



Harmonizing Hybrid Worship: Exploring Dynamics, Technology, and Growth at GII Taman Holis Bandung

Rita Oktavia Gunarto^{1*}, Samuel Herman²

^{1,2} Sekolah Tinggi Teologi Kharisma Bandung

Corresponding Author: Rita Oktavia Gunarto; Email: rita.bintang99@gmail.com

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ABSTRACT

This study delves into the intricate interplay between hybrid worship, technology integration, and congregational growth in the digital era. Originating as a response to the COVID-19 pandemic, online worship evolved into a lifestyle, presenting challenges and opportunities for church leaders. The research employs a qualitative approach, gathering primary and secondary data through observations, interviews, and literature review. Analyzing the impact of hybrid worship on physical attendance, the study explores the delicate balance between online and onsite worship. The government's shift from pandemic to endemic status further complicates the landscape. As churches navigate this dynamic, the study concludes that creative hybrid worship, anchored in theological perspectives, is vital for engaging congregants, ensuring the church's continuity, and proclaiming the Gospel.

INTRODUCTION

Hybrid worship is an amalgamation of online (virtual) and onsite (physical) religious practices. The onset of the prevalence of online worship emerged primarily in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. During this period, individuals found themselves compelled to adhere to restrictions implemented during the New Normal era, which mandated limitations on direct face-to-face interactions as decreed by the government. (Kurniawan, 2021) The church, unable to conduct onsite worship, resorted to online services. However, as the pandemic transitioned from the endemic phase towards normalization, the church began enhancing its services to embrace a hybrid worship approach. (Tiurina, n.d.)

The purpose of hybrid worship is to ensure that vulnerable congregants, such as the elderly and children, can continue to engage in worship even from their homes. Additionally, individuals who are unwell and required to undergo self-isolation also retain the opportunity to participate in collective worship. Hence, hybrid technology serves as a solution to the religious community's need for maintaining worship practices under diverse circumstances.

The government has officially lifted the pandemic status and declared Indonesia to be in an endemic state since June 21, 2023. (Yanwardhana, n.d.) The government's decision is based on findings from a survey indicating that 99% of the Indonesian population has developed antibodies. Concurrently, this aligns with the prior decision of the World Health Organization (WHO), which had already revoked the status of public health emergency of international concern. (Yanwardhana, n.d.) Consequently, individuals are now granted the freedom to resume in-person worship at churches. Protocol regulations are adjusted based on respective conditions and policies, including the elimination of the obligation to maintain physical distancing while seated. The use of masks is reserved for those displaying symptoms, while the application of hand sanitizer is left to individual awareness and personal needs.

The church is eagerly reopening worship services and all related activities. However, a phenomenon has emerged wherein the attendance of congregants at the church seems far from the pre-pandemic "normal" levels. The decline in

attendance has become a common concern among church leaders, indicating a sustained trend towards online worship that continues to attract an increasing number of participants.

The practice of online worship during the pandemic has become ingrained and even evolved into a lifestyle for some Christians to this day. Online worship seems to have become a "competitor" that hinders the physical attendance of congregants in churches. The advancements in sophisticated technology further facilitate access, whether through social media platforms with live streaming or audio/video recordings. Various church brands are increasingly emerging to garner support through social media channels such as YouTube, Instagram, Facebook, television broadcasts, and even radio. (Tambunan, 2021) As a result, the number of congregants physically attending church services has declined as they are drawn into online worship. Consequently, churches are strategizing through various efforts to encourage congregants to return to onsite worship.

Undeniably, online worship possesses a unique allure and comfort, creating additional value that dissuades congregants from attending church services physically. Contemporary technology enables individuals to participate in worship from anywhere in the world at any given time. This challenge has become a "public relations" task for church leaders, compelling them to strive towards reinstating the commitment of congregants to attend worship services in person.

The analysis of online worship is crucial, as it is possible that online worship was merely a pandemic-induced euphoria that turned into a habit. There is a concern that this habit might eventually become a vulnerability for churches, leading to the loss of tangible congregants who transform into virtual followers in the online realm. A large number of followers does not necessarily indicate that they all belong to a specific local church. It is highly plausible that they are merely transient congregants whose commitment cannot be predicted in terms of being part of a unified flock under one shepherd.

