



## Application of Shepherd Leadership to the Spiritual Growth of Christian Youth in the Digital Age

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**ABSTRACT:** Writing this article aims to describe the pastor's strategy in educating, fostering and guiding young people to experience spiritual growth. This article refers to the role of pastors in formulating the right strategy to solve the spiritual problems of young people which are slowly declining due to the pace of technology. Where, young people ignore worship and other spiritual activities such as a lack of interest in worship both in public worship, household worship, youth worship, and worship activities on church holidays. The method used in this research is literature study which refers to references related to the topic raised. In this study, the authors found that pastors have a strategy to apply their leadership to grow the spirituality of youth through Teaching God's Word with contextual topics, Bible study, coaching and guidance through counseling and the use of digital media. The achievement of pastoral leadership in the spiritual growth of young people is seen in terms of their quality of life. The proof of the spiritual growth of young people is that they will be diligent in participating in fellowship services at church and are able to practice the value of the truth of God's Word to their surroundings.

Keywords: Pastoral Leadership, Spiritual Growth, youth, Digital era.

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### INTRODUCTION

There are several studies of previous articles that discuss the leadership of a shepherd. Gultom (2022), for example, writes about the urgency of multidimensional pastoral leadership in the digital era. In his study, Gultom explains several points, namely the emotional intelligence of shepherds as an integral part of multidimensional leadership, multidimensional leadership strategies of shepherds in the digital era, vision and mission emerging from the needs of the digital generation, multidimensional in communication and interaction in the social and digital world, multidimensional in the role of innovation, inspiration and creativity in the Great Commission, reskilling and upskilling current leadership and growing appreciation and appreciation (Gultom, 2022). However, that discussion is more directed to the preparation of the

pastor personally and his strategy to the congregation in general. Meanwhile, Heryanto (2020) wrote about the role of church leaders in today's youth ministry leadership in order to produce young leaders with Christ's character. This research, however, is more directed at the counseling side (Heryanto, 2020). Likewise, Lombok, Kagu and Gultom write about shepherding strategies in developing the experience dimension of generation z according to Psalm 103:1-18 with the aim of explaining shepherding strategies in developing the experience dimension of generation Z according to Psalm 103:1-18 (Lombok et al., 2023). However, the explanation uses the methodology of biblical studies, so the results are not the same as this article.

With regard to the above literature review, the development of information and communication

technology confronts young people with various life problems as realities that greatly affect their spiritual growth. The impact of the development of digital-based information and communication technology spreads to all age levels. Digital activities often take up the time and attention of young people, who then sometimes neglect worship and other spiritual activities, showing a lack of interest in worship both in public worship, household worship, youth worship, and worship activities on church holidays (Tarisih & Sutrisno, 2022). On the other hand, the church is faced with all the other problems facing young people such as overcrowding of work, low economy, promiscuity, and other negative things that make young people forget about worship. This goes on continuously and becomes a spiritual problem for young people. Sanders emphasizes that facing this reality, a leader must be careful and careful in prioritizing opportunities and responsibilities with full consideration and doing it diligently. This is important so you don't waste your time on things that are not a priority and urgent to pay attention to. Therefore, leaders must plan their time carefully (Sander, 2006). Thus, young people will grow spiritually well if the church leaders give time and attention to embracing them into the community of God's church.

Based on the January 2022 Datareportal report, the total population of Indonesia is 277.7 million people with internet users reaching 204.7 million. The average user is 30.3 years. Some of the digital media that are often used are Facebook 129.9 million, Youtube 139.0 million, Instagram 99.15 million, Tiktok 92.07 million and Twitter 18.45 million (Kemp, 2022). Central BPS noted that throughout 2020, the increase in internet usage for various purposes reached 442 percent. This figure was contributed by the rampant ordering of goods and employees working from home and 68,729,037 students doing distance learning (Badan Pusat Statistik, 2020). This means that most children aged 13 years and over already know and use social media for various purposes such as work, travel,

school, service and so on. BPS City of Bandung explained that the use of digital media is used for various purposes such as using the internet for social media, getting information or news, entertainment, doing school assignments, sending email, buying or selling goods and services online, financial facilities, and so on (Susanti, 2020). Therefore, whether you agree or not, technological developments have contributed to influencing the spirituality of youth.

