



# Metaverse: An Opportunity and Challenge for Christian Ministry in the Digital Era

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**Abstract.** Metaverse technology is one form of the rapid development of digital technology. The development of technology that can combine physical reality with virtual digital is responded to by pros & cons by the church. The developing metaverse technology can provide opportunities and challenges for human life, including for the church and its priests in Christian ministry. Church & priests must continue to carry out the task of Christian ministry in every generation amid today's developments and technological advances. This article analyzes the opportunity and challenge between the priest's ministry in the metaverse and on-site church worship services comparatively. This study uses a qualitative method through a literature review approach with descriptive comparative analysis. The results of the study show that through metaverse, the opportunities for the reach of Christian services are wider even though there are challenges in their implementation. There are similarities and differences between services on-site and in the metaverse. Worship services in the metaverse can be carried out as long as they adhere to the concept of the essence of the church and ministry; therefore, the church and its priests need to prepare themselves and their generations to face the development of the evolving metaverse technology. This research contributes to the knowledge of church leaders and Christian academics in preparing Christian ministry strategies to welcome and deal with the development of metaverse technology in today's digital era.

**Keywords:** Christian Ministry, Church, Digital Era, Metaverse, Priests.

## 1 Introduction

Internet of Things (IoT) technology has developed rapidly in today's era [1, pp. 218–219]. The emergence of IoT is inseparable from technological developments from the Industrial Revolution 1.0 to the Industrial Revolution 4.0. Technological developments have influenced human behavior and made it necessary for every job. In the research of Prasetyo and Trisyanti quoted by Mumtaha and Khoiri, they stated that the Industrial Revolution 4.0 affected not only the technology field but also the social fields - humanities, economics, and law [2, p. 55]. This change in human behavior is marked by the development of Society 5.0 today. The development of the Industrial Revolution 4.0 and Society 5.0 has greatly impacted people's lives. The Metaverse technology that has

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begun to be developed is a form of technological development that is currently developing and becomes a challenge for human life, including in the world of Christian ministry in the current and future digital era.

Metaverse technology allows the merging of physical reality with digital virtuality [3, p. 486]. This condition makes the pattern of Christian ministry change and can occur virtually [4, p. 5781]. This is evidenced by the virtual Christian ministry activities that have occurred for approximately the last two and a half years due to the impact of covid-19 [5]. Dwiraharjo, in his work entitled "Digital Church Theology Construction," proposes further research on whether digital services can become a digital church pattern in the future [6]. However, the emergence of metaverse technology is responded to by pros and cons by the church, especially in the Christian ministry.

Kusuma cites Suslov's statement that the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) has a negative attitude towards the use of Internet Technology (which may include metaverse technology) even though it considers it an ethically neutral instrument [1]. Furthermore, Larson expressed concern about the emergence of metaverse technology and warned believers to prepare themselves not to be drawn into a life that drifts away from God and could lose their true soul [7]. Meanwhile, Wibisono stated that the church needs to have a positive attitude toward the development of metaverse technology. He argues that the metaverse church is also authentic and valid as a community of believers in a virtual world that is universal in the same faith and is lived by the Holy Spirit with whom they interact (John 4:21-23) [8, p. 17]. As with Zaluchu's research, *koinonia* in Christianity can be implemented digitally [9]. These conditions indicate that believers address the development of metaverse technology differently.

Moving on from different attitudes towards the emergence of metaverse technology, the author will show more opportunities and challenges that arise from the development of metaverse technology for Christian ministry and in particular, its implications for the ministry of a priest. Therefore, this study attempts to analyze the opportunities and challenges between the priest's ministry in the metaverse and on-site worship services comparatively. This understanding can contribute to the church in carrying out Christian ministry tasks amid the rapid development of technology today.

## 2 Method

This study uses qualitative research methods, with a literature study approach to reliable literature relevant to the topic to obtain dedicated data [10], [11]. Existing data were analyzed by descriptive comparative analysis through three stages, namely classification, reduction, and interpretation. First, it discusses the concept of Christian ministry, then explains the metaverse, and closes with a discussion on Christian ministry in the metaverse.

