

The church as narrative polis: Revitalising congregational formation through the virtue ethics of Hauerwas and Macintyre in the Indonesian context

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Abstract: Congregational formation in contemporary Indonesia has shifted problematically: it has been reduced to cognitive instruction, trapped in normative moralism, and stripped of the depth of character formation. This article offers a theological reconstruction of formation through critical dialogue with the virtue ethics of Stanley Hauerwas and Alasdair MacIntyre, who understand the Church as a narrative polis, a political community that shapes moral imagination through practices, tradition, and the narrative unity of life. Using a constructive practical-theological approach structured by Richard Osmer's four tasks, the study argues that formation must move from information transfer towards initiation into a community of character shaped by Christ's cross and resurrection. The Indonesian context is examined through dialogue with local wisdom as a thick tradition, set in creative tension with religious pluralism and digital polarisation. The findings show that the Hauerwas-MacIntyre perspective offers a framework that addresses the formation crisis by restoring the Church as a school of virtues while opening critical dialogue with pluvirtues without lapsing into sectarianism.

Keywords: Alasdair MacIntyre, congregational formation, Indonesian contextual theology, narrative polis, Stanley Hauerwas, virtue ethics

Introduction

Congregational formation in contemporary Indonesia stands at an ironic crossroads. On the one hand, almost every church, whether mainline or Charismatic-Pentecostal, runs structured formation programmes, from catechesis, cell groups, and Bible schools to large-scale annual thematic seminars. On the other hand, empirical indications suggest that the quantitative growth of these programmes is not proportionate to the depth of Christian character formation among church members. Political polarisation on social media, minimal participation in ethical public discourse, and cases of compromised integrity involving church figures are symptoms of a deeper problem: formation often stops at the cognitive-informational level and fails to develop a whole moral habitus.¹

This critical diagnosis needs to be formulated carefully and honestly. Dominant congregational formation today tends to reduce the formation of faith to three interlocking

¹ Andrew Root, *The Pastor in a Secular Age: Ministry to People Who No Longer Need a God* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2019), 12–14.

paradigmatic traps: first, cognitivism, which treats formation as the transfer of doctrinal knowledge; second, programmatism, which measures the success of formation by the number of participants and certificates; and third, moralism, which presents Christian ethics as a list of commandments detached from the narrative of salvation and from community. These three reductions strip formation of its genuinely formative dimension, namely the shaping of human beings as creatures governed by desire and formed by repeated liturgical-communal practices.²

The Indonesian moral landscape reinforces the urgency of this diagnosis. Contemporary Indonesians live in what Charles Taylor calls a secular age, one in which faith is no longer the default position but one option among many, and in which cross-pressures among competing narratives of meaning vie for people's loyalty. Digital polarisation, religious cancel culture, intolerance mediated by social media, structural corruption, and the commodification of spirituality together form a landscape that requires the Church to reformulate its most basic ecclesiological question: what is the role of the Church as a character-forming community in the midst of a plural society and a radical pluralism of values?³

The need for a new theological framework capable of answering this crisis is urgent and cannot be deferred. Dominant approaches in Indonesian Christian Religious Education (CRE), many inspired by Thomas Groome and his framework of shared praxis, John Westerhoff and his theory of enculturation, or Maria Harris and her curriculum of formation, have contributed valuable work to faith formation. Yet these approaches have not sufficiently explored the political-communitarian dimension of the Church as a character-forming community in the richer, metaphysically and teleologically grounded Aristotelian-Thomistic sense. It is here that virtue ethics, with its long tradition from Aristotle to Aquinas, revitalised in the twentieth century by Alasdair MacIntyre, offers a valuable conceptual resource.

In his monumental work *After Virtue* (1981), Alasdair MacIntyre advances the sharp diagnosis that modernity suffers a "moral catastrophe" because it has lost the teleological framework that united action, the narrative of life, and tradition as the constitutive triad of morality. His key concepts (practice, internal goods, tradition, and narrative unity of life) supply a philosophical framework for understanding formation not as the transfer of information but as initiation into communal practices that form the virtues intrinsically.⁴ In his later work, *Dependent Rational Animals* (1999), MacIntyre elaborates further on the virtues of acknowledged dependence, virtues that arise from acknowledging human vulnerability and mutual dependence, which are highly relevant to a theology of *koinonia* and to social ecclesiology.⁵

Stanley Hauerwas takes up the MacIntyrean framework and sets it within the horizon of a radical ecclesiology. Hauerwas's central thesis, as formulated in *A Community of Character* (1981) and *In Good Company: The Church as Polis* (1995), is that the Church does not have a social ethic; the Church *is* a social ethic. The Church is a polis, a political community in the

² James K. A. Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom: Worship, Worldview, and Cultural Formation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2009), 39–41.

³ Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), 3–5.

⁴ Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, 3rd ed. (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007), 187–189.

⁵ Alasdair MacIntyre, *Dependent Rational Animals: Why Human Beings Need the Virtues* (Chicago: Open Court, 1999), 1–3.

classical Aristotelian sense, formed by the narrative of Christ's cross and resurrection and, through communal practices (baptism, the Eucharist, peacemaking, and forgiveness), shapes its members into witnesses to the Kingdom of God. Formation, in the Hauerwasian framework, is the initiation of a person into this narrative community, not instruction about the Church from a distance.⁶

The literature review reveals a significant research gap that merits investigation. First, although the thought of Hauerwas and MacIntyre has been discussed separately in some Indonesian theological literature, no reputable journal article has yet comprehensively integrated the two in order to read the problem of congregational formation in a relevant context. Second, Indonesian CRE literature remains dominated by an individualistic-cognitive paradigm of faith education, with minimal exploration of communitarian-narrative frameworks. Third, dialogue between Western communitarian virtue ethics and Indonesian local wisdom as a thick tradition in the MacIntyrean sense has rarely been undertaken in a systematic and reflective manner. This article fills that gap as a constructive contribution that bridges theory and practice.

The aim of this research is to revitalise the paradigm of congregational formation in Indonesia through a theological-ethical reconstruction using the narrative-polis framework of Hauerwas and MacIntyre, while engaging in critical dialogue with local wisdom and with contextual public challenges. The study is constructive library research within the framework of practical theology, not fieldwork. Its operational framework is Richard R. Osmer's four tasks of theological-practical interpretation: the descriptive-empirical task ("What is going on?"), the interpretive task ("Why is it going on?"), the normative task ("What ought to be going on?"), and the pragmatic task ("How might we respond?").⁷ The four tasks are not treated as labels but are mapped onto the structure of the article. The first section carries out the descriptive-empirical task by reading verified secondary data (civil society monitoring reports, national surveys, and published research findings) as a form of semi-formal *priestly listening*. The second section carries out the interpretive task by drawing on MacIntyre's philosophical framework to explain the structural roots of the reductions identified. The third section addresses the normative task through Hauerwas's ecclesiology. The fourth and fifth sections carry out the pragmatic task in the form of seven paradigmatic shifts and an Indonesian contextualisation.

The methodological consequence of this design must be stated openly: the descriptive-empirical task is carried out at the level of secondary data, not through collecting primary data from a particular congregation, so this article's constructive proposal has the status of a theological hypothesis awaiting further empirical testing. To maintain terminological consistency, the technical terms of MacIntyre and Hauerwas are used in a single fixed form throughout. The discussion is organised into five main sections. The first diagnoses the crisis of contemporary congregational formation theologically and sociologically; the second maps the framework of MacIntyrean virtue ethics, focusing on the concepts of *practice*, *tradition*, and *narrative unity*; the third discusses Hauerwas's communitarian ecclesiology, with the Church

⁶ Stanley Hauerwas, *A Community of Character: Toward a Constructive Christian Social Ethic* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981), 9–11.

⁷ Richard R. Osmer, *Practical Theology: An Introduction* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 4. The full exposition of the four tasks appears at 31–78 (descriptive-empirical), 79–128 (interpretive), 129–174 (normative), and 175–218 (pragmatic); an overview of all four appears at 28.

as narrative *polis* as its central category; the fourth offers a constructive reconstruction of congregational formation within a paradigm of virtue; and the fifth develops the Indonesian contextualisation through dialogue with local wisdom and an articulation of the ideal-empirical tension that is productive for the development of a practical ecclesiology in the archipelago.