Indeed, a person's spirituality cannot be measured by his attendance at church or participating in activities from churches or institutions related to spirituality. However, worship is an important part of spiritual formation, and it is one of God's commandments to keep the Sabbath day holy (Ex. 20:8, Lev. 26:2, Deut. 5:12,14, 15, Isa. 56:2,4, Jer. 17:22,24, 27, Ezek. 20:20, Mark 6:2, Luke 4:16). Bridges has said that the New Testament writers emphasized growth, and continually encouraged a person to keep pursuing it (Bridges, 2013), because spiritual growth is a normal expression of the expected Christian life. Spiritual growth in the Christian faith is described by the apostle Peter as "Grow[th] in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ" (2 Pet. 3:18); the Apostle Paul also taught about Christian spiritual growth by saying that: "By holding fast to the truth in love, we grow in all things towards Him, Christ, who is the head" (Eph. 4:15). The Christian spiritual growth described by the apostles Peter and Paul is therefore only and through Jesus Christ as the source of spiritual life that God has given.

Spiritual problems faced by young people have become banal, as well as the struggles of church pastors in leading and pastoring congregations, especially young people. The Congregational Pastor in his role as church leader, must provide extra time to visit, teach, foster and guide young people so that they can return to giving attention and time to worship and church activities (Santoso, 2020). Youssef (2019) says that church organizations must be led by a pastor who is

friendly in leadership and cooperation so as to bind young people to the church. The pastor's time and attention for young people is one of the solutions in embracing young people to be active in worship and serving in the church. Young people are an integral part of adult congregations, church boards and church leaders (Youssef, 2019). Therefore, adult congregations, assemblies and church leaders must pay attention to and embrace young people so they feel accepted as part of the church where they worship.

Based on the explanation above, writing this article aims to describe the pastor's strategy in educating, fostering, and guiding young people to experience spiritual growth. The formulation of the problem that will be answered is what strategies are used by pastors to help grow the spirituality of young people? Even further, how does the pastor carry out the task of pastoring within the real situations of youth—even arrogant youth—opening the minds of young people to the importance of spiritual growth in order to face the difficulty of predicting all that is coming their way, so that they are strong mentally, morally, psychologically and have self-integrity.

## **METHOD**

The writing of this article uses the literature study method which refers to references related to the topic raised. Researchers collect various theories and information from library materials, such as the Bible, books, journals, online media, and other sources that discuss pastoral leadership and materials about the spiritual growth of young people in the digital era. In addition, the materials used from these sources consist of concepts, opinions, and ideas that have been selected by the author based on suitability for the discussion.

To produce scientific work that is descriptive, systematic and easy to understand, the author uses Bible studies to support the study in writing articles. The steps taken are first to analyze the concept of pastoral leadership according to the view of the Bible and some supporting literature.

Then the researcher conducted a literature review related to youth psychology in order to find a picture of the real problem. Furthermore, to provide a solution to the problem raised, the author makes an overview of the pastor's application to foster the spiritual attitude of youth through teaching God's Word with contextual topics, Bible study, coaching, and guidance through counseling and use of digital media. The expected result of this method is to show that in the context of a creative shepherd, young people not only experience spiritual growth, but also become mature in Christ, so that they can make the right decisions about their problems.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

### **Spiritual Growth**

Spiritual growth is a relationship that is built with God as the true source of growth. The word spiritual shows that every human person is in a spiritual dimension that is different from the body and mind. The term spirituality is often used for activities such as worship and prayer and work (service) related to the church or God (Sumiwi, 2019). As Doe and Walch (2001) explain, the spiritual (spirituality) is the basis for the growth of self-esteem, values, morals, and a sense of belonging in Christians, including psychological, spiritual, inner, mental, and moral elements. Spiritual growth becomes a guide for the direction and meaning of Christian life related to the belief in the existence of spiritual strength that is greater than physical strength, so as to foster awareness that directly connects the believer's person with God as the source of Christian existence (Doe & Walch, 2001).

