

# Challenges for Online Sermons and Online Communion during Covid-19 Pandemic: A Historical Perspective of Rural Congregations in the Reformed Church in Zimbabwe.

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## Abstract

This article aimed to investigate the challenges rural congregations face in the Reformed Church in Zimbabwe. The presentation employed literature review and documentary reviews such as church magazines because it is historical in nature. The findings showed that, unlike urban congregations who continued to benefit through digital gadgets to receive online sermons and online communion, rural congregations lag in all aspects involving digital sermons. Using face-to-face interviews and archival research, this paper proposes improved sermon dissemination packaging as key to the effective spread of the word in the face of difficulties in accessing technologically disseminated sermons in rural areas in Zimbabwe. Underpinned on the technological determinism theory, this paper unpacks technologically based preaching approaches that can be used to send sermons to all areas to improve Christian lives in rural areas in Zimbabwe. The study used a qualitative exploratory study designed to probe the perceptions and experiences of rural communities on issues about online sermon delivery communication. A qualitative research design enabled the researchers to interact with the study's participants. Rural congregations in the Reformed Church in Zimbabwe faced several challenges. The most reported challenges were a lack of appreciation for using electronic gadgets to access platforms such as Zoom, Youtube, Facebook, WhatsApp, and Google Meet and a lack of data and network connectivity resources. It was recommended that the Reformed Church in Zimbabwe strive to make an effort to capacitate pastors in rural congregations and their congregations so that they are well equipped with user-friendly electronic gadgets even in remote areas. This helps the church to benefit and continue to be enlightened with the word of God and communion even during the advent of pandemics such as COVID-19.

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**Keywords:** Online Sermons, Online Communion, Covid-19, Rural Congregations, Reformed Church in Zimbabwe.

## Introduction

Sermons and communion in the Reformed Church in Zimbabwe (RCZ) had been physically present in rural congregations. As such, pastors and other religious leaders heavily relied on face-to-face care and reassurance of God's love and accompaniment, even when this was officially banned. The catastrophic outbreak and swift spread of COVID-19 late in 2019 from Wuhan, China (Zhu et al. 2020, 1), triggered unprecedented challenges for congregations (Afolaranmi 2020, 12), which dramatically led to restrictive national lockdowns, lapse of physical gatherings, fundamentally unsettled routine ways of doing ministry and demanded total digitalisation of the gospel, which eventually closed down the physical ministry of presence. Although doing ministry online seemed to work well in other countries, it has been a very different story in other parts of Zimbabwe. Numerous challenges have been witnessed through the course of conducting Covid 19 online-induced sermons and communion among rural congregations of the RCZ (Reformed Church in Zimbabwe). The phenomena have affected almost all congregations that affiliate with diverse church outfits in the country where religious inclusivity and tolerance are upheld. Hence, those of the Reformed Church in Zimbabwe have not been spared. The rural congregations in this regard have been the hardest hit owing to a plethora of reasons, chiefly geographical location, distribution of broadband-related amenities for internet connection, and proximity to related resources and requirements.

The study used a qualitative method and an exploratory research design. Exploratory research is research conducted to gain new insights and discover new ideas (Hair et al., 2003). Hence, a qualitative exploratory study was designed to probe the perceptions and experiences of rural communities on issues pertaining to online sermon delivery communication. Using a qualitative research design enabled the researchers to interact with the study's participants (Bessette 2004). This article looked into challenges of online sermons and communion, which will gain momentum from the following issues, which will be discussed later: economic crisis, lack of preparedness, material resources, and lack of human resources, communication disruptions, and high costs of data, electricity blackouts and congestion on online platforms. Prior to discussing all these challenges, a brief historical background of the development of the Reformed Church in Zimbabwe is elucidated.

Rural residents are not an exception regarding the importance of communication. Communication skills are typically not learned directly or professionally, yet they are nevertheless crucial for humans (Lu 2009). A social process that begins in childhood and lasts until death is communication. In some instances of religion, it is also believed that communication channels stay open even after death. However, internal and external communication is extremely important in rural Zimbabwe. Effective communication is

more important than ever for preaching in rural Zimbabwe (Simba, Chikodzi, and Murwendo 2012).

