






Fruit in the unfruitful season: A case study of the Indonesian Bethel Church's response to the COVID-19 pandemic



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The coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic is similar to the Spanish flu that occurred 100 years ago. Various media and research institutes have reported different church-related responses regarding the pandemic, especially in church growth. The pandemic has become a threat associated with fear, stress and frustration and causes significant health and economic crises. Its impact was inevitable on churches, with a substantial decrease in the level of worshippers. This research aims to assess the impact of and the church's responses to the pandemic phenomena in Indonesia. It is a qualitative research with data descriptively analysed. Drawing on the Indonesian Bethel Church (GBI) case, the results showed that the Indonesian church has historically experienced various challenges and crises and considers the pandemic an opportunity for the church to show its natural character and use this as a moment of spiritual awakening. It is evident that the GBI considers the pandemic a spiritual-awakening momentum. In these challenging times, the GBI experienced an addition of 659 local churches (250 inaugurated and 409 pioneering posts) in response to the Great Commission's fulfilment.

Intradisciplinary and/or interdisciplinary implications: This research helps readers determine how the mission report acts as an understanding source of the church ecumenism in response to completing the 'Great Commission' of the Lord Jesus beyond the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic phenomenon.

Keywords: influenza; Pentecost; practical theology; Indonesian Bethel Church; case study.

Introduction

The rapid spread of the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic indicates a recurring epidemiological history. In 1918, the entire world was overwhelmed with a viral infection caused by a new influenza virus strain characterised by three waves (Short, Kedzierska & Van de Sandt 2018). This pandemic, the Spanish flu, infected over one-third of the world's population and killed an estimated 50 million people (Johnson & Mueller 2002), with unusually severe clinical manifestations in previously healthy young adults (Hoffman 2011). However, the aetiological agent that caused this sickness was unknown (Hildreth 1991). The origin of the Spanish flu has long been debated. Claude Hannoun of France's Pasteur Institute has posited that the virus originated in China, then spread to Boston and Kansas and from there, via troop movements, to Brest, France, and then spread all over the world (Wendorf 2020). But according to the consensus, the 1918 influenza virus originated in the Midwest of the United States of America (Barry 2004). The virus then spread throughout the United States and was transferred by American troop ships to France's battlefields, from where it gradually spread throughout Europe and the rest of the world (Patterson & Pyle 1991). Local transport networks, predominately railways, further facilitated the spread of the virus beyond port cities (Johnson 2006).

The 1918 Spanish flu occurred in two waves in Indonesia, known as the Dutch East Indies. According to Chandra (2013), as quoted from the report of the Colonial Department of Health 1920, Burgerlijken Geneeskundigen Dienst, the virus had spread to almost every region in the Dutch East Indies in a short period. The first wave of the disease was found in Pangkatan Port of North Sumatera from June to September 1918. Experts believe that the source of the virus was workers from Singapore who worked at plantations in Sumatra. In just a few weeks, the Spanish flu had reached Tanjung Pandan (Belitung) and Waltevreden (Batavia). The virus was estimated to have infected 5% of the total population of Surabaya in June alone. The second wave was enormous, and it took place from October to December 1918. The virus reached further east, and the disease

was still found in some areas until January 1919. Ultimately, the disease killed millions of people globally; a conservative estimate of Indonesia's mortality was 1.5 million people (Chandra 2013).

Pandemics, like the current COVID-19, bring an array of health, economic and social disruptions. The resultant devastations render people helpless, and it becomes difficult to see anything other than fear and evil. Historical studies of the past and the legacies in the present are essential for 'rooting' people and events. However, no study to the authors' knowledge has been conducted on the effects of the pandemic with a focus on Christianity in Indonesia. The aim of this article is to discuss the activities and events of the Indonesian Bethel Church (GBI) – the second largest denomination of Pentecostal/Charismatic with 3.5 million members in Indonesia – during the pandemic, and their implications for COVID-19.

This research was carried out to obtain meaning and understanding of the COVID-19 pandemic phenomenon in Indonesia. The research method is qualitative and descriptive. The data sources were the Bethel Research Center and the GBI's local churches in Aceh, North Sumatra, Riau and Riau Islands-West Sumatra, South Sulawesi, West Sulawesi, Sumba, East Nusa Tenggara and Papua.

