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## ECUMENICAL MISSION IN INDONESIA: A Respon On Covid-19 Pandemic Situation

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### **Abstract**

*Mission in ecumenical era is a new paradigm as the changing of time and the perspective of postmodern society. Recently, global people were challenged by pandemic situation that caused some shifts in the church ministry. This article offers some concept of mission which takes into account an interpretation to WCC declaration that is relevant to face pandemic situation in Indonesia. The writing method used is descriptive theological analysis with an ecumenical mission perspective. The result is that the mission of the church is to be present in the midst of the world to spread the word, help, love, and heal people affected by Covid-19 to become one.*

**Keywords:** mission, ecumenical, pandemic, paradigm

### **INTRODUCTION**

The Covid-19 pandemic raises the question of how the church is responding to the extraordinary situation in which not only health and economic issues are at stake, but also the understanding of what a church is and how ecclesiastical life is practiced, especially in particular the mission of the church.<sup>1</sup> Talking about the mission paradigm in Christian theology cannot be separated from the thoughts of Davic J. Bosch, a missiologist from South Africa with a Magnum Opus (masterpiece) entitled "Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission." The popularity of this book is so excessive that it has been translated into various languages including Indonesian with the title "Mission Transformation: A History of Mission Theology that Changes and Changes". I'm sure theology students have read this book more or less because it is a mandatory book in missiology and ecumenical courses at the Theological College in general.

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<sup>1</sup> Jean-Daniel Plüss. "COVID-19, the Church, and the Challenge to Ecumenism." Transformation 37, no. 4 (October 2020): 286. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0265378820961545>; Awal praktik gerejawi dilihat di Kisah Para Rasul dimana jemaat saling sepenanggungan tanpa melihat later belakang sosial dan budaya. Baca Bobby Kurnia Putrawan. "Pengantar Latar Belakang Kitab Kisah Para Rasul." QUAERENS: Journal of Theology and Christianity Studies 1, No.2 (2019): 176-183. <https://doi.org/10.46362/quaerens.v1i2.8>.

According to Bosch, there are 6 mission paradigms, namely: the ancient church, the Hellenistic church, medieval Roman Catholicism, the Protestant Reformation, the Enlightenment and the last one was the Ecumenical or Ecumenical era.<sup>2</sup> Therefore, according to him, the position of our current mission paradigm is in the Postmodern, or commonly called the ecumenical paradigm.

Until now the world is still shaken by the outbreak of a new virus. Initially the spread of this virus came from Wuhan, China, in 2019, therefore the virus is called Covid-19. But the outbreak spread so quickly to a global level that the WHO declared Covid-19 a pandemic.<sup>3</sup> Worldometer records infected cases globally and also provides daily country-by-country data.

This pandemic crisis affects all aspects of human life globally. Indeed, there is already a vaccine that is running according to the government's program and will continue. However, human activities in the fields of economy, education and religion are still limited and some have even been suspended for an indefinite period of time. This of course also has an impact on the activities of churches in Indonesia. There are many things to consider including theological and mission perspectives. The purpose of this paper is to explore ecumenical missions in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic situation in Indonesia.

## **METHOD**

This article is an analysis of descriptive theology in the field of mission with an ecumenical perspective. This descriptive theological analysis uses a literature study, where the written sources of topics related to the mission are ecumenical. This article is based on the thoughts of David J. Bosch and the results of the World Council of Churches on the mission of the church.

At the beginning, the author discusses the general description of the ecumenical mission paradigm and the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic and its influence on church mission services in Indonesia. The final part, this article offers an interpretation of the

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<sup>2</sup> David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (Orbis Books, 1991), 181-349.

<sup>3</sup> Dawn Kopecki Higgins-Dunn Berkeley Lovelace Jr, William Feuer, Noah, "World Health Organization Declares the Coronavirus Outbreak a Global Pandemic," CNBC, March 11, 2020, <https://www.cnbc.com/2020/03/11/who-declares-the-coronavirus-outbreak-a-global-pandemic.html>.

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relevant concepts regarding the current ecumenical mission in the Covid-19 pandemic situation in Indonesia.

## RESULT AND DISCUSSION

### An Overview of the Ecumenical Mission Paradigm

The emergence of the ecumenical paradigm initially was the end of the Enlightenment period, when postmodernism emerged in the 19th century, and churches around the world began to realize that they had to articulate a vision in one forum (ecumenical) to realize a common mission. But the most well-organized ecumenical movement was the World Conference of Missions held in Edinburgh in 1910. Its chairman at the time was John R. Mott. Indonesian students who join GMKI should not forget this one figure. He was Secretary general of the World Student Christian Federation (WSCF) from 1895 to 1920 who succeeded in organizing the grand meeting.