## Historical Background of the Reformed Church in Zimbabwe

The Dutch Reformed Church Mission came to Zimbabwe, which was called Rhodesia, after the initiation of the Dutch Reformed Church Christians in Zoutpansberg under the guidance of Rev Stephanus Hofmeyr, who was a missionary in Transvaal, South Africa (Cronje 1984, 114). Hofmeyr laboured through training the evangelists and holding some spiritual revivals to stimulate the zeal in his members to participate in this noble cause of witnessing among the now Christians (Cronje 1984, 115). Rutoro (2018:39) asserts that the Reformed Church in Zimbabwe is the “daughter” church of the Dutch Reformed Church of the Cape Synod, founded in 1891.

According to Cronje (1984:114), the revival touched the heart of Andrew Louw, the son of the Dutch Reformed Church minister in the town of Paarl in South Africa. He declared that he was convinced of having been called by God to minister to the people of Zimbabwe. This young man was a student at Stellenbosch Theological Seminary but withdrew in the third year of his studies because of ill health. Andrew, with a team of seven evangelists, left Kranspoort in South Africa by an ox wagon on June 18, 1891, crossed the Limpopo River, and entered Rhodesia. They arrived on the 9th of September, 1891, at Morgenster and established the Morgenster mission under Chief Mugabe. Chief Mugabe permitted them to start mission work among his people (Mutumburanzou 1999, 35). The first mission station was founded on the 9th of September, 1891. The seven evangelists accompanied Andrew Louw, and these were Micha Maghato, Joshua Masoha, Luke Mokoete, Jeremia and Petros Morudu (two brothers), David Molea and Izak Khumalo (Van der Merwe 1981, 62).

Various mission stations were established across the country from 1901 to 1954. Several of these mission stations were established in one province, Masvingo province, except for only two mission stations, namely Makumbe, founded in 1915 by Rev P.A Badenhorst and Nyashanu mission station in 1954. These two mission stations were established in the Buhera district in the west of Manicaland province (Cronje 1984, 120). The Dutch Reformed Church Mission in Zimbabwe also founded many congregations in towns, mines and rural areas. The niche area of the research is mainly focused on online sermons and online communion during the COVID-19 pandemic. What were the experiences of rural congregants during this pandemic? However, it is prudent to mention various methods of spreading the gospel used by the missionaries. Van der Merwe (1981:89) notes that evangelism, education, medical work, Christian literature and Bible translation, training of local evangelists and ministers and radio broadcasting were various methods used by missionaries to spread the gospel to all corners of the country.

## Radio - the Medium for Rural Folks

Radio broadcasting was another means the church used to preach the gospel to all congregations. Radio is a tremendously effective mass communication tool, especially when propagating the gospel in rural areas. The teachings of Jesus to his apostles are echoed in radio broadcasting: "You received without charge, give without charge...What you hear in whispers, proclaim from the housetops" (Matthew 10 v 8). Although the Church utilises radio to spread the Good News of salvation and we as humans listen to radio broadcasts as part of our daily lives, we seldom ever stop to consider the fundamental characteristics of radio as a form of communication.

The Church has viewed radio as a tool for widespread evangelisation from the very beginning. Despite this, the topics covered in the article apply just as well to television when used as a mass communication tool. Second, the Church actively participated in radio broadcasting in 1931 by commissioning Guglielmo Marconi to build the Vatican Radio. The Church's writings also provide a theology of radio as a mass communication medium, with evangelisation, progress, and unity as its core tenets. According to church literature, only messages that promote harmony and peace should be broadcast on the radio.

The Reformed Church in Zimbabwe previously owned a radio station called *PENYA* (*Paridzai Evhangeri Nyika yeAfrika*). Preach the Gospel in the Continent of Africa (Cronje 1984, 132). In *Shona*, the word *PENYA* means to shine, emphasising audio-visual aids in evangelistic work (Mutumburanzou 1999, 107). This was an effective way for the Reformed Church in Zimbabwe to cater for rural congregations. Radio broadcasting has been defunct for several years. This could have helped the church during the COVID-19 pandemic if it was still functional because this method of evangelism aimed to reach many people throughout the country every day. The gospel should shine in people's lives whilst they are in their respective homes. It would be easy for rural congregations to assess the Word of God during the COVID-19 pandemic. The economic situation that caused the church to close the radio broadcasting continued to affect the church during the outbreak of COVID-19. Therefore, this paper will dwell on the challenges that impacted online sermons and online communion during the COVID-19 pandemic.