The church needs to assess the effectiveness of its hybrid services in the present, considering the necessity for continued productivity and creativity. The author asserts that this study differs from previous discussions, which predominantly focused

on the impacts of COVID-19 and the consequences of the pandemic alone. Instead, this writing takes a step further by evaluating the impact of hybrid worship on the physical attendance of congregants at onsite church services.

The reality during the endemic situation is that church buildings are no longer filled with the presence of congregants, indicating that they are still divided between onsite and online worship. This raises the question of whether hybrid worship has positive or negative implications for the growth of the physical attendance of congregants at onsite church services. If onsite churches are increasingly being abandoned because congregants prefer online worship, then the continuity of the existence and regeneration of onsite churches becomes a crucial consideration that needs to be addressed. This writing aims to encourage church leaders to evaluate the extent of the role and impact of hybrid worship. Hopefully, this piece is also beneficial for churches facing similar challenges, providing considerations in determining their stance towards hybrid worship, which has become one of the worship models in this digital era.

METHODS

This study employs a qualitative approach. The stages involved in gathering sources as the foundation for the study entail both primary and secondary data collection. To achieve this, the author will conduct observations and interviews with congregants participating in both online and onsite worship at GII Taman Holis. Additionally, the methodology includes the compilation of literature sources, journals, and relevant articles corresponding to the discussion topic. In the view of Ade Ismayani, research is a systematic approach to addressing a problem by collecting data. This method serves to satisfy curiosity and enhance understanding through continuous questioning, thereby expanding knowledge to provide answers to those inquiries. (Ismayani, 2020) The conclusion is drawn through an inductive approach involving logical reasoning closely tied to the clarity of thought. Critical analysis will emphasize interpretations that elaborate on the theological perspectives of hybrid worship and its relevance to the growth of congregational attendance in contemporary churches.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Hybrid Worship

The term "hybrid" is commonly utilized in the field of biology to denote the crossbreeding of mixed genetic traits from two or more species of seeds. Additionally, it is employed in the automotive industry, where it has garnered considerable attention and interest as a prestigious modern vehicle. A hybrid vehicle implies the use of two sources of energy, namely, an engine and electricity. (Leman et al., 2022) Similarly, hybrid worship entails employing two methods, namely, face-to-face (offline) worship, known as onsite worship at the church, and simultaneously engaging in virtual/online (online) worship.

The phenomenon of congregants attending onsite worship at churches tends to experience a decline in numbers. This is evident across all churches, from smaller ones to mega-churches. The loyalty of congregants to return for worship at the church seems to be under scrutiny due to the availability of the option for online worship, eliminating the need to hassle with physically attending the church.

Challenges also arise in the current situation where various church streams are widely spread across social media, each showcasing its charm. They offer attractive worship models with eye-catching titles, creative liturgy, melodious praises, enjoyable music, renowned preachers, and shorter worship durations tailored to needs. Consequently, online congregants have more opportunities to explore and choose worship experiences that cater to their preferences. Some online congregants become addicted to participating in online worship, attending multiple times in a single day. They search and dive into captivating digital worship experiences, while others find themselves caught in a dilemma between sincerely engaging in worship and merely watching worship videos as a form of entertainment.

Before the pandemic era, worship through radio or television broadcasts at home received strong warnings from church leaders, being considered somewhat "less legitimate." It was emphasized that congregants should worship in church unless they were unwell. However, since the pandemic, online worship has become the sole means through which churches can invite the congregation to worship. The circumstances have

compelled church leaders to reluctantly agree, as online worship became the only way to engage in worship. Congregants, in turn, are perplexed by the shift in their church leaders' stance, who were once staunchly against worship outside the church but now permit it. Older congregants, in particular, have largely embraced this doctrine, making it challenging for them to transition from onsite worship to online church services. Various reasons contribute to the older generation feeling "left behind" in adapting to digital technology. They find it uncomfortable to adapt to online worship through television screens, computers/laptops, or smartphones. They hope for a return to face-to-face worship at the church.