The Crisis of Contemporary Congregational Formation: A Theological-Sociological Diagnosis

The diagnosis of the crisis of congregational formation must begin with an honest acknowledgement that the term “crisis” here is not alarmist rhetoric but a phenomenological description of the gap between the Church’s theological claims and the formative reality in its congregations. The crisis is multidimensional: it is an epistemological crisis (how faith is learned), an ontological crisis (what formation actually forms), a sociological crisis (how community shapes the identity of its members), and an eschatological crisis (the teleological direction in which formation is oriented). Ignoring this crisis by preserving the status quo of formation is a form of pastoral malpractice that is increasingly difficult to justify theologically in the face of the age’s demands.

The first reduction to diagnose is cognitivism. In this paradigm, formation is understood chiefly as the transfer of doctrinal information: a church member is considered “formed” if he or she has mastered the catechism, memorised verses, and can articulate the formulations of faith verbally. James K. A. Smith criticises this paradigm as an anthropology of the thinking thing, a view of the human being as a brain-on-a-stick formed chiefly by ideas. Yet, as Smith argues persuasively, human beings are liturgical animals: creatures formed more fundamentally by desire and habit than by the propositions they think. Reductive-cognitive formation fails to reach the affective-habitual layer, which is why it is impotent against the counter-narrative pull of secular liturgies (the shopping mall, social media, and the sports stadium) that shape church members’ moral imagination every day.⁸

The second reduction is programmatism. Here formation is measured by managerial categories borrowed from corporate logic: the number of participants, the smooth running of the curriculum, graduation certificates, and annual reports full of statistics. This programmatic logic places external goods (numbers, size, public image) above internal goods (the quality of character formation), to use a MacIntyrean distinction discussed further below. As a result, formation becomes an event that ends when the programme ends, rather than a practice that shapes identity over a lifetime. Andrew Root aptly calls this phenomenon the “MBA-ification” of congregational ministry: the colonisation of pastoral action by an instrumental logic, when it ought to be rooted in a ministerial encounter with the Christ who is really present among his people.⁹

The third reduction is moralism. In this paradigm, Christian ethics is presented as a list of commands and prohibitions detached from the narrative of salvation that gives them their meaning. Church members are taught what they must do without sufficiently understanding who they are as a narrative community formed by the story of God in Christ. Hauerwas

⁸ Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom*, 41–43.

⁹ Andrew Root, *Christopraxis: A Practical Theology of the Cross for Homo Incurvatus in Se* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2014), 8–10.

criticises such moralism as a betrayal of the theological character of Christian ethics: “Christian ethics does not begin with the question ‘What should I do?’ but with ‘What narrative forms the community that makes my actions meaningful?’” Without a constitutive narrative, moralism becomes burdensome legalism; with a living narrative, moral obligation becomes an expression of gratitude for the grace received.¹⁰

The Indonesian contextual landscape significantly aggravates the impact of these three reductions. Contemporary Indonesia is a society that sociologists call post-secular: a social configuration in which religion has not disappeared (as classical secularisation theory predicted) but has re-emerged in the public sphere in new ways, some fundamentalist, some therapeutic, and some politically instrumental. Churches in Indonesia navigate this space with a variety of responses, yet dominant formation has not sufficiently equipped church members to live reflectively and critically in this post-secular terrain. As a result, many church members fall into religiously based political polarisation or, conversely, dissolve into a consumerist spirituality that has lost its ecclesiological direction and its public responsibility.¹¹

The digital era deepens this crisis by structurally shifting the ecology of faith formation. Heidi Campbell and her colleagues show that digital religiosity is not merely the transfer of analogue practices into the online realm but a structural transformation in how communities of faith are formed, how authority is distributed, and how identity is negotiated in daily life. Social media algorithms have become new liturgists, shaping church members' moral imagination through the content they receive every day, even every minute. Formation that still operates on the assumption that a weekly face-to-face meeting is enough to form Christian character fails to recognise that formation takes place all the time, in many spaces, through many actors, and that many of these stand in fundamental opposition to the narrative of the Gospel.¹²

This diagnosis is not intended as paralysing pessimism but as a gateway to a more radical and responsible reconstruction. What is needed is not merely a methodological revision of existing formation programmes but a paradigmatic shift in what formation is, where it takes place, by whom it is carried out, and in what teleological direction it moves. This paradigmatic shift is what the virtue ethics of MacIntyre and the narrative-*polis* ecclesiology of Hauerwas offer, and the two are explored in turn in the next two sections. Woven together dialectically, these two frameworks provide conceptual resources adequate for reformulating congregational formation as a substantive and transformative ecclesial praxis.