## Methodological Note

The study used a qualitative method and an exploratory research design. Exploratory research is research conducted to gain new insights and discover new ideas (Hair et al., 2003). Hence, a qualitative exploratory study was designed to probe the perceptions and experiences of rural communities on issues pertaining to online sermon delivery communication. Using a qualitative research design enabled the researchers to interact with the study's participants (Bessette 2004). Some of the participants were fellow congregants. Using field interviews and archival research, this paper proposes improved

online sermon dissemination packaging as the key to effective communication in the face of digitalisation.

Data presented in this study is the result of a cross-sectional study conducted for a period of ninety (90) days. The main focus of the cross-sectional inquiry was on church-related activities engaged by the participants who are directly affected by online sermon deliveries in rural Zimbabwe. Two hundred (200) participants were purposively drawn from the rural areas of Masvingo, Midlands, Matabeleland South and Manicaland Provinces, where the majority of the Reformed Church in Zimbabwe and congregants are largely populated. Purposive sampling was used mainly because it was easy to select sample units with particular characteristics that enhanced the exploration and understanding of the aims and objectives of the study. Community members aged 20 and above were considered. The researcher also considered individuals who had a general understanding of online technology despite age or education.

## Rural Communities

Rural communication is primarily an interactive process in which communities and their superiors exchange information, knowledge, and skills important to development face-to-face or via media like radio, print, and, more recently, new information networks processes like smartphones, Twitter, and Facebook pages (Simba, Chikodzi, and Murwendo) (2012). Radio, television, newspapers, and magazines were among the traditional mass media outlets utilised for religious communication; however, these outlets are not very effective in rural areas.

Radio is the classic mass media form that is most commonly employed in rural regions. The church and telecom companies continue to underinvest in rural areas because they do not see them as profitable commercial ventures. They receive a meagre wage in exchange for their services. The digital divide between rural and urban areas has grown due to the recent increase in teledensity in metropolitan areas, supported by mobile technology. By linking remote areas to broadband core networks at a lesser cost than those available in urban areas, rural inhabitants will need to be given mobile telephone and wireless internet access.

Church sermons will be more accessible if efficient, affordable, and quick-deployment technologies are used on wired and wireless networks. Both technological and financial factors influence the main obstacles to delivering telecommunication services in rural areas. Backhaul connectivity setup continues to be expensive. Rural communities in Zimbabwe suffer the most from the scourge's intermittent power delivery, which is the norm (Mugambiwa 2018). There may be a complete absence of energy supplies in some rural locations, and photovoltaic power generation is gradually emerging as a competitive option. The need to maintain adequate backup systems significantly increases operational costs. Utilising the right access, backhaul, and power supply technologies will aid in the development of connectivity in rural and isolated locations.

## High Poverty Levels

To commence with, many rural congregations and pastors in the Reformed Church in Zimbabwe could hardly afford online sermons and communion because of economic problems. As a result, the economic crisis formed a dura-wall crust barricading the smooth sail of online sermons and communion. Zimbabwe has been in a deepening economic crisis since the reign of the late Robert Gabriel Mugabe up to the military-assisted rule (Cook 2017, 1) of incumbent president Emmerson Mnangagwa in November 2017 (Masunungure and Bratton 2018, 1). The Zimbabwean economy has been disturbingly floundering, as confirmed by increased dependence on primary commodities such as platinum, diamonds and gold, massive deindustrialisation and informalisation of the economy (Kanyenze, Chitambara and Tyson 2017:6–14). The country has also encountered low investment levels because political volatility and policy discrepancies destabilising business confidence. Issues of the flawed rule of law, command policies, weakening of public institutions, fiscal and debt mismanagement, corruption, heavy taxation, high inflation and high liquidity constraints ruined the Zimbabwean economy (Bhoroma 2021; Pasara and Garidzirai 2020:2).

Poverty levels in Zimbabwe have been rampant; a fair share of this category is in rural areas. As a result of the pandemic's second economic blow, 7.9 million Zimbabweans are now living in extreme poverty. According to the World Bank's economic and social update report, most of Zimbabwe's youngsters suffered the most from extreme poverty between 2011 and 2021. Despite ongoing price increases and a sluggish recovery of jobs and salaries in the official and informal sectors, the number of extremely poor is anticipated to stay at 7.9 million in 2021, and the effect in rural areas is serious (Bhoroma 2021). Due to the inadequate social safety nets protecting the sizable disadvantaged population in rural areas, households are more likely to utilise unhealthy coping mechanisms.