The COVID-19 pandemic has almost paralysed economic activities in Indonesia. Because the government implemented various policies such as work from home, territorial restrictions and closure of different public places such as tourist attractions, many companies or offices have been forced to close down their operations. Some small-scale entrepreneurs have even retrenched their employees in anticipation of businesses being closed for an undetermined time (Bastomi 2020). The COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in severe economic hardships, such as loss of jobs, difficulty in finding jobs, loss of income, struggles in meeting the needs of daily life and many more (Hanoatubun 2020). According to Mahfud (quoted in Bastomi 2020), as a result of the deteriorating economic conditions, the effects of COVID-19 were hugely apparent on general law and order. There has been a significant increase in general criminality in some areas. As seen from the crime reports of the local authorities, thefts are on the rise. On the humane side, prejudice and discrimination against people suffering from COVID-19 are rampant. Prejudice and discrimination are a result of people's fear of uncertain situations. The COVID-19 pandemic has not only resulted in social disorganisation but has also caused social dysfunction (Bastomi 2020). The COVID-19 pandemic has led to a rise in poverty and unemployment rates in Indonesia. As of March 2019, it was recorded that the population of vulnerable groups of poor and near-poor in Indonesia had reached 66.7 million people, or almost three times the number of people below the poverty line (CNBC Indonesia 2020).

This problem also marks the beginning of the shift in church practice. In Indonesia, the pandemic affected the execution of various religious activities. The government issued

temporary regulations, including cancellation of many social activities, prohibition of worship and celebration of the religious holidays. Furthermore, all significant religious events, including those of Christianity and the prospects of the church, were also influenced by the pandemic's global impact. Coincidentally two days before the announcement of social distancing by the Indonesian president, one of the GBIs in West Java held a pastor meeting on 3–5 March 2020, at the Lembang Asri Hotel, West Java. After that event, West Java Governor Ridwan Kamil revealed several findings related to the COVID-19 testing. As many as 226 members of the Bethel Church congregation in Bandung City tested positive for COVID-19 (Iqbal 2020). The pastors' meeting became one of the epicentres of initial transmission of the COVID-19 pandemic in Indonesia. Responding to the pandemic situation, the Chairperson of the GBI Synod, Pastor Rubin Adi Abraham, appealed to the congregation to follow government recommendations. In response to government's regulation on social distancing (Gunawan 2020), the GBI (as one of the dominant churches) stopped all the activities starting from 22 March.

On 02 March 2020, the president of Indonesia, Joko Widodo, announced that two persons, mother and daughter, were the first ones to be infected since the pandemic started. This situation was immediately investigated by the Indonesian Health ministry (Ihsanuddin 2021). On Sunday, March 22, all worship places, including churches, were closed (after 548 cases and 48 deaths were recorded). On 23 March, the president inaugurated Wisma Atlet (the former Asian Games dormitory for Athletes) as the COVID-19 National Hospital (Ihsanuddin 2020). Unfortunately, when this research was being carried out in mid-March 2021, one year after COVID-19 hit Indonesia, a total of 1 341 314 cases and 36 325 deaths had been recorded (RM 2021).

Apart from the various crises caused by COVID-19, the GBI has focussed on the following three essential areas as a response to the pandemic:

1. Spiritual awakening.
2. Revitalising faith.
3. Pandemic as a catalyst for church growth.

A brief history of Christianity in Indonesia

Indonesia is a multicultural and multiracial nation. Furthermore, it is multi-religious with high heterogeneity and comprises the former Dutch East Indies and a vast archipelago with 17 000 islands. These are the fabled Spice Islands and specific spaces occupied by the Portuguese, the British and Japanese (3.5 years) before August 1945 (Vickers 2013). Consequently, after independence, the Dutch tried to recolonise, and it was finally recognised by the Netherlands as an autonomous state in 1949. Moreover, before the introduction of foreign religions, Indonesian culture was based on spiritual animism. However, the introduction of Hinduism and Buddhism in the archipelago,

India and other Asian countries led to the natural occurrence of its penetration and interaction. The ability to assimilate with the local Indonesian culture has led to Hindu and Buddhist religions' existence to date (Widjaja 2019, 2020; Widjaja & Boiliu 2019). Christianity was first introduced in the 7th century and disappeared without clarity, although it finally reappeared in the 11th century when Islam was introduced in the archipelago. Christianity started its mission in the 16th century (Aritonang & Steenbrink 2008) and subsequently Catholic and Protestant missionaries reached out to the Indonesian Muslims in 1511 and 1605, respectively.

