



Jurnal Teologi (JUTEOLOG)

Vol. 6 No. 2 (June 2026) p. 84–95

Jurnal Teologi (JUTEOLOG)

e-ISSN 2775-4006

<https://ejurnal.sttkadesiyogyakarta.ac.id/index.php/juteolog>

p-ISSN 2774-9355



<https://doi.org/10.52489/juteolog.v6i2.232>

Building Wise Christian Leadership in the Era of Virtual Worship

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Recommended Citation

Turabian 8th edition (full note)

Natan et al., “Building Wise Christian Leadership in the Era of Virtual Worship.” *Jurnal Teologi (JUTEOLOG)* 6, no. 2 (June 01, 2026): 84-95, accessed June 01, 2026, <https://doi.org/10.52489/juteolog.v6i2.232>

American Psychological Association 7th edition

(Natan et al, 2026, p.84).

Received: 23 June 2025	Accepted: 09 February 2026	Published: 01 June 2026
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Abstract

The rapid development of digital technology has significantly transformed the form and practice of Christian worship, especially with the rise of virtual worship services. These transformations demand that church leaders adapt their leadership principles to remain both relevant and effective in guiding faith communities. Since the COVID-19 pandemic, virtual worship has emerged as a dominant medium for congregational gathering, offering increased accessibility and flexibility. However, this shift also presents considerable challenges, such as reduced direct interaction, diminished communal intimacy, and the potential loss of the perceived sacredness of worship. In light of these changes, this article aims to investigate the principles of wise Christian leadership grounded in biblical theology, and assess their applicability within the contemporary context of digital worship. This study employs a theological-practical approach, integrating biblical exegesis, leadership theory, and qualitative analysis of current trends in online worship practices. Through literature review and theological reflection, the paper analyzes how church leaders can maintain ecclesial identity and spiritual vitality in a virtual setting. The research reveals that effective Christian leadership in the digital age requires a transformative approach that upholds the essence of worship, fosters spiritual intimacy, and cultivates communal faith formation. Leaders must creatively harness digital platforms to extend pastoral care, teaching, and evangelism while ensuring that worship remains a space for healing, sacred encounter, and the manifestation of the Holy Spirit. This paper contributes to the ongoing discourse on digital ecclesiology by offering strategic insights for church leaders navigating the shift to virtual ministry. It underscores the importance of balancing technological innovation with the preservation of core Christian values, promoting a leadership model that is both contextually responsive and spiritually grounded. Wise and adaptive leadership is essential to guide the church through digital transitions without compromising its theological integrity or mission.

Keywords: Christian Leadership, Virtual Worship, Sacredness, Digital Technology, Evangelism

INTRODUCTION

The advancement of digital technology has brought about major transformations in various aspects of life, including in the context of Christian leadership and worship practices. The development of online platforms such as Zoom, YouTube, and social media has enabled churches to reach congregations in ways that were previously unimaginable (Bani et al. 2023). Worship is no longer limited to physical space, but can be accessed virtually by congregations who are in remote locations or who experience obstacles to attending in person (Barna Group, 2020).

However, this change also raises a number of theological and pastoral questions. Among them are how to maintain the sacredness of worship in digital space, how to build a genuine community of faith without physical presence, and how to apply the gifts of the Holy Spirit in an online context. The presence of God, traditionally understood in terms of physical liturgical encounter, is now reinterpreted in a digital format that demands a new theological approach (Campbell, 2010; Anderson, 2018).

The transformation from physical to virtual worship has become an increasingly common global phenomenon, especially since the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. Social restrictions and health protocols have forced churches around the world to close their

physical doors and adopt digital platforms as the primary means of continuing their spiritual ministry. In this context, virtual worship offers great flexibility and greater accessibility, allowing congregants to participate from anywhere and at any time (Campbell & Tsuria, 2021).

Some of the benefits of virtual worship include increased service reach, operational cost efficiencies, and the ability to continue reaching people in geographic locations that are difficult to reach conventionally. In many cases, online worship also allows for the participation of diaspora congregations or those previously disconnected from local church life (Hutchings, 2017).

However, this approach is not without serious challenges. The lack of direct interaction can reduce the depth of relationships between congregations and between spiritual leaders and congregations. Technical glitches, lack of concentration, and passive attendance at worship services are obstacles to building an intimate and transformative community (Radde-Antweiler & Zeiler, 2020). In addition, there are concerns that virtual worship has the potential to reduce the sense of sacredness and the experience of God's presence that has been felt intensely in physical meetings, whether through liturgy, sacraments, or togetherness of the congregation (Campbell, 2010).

