

Empowering Future Leaders: The Role of Religious Institutions in Addressing Social Issues Through Training and Community Engagement

Edi Purwanto

Department of Management, Universitas Pembangunan Jaya, South Tangerang, Indonesia

Email: edi.purwanto@upj.ac.id

* Correspondence Authors: edi.purwanto@upj.ac.id

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Abstract

Religious institutions are pivotal in addressing social issues, acting as agents of spiritual guidance and societal transformation. This study examines a community service program at Victory Theological College, designed to prepare future religious leaders through an integrated approach to theological education and practical social engagement. The program encompassed three phases: interactive training on social justice and contemporary issues, hands-on field practice addressing real-world challenges, and reflective evaluations to assess impact and learning. Participants demonstrated significant improvement in understanding the dual role of religious institutions in providing social aid and advocating for justice. Field activities included initiatives to combat poverty, promote racial reconciliation, foster gender equality, advocate for environmental stewardship, and support human rights. Reflective discussions highlighted the program's success in connecting theological principles with practical solutions, preparing leaders to navigate complex social realities. The study underscores the transformative potential of combining faith-based education with community engagement, offering a replicable model for fostering justice, compassion, and sustainable development through religious institutions.

Keywords: religious institutions, social justice, community engagement, leadership development.

Abstrak

Institusi keagamaan memiliki peran penting dalam menangani masalah sosial, berfungsi sebagai panduan spiritual dan agen transformasi masyarakat. Penelitian ini mengkaji program pengabdian masyarakat yang dilaksanakan di STT Victory, yang dirancang untuk mempersiapkan pemimpin agama masa depan melalui pendekatan terintegrasi antara pendidikan teologi dan keterlibatan sosial praktis. Program ini mencakup tiga tahap: pelatihan interaktif tentang keadilan sosial dan isu-isu kontemporer, praktik lapangan langsung untuk mengatasi tantangan nyata, serta evaluasi reflektif untuk menilai dampak dan pembelajaran. Peserta menunjukkan peningkatan signifikan dalam pemahaman tentang peran ganda institusi keagamaan dalam memberikan bantuan sosial dan memperjuangkan keadilan. Kegiatan lapangan meliputi inisiatif untuk mengatasi kemiskinan, mempromosikan rekonsiliasi ras, mendorong kesetaraan gender, mendukung pelestarian lingkungan, dan memperjuangkan hak asasi manusia. Diskusi reflektif menyoroti keberhasilan program ini dalam menghubungkan prinsip-prinsip teologi dengan solusi praktis, mempersiapkan pemimpin untuk menghadapi realitas sosial yang kompleks. Studi ini menegaskan potensi transformasi dari penggabungan pendidikan berbasis iman dengan keterlibatan masyarakat, menawarkan model yang dapat diterapkan untuk mendorong keadilan, belas kasih, dan pembangunan berkelanjutan melalui institusi keagamaan.

Kata-kata kunci: institusi keagamaan, keadilan sosial, keterlibatan masyarakat, pengembangan kepemimpinan

Introduction

Religious institutions have long been integral to addressing social issues, acting as spiritual guides and change agents within communities (Privor-Dumm & King, 2020; Derksen & Teixeira, 2023). In the modern context, these institutions face increasing demands to address complex social challenges, including poverty (He, 2023; Magnus & Sherrick, 2023; Tamlin et al., 2021), inequality (Panter-Brick, 2021), environmental degradation (Peracullo & Quindoza, 2022), and human rights issues (Schweiger, 2019). As societal needs evolve, the role of religious institutions must expand beyond traditional spiritual care to include proactive engagement in social justice and community development (Van Der et al., 2019; Rakotoarison et al., 2021).

Theological education is pivotal in equipping future leaders to meet these demands. Training programs for prospective leaders, such as pastors and theology students, are essential for building their capacity to address societal issues effectively. These programs provide a deep understanding of biblical principles and emphasize the practical application of these teachings in fostering social transformation. By linking theological foundations with contemporary social issues, such training ensures that religious leaders are prepared to act

as agents of justice, compassion, and holistic community development.

This study focuses on a community service program at Victory Theological College in Cibubur, a theological education institution dedicated to preparing future Christian leaders. The program was designed to integrate theoretical and practical learning, equipping participants with the knowledge and skills necessary to address social challenges from a theological perspective. Through structured training, field practice, and reflective evaluation, the program aimed to enhance participants' understanding of the dual role of religious institutions in providing social aid and advocating for justice.