Irrespective of the fact that Indonesia is a former Dutch colony, Christianity has experienced rapid growth (Widjaja 2019), especially in high society. However, it was still not regarded as a Christian state because the scattered islands only practised the Eastern religions. Pentecostalism has experienced rapid growth in Indonesia with over 9.45 million followers (Wiyono 2019). The Pentecostal message reached the Dutch East Indies in 1921, when two Dutch-American evangelists travelled from Seattle to Batavia, known as Jakarta today (Wiyono 2019).

In big cities such as Jakarta, Bandung, Surabaya, Semarang and Medan, Batam and Makassar, this growth trend is very clear. Thousands of people witness vibrant worship and dynamic preaching in Pentecostal churches during Sunday services. Meanwhile, there are usually tens of thousands of people in the open area hoping to experience miracles and healing in awakening services.

A brief history of the Indonesian Bethel Church

The historical evidence shows that prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, the world faced a similar situation in 1918 with the break-out of the Spanish flu. The purpose of this article is to study and analyse GBI's repositioning of its mission to meet the current context to evangelise, show love and carry out social actions in response to COVID-19. The church needs to carefully analyse its mission dynamic to anticipate a relevant strategy during these difficult times when the world is struggling with the pandemic.

The Church of God's (USA) dream of Indonesia's Mission was eventually developed after an extended period after 1952; however, it was bigger than anyone had ever imagined (Conn 1996). In 1955, Dalraith N. Walker was sent as a missionary to the new island republic. Dalraith had assisted Ho L. Senduk ('Om Ho' as he was fondly called) to found the Bethel Full Gospel Church, three years earlier, in 1952 in Jakarta.

Ho L. Senduk and his wife, Helen, visited the United States in 1958 and joined the Church of God. Furthermore, Senduk worked tirelessly and looked forward to the day when the Bethel Full Gospel Church would be united with the Church

of God (Conn 1996). Fortunately, this dream came true in 1967 after Indonesia broke off its growing ties with international communism (Adam 2015).

In the book entitled *Like a Mighty Army*, Conn (1996) stated that James L. Slay, the World Mission field representative, learned of Bethel's desire to join the Church of God. In response to the news, General Superintendent Charles W. Conn travelled to Indonesia in February 1967 and was joined by C. Raymond Spain and W.E. Johnson. In Asia, Spain was assigned to the Ministry of Service, and W.E. Johnson was the chairman of the World Mission Council.

On 02 February 1967, two teams met in Jakarta, with the Indonesian delegation led by Senduk. The Church of God team was led by Charles W. Conn as the general overseer. Regardless of the cultural differences, language difficulties and broad geographic expanse, these two groups worked together to become one. The merge description was drafted and signed.

The signatories to the Church of God were Charles W. Conn, the general overseer; C. Raymond Spain, the assistant general supervisor; and William E. Johnson, chair of the World Mission Council. The Bethel Full Gospel Church's signatories were Ho L. Senduk, the national overseer; the Sean King, the assistant supervisor; Ong Ling Kok, the first secretary; Khoe Soe Liem, assistant secretary; and A.I. Shy, the treasurer. The Indonesian Council used both the English and Indonesian names, *Bethel Full Gospel Church of God* and *Geredja Bethel Indonesia* (Conn 1996).

Ho L. Senduk was the founding father of the GBI. He was a lifelong Christian and was filled with the Spirit for several years. Indonesia remains a mature nation for the gospel of Christ, despite having the most significant number of Muslims globally. There are over 6100 GBI and Church of God congregations in cities and villages, and 27 others in various parts of the world in five continents. There are 16 860 pastors at different levels: 3442 pastors, 4737 associate pastors and 8681 assistant pastors. In 2019, the Bethel church recorded 3.5 million adult members, with children, likely making the church the largest in Indonesia (Sabar 2019). The church sends missionaries to countries on all the continents (Widjaja 2018).

The GBI also has an excellent Community Development Department, which helps people learn social skills such as health care, agriculture and commerce. At the last Synod held by the GBI and Church of God in August 2019, Rubin Adi Abraham was chosen as the chairman of the GBI to serve from 2019 to 2023. Rubin is Julius Ishak's son (82 years), one of the early GBI founders. Rubin's vision for the future is brilliant and straightforward. Furthermore, Rubin is a kind, charismatic leader (Kaukahe & Widjaja 2020). The Great Commission concept generally refers to Matthew 28, verses 16–20, and the GBI Mission Department applies it correctly.