As time progresses, the congregation gradually adapts to the practice of online worship. Congregants not only enjoy it but may also become complacent with its advantages, to the point where they are reluctant to participate in onsite worship, even though the government has permitted it. It is humane and reasonable for individuals to require time to reorganize a habit. Psychologically, humans demonstrate a tendency to change rapidly due to their various intelligences, encompassing emotional, intellectual, spiritual, and innovative capabilities. (Suryono, 2019, p. 3)

Perspectives on the Positive and Negative Aspects of Online Worship

The advantage of online worship lies in its efficiency and cost-effectiveness. Online worship merely requires wifi/network access, which is relatively inexpensive, especially considering the widespread availability of free wifi in many places. Congregants are spared the expenses associated with commuting, including round-trip transportation costs and parking fees. Additionally, it is more time-efficient, as time is not wasted on potentially congested journeys or searching for parking in crowded church areas.

Online worship requires almost no specific preparation to leave the house and tends to be more relaxed without the need for dressing up, saving time and attention on selecting attire. The demeanor during worship is also less formal due to its more private nature. Congregants are free to arrange and determine their own suitable postures. Online worship is not rigidly bound by the formalities of church liturgy. It seems to waive the requirement to

adhere strictly to the liturgical atmosphere of onsite worship. Essentially, congregants can independently organize their worship practices.

Online worship is oblivious to the concept of "being late for worship" because the duration of the broadcast can be adjusted and tailored to the preferred starting time for worship. Moreover, individuals can determine their own worship schedule. Although not synchronized with onsite worship, congregants can still participate by replaying desired recordings. They can even worship at three different churches in a single session. For instance, at the beginning of worship, they might follow Church A's channel because they find its praise leader and music arrangements impressive. Then, during the sermon, they may switch to a speaker who is currently trending on Church B's channel. Meanwhile, during the offering, they align themselves with a particular church based on their inner convictions and the "guidance of the Spirit." Essentially, congregants engaging in online worship can independently structure their worship practices, prioritizing the essence of worship itself.

The primary drawback of online worship is the lack of direct face-to-face fellowship. The online setting fails to capture the warmth conveyed through smiles, the touch of greetings, and the nuanced emotions conveyed through both verbal and non-verbal gestures and facial expressions during in-person encounters. (Ismaya, 2023) The focus of online worship is also highly susceptible to diversion due to numerous distractions that hinder concentration during worship. Some congregants may lean towards merely watching the broadcast without maintaining a heart-focused attitude towards God. This is especially true in the face of unexpected external disruptions, such as sudden visits from guests, engaging in casual conversations, the temptation to adopt a relaxed posture while lying down, snacking, using mobile phones, or participating in other irrelevant activities during the worship session.

Online worship offerings are conducted through virtual accounts, and not everyone understands how to give using the provided barcode. The time for offerings is also not specifically allocated but is only announced and briefly displayed on the screen. These challenges may hinder people from making offerings. Praise

offerings, such as virtual choir performances or musical drama presentations through online broadcasts, cannot be fully enjoyed. Factors influencing this include differences in ambiance, feel, atmosphere, mood, look, room comfort conditions, as well as the sound and lighting effects when compared to experiencing live performances onsite.

Perspectives on the Advantages and Disadvantages of Onsite Worship

The advantage of onsite worship that is impossible to attain online is the fellowship with fellow believers face-to-face, bringing a joy that cannot be compared to virtual encounters. Physical meetings imply closeness and an impression of intimacy derived from the unique breath of life aura. The worship atmosphere can be heightened, supported by the quality of sound used in the church. Additionally, the collective sound of congregational singing and live music helps the congregation feel a positive emotional connection to enter into intimacy in fellowship with God and anticipate His Word in worship. (Sodikdiana et al., 2023)

Onsite worship in the church demands more discipline in behavior, ranging from punctuality to decency in attire. Additionally, attendees are obligated to follow the worship liturgy, such as when to stand, sit, sing together, clap, raise hands in prayer, give offerings, shake hands, and engage in friendly interactions with fellow congregants. Orderliness is also highly emphasized, for instance, not entering or leaving the worship space arbitrarily and refraining from engaging in other activities, especially eating or drinking, and casual conversations during the worship service. This ensures that congregants are assisted in maintaining focus and fully enjoying the worship experience. Consequently, congregants are educated and provided with the opportunity to respect worship with appropriate behavior, concentration, and mutual appreciation for those around them.