By examining the effectiveness of this program, this paper seeks to highlight the importance of combining theological education with practical social engagement. It explores how such initiatives can transform future religious leaders into holistic change agents capable of addressing spiritual and societal needs in an increasingly complex world.

Method

Location and Participants

This community service program was conducted at Victory Theological College in Cibubur, a theological education institution that

prepares future Christian leaders, including pastors. Participants comprised theology students and prospective pastors undergoing academic preparation. They were chosen based on their potential to become spiritually proficient leaders capable of addressing and

resolving various social challenges within their communities. This workshop was a community service activity conducted online using Google Meet. Figure 1 is one of the screenshots from the activity.

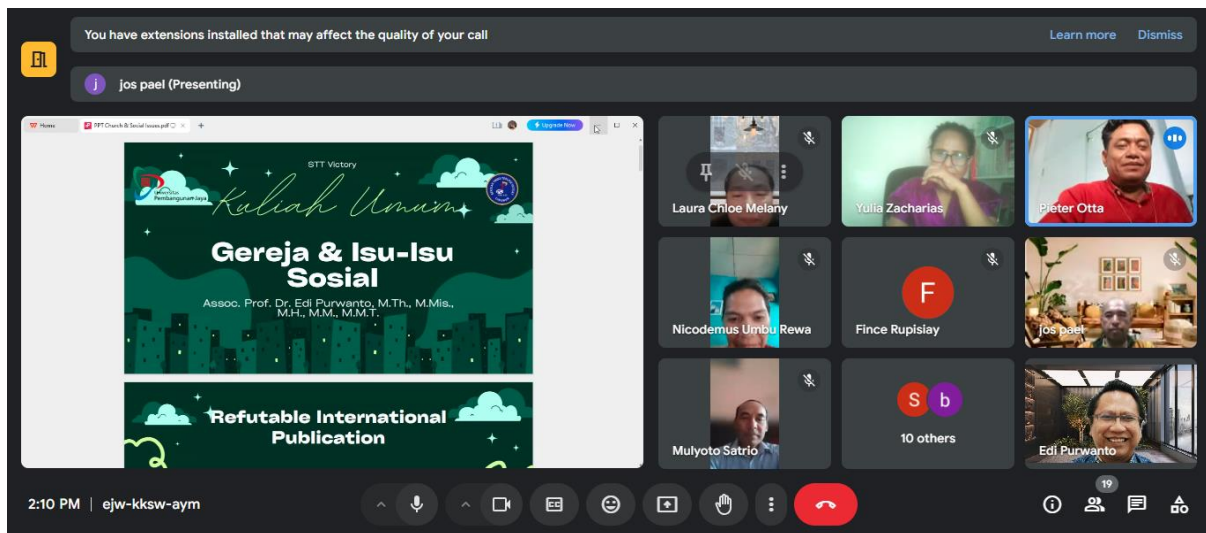


Figure 1. Online Workop

Program Design and Implementation

The program was structured into three primary phases: training, field practice, and reflection and evaluation.

The first phase, training, involved interactive lectures and discussions based on the book *Gereja & Isu-Isu Sosial* (Purwanto, 2024). The training covered topics such as the role of religious institutions in addressing social issues, the theological basis for social engagement (including the biblical mandate for social justice and Jesus' teachings on social responsibility), and contemporary social problems like poverty, economic

inequality, gender equality, environmental stewardship, and human rights. Participants also learned about different models of church engagement, including prophetic approaches, service-oriented models, advocacy, and case studies of effective social involvement. Additionally, strategies and challenges for engaging with social issues were discussed, focusing on education, advocacy, collaboration, and opportunities for social transformation.

The second phase, field practice, required participants to complete assigned social tasks within their local communities. These activities were designed to apply the

theoretical concepts learned during the training while building practical skills in social ministry. The field practice emphasized meaningful interaction with community members and direct involvement in addressing real-world social challenges.

The final phase, reflection and evaluation, involved group discussions in which participants reflected on their experiences during the field practice. This phase aimed to assess the effectiveness of their social engagements, identify challenges faced during fieldwork, and provide constructive feedback. These discussions deepened participants' understanding of the role of religious institutions in social ministry while enhancing their readiness to apply what they had learned.

Educational Approach

The program integrated theoretical and practical learning to equip participants with a deeper understanding of the theological basis for social justice. It provided valuable skills for designing and implementing social service programs and emphasized the importance of participants acting as change agents within their communities. This holistic approach ensured that participants were prepared to lead initiatives effectively addressing both spiritual and social challenges.

