

# Theological Challenges of God's Providence during the Covid-19 Pandemic: a Case Study in Indonesia

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## Abstract:

The misguided theological view of God's providence and worship practices that are not in accordance with health protocols contributed to the spread of Covid-19. It was seen in many religious clusters of the spread of Covid-19 in Indonesia. This research answers the challenges faced by the church in theology and explains how theology has developed during the pandemic. The research was conducted with a qualitative approach. The participants involved in this research were priests, assemblies, and members of congregations of churches in Maluku, Indonesia. The data in the form of interview results were then analysed with Huberman's analysis. The real challenge faced by the church is not the Covid-19 pandemic itself but the challenge from within. The Covid-19 pandemic has had a positive impact on Christian theology because it encourages the improvement of theological concepts, and religious practices in accordance with the development of science and technology, as well as the development of human resources and infrastructure that support worship. Concrete action is needed to answer the findings in the form of education and training, standardisation of priests, and inter-religious cooperation in various elements in the context of developing human resources and infrastructure.

**Keywords:** theology, providence, Covid-19, church, virtual

## Introduction

The theology of God's providence has long been discussed particularly in relation to various humanitarian issues. Grudem interprets God's providence as God being continually involved with all created things in such a way that he: (1) keeps them existing and maintains the properties with which he created them; (2) cooperates with created things in every action, directing their distinctive properties to cause them to act as they do; and (3) directs them to fulfil His purposes.<sup>1</sup> Theology of God's providence is again discussed related to health problems, especially during the Covid-19 pandemic. The concept of God's Providence can be a blessing but it can be

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1 Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology* (Zondervan e-book, 1994), 384.

a curse as well.<sup>2</sup> In practice, the theology of God's providence is related to many issues such as the almightiness of God, the miracle of healing, and the blessing of God. Charismatic Pentecostal churches in Indonesia believe that the miracle of healing is a gift to the church universally and continuously. They believe in the possibility of divine healing as a legitimate expression of the ministry of the Church, entrusted to the church by Jesus and mediated by the power of the Holy Spirit. Menzies asserted that healing flows from the cross and, of course, it is necessary to pray regularly for sick people.<sup>3</sup> This understanding prompted many ministries that demonstrated the miracle of healing through Sunday worship and revival services. Before the Covid-19 pandemic, Sunday worship was usually carried out in church buildings in congregations with worship arrangements that contained activities: singing, praying, confessing sins, giving offerings, and preaching. The practice of worship that requires people to gather in church buildings as well as the theology of God's providence is questioned for its validity in the face of health hazards. The validity of God's theological views and worship practices was in controversy during the Covid-19 pandemic. Many religious people then refuse to obey health protocols on the belief that a 'health is determined by God'.<sup>4</sup> At the same time, the fact showed that many deaths during the Covid-19 pandemic, including pastors, confirm the certainty of a healing miracle.

The Head of the Covid-19 Handling Task Force, Doni Monardo, revealed that most beginnings of the Covid-19 cases in Indonesia came from religious clusters, such as Islam, Protestant Christianity or Catholicism.<sup>5</sup> The spread of Covid-19 occurred in places of worship, religious activities, as well as Islamic boarding schools and dormitories of theological colleges. From May to November 2020 in DKI Jakarta there were 17 clusters related to places of worship and religious activities with 236 cases, as well as 8 clusters from Islamic boarding schools and pastor dormitories in DKI Jakarta with a total of 514 cases.<sup>6</sup> Among Christians, there was the Indonesian Bethel Church (GBI) cluster in Lembang, and the annual Synod session cluster of Protestant churches in Western Indonesia (GPIB). The experience of Covid-19 in religious clusters is the basis for questioning the validity of the theological views of God's providence and the practice of worship so far.

Previous studies that discussed the theological relationship with the Covid-19 pandemic showed several trends. Firstly, it was to find the right formula for worship during the Covid-19 pandemic.<sup>7</sup> Secondly, it highlights the church's efforts to maintain contact with congregations during the Covid-19 pandemic. These efforts are carried out using modern technology and access to public media, where the church declared various forms of cooperation but did not change their doctrinal position.<sup>8</sup> Thirdly, Bryson, Andres, and Davies highlight the boundary between sacred and secular spaces during virtual worship services, where the house and the space in the house

2 Philippa Koch, *The Course of God's Providence: Religion, Health, and the Body in Early America North American Religions* (New York: NYU Press, 2021), 71.

3 William W. Menzies and Robert. P Menzies, *Spirit and Power: Foundations of Pentecostal Experience* (Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, 2000), 159.

4 Marsi Bombongan Rantesalu, 'Penderitaan Dari Sudut Pandang Teologi Injili', *Jurnal Ilmiah Religiosity Entity Humanity (JIREH)* 2, no. 2 (2020): 126–35, <https://doi.org/10.37364/jireh.v2i2.46>; Samuel Dwi Krisna Triyono and Yohanes K. Herdiyanto, 'Konsep Sehat Dan Sakit Pada Individu Dengan Urolithiasis (Kencing Batu) Di Kabupaten Klungkung, Bali', *Jurnal Psikologi Udayana* (2017): 263–276, <https://doi.org/10.24843/JPU.2017.v04.i02.p04>.

5 Tim Detikcom, 'Doni: Awal Mula Kasus COVID Terbanyak Klaster Keagamaan, Sekarang Keluarga', *Detik News.Dom* (Jakarta, 2021), <https://news.detik.com/berita/d-5324323/doni-awal-mula-kasus-covid-terbanyak-klaster-keagamaan-sekarang-keluarga>.

