Ritualization of Online Worship During COVID-19 Pandemic: A Case Study in GKMI ARK

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ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 outbreak that first happened in the city of Wuhan, China on January 2020 did not take long until it reached other parts of the world and then declared by World Health Organization as a pandemic within two month. In Indonesia, Mr. President Joko Widodo urged every citizen to do academic, economical, and religious activities at home in order to slow the spread of the virus. Christian congregations are among religious groups that had been affected by government's measures to reduce the Coronavirus transmission. While online learning and remote working have been known and practiced by some, online worship was imaginable by none. Located within the "red area" where Coronavirus transmission is high, Gereja Kristen Muria Indonesia Anugerah Rayon Kembangan (GKMI ARK) was among the first churches in Indonesia to switch from on-site to fully online worship. The pastor and elders gave new set of rituals for online worship, to which the congregation must adapt, regardless of their preparedness. Ritual can be broadly defined as a set of meaningful sequence of actions produced by ritualization. This paper aims to explore the ritualization of online worship of GKMI ARK congregation during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Keywords: COVID-19, Sacred Spaces, Online Worship, Ritual, Ritualization.

INTRODUCTION

In the beginning was COVID-19. In early January 2020, a hospital in Wuhan reported a collection of cases with symptoms of pneumonia without a clear cause. A study of 41 initial patients enrolled in a hospital in Wuhan showed symptoms such as fever (98%), cough (76%), dyspnea (55%), myalgia or fatigue (44%), with a high risk of human-to-human transmission through contact with patients, so the use of N95 masks is highly recommended for medical workers to avoid transmission (Huang et al., 2020). The Chinese government began implementing strict social restrictions since January 23, 2020, and on March 23, 2020, no new cases were reported for five consecutive days—indicating the success of the social distancing policy in controlling the spread of COVID-19 (Ainslie et al., 2020). Thus, many governments have tried to replicate the approach through various social restriction policies, ranging from closing schools, offices, restaurants, to places of worship, to limit the number of people in public places to slow down transmission and reduce the intensity of the outbreak (Kissler et al., 2020). Apart from the loss of millions of lives worldwide, almost all businesses and industries are affected by the pandemic, such as aviation, tourism, entertainment, food, sports. Restrictions on social activities imposed by many governments have forced companies to lay off and reduce the number of employees. Millions of people suddenly lost their jobs. Not only economic activities, but spiritual activities are also affected by this highly contagious virus. Rituals of worship and prayers of various religions and beliefs had to be aborted or held online, and houses of worship were closed to prevent gatherings of people (Koley & Dhole, 2021).

For thousands of years, places of worship have been the center of religious activity in human civilization (Cianca, 2018; Harrington, 2004; Mazumdar & Mazumdar, 2004). In sacred spaces, there are complex dynamics of communication, a combination of inter-personal communication to intrapersonal communication. Several things can make these sacred spaces unusable, such as being destroyed by war and territorial disputes, natural disasters, and so on. If that happens, people can still meet physically and carry out their rituals in alternate sacred spaces. Sacred spaces are also physical because most people are only able to interact with matter. Physical sacred spaces serve as symbols of the invisible (Harrington, 2004). However, pandemics such as COVID-19, which are triggered by viruses with serious enough consequences to cause death in a relatively short period of time, have forced worship meetings in physical sacred spaces to be postponed for the time being.

More than a century ago, in 1918 to be exact, a similar pandemic called the Spanish Flu also swept across the world including the Dutch East Indies region, causing

the deaths of more than 30 million people in just six months (Phillips & Killingray, 2011). A report concluded that the Spanish Flu outbreak spread rapidly due to four things, namely: (1) population suscepti- bility to influenza transmission, (2) the short incubation period of the virus, (3) the virus is in the respiratory tract, so it is easily transmitted through the respiratory tract. talking, coughing, or sneezing, and (4) many people with mild symptoms continue to work and communicate with others (in schools, factories, chur- ches, mosques, etc.), thereby accelerating the spread of the virus (de Langen et al., 1920). Different from its predecessor the Spanish Flu, the COVID-19 pandemic occurred in the information age, so that social struc- tures that were disrupted, such as work, school, and worship, could be facilitated by new media. On March 16, 2020, President Joko Widodo at a press conference at the Bogor Palace emphasized that policies for productive activities at home need to be carried out to suppress the spread of the Covid-19 disease. These activities are mainly related to work, study, and worship (Ihsanuddin, 2020). Many offices have changed their work pattern from work from office (WFO) to work from home (WFH) for staff or emplo- yees whose responsibilities can be done online. Teaching and learning activities have also changed, from meeting in class to online distance learning (PJJ). For religious congregations, sacred spaces in worship are not completely closed, but take a non-material form in the form of cyber spaces for a while, with the hope that the pandemic will pass soon, and face-to-face worship meetings can be held again.