This section functions solely as a thematic synthesis of existing theological discussions on virtual worship and does not propose a gap theory, new model, or conceptual novelty. Rather, it consolidates established perspectives to frame the broader discussion concerning Christian leadership in digital worship contexts.

Contemporary Christian leadership is increasingly required not only to master digital technologies but also to cultivate authentic and contextual forms of digital spirituality that preserve the transcendental dimension of Christian worship. A central theological concern within virtual worship is how the sacredness and experiential presence of God can be meaningfully maintained in digital space. Traditionally, Christian worship has emphasized the tangible experience of God's presence through physical gatherings, liturgical practices, communal prayer, congregational singing, and sacramental participation (Schmemmann, 1987). In virtual worship, however, the perception of sacred presence becomes more mediated and abstract, largely dependent on the depth of spiritual engagement and interpretive meaning formed by the congregation (Campbell, 2012).

Ecclesial community remains a fundamental element of church life, as articulated in the Pauline metaphor of the body of Christ (1 Corinthians 12). Virtual worship challenges conventional forms of communal interaction, as the absence of physical presence can reduce emotional and spiritual intimacy among congregants (Hutchings, 2017). Nevertheless, existing scholarship acknowledges that intentional digital practices—such as online discussion forums, virtual prayer meetings, and digital pastoral accompaniment—can foster meaningful expressions of Christian fellowship.

The exercise of charismatic gifts, including prophecy, healing, and miracles, also presents theological and pastoral challenges within virtual settings. While these gifts are not theologically constrained by physical space, their mediation through digital platforms requires discernment and adaptive pastoral leadership (Cartledge, 2016). Consequently,

church leaders are encouraged to develop creative and spiritually responsible practices that allow congregational participation while maintaining theological integrity.

Pastoral leadership in virtual worship demands wisdom in liturgical design, theological reflection, and congregational care. Structured and meaningful liturgy must be preserved even within digital formats, alongside sensitivity to the diverse spiritual and emotional needs of congregants (Anderson, 2018). Although worship occurs virtually, the church's essential role as a space for faith formation, restoration, and spiritual maturation remains unchanged. Pastors therefore bear responsibility for providing accessible, relevant, and sustainable forms of teaching and pastoral support in digital contexts.

Digital platforms also offer significant opportunities for evangelism and mission. Social media, streaming services, and digital content distribution enable churches to reach individuals beyond the boundaries of traditional worship spaces. However, these opportunities require careful theological discernment to ensure that the gospel message remains faithful, contextual, and pastorally responsible (Campbell & Tsuria, 2021).

Scripture affirms the enduring importance of communal worship, as expressed in Hebrews 10:25, emphasizing encouragement, mutual edification, and perseverance in faith. While the mode of gathering may evolve, the theological essence of Christian fellowship remains constant.

Scholarly perspectives on virtual worship vary. Some theologians view it as a complementary pastoral tool rather than a substitute for embodied worship (Murray, 2020), while others caution against the potential erosion of sacred space and communal depth in digitally mediated practices (Beaudoin, 2000). More integrative approaches suggest that digital technology, when employed thoughtfully, can enhance inclusivity and engagement without abandoning ecclesial tradition (Wilson, 2016).

Overall, contemporary theological discourse increasingly recognizes virtual worship as a legitimate and supportive medium within church ministry, provided it remains balanced with theological depth, liturgical meaning, and a commitment to embodied community (Anderson, 2018; Campbell & Tsuria, 2021; Hutchings, 2017). Accordingly, this paper situates itself within existing scholarship, aiming to summarize and contextualize established insights on how Christian leaders may respond wisely and pastorally to the realities of digital worship in the present era.