6 Rahajeng Kusumo Hastuti, 'Duh! Ada 17 Klaster Rumah Ibadah & Kegiatan Agama Di Jakarta', *CNBC Indonesia* (Jakarta, 2020), <https://www.cnbcindonesia.com/news/20201127204810-4-205341/duh-ada-17-klaster-rumah-ibadah-kegiatan-agama-di-jakarta>.

7 Murni Hermawaty Sitanggang, 'Beradaptasi Dengan Pandemi: Menelisik Arah Pelayanan Gereja Ke Depan', *Diegesis: Jurnal Teologi* 6, no. 1 (2021): 1–19, <https://doi.org/10.46933/dgs.vol6i11-19>.

8 Lukasz Sulkowski and Grzegorz Ignatowski, 'Impact of COVID-19 Pandemic on Organization of Religious Behaviour in Different Christian Denominations in Poland', *Religions* 11, no. 254 (2020): 1–15, <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel11050254>.

were transformed into temporary sacred spaces.<sup>9</sup> Fourthly, it highlights the dilemmas faced by traditional belief practices during the pandemic, especially in areas such as worship, sacraments, and understanding the value of technology in faith practice.<sup>10</sup> According to the authors, these studies do not highlight the theological implications for the fact of virus transmission. Theology is not only a source of belief to explain and organise life related to the pandemic, but it is also an object to be questioned for its credibility in crises.

This research aims to complement the shortcomings of previous studies that tend to see theological problems as factors that structure the situation and practice of society. It is as if theological problems are situations and practices of society that are routine, repeated, and have standard procedures that cannot be changed. Theology during the pandemic needs to be studied from another perspective by looking at how the objective conditions of the pandemic affect theological conceptualisation. In line with that, this paper answers the main obstacles faced in theology and explains the development of theology during the Covid-19 pandemic. These two issues are the main topics that fill the sections discussed in this paper.

This paper is based on the conclusion that the church is not ready to face the changes. This unpreparedness can be seen in the reluctance to improve misconceptions regarding the theological concept of God's providence and the reluctance to change worship practices. The unpreparedness of the church is characterised by at least three things. First, the limitations of qualified human resources, where the Charismatic Pentecostal churches in Indonesia are dominated by pastors who are laymen in the field of theology. In addition, the priests were not well prepared to use information technology. Second, there is the lack of involvement of the young generation in Church ministry. Church ministry is dominated by the older generation who are not technologically literate. On the other hand, the young generations who deal with the development of science and technology, are not involved in ministry and worship practices. Third, it is the excessive fanaticism toward dogmatic understanding that puts down rationality. Rationality is ignored to maintain distorted theological understanding.

## Literature Review of Pandemic and Religion

### *Pandemic and religion*

The Covid-19 pandemic caused a tremendous impact on the global community that was unprecedented. By the time of early September 2020, the number of confirmed cases across the country exceeded twenty million positive cases and about nine hundred thousand deaths.<sup>11</sup> Thus, the massive spread of the Covid-19 virus has caused most people to be much more open to beliefs and prayers. In the months during the pandemic outbreak, there have been many reports of religiosity and Covid-19, most of them detecting the existence of religious revival in some countries.<sup>12</sup> According to the Pew Research Center, in its survey of 27 countries in 2019 on how people see the role of religion, 83% of Indonesians think religion plays a more important role today than it did 20 years ago. On a global scale, Bentzen noted a 50% increase in Google searches

9 John R. Bryson, Lauren Andres, and Andrew Davies, 'COVID-19, Virtual Church Services and a New Temporary Geography of Home', *Tijdschrift Voor Economische En Sociale Geografie* 111, no. 3 (2020): 360–72, <https://doi.org/10.1111/tesg.12436>.

10 N. Barney Pityana, 'A Theological Statement on the Coronavirus Pandemic', *Religion and Theology* 27, no. 3–4 (2020): 329–358, <https://doi.org/10.1163/15743012-02703006>.

11 Francesco Molteni et al., 'Searching for Comfort in Religion: Insecurity and Religious Behaviour during the COVID-19 Pandemic in Italy', *European Societies* 23, no. S1 (2021): S704–20, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14616696.2020.1836383>.

12 Ibid.

for prayer-related topics compared to the period before the Coronavirus crisis.<sup>13</sup> On a small scale, a quarter of the U.S. adult population says their priests have become stronger because of the pandemic. Correspondingly Kowalczyk et al say that people who experience fear, suffering, or illness often experience 'spiritual and religious enhancement'.<sup>14</sup> Then Sibley & Bulbulia also said that when facing dramatic and life-threatening experiences, especially in a sudden form, people tend to use coping strategies to reduce their insecurity. Religion can serve as one of these strategies.<sup>15</sup> The function of religion during the Covid-19 period was very important, one example of which is to control emotions and control stress during the ongoing pandemic threat. Therefore, in some religions, various techniques are taught to overcome emotions during a pandemic, because uncontrolled emotions increase susceptibility to the virus. In Christianity, to increase these positive emotions is known as the 'fruit of the spirit' (love, joy, peace, patience, mercy, kindness, faithfulness, meekness, and self-mastery: Galatians 5:22-23).<sup>16</sup> Then, in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic, social distancing measures and sheltering inside the home have resulted in many social changes, including the cancellation of sporting and entertainment events, the closure of schools and colleges, and religious gatherings in all religious communities.<sup>17</sup> This has caused the majority of people to be forced to carry out all worship activities at home. Religious practices that essentially have a community dimension value in almost all religions, including Christianity, are now changing under the influence of the pandemic. For example, there is the case in Poland, where all churches began to impose strict restrictions on incoming congregations. In addition, to minimise the spread of the virus, the church has now begun to switch to holding virtual worship.<sup>18</sup> Thus, the pandemic has not only changed a person's level of religiosity, but the pandemic changed conventional worship spaces into virtual worship rooms.