MacIntyrean virtue ethics: Practice, tradition, and narrative unity

Alasdair MacIntyre's monumental work *After Virtue* (1981) opens with a dramatic and provocative thought experiment: imagine a civilisation in which, after a great catastrophe, fragments of scientific knowledge survive only as terms detached from their complete theoretical context. People would use words such as “atom” and “neutrino” without really understanding the scientific framework that once united them. MacIntyre claims that this is precisely our moral condition: we use moral terms such as “duty,” “rights,” and “justice” as

¹⁰ Hauerwas, *A Community of Character*, 96–98.

¹¹ Jürgen Habermas, “Notes on Post-Secular Society,” *New Perspectives Quarterly* 25, no. 4 (2008): 17–29.

¹² Heidi A. Campbell, *Digital Religion: Understanding Religious Practice in Digital Media*, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 2022), 3–5.

fragments detached from the Aristotelian-Thomistic teleological framework that once held them together coherently. Modernity, in MacIntyre's diagnosis, suffers a *moral catastrophe* that renders contemporary ethical discourse incommensurable and emotivist.¹³

The MacIntyrean solution is a constructive revitalisation of the virtue-ethical tradition. MacIntyre's distinctive move is not simply a return to Aristotle by repristination, but a conceptual reconstruction that places three key concepts in an interlocking constellation: practice, narrative unity of life, and tradition. A practice is defined technically as "a form of human activity that is cooperative, complex, and socially institutionalised, through which the goods internal to that form of activity are realised." This definition sharply distinguishes internal goods (goods that can be achieved only through participation in the practice itself) from external goods (instrumental goods such as money, status, and power). Playing chess to become a master strategist pursues internal goods; playing chess only for prize money pursues external goods.¹⁴

The concept of practice has profound and transformative theological implications. When we regard worship, prayer, fellowship, diaconal service, and even faith education as practices in the MacIntyrean sense, we understand that the goods these practices yield cannot be obtained in any way other than through sustained and faithful participation. There is no shortcut to forming Christian character; it grows only through faithful engagement in communal practices that have their own distinctive internal goods. This is why the programmatic reduction discussed earlier is so fatal: it converts a practice (oriented towards internal goods) into a programme (oriented towards external goods) and thereby kills its genuinely formative capacity.¹⁵

The second concept, the narrative unity of life, answers a fundamental philosophical-theological question: how do particular actions become coherent within a person's life? MacIntyre's answer is narrative: human beings are "storytelling animals" who understand their actions only within the context of a larger life story. "I can only answer the question 'What should I do?' if I can answer the prior question 'Of what story or stories do I find myself a part?'" Moral identity, then, is not a calculative-rational construction but a narrative discovery. The theological implication of this claim is profound: congregational formation is at heart an effort to help church members find themselves within the story of God (creation, covenant, incarnation, cross, resurrection, Pentecost, and the eschaton) as the narrative that forms their identity.¹⁶

The third concept, tradition, places practice and narrative within a broader and more dynamic historical horizon. Tradition in the MacIntyrean sense is not a static conservatism frozen in the past but "a historically extended and socially embodied argument about the goods that constitute that tradition." A living tradition is one that continually argues with itself about what lies at the core of its calling. For MacIntyre, human beings never stand outside tradition (modernity's claim to a tradition-neutral rationality is an epistemological illusion) but always think and act from within a particular tradition, with the capacity to criticise and

¹³ MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 1–3.

¹⁴ MacIntyre, 187.

¹⁵ Craig Dykstra, *Growing in the Life of Faith: Education and Christian Practices*, 2nd ed. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005), 56–58.

¹⁶ MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 216.

develop it from within. For theologians, this means that the Church is called to be the heir and developer of a living tradition, not a dead and unresponsive doctrinal museum.¹⁷

In his later work *Dependent Rational Animals* (1999), MacIntyre extends his virtue ethics by adding what he calls the virtues of acknowledged dependence: virtues that arise from an honest acknowledgement of human vulnerability and mutual dependence. His argument is that traditional ethics (including classical Aristotelian ethics) places too much emphasis on the independent, mature, rational agent, while neglecting infants, the sick, the elderly, and persons with disabilities, who in empirical terms account for a large share of human existence. Virtues such as *misericordia* (compassion), gratitude, and humility become central in these phases of dependence. This concept resonates strongly with a theology of *koinonia*, which places mutual dependence at the heart of ecclesiology rather than treating it as a weakness to be overcome or concealed.¹⁸