Disadvantaged families are more likely to put off getting official medical care because they cannot afford it, and they are also more likely to keep their children out of school to save money on basics like textbooks, uniforms, and school fees. Due to the loss of income and jobs in urban areas, the pandemic increased the number of extremely impoverished Zimbabweans by 1.3 million, which, by extension, affected the livelihoods of rural folks. The World Bank defines those who fall below the monthly food poverty limit of US\$29.80 for each person as being considered to be extremely poor, more so those living in rural areas. From 3 million in 2011 to 6.6 million in 2019, the number of people living below this poverty line doubled, with higher numbers in rural regions than ever before. According to the majority of Zimbabweans, they have been subjected to abject poverty (Chingono 2021). In such dire economic conditions, congregations and pastors in the Reformed Church in Zimbabwe could hardly meet the cost of attending online sermons and communion.

## Lack of Preparedness

There was a lack of readiness in this regard within the church fraternity, regardless of the aforementioned poverty levels. In light of the numerous effects of the COVID-19 lockdown on the church, it became clear that the church had taken a variety of steps to both stay relevant and carry out its social mission. In an effort to address the limitations of face-to-face connection and church management, several churches have gone digital. The most popular platforms for communication were listed as WhatsApp, Facebook, and Zoom meetings. These platforms have given churches some continuity in information dissemination, word preaching, and prayer because they are now using technology to do so, which they had not been doing to such a great extent before the lockdown and social estrangement.

In order to overcome regional limitations and reach their audience, face-to-face engagement amongst church members transitioned to digital during the lockdown period. Churches were no longer allowed to assemble in the actual church structures. According to the rules in effect, the practice of assigning individuals to visit church members had likewise ended. The invasion by the COVID-19 pandemic was sudden and yet demanded a swift response as mitigation, moving operations to virtual modes.

Considering the proximity of rural congregations to the core hub of evangelical activities that champion and promote online pastoring, there is no doubt that it would be a mammoth task to establish fruitful online sermons and communion. Globally, the process of moving the church online demanded research, budget, plans and expertise (Elbert 2020:12–14). The COVID-19 pandemic drew some human resources to quarantine centres and intensive care units (ICUs) nationwide. That wreaked havoc in human resource mobilisation and development processes for the church to catch up with the digital demands. Such setbacks hard-pressed Zimbabwean denominations as material, human and financial resources got unsettled. This has been a challenge in rural areas where Reformed Church in Zimbabwe congregations are harboured.

## Novelty Physical Sermons

Physical sermons are undoubtedly the best and receive a higher tolerance level from congregants and their religious leaders. Pastoral ministry has always been physically present in churches, homes, and public spaces, offering direct care and assurances of God's love and presence. The sudden emergence and rapid spread of COVID-19 from China prompted unprecedented difficulties in the church, dramatically resulted in repressive national lockdowns, the closure of physical meetings, fundamentally upended routine ways of carrying out ministry, and demanded complete digitalisation of the gospel, which ultimately rendered the ministry of physical presence absent. While doing ministry online appeared successful in other nations, it has taken on a wholly different trajectory in Zimbabwe, mostly due to limitations in terms of money, resources, and human capacity, as well as cultural and other contextual considerations.

COVID-19 disrupted the process due to social distancing regulations and other tighter measures put in place. Universally, the church is used to face-to-face communication of the gospel (Reimann 2017, 70). Digital platforms might be useful to advance the occurrence of sermons and online communion in the prism of COVID-19 in the Reformed Church in Zimbabwe, but the sudden twist from physical to online robbed pastors of access to voice and body language. Congregants are better off being together physically, singing and praising as usual, and getting direct instruction from their leaders, who then deliver sermons.

The Zimbabwean context is affected by electrical and resource problems that weaken fluidity, usability and efficacy. Communication by gestures helps speakers formulate and retrieve elusive words from lexical memory information to listeners and enhances listeners' ability to decode the message in the correct context (Byrne and Nuzum 2020, 208; Driskell and Radtke 2015). In line with the above, under digital communication, pastors cannot fully convey gestures, tone and facial expressions, which enhances encoding and decoding of messaging in the mind that human beings communicate gesticulations—shifting from physical to online disrupts such non-communicative functions and listeners' gestures for fruitful communication.