### *The pandemic as a challenge to religion*

During the Covid-19 pandemic, religion was described as a problem. There is a narrative that sometimes implies that religion is directly detrimental to public health or indirectly undermines the public health response to conditions of Covid-19.<sup>19</sup> This is motivated by many Covid-19 cases in early 2020 being related to religious activities. In South Korea, it is estimated that there was a spread of Covid-19 at the Shinceheonji Church of Jesus, in Southeast Asia; the 14,000-strong delegation of the Islamic Tabligh Congregation in Kuala Lumpur caused a large wave of the pandemic in Malaysia, with event attendees from Brunei, Cambodia, and Indonesia.<sup>20</sup> Therefore, religious gatherings such as prayers and worship services are required to be carried out at home because it allows the risk of transmission of Covid-19. In addition to the prohibition of worship

13 Jeanet Sinding Bentzen, 'Acts of God? Religiosity and Natural Disasters Across Subnational World Districts', *Economic Journal*, (2019): 1–75, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ej/uez008>.

14 Olivia Kowalczyk et al., 'Religion and Faith Perception in a Pandemic of COVID-19', *Journal of Religion and Health*, (2020): 2671–2677, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10943-020-01088-3>.

15 Chris G. Sibley and Joseph Bulbulia, 'Faith after an Earthquake: A Longitudinal Study of Religion and Perceived Health before and after the 2011 Christchurch New Zealand Earthquake', *PLoS ONE* 7, no. 12 (2012): 1–10, <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0049648>.

16 Harold G. Koenig, 'Maintaining Health and Well-Being by Putting Faith into Action During the COVID-19 Pandemic', *Journal of Religion and Health* 59, no. 5 (2020): 2205–14, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10943-020-01035-2>.

17 Giancarlo Lucchetti et al., 'Spirituality, Religiosity and the Mental Health Consequences of Social Isolation during Covid-19 Pandemic', *International Journal of Social Psychiatry* 67, no. 6 (2021): 672–279, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0020764020970996>.

18 Sulkowski and Ignatowski, 'Impact of COVID-19 Pandemic'.

19 Sima Barmania and Michael J. Reiss, 'Health Promotion Perspectives on the COVID-19 Pandemic: The Importance of Religion', *Global Health Promotion* 28, no. 1 (2020): 1–8, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1757975920972992>.

20 Nor Fazila Che Mat et al., 'A Single Mass Gathering Resulted in Massive Transmission of COVID-19 Infections in Malaysia with Further International Spread', *Journal of Travel Medicine*, 2020, <https://doi.org/10.1093/jtm/taaa059>.



activities, there are prohibitions on other activities such as funerals, because it allows gatherings or crowds.<sup>21</sup> This is in line with what Beamish said that the pandemic triggered a rapid change in the form of religious practices and pastoral mutual funds due to the *lockdown* policy to hold worship practices online.<sup>22</sup>

In these conditions, the church faces challenges relating to perspectives on fundamental theological issues, such as the importance of prayer, the eschatological vision, or the nature of sacraments. Prayer has received important emphasis during the Covid-19 pandemic; at the same time its effectiveness in dealing with the Covid-19 pandemic is awaited by the people. The Covid-19 pandemic itself gave rise to a lot of speculation regarding eschatological theology. Catholic Christianity recognises seven sacraments: **Baptism, Confirmation, Eucharist, Reconciliation, Anointing of the Sick, Holy Orders, and** the sacrament of Marriage.<sup>23</sup> However, Protestant Christianity recognises two sacraments: the sacrament of holy baptism and communion. The sacrament of holy baptism is essentially a union with God's work of salvation which is symbolically interpreted as dying and rising with Jesus in His death and resurrection.<sup>24</sup> The sacrament of holy communion is essentially communion with God and fellow human beings, which has pedagogical implications regarding the past, present, and future.<sup>25</sup> All of these are the starting points for reflecting on how the church should continue to apply its doctrines and secure the topicality of the message by adapting to changing social circumstances.<sup>26</sup>

The massive spread of the pandemic has forced religious parties and figures to make new policies, namely by changing conventional worship to virtual worship. Correspondingly, the term mediatisation of religion appeared which encompassed all religions or symbolic forms as a result of virtual religious activity during March, April, and May 2020.<sup>27</sup> Bandeira and Carranza went on to say that the existence of religious mediatisation during a pandemic is a challenge whether religious practices through the media remain essential or reduce the substance of religious teachings.<sup>28</sup> Then Tudor et al. mention the media's way of avoiding the silting of worship by (a) media must show religious development contributions (magazines, religious websites, and religious events); (b) organizing religious presence in the media (church meetings), and (c) present a file of religious elements in the media.<sup>29</sup> In addition, the pandemic has also caused the elimination of worship activities and religious celebrations.<sup>30</sup> All churches in different denominations and other

21 Ishmael Festus Jaja, Madubuike Umunna Anyanwu, and Chinwe Juliana Iwu Jaja, 'Social Distancing: How Religion, Culture and Burial Ceremony Undermine the Effort to Curb COVID-19 in South Africa', *Emerging Microbes and Infections* 9, (2020): 1077–1079. <https://doi.org/10.1080/22221751.2020.1769501>.