Shortcomings in onsite worship arise when the church organizers fail to adequately prepare for optimal service, leading to impediments during the worship proceedings. Additionally, unforeseen events such as power outages can disrupt the smooth flow of worship. Security concerns, including unexpected incidents like flooding, fires,

conflicts, or direct attacks on the church during the worship service, add to the challenges. Onsite worship is a live experience, and any mistakes occurring during the worship cannot be edited.

Congregants Attitudes Toward Hybrid Worship

In this research, the author extensively observed and employed interview approaches to uncover the reasons behind individuals' reluctance to return to physical church worship and their preference for online worship. Conversely, the study also delves into the factors influencing people to continue attending onsite worship within the hybrid worship model.

Several reasons underlie congregants' preference for onsite worship, primarily because face-to-face gatherings provide a distinct "sense" of worship compared to online services that involve staring at screens. Joint praises with fellow congregants are more feasible in onsite worship, unlike online scenarios where individuals might not feel as compelled to lift praises "alone" at home. (Susana, 2023) Congregants desire to follow the rituals or liturgy of worship more diligently in the church compared to at home without anyone observing. The sense of togetherness in meeting fellow believers is also a significant reason for attending worship services at the church.

Disruptions during onsite worship are minimal compared to online worship, which often has various distractions. This can lead to a conscience being accused of not offering one's best, lacking sincere focus in honoring God during worship. The motivation that arises within individuals will generate a passion for worship, leading to an awareness of the need to experience the anointing touch of the Holy Spirit. (Sodikdiana et al., 2023) Therefore, they continue to come and eagerly anticipate worship at the church with hope.

Various reasons lead congregants to prefer online worship, primarily due to conflicting commitments such as running a business or irregular family events. Being out of town, off the island, abroad, or on a journey are factors contributing to their choice of online worship. (Kristina, Rina, 2023) Classic reasons include laziness, lack of sleep, feeling unwell, and a general lack of enthusiasm due to physical weakness. Even though transportation services are provided, mentally, individuals find it more convenient to

participate in online worship at home. Some follow the desires of their partner or family; if one family member does not wish to go to church, for the sake of family unity, everyone cancels their plans to attend church and opts for online worship together. (Lena, 2023)

Hybrid worship provides the opportunity not to be confined to church premises. Live streaming of online worship creates a sense of "joining" and being together with the congregation seated in the church, participating in the worship simultaneously. Surprisingly, even for those who have attended church, some still choose to engage in online worship at home, whether from the same church or a different one. Their reasons range from wanting to be further "edified" by listening to the sermon or praises to mere curiosity about participating in worship led by a specific preacher. Moreover, the easy accessibility of renowned speakers from mega-churches, both local and international, adds to the appeal. Consequently, they no longer limit their worship experience to physical attendance at the church, as online worship holds equal significance. Given the provided facilities and the freedom to choose, they find it advantageous to participate in both forms of worship.

Church's Attitudes Toward Hybrid Worship

Worship is a divine gift for the people of God. It goes beyond mere actions performed by the worshippers for God or what God does for His people; rather, it centers on who He is to His people. Worship is an expression of reverence, submission, helplessness, dependency, adoration, service, humility, obedience, and a manifestation of human hope in God through prayer and praise. In worship, there is the presence of God visiting His people. This indicates that worship is a form of mutual communication and relationship between His people and God. (White, 2015, p. 8)

Fellowship (koinonia) doesn't only occur in a gathering of people with face-to-face interactions but can also take place virtually (screen to screen). The essence of worship is the personal and relational aspect of human life with God. Genuine worship is an expression of faith through a living self-offering. The dynamic nature of God moving within the progressive worship of humanity suggests that worship is not confined by space and time. (Nainggolan & Purba, 2021) Therefore,

worshipping virtually/online or physically/onsite is acceptable if it aligns with its inherent meaning.

