



Digital Churches and Faith Education in the Virtual Age: A Theological Study on the Validity of Online Worship and Communities

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ABSTRACT

The rapid development of digital technology has significantly influenced religious practices, giving rise to the phenomenon of the digital church. This study explores the theological legitimacy of online worship and virtual faith communities within the Christian context. Employing a qualitative descriptive method with literature review, the research analyzes biblical reflections, ecclesiological perspectives, and contemporary theological discourse. Findings reveal that digital worship spaces are not merely technical mediums but genuine spaces of spiritual encounter, where God's presence is experienced through faith and communal participation. Online sacraments and pastoral authority are valid when conducted with proper ecclesiastical oversight and sincere devotion. Digital faith communities provide opportunities for interaction, spiritual support, and faith formation, although challenges remain in achieving relational depth comparable to physical gatherings. Moreover, digital education of faith proves effective in enhancing accessibility and engagement, particularly for younger generations. The study concludes that the digital church, while not replacing physical worship, constitutes a legitimate, complementary form of Christian practice. It requires theological adaptation to interpret presence, sacred space, and pastoral service within the virtual realm, ensuring that digital platforms contribute meaningfully to worship, mission, and faith formation.

INTRODUCTION

The development of digital technology has had a significant impact on various aspects of life, including religious practice. The church, as a faith community, faces new challenges and opportunities in conducting worship and faith education in the virtual era. The digital church phenomenon emerged in response to the need for congregations to stay connected and worship despite the limitations of distance and time. However, fundamental questions arise regarding the legitimacy of online worship and church community.

Previous literature reviews have shown that digital churches can be an alternative for worship services and faith education. In his article, Dwiraharjo examines the theological construction of digital churches using a biblical reflection approach to online worship during the COVID-19 pandemic. This research highlights changes in the church's traditionally sacred liturgy, which has also evolved with the adoption of digital technology. Furthermore, Nendissa, in her theological study of online services at GMIM, emphasized the importance of theological understanding in digital worship services. Yuliana and Natasya discusses the challenges and opportunities in building virtual faith communities in the digital age, with a focus on Christian religious education.

Based on the literature review, it can be concluded that although digital churches offer flexibility and accessibility, challenges remain in ensuring the legitimacy of online worship and community. Questions regarding the validity of the sacraments, the authority of spiritual leaders, and congregational interactions in digital spaces are central issues that require further study. This article aims to theologically examine the legitimacy of online church worship and community in the virtual era. Through a biblical reflection approach and ecclesiological analysis, this article will explore the theological dimensions of the digital church and its implications for contemporary religious practice.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The development of digital churches in the virtual era has created new spaces for religious practices and faith education. Campbell explains that "digital religion is not merely religion online, but the blending of online and offline religious practices." This shows that digital churches are not merely technical adaptations, but transformations of the faith experience that place Christian communities in a digital ecosystem. In this context, online worship is seen as a mediated form of liturgy, but one that still has spiritual value. Hutchings emphasizes that digital worship remains valid when the elements of worship "Scripture, prayer, worship, and communal participation" – are maintained even though they take place virtually. This perspective opens up a theological space in which digital presence does not eliminate the meaning of the congregation's gathering as the body of Christ, but rather expands the ways in which the congregation experiences God's presence.

In terms of faith education, the use of digital technology has changed the way spiritual learning takes place. Anthony and Benson mention that faith education aims to "lead persons to transformational discipleship". This transformation now occurs through online media such as videos, e-learning,

podcasts, and Bible applications. Rucker explains that digital discipleship is flexible, but still requires authentic relationships so that faith does not become individualistic. At the same time, Christian communities in virtual spaces can still be an arena for significant faith growth. Howard writes that “online communities form real relationships through consistent interaction and shared purpose”. Thus, digital communities can have an authentic spiritual identity as long as communication and relationships between members are intentionally maintained.

A frequently debated issue is the validity of sacraments in virtual spaces. Cheong states that sacramental value “does not depend on physical proximity but on symbolic participation and communal faith.” However, some church traditions continue to emphasize the need for physical presence in the celebration of Holy Communion or baptism, arguing that sacraments are signs and seals that must be performed in a physically incarnate community. Nevertheless, many Protestant churches in the pandemic era have accepted online communion as a valid spiritual representation of the body of Christ, as long as it is conducted in a fellowship led by a valid minister. This shows a theological shift from a physicalistic understanding of the sacraments to a relational symbolic one.