22 Robert Beamish, 'The Distanced Church: Reflections on Doing Church Online', *Practical Theology* 14, no. 1-2 (2021), <https://doi.org/10.1080/1756073x.2021.1878193>.

23 Christiaan Kappes, 'A New Narrative for the Reception of Seven Sacraments into Orthodoxy: Peter Lombard's Sentences in Nicholas Cabasilas and Symeon of Thessalonica and the Utilization of John Duns Scotus by the Holy Synaxis', *Nova et Vetera* 15, no. 2 (2017): 405–501, <https://doi.org/10.1353/nov.2017.0023>.

24 Dominggus E. Naat, 'Tinjauan Teologis-Dogmatis Tentang Sakramen Dalam Pelayanan Gerejawi', *Pengarah: Jurnal Teologi Kristen* 2, no. 1 (2020): 1–14, <https://doi.org/10.36270/pengarah.v2i1.18>.

25 Sharon Michelle O. Pattiasina, 'Perhadliran Dalam Sakramen Perjamuan Kudus Di Gereja Protestan Maluku', *BIA: Jurnal Teologi Dan Pendidikan Kristen Kontekstual* 2, no. 2 (2019): 179–92, <https://doi.org/10.34307/b.v2i2.107>.

26 Dorota Hall and Marta Kołodziejaska, 'COVID-19 Pandemic, Mediatization and the Polish Sociology of Religion', *Polish Sociological Review* 231 (2021): 123–37, <https://doi.org/10.26412/psr213.07>.

27 Mihaela Alexandra Tudor, Anamaria Filimon Benea, and Stefan Bratosin, 'Covid-19 Pandemic Lockdown and Religious Mediatization of Social Sustainability. A Case Study of Romania', *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* 18, no. 5 (2021): 1–23, <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph18052287>.

28 Olivia Bandeira and Brenda Carranza, 'Reactions to the Pandemic in Latin America and Brazil: Are Religions Essential Services?' *International Journal of Latin American Religions* 4, (2020): 170–193. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s41603-020-00116-0>.

29 Tudor et al, 'Covid-19 Pandemic Lockdown'.

30 Mookgo Solomon Kgate, 'Religious Live-Streaming in Response to Coronavirus Disease 2019 Pandemic and the Subsequent Lockdown in South Africa', *Verbum et Ecclesia* 41, no. 1 (2020): 1–6, <https://doi.org/10.4102/VE.V41I1.2120>.

places of worship such as synagogues and mosques in South Africa are affected by lockdown regulations and restrictions. According to Corpuz, all worship services were banned during the lockdown and those who were forced to gather would be arrested by officers.<sup>31</sup> Large churches such as the Zion Christian Church (ZCC) had to postpone the annual Easter pilgrimage that usually gathers millions of people.

### *Pandemic theology*

Theology means thinking about God. In practice, it is usually the study of the Bible, the confession of faith, as well as exploring the meaning of religion in the current context.<sup>32</sup> Thus, theology helps one not to be constrained by something obvious, natural, and material, but to explore the metaphysical world beyond that belief.<sup>33</sup> Christian theology teaches that human life is never in vain, but there is an eternal purpose in it. Christian theology also helps one understand that not everything we experience today is known or can be known.<sup>34</sup> In line with that, the pandemic situation encourages the growth of one's religiosity and religious values, because religious theology encourages every devotee to carry out health practices that reflect and instil obedience to God.<sup>35</sup> Moreover, the science of religion not only has a great influence on the level of religiosity but rather on emotions, morality, and even the views that determine the values and attitudes to be healthy.<sup>36</sup> Kirkpatrick's findings show that religiosity and individual belief in God result in many of them interpreting God as a source of resistance to disease in which God is the hope of providing health and healing.<sup>37</sup> Thus, deepening theology during a pandemic indirectly provides calm and hope. From the perspective of theology, a pandemic is a form of warning for human beings always to practice and obey the right deeds according to religious values and rules. Through values in the study of theology, religion forms a harmonious pattern of thought (concentration, awareness, love, and wisdom) within each individual.<sup>38</sup> Therefore, in a crisis like this, theology and faith become something at stake, because both must be able to adapt and contribute to preventing the spread of the pandemic. In line with that, Harrington said that theology sees the pandemic as a calamity that forces people to stay at home, work from home, maintain social distancing, and force people to return to God.<sup>39</sup> Then, various theological phenomena occurred during the Covid-19 period: firstly, physical worship was closed for almost two months, so it had an impact on many churches, especially large churches; secondly, many videos and sermons about the end times are associated with the Covid-19 pandemic as a sign of the Lord's coming; thirdly, there

31 Jeff Clyde G. Corpuz, 'Religions in Action: The Role of Interreligious Dialogue in the COVID-19 Pandemic', *Journal of Public Health* 43, No. 2, (2020): PP. e236–e237, <https://doi.org/10.1093/pubmed/fdaa149>.

32 Wim A. Dreyer and Jerry Pillay, 'Historical Theology: Content, Methodology and Relevance', *Verbum et Ecclesia*, (2017):117–302, <https://doi.org/10.4102/ve.v38i4.1680>.

33 Barney Pityana, 'More Eyes on COVID-19: Perspectives from Religion Studies: How Christian Theology Helps Us Make Sense of the Pandemic', *South African Journal of Science* 116, no. 7/8 (2020): 10, <https://doi.org/10.17159/sajs.2020/8498>.