After the inaugural conference, evangelistic agencies with the worldwide church held a conference every 5 years or so (sometimes 10 years depending on the need). Starting from the inaugural conference to the most recent, namely in Arusha (Tanzania) in 2018, there were at least three changes that affected the nature of the mission, namely:

First, the mission style which is ecclesio-centrism becomes theo-centrism. For more than 40 years, missions were seen as belonging to the church and claimed to be missionary work. That is why the growth of Christianity until the second half of the 20th century is seen as the fruit of the work of the church, especially Christianity which was brought from Western Europe to all continents. New at the 1952 mission conference, in Willingen (Jerman)<sup>4</sup> The term mission of the church (*missiones ecclesiae*) has begun to be abandoned, contemporary missiologists have used the term mission of God (*missio Dei*), or simply the word mission (singular) with the consideration that only God has a mission, humans and the church are tools used by God to carry out missions. participate in God's mission. Of course, the church's mission is not wrong to continue to be used, it's just that a sharp distinction is made that the church's mission is plural while God's mission is singular.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Georg Verdom salah satu peserta dari Jerman mengungkapkan istilah ini. Namun sebenarnya istilah *Missio Dei* sudah diperkenalkan oleh Karl Hartenstein pada tahun 1934.

<sup>5</sup> Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 10.

Second, the evangelistic approach is extended to the area of the dialogue approach. From 1910 to the 1930s, missions focused on evangelizing non-Christians. However, since the 1938 mission conference in Tambaran, participants realized that the growth of major religions in the world, especially in parts of Africa and Asia, forced churches and mission agencies to think about how to interact with other religions. It was Hendrik Kraemer who was first assigned to present the theology of missions and finally invited a tough debate, because Kraemer introduced Christianity as the only religion of salvation in this world. After nearly thirty years of no meeting point, dialogue as part of the mission then becomes inevitable to be implemented at the base level (local church). Finally, the WCC compiled a dialogue guideline which was published in 1979<sup>6</sup> which was guided by its members, including the church in Indonesia.

Third, the one-way mission becomes multi-corner. Regarding the focus of evangelism in the Enlightenment century until entering the postmodern era, the world of evangelism is divided into two, namely the Christian mainland and the non-Christian land. Once there is an awareness of *missio Dei* and the importance of dialogue, missions can no longer be seen as sending missionaries from the West to the East. The term "young churches" which is intended for churches in the Southern Hemisphere (Asia, Africa and Latin America) has also drawn criticism. Mission from the West to the Rest has been replaced with the term mission in all directions. Western churches can no longer claim to be pioneer churches or missionaries. Every church on earth is a mission tool used by God. This awareness began since the Mission Conference in Accra, Ghana (Africa), in 1957-1958, and after this period we also recognize the emergence of several colors of theology in the South such as contextual theology, liberation theology, feminist theology, black theology and so on. The world of theology and missions is no longer gravitating towards the North (the churches in Western Europe and North America) but is now further south (Asia, Africa and Latin America). This is an overview of the ecumenical mission paradigm before we look at what role the church has played during the pandemic. It is also good for us to pay attention to the specific impact on church services.

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<sup>6</sup> "Guidelines on Dialogue with People of Living Faiths and Ideologies — World Council of Churches," Document, accessed September 20, 2017, <http://www.oikoumene.org/en/resources/documents/wcc-programmes/interreligious-dialogue-and-cooperation/interreligious-trust-and-respect/guidelines-on-dialogue-with-people-of-living-faiths-and-ideologies>.

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## The Impact of the Pandemic and Its Changes in Church Services in Indonesia

Of course, what I observed was in North Sumatra where I live, although I also investigated information about services in Java through information from friends who serve in the island of Java. In general, there are 4 areas that are affected, namely as follows::

### 1. Reduced church income

Whose economy has not been hit hard by the COVID-19 pandemic? Almost all of them have been affected, including the church, although most adhere to low profits. Indeed, the cash flow of spending is decreasing due to minimal activity, but this is certainly not balanced with income, which mostly relies on congregational offerings. Although there are some congregations who have a high awareness of transferring their offerings or obligations, of course the pandemic situation has greatly affected the economic life of the congregation which then has an impact on their offerings through the church.

### 2. Missioner with a *home-based* basis

The missionary was meant to open the doors of the church wide so that more and more people could join the fellowship. This pandemic period certainly makes the door have to be temporarily closed. Missionary is now defined by sending everyone to worship at home and from home in accordance with government recommendations. In this case, the congregation is invited to use the internet to connect with sermons, meditations and worship that have been guided by ministers and pastors. Missionary visits must also be replaced with virtual methods because all access is temporarily closed to break the Covid-19 chain.