Within the framework of communication theology, McLuhan states that “the medium is the message,” indicating that media influences how humans understand reality. On a theological level, Schroeder asserts that the church must understand digital media not as a threat, but as “new theological spaces for mission and spiritual formation.” This understanding reinforces the idea that church ministry in the virtual era must be able to integrate digital media as a means of presenting God's word contextually. However, Turkle warns that technology can weaken the depth of human relationships, so digital spiritual formation must continue to emphasize relational intimacy and spiritual discipline manifested in community. In this context, spiritual formation is still possible through online Bible classes, online prayer groups, devotional apps, and other digital spiritual rituals, as long as they remain oriented toward the work of the Holy Spirit in shaping Christian character.

Overall, recent literature shows that digital churches, virtual faith education, and online spiritual communities are legitimate and growing theological phenomena. The validity of online worship does not lie in physical space, but in spiritual intention, liturgical depth, and the quality of congregational participation. Digital communities can be a place for authentic faith growth, while online sacraments can be a space for theological discussion that requires a balance between tradition and innovation. In the digital age, churches are not only challenged to maintain theological purity, but also to develop pastoral and liturgical practices that are relevant to the virtual generation.

METHODOLOGY

This study uses a descriptive qualitative method with a library study approach, where data is collected from various theological literature, including books, scientific journals, and the Bible as primary sources, which are relevant to

the theme of digital church, faith education in the virtual era, and the validity of online worship and communities. This study aims to explore theological and ecclesiological understandings related to the digital church, with a focus on biblical reflections on online worship practices and virtual community interactions, as well as their implications for contemporary faith education. All materials are systematically analyzed through biblical studies, doctrinal studies, and contemporary theological studies, emphasizing the legitimacy of online worship, the validity of liturgy and sacraments, the authority of spiritual leaders, the formation of virtual faith communities, congregational interactions, and the effectiveness of faith education through digital media. This approach allows the research to produce a comprehensive understanding of the theological dimensions of the digital church, while simultaneously providing academic contributions and practical relevance to the faith life of the congregation in the virtual era.

RESEARCH RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Transformation of Worship in a Digital Context

The development of digital technology and the Covid-19 pandemic have prompted Christian churches to rethink the meaning of worship space and forms. Digital space is no longer seen simply as a means of communication, but also as a legitimate space for spiritual encounter, where worshippers can experience God's presence through faith and virtual fellowship. Indratno and Yohana emphasized that although the Bible does not explicitly describe virtual worship, principles such as meeting in the name of the Lord (Matthew 18:20) demonstrate that God's presence is not limited by physical space. Therefore, congregational fellowship can still be realized in digital spaces as long as faith and a commitment to attendance are consistently maintained.

Furthermore, the form and structure of liturgy in online worship services have also undergone significant transformation. Fernando Tambunan noted that many Christian churches are adapting their worship formats by shortening the duration, adjusting the use of visual and audio media (such as cameras, lighting, and music), and integrating congregational participation through interactive features like comment columns, reactions, or virtual prayer rooms. These efforts aim to ensure that congregations are not merely passive spectators but actively involved in the service. Classical forms such as intercessory prayer, praise, and preaching of the word are adapted to continue to convey the essence of worship even though it is delivered through digital media.

From a spiritual perspective, research by Georges Nicolas Djone and colleagues shows that online worship services have a positive contribution to maintaining faith and congregational fellowship during social restrictions. Congregants feel blessed and experience closeness to God despite not being physically present in the church building. However, they also note challenges, such as reduced interaction between congregants and the emergence of a tendency toward individualistic worship when not balanced with deep spiritual awareness. Therefore, the church is called to build a theology of digital presence that emphasizes faithfulness, active participation, and sincerity in online

worship.

Presence in digital spaces needs to be understood as a symbolic and participatory presence, not merely a physical one, manifested through faith, spiritual offerings, and mutually constructive community relationships. In this context, digital spaces become an extension of the living fellowship of the body of Christ, where love, the Word, and worship remain central to every gathering of God's people. Thus, the transformation of worship in the digital context is not merely a technological phenomenon, but also an expression of the church's mission to bring God into every space of people's lives in the virtual era.

The Validity of the Sacraments and the Authority of Ministry in the Virtual Age

In the Christian church tradition, sacraments are understood as outward signs of God's grace expressed through the faith and fellowship of believers. Sacraments such as baptism and the Lord's Supper are not merely symbolic rituals, but rather means of grace through which God's presence is spiritually experienced by the congregation. In the Protestant context, sacraments are expressions of faith rooted in God's Word and practiced within the communion of the body of Christ. However, since the emergence of digital worship practices, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic, theological debate has arisen regarding the legitimacy of administering sacraments online without the physical presence of minister and recipient. This shift raises questions about the meaning of Christ's presence, the symbolism of the body of Christ, and the essence of the faith community in the digital world.