### Expensive Digitalised Sermons

Amid the surge of COVID-19, online pastoral interaction with congregants created an opportunity for sermons and online communion, a feat many have appreciated. The new normal, socially-distanced context demanded a drastic approach to pastoral ministry, which costs digital resources such as smartphones, laptops, tablets, recording cameras, technical expertise, data, electricity and network. Due to limited capacities, few pastors from economically sound denominations engaged in live streaming and the bulk of them failed. This means that pastors could not massively execute their pastoral work online while physical meetings were suspended. It is, however, recommended that pastors utilise their limited resources and embrace any viable medium like SMS, conveniently accessible to the least resourced for short messages, while surrendering their congregations to the interminable spiritual presence until physical presence is fully restored.

Unfortunately, digitalisation grew expensive; providers kept raising their tariffs in attempts to make their businesses viable in the unstable Zimbabwean economy. Very few Zimbabweans embraced online worship services because of the high cost of data, lack of smartphones and interest (Mabhiza 2021). Due to the waning Zimbabwean economic situation, the biggest local telecommunication companies, such as Econet Wireless and Net One, hike their tariffs almost quarterly. The upsurge of data tariffs automatically dismissed innumerable people from virtual services that they could not afford. A growing number of congregants have been left out of the church. Most of those who cannot afford smartphones, computers, electricity and data are in rural areas. The ones in remote areas without gadgets, power and connectivity gave up, and online

sermons and communion in this regard are useless. Corresponding with the waning Zimbabwean situation, the biggest local telecommunications such as Econet Wireless and Net One, hike their data prices every quarter. Congregants in the rural areas could not cope and adapt to the upsurge of data tariffs and were sidelined in the process of online sermons and communion.

### Erratic Connectivity

Operations involving networks, maintenance, information, communication, and technology are disrupted by intermittent electrical supply and outages. Additionally, electrical issues have an impact on how digital devices are recharged. In Zimbabwe, these consequences of electrical power issues have occasionally been present. Online sermons and communion require an electrical outlet and a strong internet connection. Since communication is impossible without electricity, the blackouts had an impact on the rural congregations. Zimbabwe's electricity supply has been inconsistent, expensive, and regularly increased for some time now, which makes it difficult for an ordinary rural Reverend and Evangelist to reach out to the poor communities (Mananavire, 2020).

Additionally, the Zimbabwe Supply Authority (ZESA) has been unable to provide adequate electricity for the entire country, which has resulted in load shedding and, ultimately, arbitrary blackouts. According to Alhelou et al. (2019:16–17), irregular electrical supply and interruptions interfere with technical operations such as network provision, maintenance, information, and communication. Despite this, electrical issues can also prevent digital devices from being recharged. In Zimbabwe, these consequences of electrical power issues have occasionally been present. Electricity and network issues have consequently interfered with digitalised pastoral initiatives and services. This hurts the rural Reformed Church congregations in Zimbabwe's online preaching and communion.

### Hollowness Online Sermons

Online sermons are shallow and empty from a cultural standpoint because listeners cannot sense and experience the meanings and context of particular phrases. The biggest cultural fact is the hollowness of language. The idea that there is any meaningful relationship between words, truth claims, and reality is, at best, doubted and, at worst, denied by contemporary culture. The perspective claims that everything is up for interpretation, that words only mean what I think they mean, and that there are no established points of reference.

How Christians should interact with our larger culture is the most contentious question facing modern evangelicalism, especially given the emergence of the Covid 19 pandemic. Historically, evangelicals have shown little interest in popular culture. It is believed that this earth will ultimately burn up, so it is important to convert as many

people as possible, whether online or physically. If we succeed, society will transform one heart at a time.

Rural congregations in the RCZ have been impacted by online preaching and communion, which have manipulated the entire process. As is customary, cultural reformers and all Zimbabweans prioritise physical gatherings, with weddings and funerals serving as prime examples. The Zimbabwean government restricted funerals, limited the number of mourners to 30, and ordered those who passed away (of any cause) not to be taken home but to go straight to the graveyard. That body view must be discontinued or not conducted. Instead, they were hurriedly buried under strict health protocols, with a few attendants remaining four meters from the cemetery. Funerals were restricted since they were believed to be catalysts of the virus, which made the subject of condolences for fellow congregants relevant. This phenomenon slowed down the grieving and closure processes.

