach to mission services such manage to conduct meetings without creating crowds. Meanwhile, activities that require mass gathering cannot be carried out unless it is possible to limit the number of participants to comply with the social distancing policy. Programs on Peling Island, Banggai Island had to be postponed until the government announced it is safe. Rote Ndao Island is in the green zone so that service activities such as Learning Guidance, Nutrition Improvement, Youth Worship, distribution of necessities for disaster victims can be carried out. All of these service activities should comply with the health protocol in coordination with Badan Misi GaTe Surabaya's coordinator.

The problems faced in the implementation of social media and internet-based communication media cover the poor internet network or even the unavailability of the network, the additional need for purchasing phone credit, the lack of mastery of internet technology, and difficulties in operating social media.

#### IV. CONCLUSION

During the COVID-19 Pandemic, Badan Misi GaTe faced some challenges in its services due to social distancing, PSBB, PPKM policies which resulted in service stagnation at the pandemic's beginning. Therefore, Badan Misi GaTe has tried to find a solution to continue carrying out its mission. This agency has a spirit of enthusiasm to continue carrying out the Great Commission. The COVID-19 pandemic is a "coercion" for Badan Misi Gate to inevitably follow and adapt to technological developments in the industrial era 4.0 by carrying out the mission using digital media and internet-based communication media. Indeed, the mission still requires missionaries in the field as technology is a medium of communication and information. In the development of internet-based communication and information technology, it is possible to make virtual communication without being limited by geographical distances. The role of missionaries who live in the mission area remains essential. It even has increasingly broader authority due to the limitations of the center to be present in the mission areas.

In implementing the mission based on digital media and internet-based communication media, Badan Misi GaTe faces challenges such as lack of human resource skills in using the current technology, inferior and unavailability network, and the need for additional phone credits. Therefore, Badan Misi Gate has conducted training on mastering digital media and social media to equip and improve skills of human resources to be creative and innovative in facing the challenges of mission services in the pandemic and the future. Further, this agency can develop various digital and social media programs as there is no certainty when the COVID-19 pandemic will end. But, on the other hand, the world has entered the disruption era, so the old patterns can no longer be maintained.

Thus, the COVID-19 pandemic is no longer an obstacle for Badan Misi GaTe GKGA to carry out the duties of the Great Commission of Christ. Instead, it opens a new

paradigm in mission service in outreach and discipleship. The implementation of the mission can not only be done onsite (face to face) and online (virtually) using digital media and internet-based communication media.

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