Research conducted by Rendy Frederikus Vichorahadi and Busro Busro shows that online worship can still be a means of divine grace when carried out with genuine faith. In their study, they explain that physical limitations and digital media do not prevent people from experiencing God's grace, because what is most important is an awareness of His presence and a living faith in the hearts of the congregation. Therefore, although the implementation of online sacraments has not been fully accepted in all church traditions, it can be viewed faithologically as a legitimate form of spiritual fellowship recognized by God.

Furthermore, Domingus Naat emphasized that, from a Protestant theological perspective, the validity of a sacrament does not depend on the place or form of the ritual, but rather on the truth of God's word and the authority of the ministry administering it. Sacraments performed online can have spiritual significance if performed in faith and under legitimate ecclesiastical responsibility. According to Naat, digital space can be understood as an extension of the community space, as long as the elements of faith, prayer, and fellowship remain genuinely present. However, he emphasized that the church must remain careful not to neglect the dimensions of togetherness and the integrity of the body of Christ, which are the essence of the sacrament itself.

Regarding ministry authority, Djone Georges Nicolas and his colleagues explained that the legitimacy of digital ministry remains valid if the minister is an ordained pastor or elder and holds authority from the local church. The authority of ministry is not diminished by the shift in medium, because what is decisive is not physical space, but rather the calling and sending from God

through the church. In the digital context, ministers are still required to maintain the sanctity of ministry, liturgical consistency, and the integrity of the spiritual community so that online worship does not lose its theological value. However, Nicolas et al. acknowledge new challenges in the form of reduced direct interaction and the potential for a diminished sense of community in virtual worship.

Thus, the validity of the sacraments and the authority of ministry in the digital age must be seen as evolving theological issues within the context of contemporary Christian faith. Digital ministry is not simply a technological response to changing times, but rather a new form of actualizing faith and God's work in the lives of the people. Protestant and Evangelical churches in Indonesia need to continue developing contextual reflections on the theology of the sacraments so that digital ministry remains rooted in biblical principles and brings God's presence into the living community of faith.

Formation of a Virtual Faith Community

Virtual faith communities in the church context have emerged as new spaces where intercongregational interactions take place through social media, WhatsApp groups, streaming platforms, and various other online communication tools. Research by Otniel Aurelius Nole shows that digital technology allows congregations to stay connected despite physical distance, providing a forum for sharing prayers, testimonies, and spiritual support—activities previously only possible in-person at church.

Furthermore, Yuliana and Natasya's research confirms that virtual faith communities are effective as a means of spiritual development due to their ease of access, flexible schedules, and capacity to organize Bible study, faith discussions, and discipleship activities through digital platforms. However, they also note that challenges such as digital infrastructure gaps and unequal access to the internet and devices present significant barriers to congregational engagement.

However, these studies found that the depth of faith relationships in virtual communities is often limited compared to physical ones. Emotional interaction, touch, face-to-face interaction, and direct contact, which are essential elements of physical church solidarity, are difficult to fully replace virtually. Many congregants report a longing for physical togetherness, such as hugs, handshakes, or the in-person presence that provides a sense of personal care and appreciation. The use of online chat and comments often falls short of conveying empathy and a deep spiritual presence.

From a theological perspective, virtual faith communities must assert their identity not merely as broadcasting platforms, but as the active body of Christ within a network of faith and love. A healthy virtual Christian community involves the active participation of congregants, providing practical support for one another, studying God's Word together, and demonstrating tangible service through digital spaces, such as mutual assistance or emotional support, rather than simply passively listening to sermons or watching worship services.

The Effectiveness of Faith Education Through Digital Media

The development of digital technology has brought significant changes to the way churches deliver faith education. Today, digital faith education programs allow congregations to study the Bible through various platforms, such as apps, podcasts, sermon videos, and online classes. This approach provides broader and more flexible access, allowing congregations to deepen their understanding of their faith without the constraints of time or space.

Younger generations, more familiar with technology, are experiencing increased participation in digital religious activities. For example, the use of educational videos in the context of digital catechesis has proven effective in increasing students' motivation and interest in religious studies, while simultaneously expanding the reach of faith education. However, deepening faith and character formation still require personal guidance, which cannot be completely replaced by virtual media. Christian religious education in the digital era also plays a crucial role in instilling in children an understanding and awareness of the wise use of technology and its potential risks.