METHODS

This research is a normative theological study that examines theological concepts, principles, and norms related to the use of digital technology in Christian worship practices. It focuses on critically and constructively assessing how core faith values and worship principles can be preserved, reinterpreted, and responsibly transformed within a digital context. The study employs a library research method, analyzing primary and secondary sources such as the Bible, official church documents, synod and council statements, and scholarly works by contemporary theologians and church leaders (; Campbell & Tsuria, 2021; Detweiler, 2020; Anderson, 2018). The collected data are systematically analyzed through a multi-layered theological interpretation framework encompassing historical, functional, and theological dimensions: historically, by tracing the church's engagement with technology from print and

broadcast media to digital platforms (Hutchings, 2017); functionally, by evaluating the role of technology in supporting or challenging essential aspects of worship such as sacredness, ecclesial community, and faith formation (Detweiler, 2020; Wilson, 2016); and theologically, by examining worship's kerygmatic and eschatological purposes as an encounter with God, the proclamation of Christ's saving work, and the sanctifying activity of the Holy Spirit (Campbell, 2010; Anderson, 2018). Through this approach, the study seeks to articulate a theological understanding of digital worship that remains faithful to Christian tradition while engaging constructively with contemporary technological realities.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Evolution of Digital Worship

History of the Development of Worship Media

The development of communication technology has gradually changed the way Christians practice their worship (Harianto et al. 2024). Since the early 20th century, radio became the first medium widely used to broadcast services and sermons to congregations who could not physically attend. This medium opened up new access for isolated groups or those with mobility barriers. Furthermore, television introduced a visual dimension that enriched the religious experience, allowing viewers to witness liturgy, music, and teaching live (Horsfield, 2015).

Entering the digital era, the internet has become a catalyst for major transformation in religious practice. Streaming platforms such as YouTube, Zoom, and Facebook Live allow churches to reach people globally with real-time participation. Shane Hipps (2005) in *The Hidden Power of Electronic Culture* emphasizes that digital media can expand the scope of spiritual communication, but at the same time carries the risk of shallowing meaning if not accompanied by theological and liturgical awareness. Therefore, the use of technology in worship must be based on deep spiritual reflection (Sievers 2017).

New Era of Christian Worship and Interactive Platforms

The growth of digital worship accelerated significantly during the COVID-19 pandemic, when churches around the world were forced to stop gathering in person. This situation prompted the rapid adoption of technologies like Zoom for more interactive virtual meetings (Jaya 2023), allowing for small group discussions, spiritual formation, and shared prayer. This format reflects the principle of the interconnected body of Christ, as affirmed in 1 Corinthians 12:12–14.

Social media such as Instagram and TikTok are also starting to be used to spread short and contextual messages of faith strengthening, reaching a younger generation who are familiar with short digital content. In a more futuristic context, the use of Virtual Reality (VR) is starting to be introduced to create immersive worship experiences. Although still in its early stages, VR experiments show new potential in experiencing liturgy and experiential spirituality (Campbell & Tsuria, 2021).

Keith Anderson (2015), in his book *The Digital Cathedral*, emphasizes that the church is no longer centered on physical buildings, but has become a digitally distributed community

connected by faith. The church must be present in digital spaces as a form of contextual involvement in the spiritual needs of today's congregation. However, the warning given in Hebrews 10:25 not to forsake the congregational gathering remains relevant. This indicates the importance of a balance between digital flexibility and meaningful physical community connectivity.

Thus, the evolution of digital worship is not just about adopting technology, but about how the church can maintain the essence of spirituality, relationships, and sacredness amidst changing media.

The Impact of Technology on the Congregation's Worship Experience

Increasing Spiritual Accessibility and Connectivity

Digital technology has significantly increased congregational access to God's word, especially for those living in remote areas or with limited mobility. Through live streaming, worship applications, and online audio-visual content, congregations can follow services in real time or re-recordings at any time. In this context, John Dyer (2011) in his book *From the Garden to the City* emphasizes that technology is not a neutral entity, but rather a cultural instrument that can be used to expand spiritual reach if used reflectively and theologically.

This is in line with the biblical principle in Romans 10:17 (ESV), "So faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ." This verse emphasizes the importance of access to the proclamation of the word, where digital technology can act as a channel that expands these possibilities, especially for those who are not physically reached by the church.

Immersive Experience through Virtual Reality Technology

Virtual Reality (VR) technology is starting to be utilized by a number of churches and Christian communities to create a more immersive and interactive worship experience. VR allows the congregation to be virtually "present" in a three-dimensional worship space, presenting a participatory atmosphere that approaches the physical experience. In the book *The Church of the Future: Technology, Innovation, and the Sacred* (2022), Richard A. Rogers and his team of researchers emphasize that VR can enrich the spiritual and emotional engagement of the congregation, but it still cannot completely replace physical presence, which plays an important role in building interpersonal relationships, community depth, and a complete sacred experience.