Humans are spiritual beings, crafted in the likeness and image of God. As creations, they possess an innate desire to understand their Creator. "Humans are spiritual beings, created in the image of God... our spiritual and moral attributes provide us with the capacity for communion and fellowship with God." (Mc.Dowell, 1991) The spiritual and moral attributes endowed in humans grant them the ability to seek fellowship with the Divine.

In the beginning, the church utilized its website to conduct online worship services. In the virtual realm, the congregation's presence seems to be there yet not, appearing faithfully present but potentially lost. The practice of online worship by the congregation has implications for the growth of the number of attendees in physical church services. Some have adopted online worship as a lifestyle since the COVID-19 pandemic, and they seem unable to move on from this habit to return to onsite worship.

The term "church" (ekklesia), etymologically, originates from the words "ek" and "kaleo," meaning 'those called out.' The church is a gathering of people who are called out, specifically those who are called from darkness into the light of Christ. On the other hand, the term "church" in the sense of sunagoge refers to the meaning of the Jewish congregation in worship. Sunagoge is derived from the words "sun" and "ago," signifying coming or gathering together. The term ekklesia generally refers to the church, although in some contexts, it simply denotes a general assembly (Acts 19:32, 39, 41). (Berkhof, 2014, p. 69)

Hybrid worship can be regarded as a contemporary creativity and innovation emerging from the development of the church to become more effective and dynamic. The church is not merely a building or an organization representing the body of Christianity; rather, it is an organism embodying the body of Christ. The church must discover a rhythm that aligns with the principles of the Bible to reach and serve believers in accordance with the current digital context.

Hybrid Worship's Impact on the Onsite Worship Attendance at GII Taman Holis

Before the pandemic, GII Taman Holis recorded a registered adult congregation of 805

people in February 2020. (Ong, 2023) As onsite worship resumed, the church experienced a significant decline in attendance. This was considered normal as it was still in the early stages of the "trial" period. The congregation was still uncertain and hesitant about whether it was truly safe to worship at the church. Comfort was also a consideration, ranging from the complexity of registration through e-forms or body scans to the obligation to follow health protocols such as body temperature measurement, hand washing, and disinfectant spray/hand sanitizer. Sitting at a distance and wearing masks during worship also contributed to reduced comfort, especially when raising collective praises. Until the end of the service, comfort was still disrupted as congregants were prohibited from congregating, and everyone was promptly advised to leave the area.

As time progressed and entered the endemic era, many churches adopted a hybrid worship approach. Despite church leaders urging and emphasizing the congregation to return for onsite worship, the church itself continued to conduct online services, citing the reason that many still needed it. Since there are no specific limitations or criteria, anyone can choose to participate in online worship. Thus, the impact of hybrid worship on the attendance of congregants in the church is very evident.

The congregation's attendance has indeed increased compared to the transitional period from the pandemic to the new normal, and then from the endemic to the normal. However, the increase has not yet reached the initial numbers from before the pandemic. The growth in congregation attendance feels very slow. As of July 2023, GII Taman Holis still experiences a "loss" of one-third of its congregation. (Ong, 2023)

The church's efforts are highly focused and felt, encompassing renewals in various aspects. For instance, a new look and detailed interior decoration renewal of the church with a contemporary appearance. A noticeable change includes the refurbishment of musical instruments and audio-visual equipment with LCD screens behind the pulpit. Additionally, the revival of the café as a gathering place for fellowship after the service to foster camaraderie. Quality adjustments are also made according to the needs, referring to the current liturgical trends preferred by most contemporary

Christians. All of these efforts aim to capture the congregation's attention and boost their enthusiasm for enjoying the church service. However, despite yielding results, the increase in the congregation's numbers still tends to progress slowly. This is because online worship remains a strong competitor. The hope is that their presence is still absorbed in the local church's online hybrid service rather than seeking alternatives in uncertain places. Many possibilities exist, but it is essential for shepherds to continue "seeking" their lost sheep to bring them back into the community.

