

# The Smart Church, a New Normal Church in Digital Era

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**Abstract**—COVID-19 has become the trigger to speed up churches' move to digital platform. While the world is gathering big data and operating in artificial intelligence, churches are limited in its approach to digital Sunday services. More than just an online church that airs services to replace indoor services, the smart church is fulfilling its mission to build relationships and make disciples, supported by big data as the backbone of the ministry. The goal is not filling the building back after COVID-19, but accomplishing the mission through state-of-the-art technology. The purpose of this paper is to examine the future of church that is not necessarily contained within the four walls of the church building but rather as smaller communities of disciples meeting in various locations. This paper will provide a model for a church that fosters relationships in a digital age, providing ways to invite people, disciplining them, growing them as leaders, and sending them to influence the world. **Research Contribution:** This research will help churches to have a new paradigm to enter the digital world that is now becoming a reality. It will also provide a model for churches that promotes discipleship in the new normal.

**Keywords**—digital discipleship; digital church; COVID-19; smart church; virtual church

## I. INTRODUCTION

As the pandemic hit Indonesia, religious leaders advise their congregations to conduct worship at home in order to prevent the spread of COVID-19. While some churches have opened Sunday worship services in a limited capacity, others are still hesitant to conduct their services in indoor church buildings to reduce transmission of COVID-19. The Minister of Religion of Indonesia has released a permit to open mosques, churches, and other worship places with strict health protocols. [1] However, there are cases of COVID-19 transmission during worship services and religious events [2]. Health experts voiced their concern that mosques and churches often become the center of COVID-19 transmission by suspected COVID-19 cases or asymptomatic people who can still transmit the virus [1]. Therefore, some pastors have decided not to conduct worship services inside the church buildings and continue to conduct the service online. This trend is likely to continue in the future as the majority of the Indonesian population has not received the vaccination. From 271 million people, only 8 million people have been vaccinated by May 2021 [3]. Thus, churches might not open soon,

especially in the area where COVID-19 is prevalent. Some churches open in a hybrid mode, combining online services and on-site worship with limited attendance.

The pandemic has changed the way people live, and experts stated that the world would not go back to normal as to how we used to live before the pandemic. Social distancing will be the new normal, as breakouts will keep recurring as long as the virus can find a human host and not everyone in the world is vaccinated [4][5]. In addition, people are adapting to the culture of new normal, such as working and studying from home, wearing masks, as well as attending church online [6]. However, the pandemic only serves as a trigger for churches to move on to digital platform [7]. The world moves on to smartphone to improve their daily life, beyond just calling, texting, or browsing the Internet. Smartphone is also used in navigating while driving, checking on one's health condition, and enrolling in educational courses [8]. Smartphone is also used in enhancing mental health [9], shopping [10], banking activities [11], and many other activities in just one click. This paper will discuss the need for churches to build discipleship culture while integrating digital platforms as the backbone of the ministry.

## II. METHOD

The article uses qualitative exploratory and explanatory research methods using books, journals, and the latest news as resources. The purpose of this paper is to describe in order to explain. Thus, the authors use qualitative exploratory and explanatory methods [12]. The qualitative research method will give a better understanding of the subject [13]. This paper will approach the discussion by first describing the reality of a digital culture that continues to grow. Second, it will discuss the challenge of discipleship in a digital platform. Third, it will describe the need for a new wineskin, or the acceptance of online service as part of the church that will continue even after the pandemic, yet with a strong discipleship culture. Fourth, this paper will explain the smart church, its format, and its ministries. Lastly, it will conclude the discussion by restating the definition of the smart church.

### III. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

#### A. *The Digital Church*

Digital technology has brought a new culture to society. People can have a vacation virtually to any place in the world without moving their feet from the room using virtual reality. They can meet people from their childhood or their work wherever they are on this planet. All sorts of information and objects are accessible, such as scientific inventions, movies, arts, and music that used to be accessible only in specific physical spaces for those who had access. Digital technology brought a democracy of culture and brought things closer [14].

In the church, digital technology offers some benefits as well as cultural changes. Worship services that used to be conducted in a church building on Sundays are now happening every day. Churches offer midweek services through Zoom, daily devotional through Instagram online, and countless YouTube services that can be accessed anytime, from anywhere. Thus, services are happening in cars, at homes, quarantine hotel rooms, offices, and various other places. Before the pandemic, a Christian usually becomes a member of one church, but currently, they can listen to unlimited preachers from various churches worldwide. Thus, denomination boundaries are less and less relevant nowadays as people adapt to a digital culture in the church. The pandemic is changing the religious landscape from institutionalized practice into private exercise [15]. Nevertheless, churches need to ensure that the discipleship for the great commission still continues.