34 Cheryl Peterson, 'Renewing Christian Theology: Systematics for a Global Christianity', *Anglican Theological Review* 98, no 4 (2016): 805–806.

35 Adam B. Cohen, 'You Can Learn a Lot about Religion from Food', *Current Opinion in Psychology*, 2021, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.copsyc.2020.07.032>.

36 Magali Clobert, 'East versus West: Psychology of Religion in East Asian Cultures', *Current Opinion in Psychology*, (2021):1–20, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.copsyc.2020.08.021>.

37 Lee A. Kirkpatrick, 'An Attachment-Theory Approach to the Psychology of Religion', *The International Journal for the Psychology of Religion* 2, no.1 (1992): 3–28, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429495915-10>.

38 Lluís Oviedo, 'Theology in Times of Pandemic', *Studia Humana* 10, no.1 (2021): 34–40, <https://doi.org/10.2478/sh-2021-0003>.

39 Melanie Harrington, 'Towards a Theology of Covid: Providence and Lament in Past, Present, and Future Trauma Narratives', *Practical Theology* 14, no. 1-2 (2021), <https://doi.org/10.1080/1756073X.2020.1861403>.

are the pros and cons among church leaders on social media regarding divine healing.<sup>40</sup> This is in line with the case in Poland, where all churches began to impose strict restrictions on incoming congregations. In addition, to minimise the spread of the virus, the church has begun to switch to holding virtual worship.<sup>41</sup>

## Method

The challenges of theology of God's providence during the Covid-19 pandemic were chosen as the focus of this study based on considerations of the dynamic nature of theology, the importance of theology in shaping people's attitudes in horizontal relations with others, and the vertical relationship with God. Theology is dynamic. It is constantly changing with the times. In line with that, theology needs to adapt to the current context of the people. Biblical texts need to be reinterpreted to be relevant to the context. The attitudes and behaviours of the people are strongly influenced by the understanding of the theologians who believed. Incorrect theological understanding will contribute to attitudes and behaviours that endanger oneself and others including violent behaviour in the name of religion. Man's relationship with God is largely determined by someone's theological understanding. Correct understanding will strengthen our faith while a wrong understanding will lead us to a denial of God.

The type of data used in this study is primary data in the form of structured interview results. Interviews are conducted face-to-face as well as through communication media. Researchers conducted in-person meetings with participants in their places that can be reached. On the other hand, interviews were also conducted with other participants using telephone communication media and 'Whatsapp'. Interviews were conducted to obtain an understanding of theological conceptualisation, a description of the challenges faced, the impact of the pandemic, and the attitudes and practices of Christian worship during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Participants in this study were pastors, assemblies, and members of congregations that were randomly selected from various church denominations in Maluku. Participants were selected based on the consideration that they were congregational leaders who had extensive knowledge and were directly involved in the development of people during the Covid-19 pandemic. Congregation members who became participants in this study were selected based on the minimum age criteria of 20 years old, as an adult congregation member. The selection of participants is also based on the consideration that they represent the denomination of the church, the procedures for carrying out worship during the Covid-19 pandemic, as well as the representation of churches in villages and cities.

The research was conducted from January to July 2021. The first stage was in the form of a survey. The survey was implemented from January to May 2021, then the data analysis was carried out from June to July 2021. Researchers conducted a direct survey of several churches based on considerations of church denominations, worship procedures, and places. The research took place at the synods of the Maluku Protestant Church, the Indonesian Bethel Church, the Pentecostal Church in Indonesia, and the Assembly of God in Indonesia. It takes into account that the synods of these churches are more dominant in Maluku. The determination of the research locus was based on the consideration of churches that carry out face-to-face worship in small groups,

40 Calida Chu, 'Theology of the Pain of God in the Era of COVID-19: The Reflections on Sufferings by Three Hong Kong Churches through Online Services', *Practical Theology* 14, no. 1-2 (2021): 22-34, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1756073X.2020.1864101>.

41 Sulkowski and Ignatowski, 'Impact of COVID-19 Pandemic'.



churches that worship directly from their own homes using loudspeakers from the Church, and churches that worship virtually. The churches surveyed in this study represent the place of villages and cities. At this stage, the author prepared the interview guidelines as well. Data were collected through structured interviews and Focus Group Discussions. This research involved nine selected participants to gain a participant evaluation of the initial findings of the study.

Data analysis was carried out by following Huberman's stages, namely, data reduction, display, and verification. Data reduction is done by grouping data based on the similarity of themes. The data were analysed by restatement, description, and interpretation methods. Restatement is carried out by citing the results of informant interviews according to the issues discussed. The description is done by building a data typology that shows an orderly pattern of data tendencies. Interpretation is done by looking at the contextual meanings of data. The processed data is displayed in the form of interview citations.

## Results

Firstly, the author measures the theological conceptualisation of God's providence with two questions. First, why can Christians be infected with Covid-19? The answers indicate three categories of response. Most of the participants came up with a reason for the emergence of the Covid-19 pandemic because of sin. ML, SS, and AW attribute it to sin in general, While JS, HL, and AY associate it with the sin of not obeying health protocols. The second category of answer was put forward by MT and JRS who saw it as a common disease. According to MT, the type of illness is the same as diseases that humans have experienced before, such as colds and coughs. From JRS's point of view, Covid-19 is just an ordinary virus. However, many people associate it with the anti-Christ and the number 666 in the Bible. The third category of answer was put forward by HD. He believes it to be the conditions of the end times, where God allows the Covid-19 pandemic so that humans repent and be more serious with Him. Thus, most of the participants associated the Covid-19 Pandemic with spiritual aspects. Traditional theological views see disease as a result of sin and sufferers are seen as sinners. The concept is then applied to the current context of the Covid-19 pandemic. This argument is reinforced by the opinion of Petrus Kanisius Siga Tage.<sup>42</sup> He sees the emergence of the pandemic as the result of ecological sin, although he did not say that all people infected with Covid-19 was the result of their sins. The tendency of this view leads to the belief that only sinners are infected with Covid-19, and the righteous would be protected from the Covid-19 pandemic.