Assessment and Evaluation

Pre-and post-tests were conducted to evaluate the program's effectiveness and measure participants' understanding of key concepts before and after the program. These tests assessed comprehension of the definition of social problems, the dual role of religious institutions in providing social aid and promoting justice, the biblical mandate for social justice, the priority focus of social ministry according to Jesus' teachings, and contemporary social challenges.

Result and Discussion

The First Phase, Training/ Workshop

Figure 2 quantitatively assesses participants' understanding of various theological and social concepts related to the role of the church as a religious institution in addressing social issues. The analysis is structured around six key questions, comparing the results of a pre-test and post-test evaluation to measure shifts in understanding.

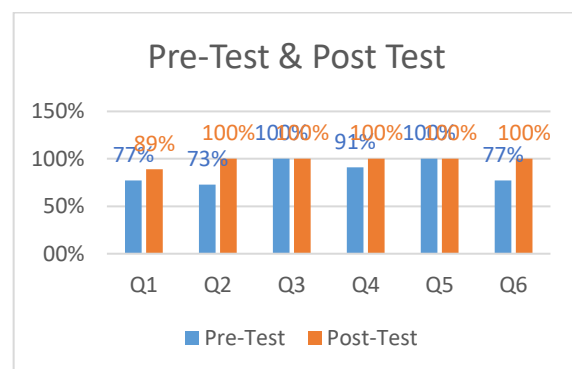


Figure 2. Pre-Test & Post-Test Result

Understanding of Social Problems in the Context of Religious Institutions

The initial understanding of “social problems” was moderately intense, with 77.3% of participants grasping that these conditions negatively affect individuals and groups. This understanding improved to 88.9% in the post-test, demonstrating a notable increase in comprehension. This suggests that the educational intervention effectively clarified the role of religious institutions in addressing social adversity. This change highlights the effectiveness of the training in broadening participants' understanding of social issues. Previously, their perspective was relatively narrow, but after the training, they became more capable of actively recognizing social issues about religious institutions' responsibility to foster change. The training provided a solid theological foundation for understanding the connection between the biblical mandate and social issues.

Recognition of the Dual Social Role of Religious Institutions

Before the intervention, 72.7% of participants acknowledged the roles of religious institutions in providing social aid and promoting justice. This figure reached

100% in the post-test, highlighting the program's success in reinforcing the importance of these dual functions within societal contexts. These results indicate an improvement in participants' understanding of the multifaceted role of religious institutions in society. The training successfully emphasized that promoting social justice is a moral responsibility of religious institutions, as taught in the Bible and exemplified in Jesus' ministry. Participants began recognizing that religious institutions are not merely providers of charity but also agents of change, supporting communal well-being holistically.

Significance of Social Justice

Participants unanimously recognized in the pre-test and post-test (100%) that social justice aligns with biblical teachings and compels religious institutions to advocate for fairness and equity. This consistency reflects a robust foundational understanding of the theological imperative for social justice. The training successfully provided participants with a solid theological foundation, shifting their perspective from a charity-based approach to one rooted in the biblical mandate. Participants began to understand that social justice is not merely an act of compassion but a reflection of God's just nature and a call to create a better social order.

This understanding is crucial in preparing participants to become church leaders who are more attuned to addressing social needs.

Priority Groups in Social Outreach

Understanding that religious institutions' social outreach should focus on the impoverished and oppressed was strong initially, with 91% accuracy in the pre-test. This figure improved to 100% in the post-test, indicating the intervention's role in reinforcing this critical aspect of Christ's teachings. The training provided valuable insights into Jesus' teachings on the priorities of a religious institution's ministry. Before the training, participants tended to view social outreach in general terms without focusing on specific groups. After the training, they understood that special attention must be given to marginalized communities, aligning with Jesus' teachings. This shift reflects the training's success in clarifying the mission of religious institutions as agents of love and justice for those most in need.

Biblical Mandate for Social Justice

The understanding of the "biblical mandate for social justice" as the obligation of religious institutions to reflect God's love and justice toward the marginalized was perfect both pre- and post-intervention, maintaining a 100% score. This result

suggests that participants already well internalized this concept. The training effectively emphasized the importance of a solid theological foundation in understanding the mandate for social justice. Before the training, participants viewed social justice primarily from an action-oriented perspective. However, after the training, they connected it to the spiritual calling mandated in the Bible. This demonstrates that the training enhanced participants' awareness of social justice as an expression of faith rather than merely a worldly activity.