Discussion and results

The momentum of spiritual awakening during the pandemic

The pandemic certainly causes suffering. Suffering is both a result of sin and a consequence of man's rebellion against God (cf. 2 Cor 7:10). Suffering is a tool used by God to make people repent, and suffering is used by God to achieve his purposes in human life. Jesus never promised someone who believed in him to be free from suffering, for example illness, persecution and various external sufferings. In such circumstances, Jesus also promised to give strength and patience to face suffering (cf. Mt 16:24, Mt 10:16). It is in this 'meeting place' that God and humans meet. Here we meet each other in humanity, and more importantly, God meets us (Kuhlman 1986).

The story of Job in the Bible gives a detailed understanding that human life is a struggle. Humans often rely on their feelings when they experience difficulties, so they cannot understand God's plan for their lives. God plans a lot of goodness in human suffering. From God's point of view, suffering is a way for humans to realise their position before God. In Job's story, through the suffering, he experienced a personal encounter with God (Job 42:1–6). In the end, Job realised his position before God and humbled himself to God.

The pandemic is changing the priorities of religious communities and also their spiritual lives. Religious practice, freedom of movement and assembly are restricted. The COVID-19 pandemic has transformed Christian congregations from onsite to online. Onsite fellowship restrictions are not an obstacle. The dynamics of the church during the pandemic are also high-speed and profound. The preaching of the Word of God, prayer fellowship and even outreach have become more dynamic.

Furthermore, the spiritual awakening as a result of the breakout of the COVID-19 pandemic, which was previously centralised because of alliance's boundaries, has turned into a vibrant, online collaboration. For example, Paul invited the Corinthians to unite with him in Spirit and decide on a church case (1 Cor 5:3–5). The difference between place and space did not prevent Paul from being spiritually present. Similarly, online worship, especially under special conditions, still accommodates fellowship; therefore, the church is much more flexible in reality beyond static spaces.

Apart from that, what is interesting is that the church has evolved as a digital reality in response to the pandemic. The unique transformation in the digital world makes the pandemic challenge an opportunity to understand God's place and us in it. Of course, media and digital technology have accelerated access for the church to build God's Kingdom through digital transformation, but the church's role in this movement is also crystal clear. Geographically, there are no boundaries for the community to fellowship,

from the community gathered to be connected. Through this digital transformation, we are experiencing a momentum of awakening in spiritual matters.

Revitalising of the Christian faith and purity

Since the church was founded two millennia ago, the world has faced many plagues and pandemics. COVID-19 has not only led to medical and economic problems, but has also resulted in religious and spiritual struggles. In the Old Testament, God often allowed suffering to educate his people. Suffering provides space for critical reflection on the spiritual struggles of God's people. According to Morley (2012), pain is God's megaphone. The Scriptures also link suffering from the mandate of repentance and return to God (2 Chr 7:13–14).

Regarding suffering, Gunawan (2017) explains that a new paradigm assumes the problem of human suffering as a tradition. Through the pandemic, believers are tested for their dependence on God and their moral capacity to freely choose the good and the right. In this pandemic, God wants believers to have faith in him to be refined and reaffirmed. God is not ignorant; instead, he allows suffering to be experienced by humans to fulfil his human character formation plan (Alinuridin 2020).

According to Hidayat (2017), suffering cannot be seen narrowly as merely a 'punishment' from God for human sin. Despite not being a pandemic, suffering is a natural and inevitable reality of human life. Hooker (2008) stated that suffering leads people to glory, such as life in Christ. It can also purify (Ja 1:3, 12; 1 Pt 1:7) or lead people to repentance and serve as a human educator in Christian virtues, especially regarding endurance and perseverance. Through suffering, humans and God recognise one another (Hidayat 2017).

Suffering is also a consequence of Jesus' followers, but on the contrary, it is also a process in shaping faith so that one becomes more dependent on Christ (cf. Rm 5:3–5, 2 Cor 2:8–9). In principle, Jesus never promised someone who follows him to be free from suffering. In James 1:2, the suffering that a person experiences can purify one's faith and test one's integrity just as gold can be tested for purity (cf. 1. Pt 1:6–7).