Digital or online church is also a tool to reach the next generation. Younger audience speak and interact with a different language than the older generation. They share their lives with Tik Tok, speak with Line and Whatsapp, get their news from Twitter and learn from YouTube. Churches need to speak to them in their language. Statistics say that 4.72 billion people, or more than 60% of people worldwide, use the Internet. In April 2021, social media users reached 4.33 billion or 55% percent of the world population, with 1.4 million new users per day [16]. Moreover, Barna tracked a gradual shift from on-site church attendance to online church services among the younger adult generation in the U.S. [17]. Only 52% of church-goers want to go back to in-person services [18]. These statistics confirm that churches need to claim the digital territory for service and mission.

#### B. *Discipleship in the New Normal*

The primary goal and the objective of every church and Christians are obedience to the Great Commission by growing committed disciples of Jesus. Chris Shirley quoted Gary C. Newton that in Jesus' time, disciples were more than just pupils in schools, but were apprentices in the work of the master [19]. A disciple will emulate the life of the teacher. The result of successful discipleship is a changed life, as Jesus changed the life of Peter, from a fisherman to fishers of men (Matthew 4:19), from a coward who denies Jesus (Matthew 26:75) to a person who is willing to die for his faith [20]. Thus, discipleship is more than just a series of programs, but a

growth experience for every individual in the church into maturity.

The pandemic brought a unique challenge as "church" is traditionally linked to a physical gathering of persons in a particular physical space by which a community is sustained [21]. Will lack of physical gathering lessen or even deprive the sense of community among the congregation? Another concern is the loss of involvement. People are becoming passive and not active; they are listeners and viewers rather than participants [21]. As a result, there is a concern about the decline of faith and spirituality of the congregation during online worship, which in turn will hinder the process of discipleship. Physical meetings are necessary as discipleship is built by relations. However, there is no guarantee that sitting in a church will connect people more than facing a screen with a small group of friends discussing everyday life issues, using chat to give comments and encouragement [21].

#### C. *A New Wine Skin*

As churches adapt to the new normal situation, they need to make necessary adjustments. In Matthew 9:17, Jesus shared, "Neither do people pour new wine into old wineskins. If they do, the skins will burst; the wine will run out, and the wineskins will be ruined. No, they pour new wine into new wineskins, and both are preserved." In eastern countries at that time, people make bottles of goatskin. If they pour new wine into an old wineskin, the robust fermentation process will destroy the old wineskin. Jesus was referring to the Pharisees and Scribes that had never been regenerated in their spirit and mind. As the Gospel of the grace of God comes to the people, it did not suit the old principles and carnal mind. Thus, as the new normal way of doing church is in place, churches need to have a new paradigm of discipleship and service that will embrace the congregation and build the church for the future.

The first principle is understanding and accepting a hybrid or online church as a "normal" way of doing church. Although there is an opportunity to go back to worship in church buildings in a few years, some people will choose to continue worshipping at home or privately. Churches need to include them as part of the congregation, continue to hold services online, and create an online community for them. The issue here is not whether we should or should not go back to fill up the church building, but the need to build presence and perform the great commission in a digital platform.

According to the Bilangan Research Center, less than half of the churches surveyed (49.9%) stated that they would continue live streaming or doing online services after the pandemic ends [22]. Thus, churches need to see that worshipping at home is still part of the "church." Online services do not necessarily reduce the expression of reverence. Related to this, churches also need to validate the sacredness of sacrament conducted at home, in the park, or at other places where people worship online.

Secondly, churches need to build an online community through various digital and online media, and not merely

sharing information. People have a great need to belong, as it is a fundamental human motivation [23]. The need to belong can motivate belief in God [24]. On the other hand, exclusion causes people to lose their willingness to attain self-control because they ask, "If people are not going to include me, why should I bother trying to be a good person?" [25] A sense of belonging will encourage people to follow God and make an effort to change. In addition, discipleship happens in a closely related community where people are open to each other. Thus, churches need to provide a place to belong for their members through online/digital media. The sense of community and belonging is built through small groups, online gatherings, special interest classes, and the availability of leaders to be contacted for an informal chat or ministry. From time to time, pastors or group leaders can conduct offline gatherings or person-to-person meetings with the congregation for relationship building. A sense of community and engagement can also be developed through live streaming, where people can interact with each other, comment, and chat during video broadcasts.