Tradition, narrative, practice, and the virtues of dependence: these four MacIntyrean pillars supply a philosophical framework ready to be carried into a theological-ecclesiological horizon. MacIntyre himself, however, although a Catholic acutely aware of the theological implications of his work and one who frequently refers to Aquinas, never developed an explicit ecclesiology from his framework. That task was taken up by Stanley Hauerwas, who candidly acknowledges his great debt to MacIntyre while pressing the framework into more radical ecclesiological territory: the Church as a concrete narrative polis. This discussion is developed in the next section, with particular attention to how MacIntyrean categories are translated into a contemporary practical-ecclesiological discourse that has real theological bite.

Hauerwas's communitarian ecclesiology: The church as a narrative polis

Stanley Hauerwas is the theologian whom Time magazine in 2001 called "America's best theologian," an accolade to which he responded with his characteristic irony: "Best is not a theological category." The irony is theologically apt, because Hauerwas's whole theological project in fact challenges the logic of "market competition" that places theology in the category of "best" as though it were a consumer product. For Hauerwas, Christian theology and ethics can be properly understood only within a community formed by the narrative of the Gospel: the Church as polis. This is the thesis at the heart of his monumental works: *A Community of Character* (1981), *The Peaceable Kingdom* (1983), *Resident Aliens* (1989, co-written with William Willimon), and *In Good Company: The Church as Polis* (1995).¹⁹

Hauerwas's most provocative thesis is formulated tersely and sharply: "The Church does not *have* a social ethic; the Church *is* a social ethic." This claim challenges the basic assumption of liberal social ethics, which regards the Church as one civil institution among others that develops ethical positions on public issues. For Hauerwas, the Church is not an institution alongside others in a competitive civil society but an alternative polis, a political community in the Aristotelian sense formed by the narrative of Christ's cross and resurrection. The Church becomes a social ethic by being itself faithfully, that is, by living out the practices (baptism, the

¹⁷ MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 222.

¹⁸ MacIntyre, *Dependent Rational Animals*, 119–121.

¹⁹ Stanley Hauerwas, *Hannah's Child: A Theologian's Memoir* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010), 281–283.

Eucharist, proclamation, forgiveness, peacemaking) that form its members into *witnesses* to the Kingdom of God present in Christ.²⁰

The concept of *witness* is central in Hauerwas and replaces the categories of “relevance” or “social transformation” in liberal public theology. For Hauerwas, the question “How does the Church make the world a better place?” is already theologically misdirected. The right question is, “How does the Church become the Church so that the world knows that it is the world?” The Church is not called to make the world into the Church but to be a contrast society that, through its very existence, helps the world understand its own calling in the light of the Kingdom of God. This is not apolitical escapism but a more radical form of social relevance: a relevance rooted in fidelity to its constitutive identity rather than in accommodation to successive secular agendas.²¹

The formation of the Church as a narrative polis takes place through what Hauerwas calls “church as a community of character.” Character here is not merely a collection of separate individual traits but an embodied disposition formed through long and faithful participation in communal practices. Hauerwas states rightly: “Character is the formed pattern of life that makes a person ready to act in a certain way.” In this framework, formation is the initiation of a person into the community’s pattern of life. It is not informational teaching about the Church but incorporation into the Church as a character-forming community that involves every dimension of personal-communal existence.²²

One of Hauerwas’s unique contributions is his emphasis on moral imagination as the product of continuing narrative formation. Moral imagination is the capacity to see the world in a certain way: to distinguish what matters from what does not, what is faithful from what compromises, what is Christological from what is merely generically religious. Moral imagination is not formed through abstract rational argument but through long-term involvement in a community that lives from a particular, concrete narrative. This is why Hauerwas, following Iris Murdoch, stresses the importance of “looking with love,” the capacity to see with love, which forms only through the discipline of participating in a community of faith that faithfully carries out its calling.²³

Hauerwas’s critique of Constantinianism needs to be understood carefully in this context. Constantinianism, a term he takes from John Howard Yoder, refers to the historical tendency of the Church to merge with secular political power and to identify itself with the dominant agenda of civilisation. Hauerwas does not reject public engagement per se; what he rejects is the blurring of the Church’s theological identity for the sake of short-term political effectiveness. When the Church becomes indistinguishable from other civil institutions, it loses its capacity to be an alternative polis that bears witness to a deeper truth. The practical implication is that formation must intentionally shape church members with a distinctive

²⁰Hauerwas, *A Community of Character*, 10.