Contemporary Social Challenges for Religious Institutions

The pre-test revealed that only 77% of participants identified contemporary issues like poverty, gender inequality, and environmental concerns as challenges for religious institutions. The post-test improved to 100%, indicating that the session addressed these modern concerns successfully. The response shift highlights the training's success in broadening participants' perspectives. Previously, participants focused solely on issues visible in their immediate surroundings. After the training, they could see the bigger picture and understand that religious institutions are responsible for addressing global issues. This is crucial for shaping leaders who are sensitive to a wide

range of social challenges, both local and global.

The results suggest a need for continuous educational initiatives to address foundational theological and social concepts. Topics like contemporary challenges and the dual role of religious institutions benefit significantly from structured teaching, as evidenced by the improvement rates. The consistent understanding of certain principles, such as the biblical mandate for social justice, reflects the success of prior theological education and underscores the importance of integrating these principles with practical applications in modern contexts.

The Second Phase, Field Practice

The program's second phase required participants to complete assigned social tasks within their local communities, focusing on addressing issues such as poverty and economic inequality, racism and racial reconciliation, gender equality, environmental stewardship, and human rights and social justice. This field practice was designed to apply the theoretical concepts learned during the training while building practical skills in social ministry. Participants engaged in meaningful interactions with community members and directly addressed

real-world social challenges. Below are specific examples of participants' activities.

Poverty and Economic Inequality

Participants addressed poverty and economic inequality through various initiatives. Participant #1, through Lifehouse Ministry in Mekarsari Village, distributed food packages to families in need, focusing on meeting necessities and fostering harmonious relationships between the church, community leaders, and residents (Figure 3).



Figure 3. distributed food packages in Mekarsari Village

(Source: Student assignment report)

Participant #2 organized a campaign providing donations to street children and conducted blood donation drives in Tangerang. These activities included distributing food and educational supplies while raising awareness about the importance of social responsibility (Figure 4).



Figure 4. Providing Donations to Street Children
(Source: Student assignment report)

Similarly, Participant #3 organized the distribution of necessities to widows in the Oikumene community during the Eid holiday, emphasizing inclusivity and economic support (Figure 5).



Figure 5. The Distribution of Necessities to Widows
(Source: Student assignment report)

Participant #4 contributed by conducting agricultural and livestock training in Singajaya Village, introducing sustainable practices such as fodder planting and providing rolling capital to improve the economic resilience of families (Figure 6). Additionally, Participant #5 focused on addressing basic needs by distributing clothing and giving free haircuts, particularly

to children from economically disadvantaged families.



Figure 6. Agricultural And Livestock Training In Singajaya Village
(Source: Student assignment report)

Racism and Racial Reconciliation

Participant #6 demonstrated efforts to promote racial reconciliation by organizing a community event featuring the traditional “*bakar batu*” cooking ceremony in Maluku (Figure 7). This activity fostered unity and mutual respect among diverse community members while celebrating the cultural heritage of Maluku.



Figure 7. Racial Reconciliation by Organizing a Community Event Featuring the Traditional “*Bakar Batu*”
(Source: Student assignment report)

Gender Issues and Equality

In addressing gender issues and promoting equality, Participant #7 provided food, educational tools, and creative activities for children with and without disabilities at a specialized orphanage, fostering inclusivity and empowerment (Figure 8). Additionally, Participant #8 delivered essential items and conducted motivational activities to support orphaned children, emphasizing the importance of education and personal growth regardless of gender.



Figure 8. Ministry for Children with Disabilities
(Source: Student assignment report)

Environmental Stewardship

The participants also contributed to environmental stewardship. Participant #6 combined cultural traditions such as “*bakar batu*” with efforts to clean and maintain the surroundings of a local church, highlighting

the interconnectedness of ecological and cultural care. Meanwhile, Participant #4 trained local communities in eco-friendly farming techniques, including cultivating high-yield forage crops and using organic fertilizers to reduce dependency on chemical alternatives.

Human Rights and Social Justice

The importance of human rights and social justice was reflected in activities conducted by several participants. Participant #9 provided spiritual and emotional support to inmates through motivational sessions, communal prayers, and shared meals, emphasizing rehabilitation and reducing stigma among prisoners. Similarly, Participant #10 delivered vocational training and moral support to inmates, fostering smoother transitions to life after incarceration and encouraging community engagement in supporting these efforts. Participant #4 further contributed by collaborating with local agribusiness enterprises to create employment opportunities and ensure fair market access for farmers and livestock keepers.