From a crisis to a catalyst

History is an essential legacy in the present and necessary for 'supporting' people and events. It cannot be denied that the COVID-19 pandemic has caused various crises in human lives, which are related to natural or social disasters that have also been considered as problems of faith (Starks 2000). However, it is vital to determine the strategies used by the church to respond to these pandemics.

Reflecting on the church and plagues is nothing new. However, the church needs to understand that this pandemic is a catalyst rather than a crisis. Epidemics and pandemics were some of the primary motivations for church growth in the early days (Starks 2000). In his book entitled *The Rise of*

Christianity, Stark (2000) investigates that one of the crucial factors that made the unknown and marginal Jesus movement become the world's dominant religion through Christians' response in facing the plague. The crisis becomes a catalyst to preach joyful news to those mourning.

Keep reproducing during a pandemic (fruitful in the unfruitful season)

Amid the pandemic, the GBI continues to reach out to the indigenous people from the archipelago community groups on 17676 islands (Widjaja 2018), which comprise 130 Unreached People Groups (UPG) including 35 Un-engaged People's Groups or UUPG (Indonesia Pelangi Nusantara 2017). God has entrusted GBI to adopt and penetrate some of these UPGs. This research focusses on several main activities and movements held during 2020. Besides, the GBI has built 659 new churches during the COVID-19 pandemic. It includes 409 pioneers and 250 new churches

Church building and UPG outreach mission department

Since January 2020, the mission division of GBI, a synod branch (one of 12 departments), has been responsible for building churches in urban and rural areas and UPGs and their surroundings. This department is specifically responsible for building 1000 churches yearly. They started by organising a national work meeting, held between 14 and 16 January 2020, attended by all Heads of Regional Manpower Office Representatives both at home and abroad. There are a total of 34 provincial representatives and an Asian representative. A SWOT (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats) analysis report is provided for each region, whilst all regional mission heads create SMART Goals (Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Relevant, Time-Oriented).

The socialised decisions in achieving these goals are divided into five steps:

1. **Vision delivery:** The vision needs to be shared with all pastors, and the congregations have to be involved in understanding the GBI concept.
2. **Recruitment:** Every member of the congregation who responds to God's call, whether they intend to be mission workers ready to be dispatched or part-time staff, needs to be trained in training centres in the stipulated areas. Furthermore, the recruitment of prospective missionaries from various educational backgrounds is also welcome.
3. **Training:** They are trained to introduce the Strong Gospel to the locals to embrace their target group's culture. It also provides comprehensive missiological training to maximise their capacity and practical application skills to fulfil their contextual needs.
4. **Commissioning:** Sending long-term workers to the field to build churches and partner with locals, and develop models to reach out to indigenes.
5. **Caring for** and frequently revisiting missionaries in the field to strengthen workers in the area.

The COVID-19 pandemic has emptied worship houses. It is crucial to reflect that God cannot be isolated by the limitations of location, rituals or busy atmosphere in a worship house. Most of the systems that have been built over the years in various aspects of life, ranging from health, environment, culture, social economy, even the church and ministry, are changing.

During the pandemic, the GBI Mission Department chose to be proactive and continued to improve in carrying out various outreach activities through numerous events and programs such as social service missions, community service, seminars and virtual prayer meetings. New forms of prayer fellowship, cell group worship, discipleship, online teaching and preaching were increased. The current social changes reminded the church of the slogan '*Ecclesia Reformata Semper Reformanda*', which is continuously renewing itself. Furthermore, it also transforms and innovates to surpass the current and new challenges.

Responding to the Mission Department's task, a one-year timeframe was developed; however, the Mission Department's timeframe was unable to properly conduct its services because of the emergence of COVID-19 in early March 2020. As God's Word says, humans plan; however, God determines. All the programmes, implementations and objectives of the Mission Department need to be changed completely. Besides, almost all religions, especially Christians, have been unable to conduct their worship since 22 March 2020.

Therefore, the Mission Department was consolidated. Before the consensus, online research was carried out among the servants of God, including GBI pastors, from 14 May to 31 May 2020 (As shown in Figure 1). The research comprised a survey of the psychological impact related to COVID-19 on pastors.

The results showed some form of confusion among pastors regarding the future of church maintenance and operations, especially in small and medium-sized rural areas.