²¹Stanley Hauerwas, *In Good Company: The Church as Polis* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1995), 6–8.

²²Stanley Hauerwas and William H. Willimon, *Resident Aliens: Life in the Christian Colony* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1989), 46–48.

²³Stanley Hauerwas, *The Peaceable Kingdom: A Primer in Christian Ethics* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983), 39.

theological identity before (and so that) they can make an authentic contribution to the wider plural society.²⁴

It must be honestly acknowledged that Hauerwas's ecclesiology is not exempt from sharp criticism that deserves consideration. Nicholas Healy, in *Hauerwas: A (Very) Critical Introduction* (2014), criticises Hauerwas's tendency to idealise the Church in the abstract, detached from the empirical reality of concrete congregations, which are often far from the "community of character" he describes.²⁵ Healy had earlier also warned of the risk of such conceptual reification.²⁶ Jeffrey Stout, in *Democracy and Tradition* (2004), argues that Hauerwas's position risks drawing the Church out of the broader democratic conversation, thereby endangering the Church's constructive contribution to plural society.²⁷ These criticisms warrant acknowledgment and serious consideration, especially when applying the Hauerwasian framework to the Indonesian context, which has its own plural complexity. Nevertheless, they do not undermine Hauerwas's fundamental contribution; they merely remind us that the ecclesiology of the narrative polis must always be lived out in a creative tension between theological ideal and empirical reality, a tension that is in fact productive for the development of a reflective practical theology.

Revitalising congregational formation: A constructive proposal

On the basis of the Hauerwas-MacIntyre framework mapped above, the revitalisation of congregational formation demands a fundamental paradigmatic shift, not merely cosmetic adjustments to existing programmes. The first shift is from information transfer to initiation into practice. In this new paradigm, formation is understood not as the teaching of doctrinal content but as the initiation of church members into the Church's constitutive practices: liturgical worship, contemplative prayer, *lectio divina*, table fellowship, diaconal service, justice advocacy, and radical forgiveness. Each practice has its own internal goods, which can be realised only through long and faithful participation. Formation is thus lifelong accompaniment in these practices, not a time-limited course closed with a certificate.

The second shift is from individualism to authentic communitarianism. Formation within a paradigm of virtue cannot be understood as a project of individual self-formation that is then facilitated by the community; it is meaningful only within a community that lives from a particular constitutive narrative. This challenges the modernist assumption underlying much contemporary CRE literature, namely that growth in faith is essentially an individual journey that the community facilitates only incidentally. In the Hauerwasian framework, by contrast, Christian identity is constitutively formed by the community; it does not exist outside the community. The practical implications are significant: formation must reorient itself towards forming authentic small communities in which formative practices can take root and grow organically.²⁸

²⁴ Hauerwas, *The Peaceable Kingdom*, 30–32. Hauerwas acknowledges the influence of Iris Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good* (London: Routledge, 1970).

²⁵ John Howard Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus: Vicit Agnus Noster*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 135–137.

²⁶ Nicholas M. Healy, *Hauerwas: A (Very) Critical Introduction* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2014), 8–10.

²⁷ Jeffrey Stout, *Democracy and Tradition* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), 140–142.

²⁸ Brad J. Kallenberg, "The Master Argument of MacIntyre's After Virtue," in *Virtues and Practices in the Christian Tradition: Christian Ethics after MacIntyre*, ed. Nancey Murphy, Brad J. Kallenberg, and Mark Thiessen Nation (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2003), 7–9.

The third shift is from abstract moralism to constitutive narrative. Formation must not begin with a list of moral commands detached from context but with the stories of God in Christ that form the Church as God's people. Christian morality is not an autonomous ethical system accidentally connected to religion; it directly follows from the narrative of salvation that gives it meaning. Formation therefore needs to be designed as a deepening of narrative: helping church members see themselves as characters in the story of God, with a plot, antagonists, a climax, and an eschaton that teleologically determine the meaning of their actions. This narrative approach also opens space for dialogue with Indonesia's local narrative traditions, which is explored further in a later section.