The second question deals with the participants' response to the Covid-19 pandemic. Participants' answers showed three categories. The first category recommends not being afraid of Covid-19 for several reasons. AY emphasises the reasons for God's inclusion, JS emphasises the reasons for miracles still existing, and AW and ML emphasise the reasons for God's maintenance. ML answered by asking the question 'What are you really afraid of so you don't worship at church?' Meanwhile, SS put forward the reason that there is no Covid-19. Even if Covid-19 exists, the Lord Jesus is bigger than Covid-19. According to him, people who do not worship in the church because they are afraid of Covid-19 are the same as people who do not believe in God. The second answer category, put forward by HD, is to act normally in facing Covid-19. HL, MT, and JRS put forward the third category of answers. Faith and wisdom are shown by obeying government instructions such as adhering to health protocols and carrying out vaccinations.

42 Petrus Kanisius Siga Tage, 'Dosa Ekologis Dan Kutukan Pandemi', *Walhi* (Sulawesi Selatan, 2020).



According to MT, vaccination is only an antidote to disease. He admits that the issue of vaccines as part of the antichrist system has spread to the Southwest Maluku district so many people in that area refuse to be vaccinated. The village became deserted because many residents fled to the forest to avoid being vaccinated.

The tendency of the participants' answers to emphasize the attitude of faith that it is impossible to be infected with Covid-19 is based on the understanding that people who believe in Almighty God receive protection and miracles from Him. The attribute of the omnipotence of God is inherent in Him along with His attribute of goodness and eternity. Those attributions guarantee that His omnipotence is used for the good of mankind in all ages. His omnipotence overcomes Covid-19, and His goodness desires health for His people. Thus, the nature of God's omnipotence provides a guarantee of protection for His people from various threats. This kind of concept has contributed to the low level of public awareness in adhering to health protocols during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Second, the author measured the participants' understanding of God's providence theology during the Covid-19 pandemic by asking if the miracle of healing is relevant for Covid-19 patients. In general, participants stated that the miracle of healing remains relevant in the conditions of the Covid-19 pandemic but for different reasons. AY, JS, HL, and SS emphasise God's omnipotence which remains the same, before, now, and forever. According to SS, the Lord Jesus could resurrect the dead, it is getting much easier to just cure Covid-19 sufferers. ML and AW emphasise that faith is a condition for obtaining miracles from God. Meanwhile JRS, MT, and HD indicate the certainty of a miracle that remains relevant today. According to them, the absence of services that demonstrated miracles of healing during the Covid-19 pandemic was more due to obedience to the government implementing health protocols and not because of fear and/or because there were no miracles. In JRS' opinion, God's miracles exist. God has many ways to do things through God's servants, so we cannot judge those who serve miracles of healing during the Covid-19 pandemic.

The tendency of the participants' answers that dominate is following the theological views on miracles that remain relevant today. This belief is based on a series of miracle narratives in the Bible performed by the Lord Jesus (Matt 8:1-4, 5-13, 14-17; 9:1-8, 9-13, 18-26; Mark 3:1-6; Luke 6:6-11 and others). The narratives always include the faith of the recipient of miracles in the Lord Jesus. The relevance of God's miraculous works in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic has implications for the belief that the Covid-19 outbreak will not be suffered by those who truly believe in the Lord Jesus. Therefore, it is a little possible for people who believe in the Lord Jesus to be infected by Covid-19. If they become infected by the virus, they will be cured miraculously. This understanding causes people to ignore the dangers of the Covid-19 pandemic threat.

Third, the author measured the responses and practices of Christian worship during the Covid-19 pandemic by asking how the church worships during the Covid-19 pandemic. There are four categories of answers revealed by participants. The first category is stated by HD. He said that worship is carried out virtually through zoom meetings, and/or You tube streaming. These virtual worship services are possible due to the support of technological devices. The second category is expressed by SS, AW, and AY. They reveal that worship is conducted in their own houses and/or a limited face-to-face meeting in small groups that involved families who live close to each other. This choice was made because the residences of church members are located in many villages and have very limited technology. Meanwhile, for church members whose residences are far apart,

services are carried out through phone calls and/or video calls. Places of worship will change according to the policies of the Covid-19 task force team at the regional level. Virtual worship is not possible because of the congregation's limitations in accessing the network. However, SS and AW did not agree with this situation. SS questioned worship at home like someone who has no faith, whereas AW revealed that there is nothing to be afraid of. Since the church leaders instruct the church members to worship at home, then they just obey this.

The third category of answers was revealed by HL and JS. They said that worship was carried out in a limited way at the church by the pastor and assembly, while the church members followed from their homes via loudspeakers at the church. This method is used by the church with all congregation members who live in a certain area. They do not carry out their online worship for the same reasons, being the unavailability of an internet network as well as economic factors.

