



Virtual Worship and Spiritual Growth in Digital Church Era

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Abstract. These days, the church is forced to enter the digital world deeply. This caused churches to be more digitalized in their ministry, including the Sunday service we saw on social media platforms on church days. Sunday service is one of the spiritual development platforms for believers, which needs attention. This paper aims to explain virtual worship and its relation to spiritual growth, which is impacted by the ministry through the digital world, with a qualitative approach. This paper found that: 1) virtual worship significantly affects spiritual growth; 2) Virtual Worship needs development in the fellowship aspect; 3) give many advantages in virtual fellowship and develop talent in digital gift in the new generation in the digital church era.

Keywords: Digital era, Spiritual growth, Virtual worship

1 Introduction

Worship is essential for the spiritual needs of believers [1]. Worship is usually held together with other believers in a building or another place. But starting the COVID-19 pandemic resulted in not allowing any meetings, forcing the church to enter the digital world in its duties and ministry. The concept of virtual worship was initiated around 1980 [2]. Virtual worship through live or real-time broadcasts can help the congregation so that they are not separated by distance and time. With the pandemic event and the development of technology that allows the church to facilitate worship virtually, the church is entering a new era in its existence and ministry, namely the digital age.

Apart from the advantages of the virtual worship model, several authors also put forward various challenges and problems that need to be answered. The benefits received are that virtual worship is an extension of the church for congregants who cannot attend directly to worship and a forum for youth to be involved in church services [3], [4]. However, with all the benefits obtained, a problem was found, starting from the impression that worship is just watching. The fellowship could be more robust. The attitude toward studying God's word is not sharp, to worship ethics that are starting to be ignored, such as eating and drinking, to ignoring the dress code [2], [5], [6].

This netnographic study examines Reformed Jewish rituals transmitted via virtual social media platforms during the COVID-19 pandemic. The impact of moving virtual spaces such as virtual prayer making exposes Reform services to Israeli society. On the other hand, virtual space has the opposite effect that people can perform their services without the actual formal area. This study highlights the meeting point between virtual space, religious praxis, and political conflict [7]. Qualitative research on the Eucharistic service in a Catholic church involving 13 participants shows that celebrating the Eucharist is impossible online because the congregation cannot take the bread and wine blessed by the priest. However, they argue that the Eucharist celebration differs from worship, shown live on television [8]. This research represents the congregation's opinion of virtual worship's positive side. They have not been able to leave the tradition of encounters with the community of believers.

Research in Australia through an online survey involving 1173 participants. The results of this study indicate that the Spiritual Welfare Scale found no significant difference in the Existential and Religious Well-being scores between groups who were still experiencing church closures and those who could return to church. These results support access to virtual and real-life worship during church closures and its positive effect on existential and religious well-being in the church-going Catholic population [9]. There was an opinion that developed during the Covid-19 pandemic many congregations who did not have the opportunity to go to church could enjoy worshipping virtually. Still, the long-lasting Covid-19 pandemic also influenced their previous views.

In this paper, the authors explore how virtual worship can influence the spiritual growth of churches in today's digital era. By looking at the existing challenges, a question arises whether in-person worship, as the church usually does, has the same impact as churches that currently hold services digitally. The author explores virtual worship's effect on the congregation's spiritual growth. Likewise, it can be seen and assessed how the future of virtual worship will be after the pandemic that has made it famous. Is it headed for a stop or towards an evolution of adaptation from a pandemic to a hybrid?

2 Methods

This research is qualitative, namely literature review [10], which is to determine ideas with the keywords "virtual worship" and "spiritual growth". Publication of the two keywords implied in the digital church era.

The results of the publication linking the two keywords in this study explain the relationship between the two compared to onsite worship or face-to-face worship. What challenges and opportunities and the future of virtual worship or online worship? The advantages and disadvantages of virtual worship are related to spiritual growth based on observation and data collection through Google Scholar sources. Researchers look at journal abstracts and synthesize writings as part of the research discussion [11], [12].

3 Finding and Discussion

The literature review results and observations of researchers discussing the relationship between virtual worship and spiritual growth in the digital church era. Current and future challenges and opportunities for virtual worship in Indonesian churches.

3.1 Virtual Worship

Virtual worship is still unclear in terms of phrases, so it is good if it is understood literally. Worship is a response to an entity that is the creator [13]. Not only that, but worship also includes an act that offers prayers and praises and listens to the explanation of the Scriptures [14]. This means that worship is a personal response in prayer, thanksgiving, and contemplation focused on the creator.

Virtual worship or online worship has brought about a change in church culture. During this time, the worship together was in the church. Campbell said that the religious tradition that gatherings with others are shifting to virtual communities. Learning religion online explains spiritual practices and the latest trends in the digital era [15]. In this case, through live-streaming technology, virtual is carried out through the YouTube platform. Livestreaming or commonly known as live broadcasts. In his book, Stewart notes that live streaming is an application service that allows users to broadcast live video content that can be watched on various gadgets [16]. Apostolopoulos added that the fundamental nature of streams is to reduce visual and audio files so that they are easy to send over the Internet and the process is carried out continuously. At the same time, life is a service application of streams that are real-time [17].

With YouTube, the church can provide live streaming facilities so that the congregation can attend worship while the worship is being covered while worshipping in the church building. The community follows from outside the church building. It can track the worship service in real time.