Growth, both physical and spiritual, happens gradually at normal levels and stages. Every Christian experiences a different process of spiritual growth due to various factors. So too, the area of spiritual growth for each person is very different, so it cannot be measured on any scale, but by concrete actions. Spiritual growth in the Christian faith does not happen instantly because

the community is built through teaching, coaching and mentoring. Spiritual growth in the Christian faith occurs as a result of proper efforts by the pastor as the leader of the church. Church leaders or pastors must understand and use appropriate methods for the spiritual growth of the congregation according to God's steps and standards in the Bible (Tiladuru et al., 2021).

In the context of the spiritual growth of young people, it can be said that circumstances influence their intellectual development, social behavior or psychological development. Shelton (1984) explains that youth is a chronological period that begins with the psychological and emotional processes that lead to sexual and psychosocial maturity, ending with the formation of an individual who has achieved freedom and social productivity. All the processes of physical, emotional and spiritual growth that Shelton explained must be accompanied by spiritual growth so that they are controlled by God's Word as the controller of a complete life. Richardson said that youth is a time when many young people make their lives a failure and misfortune, because during youth most people make important decisions in their lives (Marpaung et al., 2022). This explanation is a clear confirmation that young people need balanced growth between physical, emotional, mental and spiritual growth, so that they are not mistaken in making decisions that endanger and destroy their future (Angkouw, 2021). Thus, young people always ought to be fostered and guided in communion with God through the teaching of the Word of God in true Christian fellowship.

In this regard, young people become the backbone as well as true leaders of the church in the future. Wagner, who was named Professor of Church Growth at the postgraduate level, views church growth as very meaningful in terms of the quality or spiritual growth of the church (Latif, 2018). He also said church growth includes everything that has to do with bringing people who have no personal relationship with Jesus Christ into fellowship with Him, and developing them into

responsible church members (Latif, 2018). So, church growth not only makes non-believers believe in the Lord Jesus Christ (quantity growth), but also makes them spiritually mature and responsible people (quality growth). Warrens (in Ndiy & Susanto, 2019) asserts that church growth is a corollary of a healthy church. A healthy church can only happen when Biblical preaching and mission are in balance (Ndiy & Susanto, 2019). That is, a church—if the teaching is correct and the mission is balanced—will experience growth in quantity and quality. The Bible provides eight things related to spiritual maturity and growth levels that are in accordance with the fullness of Christ, namely: 1) Achieving unity of faith; 2) Having the right knowledge of Christ; 3) Firmly holding on to the truth; 4) Growing in love for God and neighbor; 5) Improving one's relationship with God; 6) Unity occurring among members of the congregation; 7) Developing a life that blesses others; 8) And daring to assume responsibility in ministry (Eph. 4:13-15 & Acts 2:41-47).

### **Pastor as Youth Leader**

The success of an organization is inseparable from the role of a leader in managing and carrying out the tasks and responsibilities entrusted to him and from how the leader influences individuals and groups to be able to work together in achieving predetermined goals. The important thing that needs to be considered in carrying out their duties and responsibilities is having certain skills in influencing their followers to work together towards achieving predetermined goals (Katarina & Siswanto, 2018).

Within the church environment, the leadership of a pastor plays an important role in the spiritual growth of young people. This can be seen when the church has leaders who are serious about directing, fostering and guiding the people they serve, especially the young people in the church, so that they experience growth in knowing God and have lives that impact many people. On the other hand, the role of the pastor's leadership in the

spiritual growth of young people is to become a leader who always wants to convey God's heart well to young people, teaches young people about the true Christian faith, advises, guides and strengthens young people in various ways amid the struggles of life they face (Parhusip, 2020). Jesus Christ during his ministry in the world gave many examples to his disciples. The example of leadership that the Lord Jesus did during his ministry on earth was to lead by serving, leading by example, and leading with humility (Katarina & Siswanto, 2018). Therefore, a Christian pastor has the obligation to look after, care for, and serve voluntarily each of his congregations and is obliged to be an example for his congregation (Rumahorbo, 2020). Facts in both the old and new testaments show that shepherding is an important ministry and cannot be underestimated (Sumiwi, 2019). In the Old Testament, God rebuked the leaders of the Israelites for not being able to protect the Israelites. Their wrong actions were denounced through the prophet Ezekiel, so that God himself acted to provide a good shepherd for the Israelites (Eze. 34:15-16). In the new agreement Jesus set an example of how to be a good shepherd, where a good shepherd is a shepherd who cares for or cares for the flock with all his heart and is even willing to sacrifice his life for his sheep (John 10:11) (Rupa', 2016).