### 3. Fellowship with physical distancing basis

One of the effective mission tools is pastoral care. Here touch ministry is part of healing both physically and psychologically. The tradition of "touching" is certainly familiar in the ministry of Jesus in the Gospels as a way of therapy.

In addition, the most popular physical touch is shaking hands. In conventional churches in Indonesia, especially where I serve which is dominated by the Batak church, of course the elimination of the tradition of sharing the page is not easy. Moreover, shaking hands has been symbolized by "gift" to the priest or servant. Shaking hands is also a symbol of reconciliation, if there are two warring parties, then together is a sign of mutual forgiveness. However, in a pandemic situation, this

certainly needs to be postponed or rethought. Fellowship must be limited by maintaining a very strict distance considering that Covid-19 is a virus that spreads very quickly, especially through physical touch.

#### 4. Hygiene is paramount

The tradition of washing hands before worship is certainly not familiar among Protestant Christians and Catholics. This practice is practiced by Orthodox Christians, Muslims (ablution) and Jews (rekhitsah). However, in a pandemic situation, churches must carry out this tradition even though the goal is not a religious tradition, but purely hygiene. Unlike the Jews, the goal of hygiene is secondary, the main thing is to follow the rabbinic tradition that has been carried out for centuries. The impact of the pandemic in this case is also good to continue because of personal observations as pastors, Christian congregations pay less attention to church cleanliness. Let alone maintaining the cleanliness of the church, just defecate is done on the walls of the church.

There may still be other impacts that affect the life and ministry of the church, but these four areas are sufficient to illustrate the impact of the pandemic so that the church needs to anticipate strategic steps in its ministry efforts.

### **Interpreting the Current Ecumenical Mission Concept in a Pandemic Situation in Indonesia**

In 2013 the World Council of Churches (WCC) held a grand meeting in South Korea. Apart from the choice of structure in the ecumenical body, of course there are several issues that are discussed as mission targets. The Council for Evangelism and Mission (CWME) which is under the auspices of the WCC has also finalized the concept of ecumenical mission which needs to be a direction for churches around the world. There were at least three concepts that emerged at that time:

#### ***Mission As "The Church-With-Others"***

This mission concept is a revision of "the church for others", a concept introduced by Dietrich Bonhoeffer that the church needs to have social sensitivity to help people who suffer from political and economic injustice. The church needs to be there for people who are suffering because the church is sent to speak God's truth. However, this concept makes the church's position to distance itself from the community because the church

becomes a helping agent, while the community becomes the "target of being helped". The ecumenical paradigm corrects it with the concept of "the church with others", as Jesus who not only came to save but also became part of mankind and lived together with humans (John 1:1-4; cf. Acts 3:1-10 ).<sup>7</sup>

Even though the church is also affected by the pandemic in the economic field as mentioned earlier, we should be grateful because many churches are still open to help the community's economy. There are many who have practiced the church's social sense to the Indonesian people in this pandemic situation. Some provide masks as donations, medicines, basic necessities, etc. Even Council of Churches in Indonesia (CCI) also appealed to the church as a facility to accommodate Covid-19 patients. What needs to be addressed is the concept of mission, do churches in Indonesia reflect "the church with others"? In the context of religious plurality, this concept is also very relevant because it invites communities or interfaith institutions to work together. They, as the other, are not only mission objects, but are parallel side by side in Allah's mission.

### ***Mission From The Margin***

As mentioned above, the gravity of theology and mission in this contemporary era is in the South (Asia, Africa and Latin America). At this pole, most of the periphery are found as a result of global injustice. The poor, neglected and marginalized were often considered as recipients of missions, meaning that the church's job was to target the marginalized as a mission task so that they would be helped, supported and saved. This view has been abandoned, because it will regard the marginalized as the object of the mission. God has chosen marginal people who are considered stupid, weak by this world (1 Cor 1:18-31) to be used by Him to continue his mission in this world. Through the concept of mission from the "periphery" the church is reminded that the marginalized are not just recipients of a mission, but a source of inspiration that the mission is based on the real experience of those who are marginalized so that it calls the church to voice justice and confront the rulers who abuse power for worldly interests by exploiting and sacrificing marginal people.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Micheline Kamba. "Holistic Healing in Acts 3:1-10. A Transformative Church for All People." *International Review of Mission*, 105, Iss. 2 (December 2016): 268. <https://doi.org/10.1111/irom.12149>.