This implication is important in light of Christian teaching on the body of Christ (cf. 1 Corinthians 12:27) which emphasizes the dimension of community and interconnectedness that goes beyond mere digital representation.

Potential for Distraction and Superficiality

While digital technology offers easy access to spiritual information and faith-building materials, it also brings challenges in the form of digital distractions, attention deficits, and a tendency toward passive consumption. Nicholas Carr (2020), in the latest edition of his book *The Shallows: What the Internet Is Doing to Our Brains*, suggests that constant exposure to digital content can weaken the brain's capacity for deep and sustained concentration. In the

context of worship, these distractions have the potential to reduce the quality of the congregation's spiritual engagement, reduce the depth of contemplation of the word, and create a worship atmosphere that is more quickly forgotten or shallow emotionally and spiritually.

Thus, an intentional digital worship design is needed, which invites active, contemplative, and communicative participation, as well as the role of church leaders who are able to guide the congregation in managing their digital presence spiritually.

Theological Challenges in Virtual Worship

God's Presence in Digital Space

The main question in theological discourse on virtual worship is whether sacredness can be maintained outside the physical space of the church. Theologically, God's presence is not limited by space and time. This is confirmed by Jesus' statement in Matthew 18:20 (NIV): "For where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them." This verse provides the basis that even digital meetings can be a place of divine presence if done in spiritual awareness.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer in *Life Together* (1954) stated that Christian community does not depend on place, but on unity in Christ, which can exist even in physical separation. This becomes even more relevant in the context of digital worship, where communities of faith can remain connected through spiritual intention and awareness of God's collective presence.

The Threat of Reducing Sacredness in Digital Format

However, virtual worship also carries the risk of diminishing the transcendental dimension of worship. According to Karen Armstrong (2009) in *The Case for God*, authentic spiritual experience demands the involvement of the body, emotions, and actions—something that is often difficult to achieve in a digital space that tends to be passive. The lack of physical elements such as communion, anointing, and community touch can lead to a separation between the form and the substance of worship.

Campbell and Tsuria (2021) remind that to maintain sacredness in digital space, the church must create digital liturgies that not only transmit content, but also foster authentic spiritual presence, participation, and connectedness.

Community and Congregation Relations

Dynamic Differences between Physical and Virtual Communities

The relationship between congregations in physical and virtual communities has different characteristics. Physical communities allow for wholesome interpersonal relationships through non-verbal interactions, direct empathy, and shared rituals. In contrast, digital communities provide flexibility in terms of time and space, but often lack relational depth. This is stated by Tim Hutchings (2017) in *Creating Church Online*, who notes that digital communities are often functional and temporary, rather than relational and holistic. The Bible teaches the importance of physical gathering as part of growing in faith together. Hebrews

10:25 (ESV) advises believers not to forsake the assembly of the church, implicitly indicating the spiritual value of physical togetherness.

Strategy for Building a Meaningful Virtual Community

However, digital communities can be built intentionally. Heidi Campbell (2021) in *Digital Religion* states that digital interactive structures such as online discussion groups, community forums, and video call fellowship rooms can become dynamic spiritual spaces if guided by an inclusive and communicative pastoral approach. The book *Digital Church: Theology of Online Ministry* by Josiah Way (2022) also emphasizes the importance of integrating traditional worship elements (such as communal prayer, liturgy, and teaching) into online formats to create a strong sense of co-presence.

Growth of Faith in Virtual Worship

Discipleship Challenges and Spiritual Focus

Digital media has great potential in spreading the teachings and values of faith, but also contains challenges such as distraction, passive consumption, and fragmentation of attention. Adam Thomas (2011), in *Digital Disciple*, highlights that although access to spiritual resources increases, spiritual depth often decreases due to shallow and unstructured digital interactions. This weakens the dimension of discipleship that should take place in a relational and transformative manner.

Building Participatory Digital Worship and Fostering Faith

To address these challenges, virtual worship must be designed to be interactive and participatory, not just one-way. Heidi Campbell (2021) suggests that every digital worship experience create spaces for reflection, dialogue, and action—for example, post-service discussion sessions, online Bible study groups, and online ministry projects. This supports active and contextual faith growth, even in the midst of physical limitations.