Ideally the pastor of the church in his leadership influences the congregation for the spiritual growth of the congregation as a qualitative church growth which will naturally lead to quantitative church growth. On the other hand, the inability of the congregational pastor to influence the congregation to grow spiritually can cause the church to enter suspended animation and the congregation can even become lazy in spiritual activities such as congregational worship and service. For example, the pastor of a congregation is more likely to burn out, so he does not carry out his role and influence as a leader in teaching, fostering and guiding the congregation, especially the youth, so they do not experience spiritual growth. As a result, the congregation will also move between

churches to find spiritual food for their spiritual growth (Retnowati, 2017).

### **The Pastor's Challenge as a Youth Leader**

The role of the church pastor as a leader can influence young people by building communication and coordination between congregations including young people so they can work together to grow spiritually together. The influence of such pastoral leadership is transformative leadership, which is able to change the paradigm and self-concept in order to experience changes in life both spiritually which will have an impact on physical changes (Sulistiyawati, 2020). In addition, the influence of the globalization era as a result of digital-based information and communication technology for young people can be a reduction in worshipping and taking part in church services (Sengkoen et al., 2021). Therefore, the pastor as a church leader must understand the concepts of leadership and the right strategy, in order to be able to lead the church he pastors so that there is balanced growth in quality and quantity.

In practice, pastors experience problems implementing or consolidating their duties with young people due to various factors such as the busy-ness of young people, young people who are less communicative, young people who are arrogant, and young people who are less interested because of the monotonous approach of the shepherd (Kusumawanta, 2016). On the other hand, the church's openness to young people who have heard the Word through virtual services, so they need a response back on their faith, but are hindered or hampered from being present in the church building directly due to work (Harmadi & Budiartman, 2021). Takaliuang said that a leader in leading the spiritual growth of the congregation (youth) is not trying to build their power to become very dominant, but building the spiritual growth of the congregation is a top priority factor. Therefore, church leaders must consider that one of their most important tasks is to help God's people and develop their level of ability to grow in their spirituality

towards God (Takaliuang, 2020). The main principle of church leaders is to serve to equip, support, motivate, and mentor the congregation to experience spiritual growth and be conformed to God's will (Alexander et al., 2021).

### **Pastor's Leadership Application to Young People's Spiritual Growth**

Based on the explanation above, there are several things that pastors can apply to grow the spirituality of youth, including:

#### ***Teaching God's Word with Contextual Topics***

One of the main duties of a Pastor is to help young people understand the importance of worship and what must be done in worship. Therefore, a pastor must provide coaching and guidance to young people regarding good attitudes during worship and guide them to understand the truth of God's Word (Kadarmanto, 2003). This is important and needs to be considered in teaching materials by the pastor in every worship activity for the spiritual growth of young people. The main goal of teaching God's Word is for every young person to experience a personal encounter with God and experience spiritual growth (Gulo, 2021).

Through various forms of teaching the Word of God which are packaged and prepared by the pastor, young people can learn about the Word of God to shape their spiritual growth. God's Word is prepared to be taught by the pastor of the congregation, adapted to the abilities and needs of young people in order to experience spiritual growth and maturity so that they are involved in serving God and His church according to the spiritual gifts that God has given him. Every worship activity that is carried out should be in an atmosphere where the encounter occurs in a friendly manner and gives a feeling of peace to every young person (Kadarmanto, 2003). Every worship activity is a moment for every young person to experience a personal encounter with God.