The number of followers or the quantity of likes during online worship is not a measure of whether the congregation is truly engaged in worship. Hence, pastoral strategies play a crucial role in assisting the flock to stay on the path of truth and life. The goal of pastoral care itself is to fulfill the Great Commission by nurturing God's flock to continue growing in their faith. Faith is a gift from God, yet it is also a theological action/thought and a confession (credo). Faith can be explained scientifically, yet it cannot be fully explained as it is supernatural. Therefore, the church has started to meticulously organize congregational data to ensure effective service for everyone. A shepherd or spiritual leader should earnestly fulfill their role as someone willing to risk their life for their flock. (Bons-Storm, 2015)

The Future of Hybrid Worship

Various responses have been gathered from the congregation regarding their opinions on the continuation of hybrid worship. Those in favor suggest that the church should persist in conducting online worship indefinitely, incorporating creativity and quality to accommodate the diverse needs of the congregation, especially those who are ill and face increasingly complex reasons for being unable to attend in person in the future. (Lienardi, 2023) The church should not turn a blind eye to the evolving landscape of technological advancements in the contemporary era of digitization. Whether willingly or not, technology has shaped the future of worship through the concept of hybrid worship.

Some argue that the intensity of hybrid worship should gradually be reduced to encourage congregants to return to the habit of attending church services in person. Online worship, according to this viewpoint, merely provides an

opportunity for those who are lazy to attend church, using various excuses. Reflecting on the time before the COVID-19 pandemic, issues related to reasons for being unable to attend worship were already present. However, the solutions offered did not involve the provision of online worship facilities. The solution provided for congregants at that time was not hybrid, and it certainly did not have any impact on the physical attendance of congregants at church. (Fruitfull Community, 2023) Therefore, online worship has not proven to be a solution to congregational issues.

Another perspective, which disagrees, suggests that hybrid worship should be discontinued promptly, and congregants should return to in-person worship at the church. (Usinda, 2023) Through intimate face-to-face fellowship meetings, providing a living example is more effective as a testimony and model than online interactions. Leaders must set an example for the congregation, both morally and through actions, to cultivate faith and trust that will ultimately impact the growth of the church. (Simanjuntak & Santo, 2019) Furthermore, it reduces the risk of a split in attendance numbers for churches conducting hybrid worship. This is due to the opportunity for congregants to choose where to worship. Nevertheless, it is highly likely that congregants will still not attend the local church but opt for online worship elsewhere if that is their preference. Online worship has become a new worship style and a phenomenon that will continue to exist. Therefore, churches should be prepared for the changing times in the current digital era.

The church's focus should no longer be solely based on the quantitative aspect of the congregation's size before the pandemic compared to the present. It is advisable for the church to continually move forward with new targets by maximizing the quality of services, both onsite and online. Consequently, the quantity of congregational attendance will follow suit as the quality is enhanced. Holding firm in the belief that the Great Shepherd, Jesus Christ, is the Head of the Church who determines the number of sheep entrusted to the shepherds in each of His churches on Earth.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

In reality, the internet has become seamlessly integrated into contemporary life, making hybrid worship facilities an indispensable aspect. Consequently, hybrid worship emerges as a solution to prevent congregants from becoming "lost" from their parent church. Many churches have already initiated services, teachings, discipleship, and even pastoral care by leveraging technological advancements through online methods.

Online worship continues to be deemed necessary as long as there are congregants engaged in it, and the church facilitates it for the primary purpose of proclaiming the Gospel of Christ. The impact of hybrid worship appears to influence the attendance at onsite church services, but this doesn't necessarily imply a continuous decline; it could also lead to an increase. Relying on the wisdom of the Lord, there will come a time when the church will grow as long as the Gospel is consistently proclaimed, and the name of Jesus is exalted in every worship service. One manifestation of faith is evangelism, as proclaiming the Gospel is a life that fulfills His Great Commission.

Creative hybrid worship can motivate and inspire church leaders to manage worship services more qualitatively in line with the evolving needs of each era. On the other hand, the church must remain existent, standing on the solid rock where Jesus Christ serves as the cornerstone. Regeneration is not solely about the building and the congregation but pertains to the integrity of the church as the body of Christ. While hybrid worship may indeed impact the quantity of attendance in the church, the true essence lies in the quality of worship — a sacred offering of life accompanied by a reverent and respectful attitude towards God.

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