Based on this survey, the Mission Department conducted a national meeting held on 12 June 2020. The national deliberations resulted in the consensus that all missionaries and GBI churches in the field must continue to progress even during the pandemic. Subsequently, during the national poll, the first set of initiatives taken are reported as follows:

1. Strengthening missionaries by discipleship enables the church to appear as a solid front line to face shocks. As stated in 1 Corinthians 3 verses 12–14, however, a man tends to put gold, silver, stones of great prices, wood, dry grass or cut stems on the base. Every man's work is made evident that day because it is expected to be tested by fire, thereby clarifying every man's quality of work.
2. Hybrid in context: the Word of God never changes; the contents of the Bible need not be altered; instead, the context and fields tend to be adjusted.
3. Frontline missionaries and pastors need a new platform to survive (develop all means to supply and maintain services).

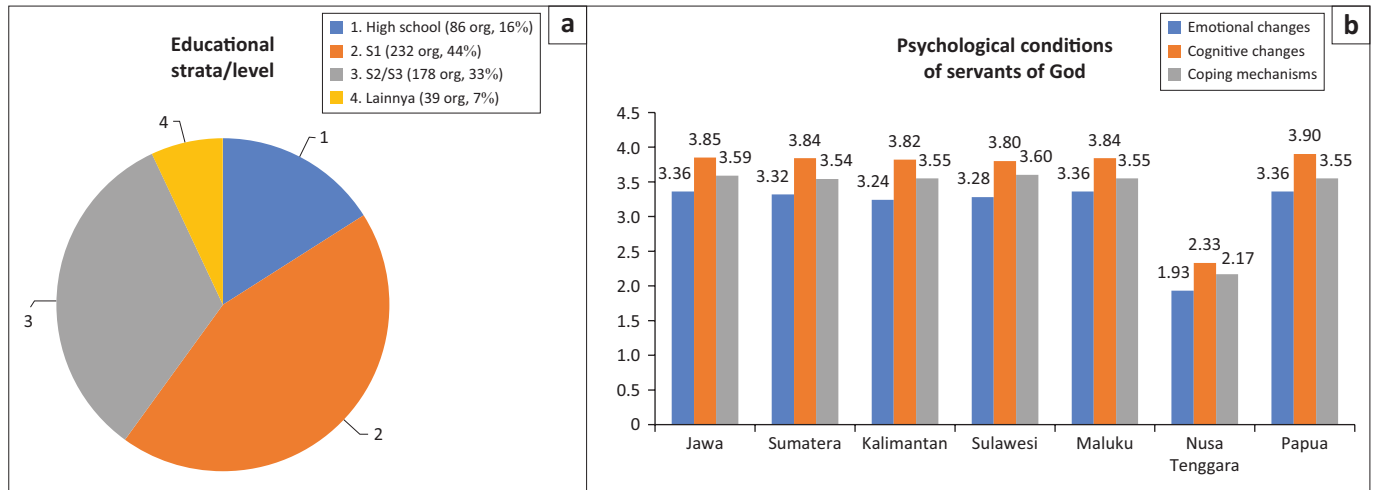


FIGURE 1: The psychological impact of COVID-19 on God's servant (Pastor). Research conducted between 14–31 May 2020.

- All GBI missionaries and pastors need additional skills to support the service.
- Consider the COVID-19 pandemic moment as a new opportunity.

Before implementing the National Consultative Committee, the pastors and field workers who were directly affected were offered financial assistance, between 30 and 60 dollars a month depending on the location. On 14 August 2020, a national webinar on food security was held. The national webinar and workshop on GBI towards independent food security from upstream to downstream was carried out in collaboration with GBI agro volunteers and the community service office. Its purpose was to equip missionaries and servants of God during the 'new normal'. The aim of the webinar was to increase independent food security realised through farming to fulfil household needs and enhance the added value of household production, personal needs and sales, such as fertilisers, snacks and herbal plants.

Furthermore, the pastors also participated in a workshop which is expected to improve skills and develop and strengthen the congregation's economy during a pandemic. Additionally, it worked towards equipping churches so that they are able to withstand technological changes and advances.

The GBI considers the pandemic a blessing because it is relevant to trust God amidst the problematic situation. History shows that obstacles boost Christianity. Starks (2000) stated that Cyprian, Dionysius, Eusebius and other church fathers presumed that the epidemic significantly contributed to Christianity. Therefore, instead of perceiving the pandemic as a challenge, the GBI sees it as an opportunity.