The role of the shepherd in leading worship is a duty of faith entrusted by God. The Bible

teaches that the role of a priest is to bring people to experience a personal encounter with God. The priest reveals the people's problems, sins, and offerings to God (Abineno, 2012). Young people are taught, guided and fostered to experience a personal encounter with God through teaching the Word of God and worship, so that they experience spiritual growth. Through worship and teaching of God's Word by the pastor of the congregation, young people not only experience a personal encounter with God, but are moments prepared by God to be a light in their families and their environment so that through their spiritual life that reflects the character of Christ, it will have an impact on many people (Widiyanto, 2022).

#### ***Bible Study***

Church growth is a goal many church leaders aspire to. Church growth can indicate success in the church's mission to expand its influence, provide religious instruction to more people, and bring them to Jesus Christ. However, it should be noted that church growth is not the only measure of church success. There are various factors that can affect church growth, and every church has a different context. Even if there is a strong desire for church growth, there is no guarantee that growth will occur continuously or at the same rate in every phase of the church. There are several obstacles that can hinder the growth of the church, such as demographic changes in the community around the church, cultural or political challenges, social changes, and so on (Santo & Simanjuntak, 2019).

Church leaders seek ways to overcome these obstacles and promote church growth. However, sometimes these efforts are not entirely successful, and church leaders may feel discouraged or unsure about the next steps. Nonetheless, it is important to note that church growth does not always keep pace with the physical size or number of congregations increasing. Church growth can also include the spiritual growth of the congregation, more effective ministries, or greater

positive influence in the community. Church leaders who are facing difficult church growth challenges or setbacks in congregational growth, can try to involve the congregation in evaluation and strategic planning. Open communication, understanding of the church context, and creativity in dealing with challenges can help churches find paths for healthy and sustainable growth. In addition, support and collaboration with other churches and utilizing existing resources can also help overcome existing obstacles (Laia, 2019).

In the context of youth, church growth requires regeneration of leaders who continue the church's mission, so as to produce leaders with character requires a true understanding of God. One way that can be done is through Bible study. The Bible is the basis of the teachings of God's church, because the Bible, which is the Word of God, is the standard and guideline for young people to maintain their life attitude in accordance with the truth of God's Word. For this reason, young people must truly understand God's Word correctly, not just knowing but truly understanding it, so that they are able to face real challenges every day with God's Word. Studying God's Word is one of the most important spiritual disciplines to fill, shape, and grow the spiritual life of young people (Baskoro et al., 2022). One of the ways for young people to correctly understand the truth of God's Word is by carrying out spiritual development activities through Bible study activities by pastors. By doing Bible study activities, young people can better understand the true meaning of God's Word.

Ongoing Bible study activities are essential for the spiritual growth of young people. Through the Bible, young people can better understand what God wants and young people can also know God, so that they can have an attitude of life that pleases God. The purpose of this Bible study activity is so that young people can have a pure and firm faith in Jesus. Bible study activities also aim to motivate young people to understand the Bible properly and correctly, and to evaluate their views about God and

others and their personal lives as written in the Bible (Oci, 2019).

### ***Guidance and Guidance Through Counseling***

Many people believe that the spiritual education of children is a shared responsibility between the church and parents. The church is often seen as a partner in educating children and providing spiritual support to families (Darmawan et al., 2021). Churches usually provide religious education programs such as Sunday School classes, youth groups, and family activities designed to assist in children's spiritual development (Sitanggang, 2023). In addition, the characteristics and experiences of the millennial generation may vary by region and culture. In general, the millennial generation was born between 1983 and 2001, so that differences in social, economic, cultural and religious contexts can influence how they build spirituality. Therefore, building spirituality among Christian millennials is a complex challenge. It takes a diverse and responsive approach, aware of the real needs and context of the lives of young people in the digital age (Han et al., 2023).

Reflecting on the explanation above, counseling is an alternative for the church to help spiritually serve young people. In fact, counseling service is the duty of the shepherd as an integral part of the shepherding ministry. In short, counseling service activities must really focus on the main goal of the spiritual growth of young people. This counseling activity is for young people so they can live according to God's Word, namely doing God's will that is written in the Bible. Siahaan (2021) quotes Anderson as saying that understanding the Bible will fail without first understanding the circumstances of the disciple and without first accepting what is (Siahaan, 2021). David Carlson (2017) said that there are times when evangelizing and teaching the Word becomes limited and ineffective, young people are not interested and do not want to be taught. It is in situations like this that counseling services become very useful to help them.