However, doing religious activities online regularly for a relatively long period of time was never anticipated by anyone. Initially, some religious communities did not pay much attention to the appeals and rules to worship in their respective homes, and some even openly rejected it, because they had a religious interpretation—citing biblical texts, that it was better to follow God's call to worship together physically instead of following the government's advice to worship at home. Such abandonment or denial exists in almost all religions. As a result, COVID-19 has also spread from religious events held, especially those carried out by mass mobilization (Arrobi & Nadzifah, 2020). The Tablighi Akbar in Malaysia with 696 participants from Indonesia, for example, raised new COVID-19 suspects and patients. Elsewhere, the conference of one church in Lembang and another church seminar in Bogor also caused the congregation and pastor who took part in these activities to even die of contracting the corona virus (Lazuardi, 2020). This phenomenon is predictable, considering that religious activities with many participants, especially those of a ritual nature, such as congregational prayers and Friday prayers for Muslims or Sunday services for Christians,

are rituals that have been going on for centuries and are based on scriptural verses, which are believed to be God's commands for His people (Bridges, 2014; Rijal, 2009). National religious institutions issued an appeal to worship at home. The Indonesian Ulema Council (MUI) issued an edict that during the epidemic period, Friday prayers at mosques can be substituted for midday prayers at home. The Association of Churches in Indonesia (PGI) also issued an appeal to churches so that while the epidemic has not passed, onsite Sunday services will not be held. As an alternative, PGI recommended that services be held online using new media, especially YouTube (Purnamasari, 2020). However, socio-political dynamics also seem to make public communication from the Government less effective in changing the behavior of religious people to follow health protocols and impose restrictions on mass religious activities. In other words, the effec- tiveness of appeals and regulations related to religious activities is more influenced by the characteristics of religious people as recipients of messages than actors who send messages from the Government (Kuipers, Mujani, & Pepinsky, 2020).

In Indonesia, Christians are a minority, which is around 20 million people (Poplawska, 2020). At first glance, it seems that problems with religious rituals such as Sunday Worships have found a solution in the midst of a pandemic through online worships. Internet seemed to provide brilliant solution for Christian congregations in the country during the drastic measures imposed by the government in pursuit of containing the pandemic. Each member of congregation can still follow the course of worship from their respective places of residence, starting from praising God with spiritual songs, participating in prayers, listening to sermons, and even sending collections—money given by the congregation to the church as a form of thanksgiving to God—to the church's bank account. However, there are more activities and rituals that had to be missed, because for most church members, Sunday Worship is not just about performing individual rituals, but also meeting other members of the congregation and carrying out various other service activities as a true community and a form of devotion to God (Bridges, 2014). Thus, the main challenge that church leaders face is for the congregation to not just attend the online worships, but also to do it meaningfully, just like when they attend the usual Sunday Worships.

METHOD

This is a case study with descriptive qualitative approach. The author collected and analysed data from GKMI ARK's group chats, online survey for conger- gation results, and social media posts that are relevant

to the research questions. The purpose of this study was to explore and examine processes and types of ritualization of online worship during COVID-19 pandemic in GKMI ARK congregation. The questions to be answered in this study are: (1) How was the ritualization of online worship conducted? (2) In what ways were the ritualization of online worship differ from that of onsite worship? And (3) Who were the actors or agents that led the ritualization of online worship?

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Throughout 2020, GKMI ARK has held online services 45 times. The themes of each service were designed in such a way as to entertain and strengthen the congregation during the pandemic.