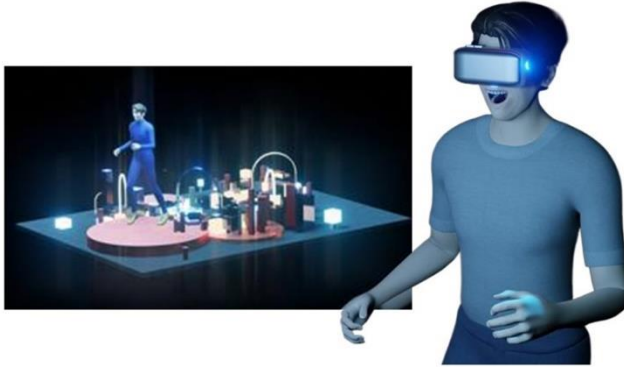
### 3 Findings and Discussion

#### 3.1 Christian Ministry

The concept of the church certainly does not change even though the era is more advanced because it is facilitated by technology. The church (ekklesia) is a called-out congregation to fellowship with the Lord Jesus Christ. Setinawati stated that the Church, which is subject to the great mandate of the Lord Jesus Christ, must carry out the duties of the church, namely fellowship (koinonia), testimony (*martyria*), and service (diaconia) [12, p. 178]. The church and its priests are commanded by God always to carry out Christian ministry until His return. This means that before the Lord comes, Christian ministry needs to be carried out from era to era. Similarly, the concept of a priest who serves. The book of Leviticus is very clear about the functions and responsibilities of a priest. The priest is the intermediary between the people and God. Before someone becomes a priest, that person will be crowned or ordained before holding his office. As happened to Aaron and his sons when God choose from among the Israelites to serve as High Priests and priests for God (Ex. 28:1). The ordination ceremony was carried out because God wanted His priests to be holy (Ex. 29:1). In the New Testament, holiness became part of the priesthood (1 Pet. 2:9). In today's era, Ruy stated that being a priest may be easy, but a priest must have qualifications. The purpose of a priest having qualifications is for the people's spiritual maturity. The perfect qualification and role model for a priest is Jesus Christ, the High Priest [13, p. 72].

#### 3.2 Metaverse Concept

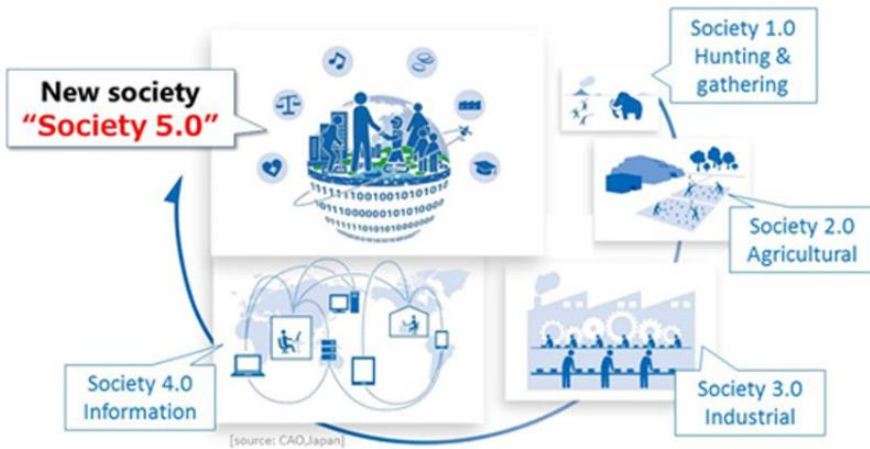
Many people see metaverse as a new word. But the concept of the metaverse is not a new term. The word metaverse first appeared in 1992 in the speculative fiction *Snow Crash* by Neal Stephenson, in which the character Snow Crash became the avatar. In this novel, Stephenson defines the metaverse as a large virtual environment [14, p. 45]. Etymologically, the word Metaverse comes from two words, 'meta', which means beyond, and 'verse', which means universe. Based on this etymology, the definition of Metaverse is a virtual reality in the form of 3D using VR (Virtual Reality) and AR (Augmented Reality) technology, which allows people to interact, work, play, socialize, and perform other activities virtually using avatars [8]. As an illustration, we can see in Figure 1. The development of this metaverse technology provides both opportunity and challenge for Christian ministry in this digital era.



**Fig. 1.** The Man Using Metaverse (Source: <https://www.forbes.com/sites/forbesbusinesscouncil/2022/03/29/embracing-the-metaverse-what-new-skills-will-businesses-need-to-succeed/?sh=12bcd4bb115c>).

### 3.3 The Opportunity of Christian Ministry in the Metaverse Era

The emergence of the metaverse allows humans to change the order of life in the future through science and technology [15, p. 353]. This is part of the Industrial Revolution 4.0 and Society 5.0, an era that facilitates human needs using modern technology-based science. As an illustration, we can see Figure 2.



**Fig. 2.** The The Industrial Revolution 4.0 and Society 5.0 (Source: <https://inmarketing.id/society-5-0-adalah.html>)

Observing this metaverse concept, some churches see this era as an opportunity. The church enters and undergoes the metaverse world, even now there is a metaverse church. Members of the congregation can consist of various circles of society and from various countries. The church liturgy proceeds as determined by the local church. There is prayer, praise, delivery of God's Word, and offerings. This was done by Enoch Lam Yee-Lok, the pastor of the Baptist Church in Hong Kong, in February 2022. He stated that just as in the condition of the prophet Noah who built the ark amid conditions many people did not believe in the flood, so is the case with the construction of a virtual church in the metaverse [16]. This means that the scope of Christian ministry carried out by churches and their priests in the metaverse can become wider and global.