From a theological perspective, digital faith education demands an integrative approach that balances technology, interpersonal relationships, and spiritual role models. This approach aligns with recommendations to develop relevant and meaningful digital content and provide adequate training for Christian religious educators to effectively utilize technology in faith education services.

Theological Implications for the Legitimacy of the Digital Church ***The Essence of the Legitimacy of the Digital Church***

The validity of a digital church lies not in the platform or media used, but in the intention of faith and the unity of the body of Christ. In this regard, the Bible emphasizes that the fellowship of God's people does not always require a shared physical space. As stated in 1 Corinthians 12:12-13, the body of Christ is made up of many members, yet remains one. This concept shows that a digital church, even though its congregation is spread across various locations, can still be considered as one whole body when faith and participation in fellowship are maintained.

Furthermore, the essence of a digital church's legitimacy also emphasizes spiritual quality and sincerity in worship. God's presence is not limited to a church building or a specific physical space, but is present wherever His people gather in the name of Christ. This allows the digital church to function legitimately as a place of worship, as long as spiritual interaction and the teaching of the Word are carried out with theological integrity.

Online Worship as a Complement and Expansion of the Church's Mission

Online worship is not intended to replace in-person worship, but rather to complement and expand the reach of the church's mission. In this context, digital methods provide access for congregants unable to attend in person, allowing the church to continue fulfilling Christ's mandate to preach the Gospel to the whole world. This analogy aligns with the way Paul used his letters to reach distant

congregations, demonstrating that long-distance communication can still nurture the growth of a congregation's faith.

Furthermore, digital worship also requires churches to develop adaptive and creative mission strategies. Through online media, churches not only expand access for existing congregations but also open up opportunities to reach previously unreached people. This demonstrates that the digital church is not merely a substitute, but a strategic complement in expanding the impact of missionary ministry and faith education.

Ecclesiological Theological Renewal in a Digital Context

The digital church demands a renewal of ecclesiological theology to reinterpret the concepts of presence, fellowship, and service in the virtual world. This transformation forces the church to consider the meaning of sacredness, spiritual authority, and congregational participation in a digital context, so that the concept of church is no longer limited by physical space. Susanto Dwiraharjo states that digital liturgy demands a new understanding of the "sacrality of space," where the sanctity of worship is not inherent in buildings, but rather in the tangible community of faith.

Furthermore, the renewal of digital ecclesiology opens up opportunities for theological reflection on the role of technology in ministry. The church can reinterpret how it provides fellowship, faith education, and congregational participation through digital platforms. With this approach, the digital church remains theologically valid, as long as it remains faithful to the principles of Christian faith, maintains the quality of worship, and builds genuine fellowship among members of the body of Christ.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on theological analysis and biblical reflection, this study finds that digital churches have theological validity within the context of Christian faith, as long as the essence of fellowship, the truth of the Word, and sincere worship are maintained. Digital churches do not replace physical worship, but rather complement and strategically facilitate the expansion of mission and faith education, especially for congregations with limited physical access.

Furthermore, the transformation of virtual worship and community requires a renewed ecclesiology, reinterpreting the concepts of presence, the sacredness of space, and spiritual ministry in the context of cyberspace. The digital church has successfully bridged the spiritual needs of the congregation with the flexibility of technology, while maintaining the quality of spiritual interaction and faith formation. Thus, the digital church phenomenon is not merely a technological response, but a legitimate and relevant manifestation of faith in contemporary religious practice, making a real contribution to faith education and Christian community building in the virtual era.

ADVANCED RESEARCH

Future research can be directed toward developing a more comprehensive digital ecclesiology by comparing the practices, sacramental legitimacy, and

dynamics of digital faith communities across diverse Christian denominations in global contexts, thereby generating cross-tradition insights on how pastoral authority, theological presence, and spiritual formation are negotiated within virtual spaces. Subsequent studies may employ mixed-method approaches to analyze religious experience, relational depth, and the effectiveness of digital faith education in order to measure whether virtual presence can serve as a medium of spiritual formation that parallels or even surpasses physical gatherings. Additionally, further inquiry could explore the theological and ethical implications of integrating artificial intelligence, virtual reality, and metaverse-based environments into liturgy and pastoral ministry, with the aim of constructing an adaptive yet theologically grounded framework for digital church practices in an era of rapid technological disruption.

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