Table 1. GKMI ARK Online Service March-December 2020

No	Pelaksanaan	Tema
1	Sunday, 22 Maret 2020	Roh yang Menguatkan
2	Sunday, 29 Maret 2020	Di mana Allahmu?
3	Sunday, 05 April 2020	Purification of The Church (Sunday Palmarum)
4	Thursday, 09 April 2020	Tetes-Tetes Darah di Getsemani (Thursday Putih)
5	Friday, 10 April 2020	Metanoia (Friday Agung)
6	Sunday, 12 April 2020	Kuasa Kemenangan Paskah
7	Sunday, 19 April 2020	Memperbaharui Perjanjian dengan Tuhan
8	Sunday, 26 April 2020	I Will Sing to the Lord
9	Sunday, 03 Mei 2020	Berkarya Atas Waktu
10	Sunday, 10 Mei 2020	God Will Show You Which Path to Take
11	Sunday, 17 Mei 2020	Mujizat Itu Masih Ada
12	Sunday, 24 Mei 2020	Manusia Rohani yang Membumi
13	Sunday, 31 Mei 2020	Apakah Artinya Ini? (Pentakosta)
14	Sunday, 07 Juni 2020	Becoming An Authentic Christian
15	Sunday, 14 Juni 2020	Hidup Bijaksana Sebagai Umat Allah
16	Sunday, 21 Juni 2020	Jangan "Terserah" – Bersukacitalah
17	Sunday, 28 Juni 2020	Hari Tuhan
18	Sunday, 05 Juli 2020	Contented & Generous
19	Sunday, 12 Juli 2020	Focus On What Matters
20	Sunday, 19 Juli 2020	Mengampuni Itu Mungkin
21	Sunday, 26 Juli 2020	TUHAN Allahku Kekuatanku
22	Sunday, 02 Agustus 2020	Bagiku, Hidup Adalah Untuk Kristus
23	Sunday, 09 Agustus 2020	Tidak Ada Dasar Lain
24	Sunday, 16 Agustus 2020	Resilient Faith
25	Sunday, 23 Agustus 2020	Accusing God of Injustice
26	Sunday, 30 Agustus 2020	Let Go Let God
27	Sunday, 06 September 2020	Dadi Wong Ki Mbok Sing Solutip
28	Sunday, 13 September 2020	Cintailah Kebenaran dan Damai (Zoom)
29	Sunday, 20 September 2020	Peace Within You, Peace Be With You
30	Sunday, 27 September 2020	Facing Discouragement With Courage
31	Sunday, 04 Oktober 2020	4L-Di Rumah Aja (Zoom)
32	Sunday, 11 Oktober 2020	Fathering
33	Sunday, 18 Oktober 2020	Trust And Obey (Zoom)
34	Sunday, 25 Oktober 2020	Wives And Mothers In Facing Anxiety And Worry During The Pandemic

No	Pelaksanaan	Tema
35	Sunday, 01 November 2020	Hidup Tangguh Dan Tekun (Zoom)
36	Sunday, 08 November 2020	Saleh, Jujur, Takut akan Allah
37	Sunday, 15 November 2020	Sesungguhnya Allah Itu Baik (Zoom)
38	Sunday, 22 November 2020	The Race Called Life (Zoom)
39	Sunday, 29 November 2020	Ada Pengharapan Di Dalam Tuhan
40	Sunday, 06 Desember 2020	Malaikat & Berita Natal
41	Sunday, 13 Desember 2020	Terang Sukacita
42	Sunday, 20 Desember 2020	Damai Sejahtera di Antara Manusia yang Berkenan Kepada Allah
43	Friday, 25 Desember 2020	Captivated by God's Love (Natal)
44	Sunday, 27 Desember 2020	Gratitude (Give Thanks In Everything)
45	Thursday, 31 Desember 2020	Ebenhaezer (Ibadah Tutup Tahun)

The content of the GKMI ARK Online Service usually consist of: (1) spiritual hymns accompanied by lyrics, (2) intercessory prayers led by the on-duty prayer, (3) sermons, and (4) account information for offerings/ collections. Each content material is pre-edited, with a total duration of about 50 minutes to 1 hour. Content is uploaded to the GKMI ARK YouTube channel with broadcast schedules every Sunday at eight in the morning. The video link along with worship proce-dures was specifically distributed to the GKMI ARK congregation, and then redistributed by the pastor, administrators, and congregation to their respective networks of friends. Initially, the online devotional content was made in the form of a YouTube playlist — videos of songs, intercessions, and sermons were uploaded separately, but because it was found that the number of views of the sermon video was more than the other videos, the administrator decided that each section would be unified. into a single video before uploading to YouTube.

At the start of the Online Worship, the congregation's WhatsApp group, "ARK Community", was filled with greetings and photo uploads from enthusiastic conger-gations during content broadcast hours, which is Sunday from 8 to 9 am. This was assessed by pastors and administrators as being able to reduce the conger-gation's solemnity in worship, so that every time the content is broadcast, the group admin turns off the conversation feature and reopens it after the content is finished broadcasting. The pastor texted a message to the chat group, asking the congregation to set their focus on the streamed content.

3/22/20, 6:01 AM - Timo GKMI: Selamat pagi jemaat ARK, selamat memasuki minggu pra Paskah keempat. Hari ini kita akan melak-sanakan ibadah di rumah masing masing dimulai serentak pukul 08.00-selesai.

Oleh karena itu mohon partisipasi jemaat semua agar mengikutinya bersama sama dengan keluarga.

Liturgi ibadah, rekaman doa syafaat dan link kotbah akan disampaikan oleh bidang ibadah sebelum jam 08.00. Juga persembahan akan disampaikan lewat transfer.