<sup>8</sup>The Commission on World Mission and Evangelism, "Together Towards Life: Mission and Evangelism in Changing Landscapes," in *God of Life, Lead Us To Justice and Peace* (WCC 10th Assembly, Busan, South Korea: WCC Publications, 2013).

Of course, this concept also covers patients who are victims of the Covid-19 pandemic and the poor who are affected by it. In this connection we also remember the recent case of George Floyd, which raised the voices of the masses who broke down racist atrocities in Minneapolis last month. Racist discrimination is also a cruel virus that destroys and kills the fabric of society. Victims of the pandemic and racism, they are marginal people who are very visible to remind us all that the mission comes from them, and the church needs to move to participate in the spirit of the mission. Incidents in the United States are also familiar in Indonesia, as we have also witnessed racist fantasies in political life that greatly disrupt people's lives. Religious institutions such as MUI and PGI should be sensitive to the lives of social strata by not mentioning religion, race, and gender issues in dialogue and public discussions so as not to cause a commotion..

If one takes the potential impact of the global Church further then we must reflect on the plight of those who do not subscribe to the Christian faith. This practical step was taken by the World Council of Churches in collaboration with the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue. They have released a document entitled "Serving a Wounded World in Interreligious Solidarity: A Christian Call to Reflection and Action During COVID-19 and Beyond. The Parable of the Good Samaritan is a reminder that religious communities cannot get past the wounded and that help can come from representatives of other communities. The document lays out the basis for interfaith solidarity, sets out the principles, and makes recommendations.<sup>9</sup>

### ***Mission As The Fullness Of Life***

This concept was declared at the 1991 WCC general assembly in Canberra (Australia) with the theme: "Come Holy Spirit, renew the whole creation." An invitation to reconciliation to every human being and civil society that justice and peace are part of the mission's goals. Environmental issues are also added as an inseparable part of human life. All issues are summarized by a program called JPIC (Justice, Peace and Integrity of

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<sup>9</sup>Jean-Daniel Plüss. "COVID-19, the Church, and the Challenge to Ecumenism," 293; Kamba, Micheline. "Holistic Healing in Acts 3:1-10. A Transformative Church for All People," 268-279; lihat juga pernyataan Dewan Gereja-Gereja Dunia dan Dewan Kepausan untuk Dialog Antaragama: <https://www.oikoumene.org/en/resources/documents/wcc-programmes/interreligious-dialogue-and-cooperation/serving-a-wounded-world-in-interreligious-solidarity-a-christian-call-to-reflection-and-action-during-covid-19> (accessed 28 August 2020).

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Creation). The mission in this case is directed to a vision of a new heaven and earth (Rev 21:1, 5) as a common place and everyone has equal rights to live fully.

During the pandemic, there is certainly a lot of speculation about the emergence of Covid-19. Most of all, there are two opposing camps: conspiracy theories and natural selection theories. The first theory states that the corona virus was caused intentionally by scientists for certain purposes. Two countries were accused of being the ringleaders, namely China and the United States, which were indeed hot in the atmosphere of a trade war. The second theory states that the corona virus emerged due to natural selection which probably came from animals sold for protein consumption in Wuhan. Of course, the scientists who have the competence to respond to this problem, we need to be careful about responding to any news that can confuse information.

Apart from this complex theory, the impact that is felt for us is the environmental climate which during a pandemic becomes fresher and friendlier. Where I live, Dumaguete, Philippines, for example, that from March to June it is usually very hot because it is summer. But lately it feels cooler and fresher. Of course this has an impact with the regional quarantine situation, which makes people have to stop mobilizing, especially those related to engines and vehicle fumes.

Therefore, during this pandemic, it is also necessary to have some kind of ecological repentance, friends in Jakarta also said that the situation is getting cleaner and cooler so that they also feel the positive impact of this pandemic. Therefore, the church needs to also pay attention to the mission as the fullness of life that the ecosystem is a gift from God that needs to be preserved for mutual survival.

## **CONCLUSION**

In the Covid-19 pandemic situation, the missionary call to the church is to be present in the midst of the world to preach the word, help, love, and heal affected communities. Of course the churches in Indonesia as a community organization are called to this task. One of the greatest gifts God has given us is the act of sharing. We are called to share sustenance, share knowledge, share time, share energy, share opportunities, etc.

The mission task also invites the church to face macro problems, such as the law and geopolitical order that oppress the lower class. Of course this is not easy, but the power of the church is very great if united. The ecumenical mission paradigm has laid the foundation of a common task, that different denominations become secondary numbers,

the primary need is to carry out missions in one container, for which we have been prayed for with the pronunciation “that all may become one” (John 17:21). A mission based on togetherness has called us since we were in the womb, to be born and live to struggle in this motherland.

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