Third, churches need to develop an integrated and seamless digital discipleship model, starting with inviting people into a relationship with Christ, growing them in faith and knowledge, preparing them for ministry, and releasing them to impact the world through their influence in the workplace and marketplace. This model is developed following the steps of Jesus. It started with the call, "I will make you fishers of men" (Matthew 4:19). In the digital world, the call to discipleship or to know Christ can start with a church website. Then, Jesus grows his disciples through various teachings (Matthew 5, 18, John 15) and lets them observe him as he deals with people: accepting, rebuking, healing, and other ministry. The goal of this stage is to be like Jesus. In the digital area, churches can use various media to teach and build community: Sunday service streaming, morning devotional through Instagram, zoom prayer meetings, courses, and training. The next step is to build a ministry culture and encourage people to serve, as the greatest is the one who serves as Jesus provides the example (Luke 22:25-27). Ministry in an online church which comes in various ways, from serving in a physical capacity such as preparing online services, as well as discipling another believer in Christ. The work of the ministry should be in the hands of the people, as the Lord has provided apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors, and teachers to equip the people of God to do ministry (Ephesians 4:11-12). Disciples beget disciples. The end goal for this process is disciples who are ready to impact the world through their everyday involvement in the workplace and marketplace. Thus, in this digital era, online media is also a tool to build disciples and not merely for sharing information or promoting sermons. Clint Schneklath stated that virtual ministry "is not a vehicle through which 'real' ministry is accomplished but is itself the ministry." [26]

#### *D. The Smart Church*

In the world that we live in now, data plays an important part, and churches should utilize and analyze data for their ministries [27]. Collecting data is not a foreign concept to the

Christian movement. The Bible records the feeding of the 5.000 and the repentance of 3.000 people during the Pentecost. The Bible also listed names from the first man (Adam) to Jesus. These records are a form of big data from ancient times. Big data is defined as a pool of data generated from a plurality of sources analyzed to provide depth and insight from collective experience [28].

Church leaders need to embrace the reality that the world is moving on to digital platforms to accomplish their daily tasks, so they need to embrace digital media as their platform for ministry and reaching the world. As churches enter the digital world, it can easily expand its ministry to new ventures. In the smart church, people are connected through Bible study online, small-group online, or other online venues that form groups according to their interest or locations, under a leader's supervision. They will meet offline (in a physical gathering) to foster relationships and discipleship from time to time. Several small group leaders are discipled under the supervision of a higher-level leader. Then, a larger group could gather for services, not necessarily in church buildings but in other occasions such as lunch gatherings or church outings. Ministry is conducted in various places by the leaders at the grassroots levels instead of focusing on one pastor in a building. The apostles utilize this approach, small group meetings at home, and temple courts gathering for a larger group meeting [29]. The difference is that the smart church is supported by big data, and it provides ministries in a digital platform.

In addition, the smart church provides various ministries and services for the public and church members, such as online counseling for people who are suffering from stress during the pandemic. Others create a special online promotion for small or new business ventures of the congregation members who are trying to start a new business. These promotional materials are for selling foods or goods and services such as beauticians, delivery services, language courses, and other services. Churches can create apps (digital applications) connecting the world to the church and connecting one church member to another. The apps also provide a way for the congregation to give their tithe and offering digitally as well as to promote social and humanitarian causes that need public donations. Still, churches can provide quality articles and practical tips for family, personal growth, and other necessary topics for the public in general and the congregation. The apps are also linked to counseling and prayer lines for those who need immediate support. Thus, digital media is a window for the world to see and get to know the church, as well as an open door for the church to actively reach the world, a "smart church."

#### IV. CONCLUSION

The pandemic forced churches to move on to digital or online platforms to conduct church services. This trend will not end in a short time since the world is still not free from COVID-19 until the whole world is vaccinated and the virus does not have the human body as a transmitter anymore. As a ramification of the pandemic, people are adjusting to online

services and meetings. Thus, some believers might not go back to in-person services even after the pandemic is over. Moreover, the young generation who is tech-savvy prefers communicating through digital media. Thus, churches need to see its future in a new paradigm. In addition to going back to the building, churches need to continue ministering in the online world. They need to build a structure that fosters discipleship culture, growing culture, and ministry culture among the congregation to help them impact the world through their daily involvement in their work and marketplace. Thus, a smart church is defined as a discipleship model and church ministry supported by state-of-the-art technology. More than just a virtual or digital church that airs services online to replace services in a church building, the smart church presents a church and its mission: building relationships and making disciples on a digital platform as a seamless ministry.

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