Dimohonkan juga kepada semua anggota grup ini agar tidak memposting info atau berita atau apapun kedalam grup ini mulai pagi ini jam 07.00 -11.00 agar tidak mengganggu jalannya ibadah keluarga melalui online ini.

Kiranya mendapat perhatian dan mari rayakan bersama persekutuan keluarga dan ibadah ARK ini dengan sukacita.

Damai sejahtera yang melampaui segala akal menyertai bapak, ibu dan saudara sekalian. Haleluya. Amin.

Pdt. Timotius Adhi Dharma
*_(Gembala Jemaat GKMI ARK)_*

In the early days of online worship services, some congregations shared photos while attending online services with their families. There are also those who share photos of the table where the cellphone and laptop are placed, complete with flower accessories and candles. Some photos were reposted on church's Instagram account.

Picture 1. The social media of GKMI ARK reposting congregation members' photos of doing online worship at home.
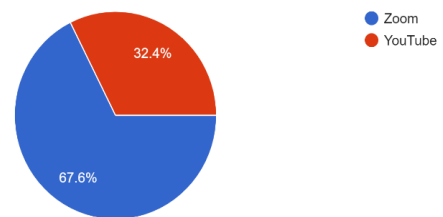
These things had never been done at Sunday Worship before the COVID-19 outbreak, indicating that in the early days of the pandemic, Online Services were still seen as a "distraction" from Sunday Worship, a phenomenon that was not imagined to last months and even years later.

Since September 13, 2020, the Online Service started using the Zoom application, which is also broadcast live on the GKMI ARK YouTube channel. Liturgy or the order of the Online Service using the Zoom application is similar to the liturgy of Sunday Worship, by eliminating or replacing parts of the liturgy that cannot be done online, such as handing over the Bible from administrators to preachers, offering prayer and distributing collection bags, and distributing the bread and wine of Holy Communion.

For some of the congregation members, the content of the GKMI ARK Online Service through the Zoom application is more enjoyable than the Online Service that is broadcast on YouTube, although sometimes there are technical problems with the device and internet network used. However, face-to-face Sunday services in church buildings are still missed and cannot be replaced by online services in their respective homes. The longing of having a "normal" Sunday Worship is also reflected in congregation's weekly prayer items, i.e., praying that the handling of the pandemic is successful, and the pandemic can be contained.
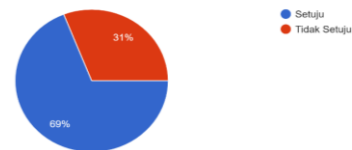

Untuk Kebaktian Online, media mana yang lebih Anda sukai?
71 responses

- Zoom
- YouTube

32.4%
67.6%

Apakah Bapak/Ibu/Saudara setuju jika Ibadah Minggu di Gedung Gereja kembali dimulai pada bulan Agustus 2020?
42 responses

- Setuju
- Tidak Setuju

31%
69%

Picture 2 & 3. The results of internal survey within GKMI ARK congregation

Berdoa untuk penanggulangan wabah pandemi COVID 19, untuk pelaksanaan vaksinasi, untuk kordinasi antara Pemerintah Pusat, Pemerintah Daerah, Kemenkes dan Satgas, kesiapan rumah sakit dan tenaga medis, kiranya Tuhan Yesus yang menolong bangsa Indonesia dalam menghadapi pandemi ini.

Picture 4. GKMI ARK congregation weekly prayer items on pandemic response

The actors or agents that led the ritualization in GKMI ARK online worship during COVID-19 pandemic are the pastors, elders, and the operational team, including the worship leaders, social media admins, and Zoom meeting hosts. They were the ones who set the rules for the online worship, which were spread on church's social media and in the chat group.

Picture 5. The new rituals introduced on church's social media.

CONCLUSION

From what the author had been found during the study, it was clear that the ritualization of online worship during the COVID-19 pandemic was led by the pastors, the elders, and the operational team before and during the worship. The new rituals were introduced through available communication channels, such as WhatsApp group and social media accounts. Because of the government's ruling that restricted mass gatherings in order to combat the spread of Coronavirus, the ritualization of online worship in the context of GKMI ARK congregation was mainly conducted through non-contact settings. The rituals in online worship have some significant differences, such as the missing symbolism of giving the bible, the blessing on the bread and wine during holy communion, and the gathering after the service. Although most of the congregation members found that doing worship online was meaningful, the face-to-face Sunday Worship has always been missed. The longing of having a "normal" Sunday Worship is reflected in congregation's weekly prayer items, i.e., praying that the pandemic will soon be over. This study, however, has its own limitation, mainly because it was conducted during the pandemic.

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