The fourth category was stated by ML, MT, and JRS. The worship was being held face-to-face as usual for various reasons. According to ML, face-to-face worship was carried out as usual because the church is located in a village and no one is confirmed positive for Covid-19. Other arguments are: very limited information technology devices, inadequate availability of internet networks, and there is nothing to be afraid of. According to JRS, from April to May 2020, no worship activities were held in the church building, but from June 2020 to April 2021, worship was still carried out as usual, with the implementation of health protocols. There was a church member who wanted to report the face-to-face worship to the police officer. However, the worship was conducted as usual with the argument that the market still operates without a strict restriction of health protocol, then why is worship prohibited? If the market is allowed to operate, then the church is the same. In line with JRS, MT stated that at the beginning of the emergence of Covid-19, there was no church worship at all for several months. However, worship was carried out as usual until 2022 when this study was conducted, except for children and the elderly. They were not allowed to attend church services during the Covid-19 pandemic. The participants' answers indicated that the worship had been adapted to the conditions of Covid-19. This shows that there is a significant change in Christian worship rituals during the Covid-19 pandemic. It covers at least three aspects. They are places of worship, procedures for worship, and liturgy of worship. Places of worship change from a church building to the houses of church members and/or small groups in the same neighbourhood. From one place, worship is carried out in many places, from one platform to many platforms, and changes in worship procedures from real spaces to virtual spaces. Aspects of the rituals of worship that are included in the liturgy of worship such as singing, praying, and thanksgiving offerings naturally change according to changes in places and procedures of worship. The interesting thing from the results of this study is that the opinions and responses are very prominent, namely ignoring the threat of the Covid-19 pandemic by holding face-to-face worship without paying attention to warnings from the government as shown by SS, AW, ML, MT, and JRS.

Fourth, the authors measured participants' opinions regarding the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic by asking how the church's finances were during the Covid-19 pandemic. Three categories of answers were given by the participants to the question. The first answer category is that the church's finances decreased during the Covid-19 pandemic because the congregation's income decreased but also because there was no face-to-face worship at the church. SS, AY, and AW acknowledged that there was a drastic decline in church income. Meanwhile, JRS, ML, and MT acknowledged that there was not a drastic decrease in the offerings because worship was still being held face-to-face as usual. The second category of answers put forward by HD is that offerings

during the Covid-19 pandemic are the same as offerings during worship before the Covid-19 pandemic. This is because there is no change in the procedure for giving offerings, which are put in the offering box in front of the church and not collected during the service. The third category of answers stated by JS and HL is that the church's finances have experienced a significant increase. As vice chairman of the church board, JS ensures that 'the offerings of the congregation have more than doubled during the Covid-19 pandemic'. This was caused by offerings during the Covid-19 pandemic being collected from one congregational house to another by the congregational assembly on duty so that almost all congregations were involved. This is in contrast to the situation before the Covid-19 pandemic, where the number of offerings was determined by the level of congregation attendance at church services.

The results of the participants' answers show that the Covid-19 pandemic has had a major impact on the economy of the congregation and church members, especially non-mainstream churches. This situation encourages them to continue to worship, including face-to-face worship. This is in contrast to the mainstream church in Maluku, which experienced a financial increase of above 100%. It also encourages them to continue with the way of worship during the Covid-19 pandemic. On the other hand, the church feels 'comfortable' with the condition of Covid-19 because it benefits greatly from it.

## Discussion

This research aimed at analysing the challenges of the theology of God's providence during the Covid-19 pandemic shows several important things. First, theological challenges during the Covid-19 pandemic show a misguided theological view of God's Providence. The belief so far that emphasises the omnipotence of God, His miracles, and protection has experienced lawsuits in line with the unstoppable level of infection with the Covid-19 Virus. Second, there is a necessity to make changes to Christian worship rituals which include places, procedures, and liturgies of worship. Worship rituals have undergone adjustments to the social restriction policy during the pandemic period. Third, organisational development occurs as a response to the objective conditions of the pandemic. The necessity of virtual worship requires experts in the field of IT and for this the church needs experts in the field of Information Technology, increasing the capacity of pastors in technological literacy and the need to improve technological infrastructure in carrying out contextual religious activities.

The theological challenges of God's providence during the Covid-19 pandemic reflect on several important points. First, misconceptions and worship practices during the Covid-19 pandemic indicate a weak level of theological knowledge and encouragement of economic factors. Ideally, the Pastor has adequate scientific qualifications so that he can guide the people well. However, many church denominations do not require a formal theological education level and/or theological competency qualifications to become pastors. Low theological knowledge correlates to a low level of congregational knowledge. Second, changes in Christian worship rituals during the Covid-19 pandemic indicated that the church was not creative in designing worship liturgies that fit the context. The lack of creativity in composing worship liturgies is caused by theological views and rules that apply to certain church denominations. Worship rituals should be designed more creatively in response to technological developments. Third, the lack of information technology and infrastructure experts indicates neglect of aspects of information technology development. The theological challenge of the Providence of God during the Covid-19 pandemic has



several implications. First, this research encourages the correction of misconceptions about God's omnipotent nature, God's promises of protection, and miracles. Misunderstanding of theological concepts is influenced by the lack of knowledge of the pastors and a pattern of congregational development that is not adapted to the times. Second, it is important to provide space for the community of people to be more creative in planning worship. The unavailability of space to be creative in worship rituals is caused by a doctrinal understanding that separates the sacred from the secular. Third, there should be encouraged the development of technologically literate human resources and the availability of infrastructure to support information technology-based worship and broadcasting of the Bible.