Christian Leadership Strategies in the Era of Virtual Worship

Balancing Tradition and Innovation

Leaders as Guardians of Faith and Agents of Innovation

Christian leaders need to demonstrate wisdom in using digital technology to strengthen community and ministry without sacrificing the essence of spirituality. John C. Maxwell (2018) emphasized that effective leadership in an era of change requires the ability to adapt while maintaining the integrity of faith and spiritual values. Technology is not an end in itself, but a means to convey the gospel and expand the space of fellowship.

In 1 Corinthians 10:31 (ESV), it is written: “... or whatever you do, do all for the glory of God.” This verse is a basic principle that every form of innovation, including the use of digital media in worship, must be directed to glorify God, not just follow trends.

Ethical and Theological Limits in the Use of Technology

Church leaders, especially the Pastor, are responsible for determining the boundaries of healthy technology use in worship practices. Andy Crouch (2017), in *The Tech-Wise Family*, reminds us that technology must be controlled wisely and must not replace the deep relationship between the congregation and God and each other. Uncontrolled use of technology risks making worship a passive visual consumption, not a transformative spiritual experience. Karen-Marie Yust (2021) in *Digital Natives, Digital Immigrants* also states the importance of “theological integration” between new forms of worship and the church’s liturgical heritage. Thus, leadership strategies must be able to bridge liturgical tradition and contemporary creativity harmoniously.

Developing an Interactive Approach

Encourage Active Congregation Participation

One of the main challenges in virtual worship is keeping the congregation actively engaged. The use of interactive features such as live chat, polls, and Q&A sessions during online worship can strengthen the sense of congregational connectedness and encourage collective participation. James Emery White (2014), in *The Rise of the Nones*, states that active participation in digital faith communities can be key to engaging a generation that is increasingly skeptical of traditional religious institutions. Furthermore, Tim Hutchings (2017) in *Creating Church Online* emphasized that digital technology has great potential to strengthen relational and spiritual dimensions, as long as it is used with pastoral awareness and participatory design. Church leaders must build a digital service system that is inclusive and touches the spiritual needs of the congregation contextually.

Innovation Without Losing Substance

The use of digital platforms should not make worship lose its meaning. Liturgy, teaching, and fellowship must remain a means of growing faith and not just spiritual entertainment. Therefore, every innovation in Christian leadership strategies must be subject to the church’s primary mission, namely: “to make disciples of all nations” (cf. Matthew 28:19–20), including through digital channels.

CONCLUSION

Digital technology has become an integral element of modern life, and the church as a community of faith cannot ignore this reality. The development of information technology offers a strategic opportunity for the church to reach more souls and increase congregational engagement more broadly and flexibly. In this context, Christian leaders are challenged to adopt technology wisely—not as a substitute for the spiritual and communal dimensions of the church, but as a means of supporting the church’s mission in presenting the gospel and discipling the nations. Various digital platforms such as YouTube, Facebook Live, Zoom, and Virtual Reality (VR) technology have enabled churches to hold online services, distribute faith-building content, and reach congregations across geographies. In addition, technology is also utilized in the administrative aspects of the church, such as managing congregation data, planning activities, and providing digital learning resources. However, this progress brings

with it a number of serious challenges that must not be ignored. One is the risk of reducing the sacredness of virtual worship. Physical absence can diminish the intimacy of the liturgical encounter, hindering a deep spiritual experience, and weakening the community dimension that is so essential to church life (cf. Heb 10:25). In addition, over-reliance on technology can create shallow and individualistic patterns of spiritual consumption, rather than active participation and the formation of Christ's character in the community. Therefore, pastors and church leaders are required to integrate technology into theological and pastoral ministry. Technology must be understood as a tool that strengthens the worship experience, enriches spiritual growth, and expands the space for evangelism—not replaces it. For example, the use of technology for online Bible classes, spiritual podcasts, and app-based faith formation can be a form of relevant contextual ministry, if it remains rooted in the word and personal relationships between congregations. As a normative guide, 1 Corinthians 10:31 (ESV) states: "... whatever you do, do all for the glory of God." This verse emphasizes that the use of technology in church life and ministry should be directed to the glory of God, not merely for efficiency or cultural relevance. By understanding the balance between the potential and risks of the digital era, the church is expected to be able to transform wisely: remaining faithful to its identity as the body of Christ, yet adaptive in carrying out its missionary calling in the midst of a world that continues to change.

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