In Indonesia itself, churches already carry out worship with a metaverse. As an article on the Answer.com website written on January 6, 2020, one of the Indonesian churches that have done this is the VR Church led by Ps. D.J.Soto, where he claims to be the first religious institution that has used computer sophistication in its full potential for service. Ps. Soto also said: "We are leaving the information age and entering the experience era of VR (virtual reality) and AR (augmented reality)" [17]. Seeing this phenomenon, there are various pros and cons, but some also say the same, considering the essence is worship. This is concluded by Putra that worshipping in a metaverse church does not conflict with the truth of God's Word, reviewed theologically and biblically [4]. This situation seems to indicate fulfilling the words of the Lord Jesus to the Samaritan woman that there will come a time when the worship of believers is no longer tied to its place because the worship that God wants is worship in spirit and in truth (John 4:21-23).

### **3.4 The Challenge of Christian Ministry in the Metaverse Era**

The challenge for the church is to live and adapt to Society 5.0. Ready or not, the church will be included in Society 5.0. Including matters of worship in the church will also use technology. The COVID-19 pandemic has changed the paradigm of Christians in worship. Worship online is one way out. Dwirahardjo stated the same thing regarding online worship during the covid-19 pandemic [6] Worshipping in a Metaverse (3D) church looks a step further than online worship (2D). Of course, people who worship in a metaverse church will feel a different atmosphere from online worship that is not 3D. Avatars in the metaverse are representative of the profile/identity of people who worship in the metaverse. The potential for differences in self-identity between profile avatars and individuals worshipping is wide open. There is a difference of opinion that worshipping in a metaverse church is not the same as worshipping in a church on-site; even online or metaverse worship can be considered not solemn. In addition, the challenge in Christian ministry in the metaverse era is the need for thorough preparation. Putra stated that worship with the metaverse concept requires preparation regarding technology and human resources [4]. This requires a reasonably high cost and the development of every human resource involved in the ministry.

Based on the description above, it can be observed that there is a comparison between a priest who serves at the metaverse and an on-site church. The comparison can be seen in the table in Table 1 below.

**Table 1.** The Comparison of Ministry in On-Site & Metaverse Church

Comparison	The Ministry in the Onsite Church	The Ministry in the Metaverse Church
The Concept of God's Presence	God is present in onsite ministry.	God is present in onsite ministry.
Priest's Role	Priest is the intermediary between God and people.	Priest is the intermediary between God and people.
Worshiping People	People worship onsite (personal physical contact)	People worship virtually (virtual personal contact via avatar).
Ministry Range	Locally ministry.	Globally ministry
Identity of Priest or People	Physically real.	Virtual with avatar and potentially manipulated.
Human Resources (HR) & Logistics	Requires HR & Logistics that can be adapted to local church conditions	Demanding competent HR in terms of technology and very expensive logistics costs.

Observing the comparison table above, the Christian ministry in the onsite and metaverse church has similarities and differences.

## 4 Conclusion

The metaverse that is currently running cannot be said to be optimal, but over time the metaverse may experience various latest improvements, at least like the metaverse technology in the movie "Ready Player One." Technological developments in this digital era are opportunities and challenges for developing holistic church ministry. Based on the results and discussion in this study, several conclusions can be drawn:

First, there are opportunities for Christian ministry in the metaverse church, namely the opportunity to do ministry with an extensive range, because the metaverse allows people to interact, socialize, and perform worship or service virtually by using avatars without having to meet physically. But on the other hand, there are challenges that need to be considered, namely the potential for differences in the identity profile of Christian

avatars, as well as the threat level of being disinterested in worship is higher, then careful preparation is needed in terms of technology and readiness of human resources.

Second, a Christian ministry in the metaverse and the on-site church have similarities and differences. The similarities between the two in terms of understanding the concept of God's presence, the duties of the church, and the role of priests and worshipers have the same essence. Meanwhile, the difference is in terms of the range of services, the identity of the priest & the people, and the need for human resources and logistics.

Third, the author believes there is nothing wrong with a church that uses the metaverse by sticking to the concept of church and ministry. Because both the worshipping congregation and the priests who serve during the service have yet to experience a shift in function in essential matters, the church and its priests must be ready for every development of metaverse technology in the digital era. In addition, it is also necessary to prepare generations to be ready to face the development of existing technology. At this time, it may seem foreign and even expensive for some churches, but when the time comes that the metaverse has become a necessity like a smartphone, then the Church needs to be contextualized.

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