The main principle of this counseling activity is to define that all problems in human life arise due to sin and therefore the only effective and permanent solution to problems is rebirth and after that life goes with God every moment. In carrying out counseling services, one must rely on God's Word to answer the problems of human life, with psychology to complement the pastor's knowledge in exploring the problems behind this complex human behavior. This is where God's Word is indeed used in counseling ways to help young people. Seeing this, counseling services are one of the services that cannot be absent in youth services. Counseling services are an important part of youth ministry. Counseling aims to provide advice, counseling, counseling is a limited process of psychological assistance. In the counseling process, the counselor helps the counselee to understand himself and his personality better. Counseling is a process of psychological assistance provided by the counselor to the counselee. Through this process, it is hoped that the counselee will gain new strengths and insights that are explored from within himself to deal with crises and critical situations as well as conditions surrounding or that will be faced temporarily. Counseling services touch the needs of young people personally and can help guide them to the path of truth and life.

### ***Use of Digital Media***

Human life in the development of the current digital era must have the ability to adapt to the rapid growth of the digital world. The church as an organization and the people as a church must adapt to developments. Adapting to a growing digital world can help churches and their followers stay relevant, connect with the wider congregation, and carry the message of the gospel to younger generations (Njuguna, 2022). However, the church must also maintain a balance between digital services and physical presence which is important in the spiritual life of the people. Therefore, technology is a means to achieve Christ's goals for His people, so that teaching cannot be separated

from rules and laws regarding changes in individual behavior. Technology is created and cultivated based on the situation that occurs. Where, teaching tries to find answers on how to help youth/congregation to change their behavior and how to deal with it.

The transition of character building and discipleship from the church building to the home is one possible way to show obedience to the Great Commission or religious guidance. This involves the formation and promotion of spirituality, morality and values that are considered important in the church.

Churches or places of worship are often used as places for discipleship and character building, such as through sermons, religious teaching, collective worship, and other religious activities. However, a shift in character building and discipleship from the church building to the home can occur for a variety of reasons. For example, emergency situations such as a pandemic or physical limitations can block access to churches or places of worship or congregations that live far away in regions and even abroad to congregations that have a lot of activities but want to worship and enjoy God's presence. In these cases, people can find alternative ways to maintain and develop their faith in the home environment or other places.

This transition can be made through various religious practices such as prayer, meditation, reading and study of scriptures, small group or family gatherings to worship together, and spiritual discussion and reflection. This allows individuals and families to remain committed to religious values and develop character that is in accordance with religious teachings, even without direct attendance at a church or place of worship (Darmawan et al., 2021). In other words, the freedom provided by information networks via the internet opens up the widest possible space that is not limited by space and time and distance, so that it can reach people from various regions and even parts of the region that were previously unreachable. With the flexibility of conveying information, each



individual can build relationships with other individuals who are in different locations without being hindered by distance and time zone. In other words, this is an easy way to convey the gospel message to a wider space and reach everyone connected to the internet (Utama et al., 2022). Because of that, the use of digital media is nothing new for today's society, including pastors and priests. Digital media makes it easier for pastors to approach young people through sermons, virtual meetings, online worship, collective prayer and so on (Hunt, 2020).

## CONCLUSION

The achievement of pastoral leadership in the spiritual growth of young people is seen in terms of their quality of life. The proof of the spiritual growth of young people is that they will be diligent in participating in fellowship services at church and

they are also able to practice the value of the truth of God's Word to their surroundings. This needs to be done intensely because young people are not yet fully mature psychologically. Young people, in the transitional period between childhood and adulthood, have a burning soul and enthusiasm and are proactive in developing their abilities or potential in all things. At this time, young people begin to experience many changes both physically, emotionally, mentally and spiritually. Therefore, in this situation, pastors have the task of educating young people effectively, actively, creatively, innovatively and dynamically. The use of God's Word as a basis for ministry of spiritual growth for young people through teaching, coaching and mentoring as well as contextual topics so that young people do not only experience spiritual growth but become mature in Christ, so that they can make the right decisions regarding their problems.

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