Through these activities, participants demonstrated their ability to translate theoretical knowledge into practical solutions to effectively address contemporary social issues within their communities. This field

practice phase not only strengthened participants' skills in social ministry but also enabled them to make meaningful contributions to societal development.

The Final Phase, Reflection and Evaluation

The findings from this program highlight the effectiveness of integrating theological education with practical social engagement to address contemporary social issues. The combination of training, field practice, and reflective evaluation demonstrated that participants could apply theoretical concepts to real-world challenges, bridging the gap between academic learning and community service (Putri Aiko et al., 2024; Fata et al., 2024; Abdurrohman et al., 2024). By aligning theological principles with practical action, the program reinforced the role of religious institutions as holistic contributors to societal well-being, addressing both spiritual and practical needs.

The program underscored the importance of theological foundations in guiding social action (Naidoo, 2022). Participants were able to connect the biblical mandate for social justice with their activities (Vorster, 2015), reflecting a deepened understanding of religious institutions' moral responsibility (Ayres, 2013). This alignment strengthened participants' roles as agents of change and emphasized the necessity for

religious institutions to contribute to community welfare through active, practical initiatives (Klaasen, 2019).

The program also demonstrated its effectiveness in addressing critical social issues. Efforts to tackle poverty and economic inequality included distributing essential goods, training in sustainable farming, and providing rolling capital, which directly impacted community resilience in underserved areas (Bossuroy et al., 2022). Cultural events promoting racial reconciliation, such as traditional ceremonies, showcased the potential of religious institutions to bridge divides and foster unity (Rivera & Nickels, 2014). Working in orphanages highlighted inclusivity's importance, especially in supporting children with disabilities (Gutierrez et al., 1996). At the same time, environmental initiatives like sustainable agricultural practices and community clean-ups emphasized the interconnectedness between ecological care and cultural preservation (Kato, 2024). Rehabilitation programs for inmates addressed human rights and social justice, fostering reintegration and reducing stigma.

Through these activities, the program revealed the multi-faceted role of religious institutions in addressing contemporary social challenges. By leveraging theological insights

and practical solutions, religious institutions can bridge diverse societal needs and create significant social impact (Mashau & Mangoedi, 2015). However, the program also faced challenges like limited resources (Beyers, 2014), community resistance (Hankela, 2014), and logistical hurdles (Beyers, 2014). These challenges offered participants valuable opportunities to develop problem-solving skills and resilience (Mashau & Mangoedi, 2015). Furthermore, collaboration with external stakeholders, including businesses and government agencies, emerged as a critical strategy to enhance the reach and sustainability of these social initiatives.

The outcomes of this program suggest that similar models could be replicated in other theological education settings. Equipping future leaders with the skills and knowledge to address societal challenges enables religious institutions to play a pivotal role in fostering justice, compassion, and sustainable development. This approach aligns with their mission to reflect divine love and justice in spiritual and societal contexts.

This program demonstrated that a well-designed integration of theological education and practical engagement benefits local communities while preparing future leaders to navigate complex social landscapes

effectively. The success of this model highlights the importance of continued efforts to combine education and social action for transformative community impact.

Conclusion

This study demonstrated the effectiveness of integrating theological education with practical social engagement to address contemporary social issues. By combining structured training, hands-on field practice, and reflective evaluation, participants could apply theoretical knowledge to real-world challenges, bridging the gap between academic learning and community service. The program reinforced the multifaceted role of religious institutions, showcasing their potential to act as holistic agents of change in society.

Key areas of impact included addressing poverty and economic inequality, promoting racial reconciliation, fostering gender equality, advocating for environmental stewardship, and upholding human rights and social justice. Participants successfully translated theological principles into meaningful actions that directly benefited their communities, highlighting the importance of faith-based approaches in tackling complex societal problems.

The findings suggest that other theological education institutions could adopt similar programs to prepare future leaders

who are spiritually grounded and equipped to navigate the demands of modern social realities. Religious institutions can play a pivotal role in creating a more just, compassionate, and sustainable world by fostering a balance between theological insight and practical implementation.

This research underscores the value of ongoing educational initiatives that integrate faith and action. These initiatives ensure that future leaders are prepared to respond to the evolving needs of their communities while remaining true to their theological commitments. The success of this program serves as a model for empowering religious institutions to fulfill their mission of serving both spiritual and societal needs effectively.

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