The results of this study show a difference from previous research where the development of theology during the Covid-19 pandemic received less attention in research. Rantesalu sees Covid-19 as suffering and a disaster which in the eyes of Evangelicals is seen as God's will and sovereignty.<sup>43</sup> This research is different because it emphasises the importance of correcting theological misunderstandings in dealing with the Covid-19 pandemic. This is similar to Amtiran who proposed a new theological effort in the midst of implementing the 'New Normal'<sup>44</sup> and Harmadi and Budiatman who saw a shift in theological perspective.<sup>45</sup> The results of this study indicate that theological misunderstandings have a negative impact on the handling of Covid-19 in Indonesia. This is in contrast to the research by Mutemwa et al. which shows that religiosity and spiritual factors contribute to increasing resilience to the Covid-19 pandemic in Zambia. These factors have resulted in a low death rate and a relatively small number of people infected with Covid-19.<sup>46</sup> The results of this study state that the Covid-19 pandemic has had a positive impact on the liturgy of Christian worship. The church has the opportunity to develop creativity in worship according to the context. This is in contrast to previous research that attempted to find a formulation of a digital church<sup>47</sup> examining the pluses and minuses of virtual worship,<sup>48</sup> answering the question of whether it is relevant to worship together in church buildings after the Covid-19 pandemic ends,<sup>49</sup> as an appropriate and effective strategy in communicating the Gospel to the world<sup>50</sup> or simply as an offer of life church today.<sup>51</sup> The results of this study show significant changes in theology during the Covid-19 pandemic. Accordingly, several action plans can be formulated. First, it is necessary to correct misunderstandings regarding the concept of theology at the pastoral and congregational levels. Improvements are made with education and training. In addition, standardisation of clergy is needed so that in the future the clergy position meets the expected qualifications. Second, difficulties in adjusting places and procedures for worship during a pandemic require a strong will on the part of the church to get out of the shackles of tradition and be open to new things. Third, the church

43 Rantesalu, 'Penderitaan Dari'.

44 Abdon Arnolus Amtiran, 'Pandemi Covid-19 Dan Implikasinya Terhadap Polarisasi Mazhab Teologi Di Indonesia', *MAGNUM OPUS: Jurnal Teologi Dan Kepemimpinan Kristen* 1, no. 2 (2020): 64–71, <https://doi.org/10.52220/magnum.v1i2.49>.

45 Mariani Harmadi and Adi Dharma Budiatman, 'Pergeseran Perspektif Teologi Penggembalaan Dengan Layanan Virtual Pada Masa Pandemi Sekarang Dan Nanti', *Jurnal Teologi Berita Hidup* 3, no. 2 (2021): 137–49, <https://doi.org/10.38189/jtbh.v3i2.88>.

46 David Mutemwa et al., 'The Role of Religion, Philosophy of Life, Global Health, Traditional Medicine, and Past Experiences in the Covid-19 Pandemic Response: Zambia Case Study', *Caritas Et Veritas* 11 (2021): 34–49, <https://doi.org/10.32725/cetv.2021.002>.

47 Susanto Dwiraharjo, 'Konstruksi Teologis Gereja Digital: Sebuah Refleksi Biblis Ibadah Online Di Masa Pandemi Covid-19', *EPIGRAPHE: Jurnal Teologi dan Pelayanan Kristiani* 4, no. 1 (2020): 1–17, <http://dx.doi.org/10.33991/epigraphe.v4i1.145>.

48 Sitanggang, 'Beradaptasi Dengan Pandemi'.

49 Irfan Feriando Simanjuntak, Ramses Simanjuntak, and Agiana Her Visnu Ditakristi, 'Analisis Tentang Relevansi Ibadah Gereja Pascapandemi Covid-19', *DIEGESIS: Jurnal Teologi Kharismatika* 3, no. 1 (2020): 13–25, <https://doi.org/10.53547/diegesis.v3i1.63>.

50 Maria Wijati, 'Strategi Mengomunikasikan Injil Kepada Generasi Milenial', *REGULA FIDEI: Jurnal Pendidikan Agama Kristen* 5, no. 2 (2020): 107–117, <https://doi.org/10.33541/rfidei.v5i2.53>.

51 Yahya Afandi, 'Gereja Dan Pengaruh Teknologi Informasi "Digital Ecclesiology"', *FIDEI: Jurnal Teologi Sistemika Dan Praktika* 1, no. 2 (2018): 270–83, <https://doi.org/10.34081/fidei.v1i2.12>.

needs to be open to building partnerships with individuals and institutions that are competent in their fields. Inter- and intra-religious cooperation is needed in various fields in the context of developing the congregation's economy, human resources, and infrastructure.

## Conclusion

It turns out that the main challenge for Christianity during the pandemic is not Covid-19 but a challenge from within the church organisation, namely the challenge of developing the quality of human resources equally in all church denominations, economic challenges, and the theological concept of God's providence at a practical level. The author does not mean to ignore or downplay the threat of the Covid-19 pandemic which is still happening today. However, if all people have good quality human resources in various fields that are spread evenly across all religions and religious sects, then the people will be able to face the Covid-19 pandemic or at least minimise the negative impact of the Covid-19 pandemic.

This study reveals concepts related to institutional readiness in facing threats – not only the threat of the Covid-19 pandemic but also other threats both from within and from outside. These include threats of division within the organization due to differences in theological concepts and threats from outside that attack Christianity. As a religious institution with a dogmatic understanding, the church will be demanded again when faced with other humanitarian problems in the future. This research is limited to one area, namely the province of Maluku, Indonesia, and only to the Christian community so it is not possible to generalise to a wider locus with residents of various religions and beliefs. In line with these limitations, it is necessary to carry out further research involving participants from different religious communities and/or from other regions to obtain more comprehensive and comparative results.

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