The results of other studies try to design church architecture in a virtual form that provides an authentic experience in three virtual dimensions, especially moving towards the metaverse, which represents a virtual reality version [18]. The reality is that the congregation can experience spiritual sensations from a personal point of view. Of course, it differs from live streaming, where the viewing angle only follows the audio-visual camera presented.

3.2 Virtual Worship and Spiritual Growth

The question is whether face-to-face worship has more impact on spiritual growth. Can virtual worship also have a positive effect on spiritual growth?

Sumigar and Wijaya show that virtual worship significantly influences students' spiritual growth. Respondents are Class 2020 students who started online lectures and virtual worship during the COVID-19 pandemic [19]. The sudden state of the world being hit by COVID-19 forced the church to blur spiritual and secular boundaries. When the church worships virtually, it reaches wider boundaries to bring about a

broader spiritual change [20]. Thus, even those who rarely go to church can worship at home.

The virtual worship challenge is the personal worship of the congregation who worships God and has the attitude of a true worshiper who worships in spirit and truth (John 4:23-24). The problem with virtual worship is an unstable internet network—a disrespectful attitude of the congregation in worshipping God. Free time to honor so delay worship of God. These problems can affect the personal spirituality of the community. The virtual reality of worship is not a substitute for spiritual formation (the discipline of worship) but an addition [21]. Individuals need to build themselves spiritually by meeting and intimacy with God. The presence of virtual worship in spiritual growth is additional because there is limited space for face-to-face fellowship in the church.

Everyone recognizes a need to grow, including spiritual things [22]. Just as when the body does not get food, it will weaken, the same thing happens to a person's spiritual life. Spiritual growth, which can also be called spiritual maturity according to Downs, is that maturity education is education about faith [23]. Faith is a description that is often used to describe a person's spiritual maturity. In his book, Still concludes that spiritual maturity is seen when freedom from the distractions of sin and carnal desires leads to the enjoyment of God [24]. Although the slow process of a person's spiritual growth is different, the result of a person's spiritual growth process is specific—believers who want to live in spiritual growth to achieve Christ's likeness [25]. Everyone who pursues spiritual growth will follow Jesus-like actions, behaviors, and desires as the pinnacle of perfection.

Benner concludes that it takes encouragement from the individual to walk in a life of spiritual growth [26]. It is essential to start spiritual growth as an inner drive, born of awareness, to live an increased spiritual life. But spiritual growth can only be done with someone [25]. It could be through the help of a mentor or accountability friend. The importance of a companion to remind, guide, and direct in spiritual growth.

Spiritual disciplines and hybrid contexts represent potential areas for further development with other perspectives. Stephen and Mary Lowe provide a sound theological model for thinking about opportunities for higher spiritual formation in digital-age education, not only online modalities. But in all modalities through an ecological view [27]. Churches need to think of other alternatives that can be done to experience spiritual growth both online and together.

3.3 The Future of Virtual Worship

The future of virtual worship can develop rapidly. The ability of digitization to enter all fields, including religion and the church, shows that the church must adapt to significant changes after entering the COVID-19 pandemic phase. The advantages of having virtual worship in its various forms are 1) providing freedom of time to worship together; 2) increasing spiritual meetings such as Bible studies and online spiritual activity meetings; 3) providing opportunities for youth and youth talents to activate their abilities in the multimedia field; 4) spread the good news of God's Kingdom more and

more; 5) Social media interactions related to spiritual growth are increasing due to the number of social media participants.

The weakness of virtual worship lies in the reality of an encounter with God that cannot be replaced by virtual worship, where humans are flesh and blood in fellowship with other believers [28]. Even face-to-face worship cannot replace an encounter with God. Another obstacle is that virtual worship is unnecessary for Christian communities in rural areas that are not covered by a stable internet network.

The presence of digital technology in the church properly and correctly increasingly connects attentional control, mindful and compassionate awareness, and social and relational intelligence with others without the need to meet [29]. The challenge of advancing digital and artificial intelligence (AI) is not only increasing intelligence capabilities but also needs to be a focus on spirituality. Jackelén mentions problems such as “mental health disorders, addiction, manipulation, and self-exploitation. Reflections on leadership suggest resilience, coexistence, and hope as theological key components for navigating the uncharted realms of the digital age,” [30].

3.4 Implication: Hybrid Church in Digital Church Era

The implications of implementing virtual and face-to-face worship are known as hybrid churches. The digital facilities that already exist in the church and human resources capable of assisting the operation of multimedia make it possible to have a hybrid church. The purpose of worshipping God is intimacy in seeking God's will and impacting the world [31]. Thus, any church model approach is used to realize the spiritual growth of the congregation in the church. The congregation's involvement in virtual worship shows the sincerity of the community to experience intimacy and want to have an impact on fellow human beings.

Implementing a hybrid church in urban areas is possible because distance and time can be combined through the Internet. Urban communities are better equipped to adapt to economic, social, and cultural changes [32]. Hybrid churches can provide a solution for congregants who are not in the place and can also live worship at the church onsite.

4 Conclusion

Virtual worship has an impact on spiritual growth. The key to the answer in the digital church era is that the church needs to adapt that joint worship does not always have to be in the church. Fellowship of fellow believers can be done digitally online. Advances in technology and the digitalization of religion are helping, not replacing intimacy with God. The purpose of worship is worshipping God, knowing His will, and impacting being a blessing to others. This can be accelerated with the help of the digital era.

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