A typical burial draws 300 mourners or more in most local cultures, including the dominant Shona of Zimbabwe. The corpse is traditionally taken home so that friends, family, and loved ones can bid farewell, shake hands, express their condolences, celebrate the life of the deceased, and attend a church service filled with uplifting hymns, dances, and sermons before viewing the body and eventually attending the burial (Dzinamarira 2021, 1; Moyo and Mazvarirwofa 2021). Thus, it is clear that the rural congregations were directly affected by the highly regulated and hurried burial of people who passed away during the COVID-19 pandemic. The rural pastors were denied the chance to preach at these funerals, a denial that exacerbates pains and delays closure for the bereaved.

Indeed, there is a great deal of complexity in the realms of ritual and liturgical expression in cyberspace (Mathee 2018). Although he contends that these complexities present a chance for a novel and developed ritual repertoire forged in the context of the late 20th century and continued in the 21st century due to high connectivity, the formation and flourishing of liminal communities on the internet, liturgy in Zimbabwe can be challenging to be flexible and porous due to poor connectivity and a lack of necessary equipment.

Given the Zimbabwean backdrop, how could the sick and the bereaved feel obliged to have their pastors grace the ceremonies by presenting sermons online after losing a loved one and having their funerals rushed and restricted? This difficulty has been made even more difficult because network issues persisted. The congregation of the Reformed Church tolerates the main Shona culture of Zimbabweans, where pastors are prominent in preaching the gospel of sympathy and condolences to grieving families, with communion available to people singing songs and dancing together in tough times. This has been impacted in rural congregations and across the nation as a whole by digitalisation.

## Recommendations

Pastors who cannot fully utilise new technologies could seek assistance from their congregations and make efforts to learn essential skills to keep themselves relevant and effective. Revival of radio broadcasting and purchase of airtime on all community radios in the country where local pastors can go on airwaves for thirty minutes or more. The provision of studios to deliver sermons in video format to simulate physical connection where gestures and facial expressions are visible to congregants was absent in rural congregations. Embracing a culture of preparedness in terms of financial budget for pastors to absorb and cope with pressures and challenges aligned to potential surges like the one COVID-19 has brought.

Depending on the type of Information Communication Technology gadget in acquiring a particular congregation, they conduct individual pastoral and care visits using the best option available. This may be through an ordinary phone call, social media, or video chat platforms to those with compatible devices such as smartphones and computers. Small group interactive prayers should be applied to observe social distance regulation fully. It is also recommended that congregations use low-technology and cost-effective means to conduct sermons and communion. The few congregants who are computer literate and have access to smartphones with solar systems for recharging should assist those challenged, including the illiterate, elderly, children and the physically challenged.

## Conclusion

The outbreak of COVID-19 has impacted heavily on the Christian communities worldwide. The effects of COVID-19 have not spared the Reformed Church in Zimbabwe's rural congregations, and the rural congregations have been the hardest hit compared to urban and peri-urban gatherings, which are better equipped to embrace digital sermons and communion. In the indigenous African communities in Zimbabwe, for instance, among the Shona who occupy a larger numerical and geographic space, most social distancing regulations rip apart their deeply cherished norms and values. For instance, being required to desist from exchanging handshakes, hugging and being restrained from gathering in numbers at funerals and weddings is a deep scar to rural congregants as the lack of these seriously and negatively hit the raw nerves. The introduction of Information Communication and Technology (ICT) has played a pivotal role in establishing smooth and easy access to information, deliverance of sermons, and communion online. Though it seems very hard to adapt to the new normal, the harsh reality is that if human communities wish to survive this catastrophe, difficult as it is, people must learn to adjust to the new way of being in the world. The issues of online sermons and communion in the rural congregations of the Reformed Church in Zimbabwe have been shrouded in several problems. The challenges discussed in the article include geographical location, distribution of broadband-related amenities for internet connection, and proximity of congregations to related resources and

requirements. The discussion was propelled by momentum from issues such as the economic crisis, lack of preparedness, material resources, lack of human resources, communication disruptions, high data costs, electricity blackouts and congestion on online platforms.

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