Creative ability is the process of capturing and implementing new ideas. In a study, Hurley and Hult (1998) revealed that an organisation with creative ability tends to successfully respond to its environmental conditions and have good competitiveness and performance. The study also stated that the high innovation level is related to how strong the education and human resource developments are and

to its member's participation in decision-making, which is actualised in the organisational culture. The GBI has proved that this organisation is agile and adaptive, as shown by the rapid synodal response to changes during the pandemic and continuity of services in the synod environment.

Even without a pandemic, the world experiences ongoing changing processes, preceded and guided by science and the human cognitive domain. It comes from the realm of cognitive change, which is preceded by affection to form skills such as social attitudes in human culture (Widjaja, Simanjuntak & Boiliu 2020). It is necessary to consider the current crisis as an opportunity to adapt and respond differently to the usual direction. Consequently, various transitions such as distance learning and web-based business, including online worship, reflect the link to change; stay or die!

Overall, the 2020 pandemic seems to be an enormous awakening for Christianity in Indonesia (Widjaja et al. 2020), especially in the GBI churches. Based on a different perspective, the spread of the GBI churches throughout the country increases the Christian faith. The 2020 pandemic started in Wuhan (Saputra 2020) and was finally detected in Indonesia on March 02, altering the normal course of life as also the religious places.

A properly planned church building must adapt to changes to hybrid mode, which means that services tend to be adjusted, not necessarily in an ordinary church building, instead in some other place. In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the church needs to create a new platform for survival.

Furthermore, pastors and members need to possess additional skills, especially those who serve in the forefront and are church builders. Worship returns to the home, and the head of the family (father) becomes the leader (Widjaja et al. 2020). The theological concept of service and worship was different during the pandemic. The church needs to understand that mission theology is the implementation of the great commission (Widjaja, Ginting & Hutagalung 2019). The church needs to be able to turn obstacles and challenges

into opportunities. In this case, Irwan stated that the house church developed a strategy to strengthen the Christian family life of faith and reach people represented in the 'house' of believers (Widjaja et al. 2020).

Conclusion

The GBI understands the magnitude and impacts of the COVID-19 phenomenon. However, the GBI, a Pentecostal charismatic church, gave a different response. Firstly, in the case of the Christian approach during COVID-19, when people worldwide experience suffering and seek help, the scriptures repeatedly talk about human suffering and become a momentum for people to return, repent and hope in God. Christianity offers something that can more safely explain why these terrible times befall humankind, and it projects a hopeful, even enthusiastic, portrait of the future. The Acts of the Apostles show that spiritual awakening gave power through the Holy Spirit to the disciples to proclaim the word of God with courage even when facing suffering. Secondly, God is using COVID-19 to draw his Church closer to himself. It challenges us to believe that God does provide, even while suffering. Is it not what the cross of Christ means. The Lord draws us into the refinement to recommit to the covenants and mission he has ordained for his Church. Thirdly, the Church must continue to make disciples, inviting all the people in to learn all the ways of Christ, including the mandate to 'go and make disciples'. Jesus makes a beautiful promise that he is always with his followers until the very end of the age.

Revival depends on God, not the evangelistic efforts of the church. Even though God makes spiritual awakening, this does not mean that evangelism is unnecessary. However, the GBI continues to move to carry out evangelistic tasks and believes God remains sovereign even during a pandemic.

The church community remained open and participated in virtual prayers, praises and healing services through various digital communication platforms, such as YouTube, Facebook, Zoom, Skype, Facebook, WhatsApp and Tik-Tok, without physically gathering together. On the contrary, there were still visits and physical relationships in rural areas and small communities around river banks, mountains and coastlines. In Indonesia, the GBI tried its best to fulfil the Great Commission by training and equipping church building missionaries and frontline pastors, as well as inspiring enthusiasm.

Moreover, during the pandemic, the church was still bearing fruit by building 659 churches in its surroundings. Currently, God has blessed them in more diverse ways than in 1918, through thanksgiving, prayers and faith. Finally, pandemics often bring destruction and therefore opportunities for spiritual awakening through worship, practical love, social justice, compassion and care, thereby yielding fruitful results in an unfruitful season.

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Competing interests

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Authors' contributions

F.S and O.H. checked and validated the data. N.B. checked the final proof of the article. R.A.A. gave valuable information on the GBI.

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Data availability

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Disclaimer

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