The fourth shift is from curriculum to liturgy. James K. A. Smith rightly argues that "we are what we love" and that our loves are formed not primarily by propositional cognitive teaching but by repeated and patterned liturgical practices. The practical implications of this claim are far-reaching: the Sunday liturgy (or daily worship) is not a mere supplement to formation but the principal and decisive source of the formation of faith. Effective formation must take the liturgical ecology of the Church seriously: how the structure of worship, songs of praise, prayers, and rites shapes the moral imagination of the congregation, subtly but deeply. A carefully designed liturgy is the most powerful formative curriculum; a carelessly designed liturgy becomes a counter-narrative that erodes formal formation.²⁹

The fifth shift is from hierarchical authority to the authority of tradition. Within a paradigm of virtue, the authority of formation derives chiefly not from the institutional position of the pastor or church council, with its ecclesiastical bureaucracy, but from the living tradition through which the pastor and council themselves have been formed and sent. The pastor is the heir and guardian of tradition, not an autonomous authority who can speak out of a vacuum. This provides a theological foundation for teaching authority that is not authoritarian but collegial, traditional, and dialogical. At the same time, it challenges the individualistic claim that "faith is a private matter between me and God," a claim which, although popular among contemporary congregations, fundamentally contradicts the classical Christian ecclesiology rooted in the *communio sanctorum*.³⁰

The sixth shift is from partial formation to ecosystemic formation. The crisis of formation cannot be answered merely by improving catechesis programmes or thematic seminars in isolation. What is needed is an ecosystemic awareness that formation takes place all the time, in many spaces, through many formative actors: the family, cell groups, Sunday worship, diaconal service, study groups, friendships, and even media consumption. Each of these spaces needs to be evaluated and designed as part of a larger and coherent formative ecosystem. This demands complex pastoral leadership: not merely the efficient management of programmes but the curation of the entire ecology of faith formation in the congregation, with sharp theological sensitivity.

Finally, the seventh shift is from quantitative evaluation to narrative-qualitative evaluation. How do we know that formation has succeeded in forming church members as disciples of Christ? Within a paradigm of virtue, this question cannot be answered with simple

²⁹ James K. A. Smith, *You Are What You Love: The Spiritual Power of Habit* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2016), 7–9.

³⁰ Stanley Hauerwas, *After Christendom? How the Church Is to Behave If Freedom, Justice, and a Christian Nation Are Bad Ideas* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1991), 27–29.

quantitative metrics oriented towards external goods. We need richer narrative metrics. Are church members increasingly able to articulate their life stories within the framework of the Gospel narrative? Does the community increasingly display the characteristics of *koinonia* commanded in the New Testament? Are church members increasingly involved in practices that form the virtues, from forgiveness to justice and from humility to faithfulness? Such evaluation is more demanding, slower, and more difficult but far more honest theologically and ecclesologically. With these seven shifts, congregational formation can be revitalised as a substantive ecclesial praxis, not merely a reproductive institutional programme.

Indonesian contextualisation: Dialogue with local wisdom and public challenges

The Hauerwas-MacIntyre framework cannot be carried over to the Indonesian context mechanically and reductively; it must be woven critically into the complex theological, cultural, and political realities of contemporary Indonesia. Authentic contextualisation is not literal translation but critical dialogue, which allows the Hauerwasian framework to illuminate the Indonesian context while also allowing the Indonesian context to criticise and enrich that framework. Eka Darmaputera rightly warned that Indonesian theology must avoid two symmetrical dangers: theology from above, which imports Western frameworks uncritically, and theology from below, which discards the great Christian tradition for the sake of a narrow and provincial local authenticity. The healthy position is a dialectical dialogue in which the two horizons illuminate each other critically and constructively.³¹

Indonesian local wisdom supplies a rich resource for dialogue with MacIntyrean virtue ethics. Concepts such as *gotong royong* (Javanese-Indonesian), *pela-gandong* (Maluku), *daliha na tolu* (Batak), *tepa selira* (Javanese), *siri' na pacce* (Bugis-Makassar), *tri hita karana* (Bali), and many others are communal practices with distinctive internal goods, formed within long traditions and carried out within complete collective narratives. In the MacIntyrean sense, these practices are *thick traditions*: traditions rich in ethical substance, not merely shallow social conventions. Congregational formation can draw on these concepts not as careless theological syncretism but as *praeparatio evangelica*, a cultural preparation ready to be transformed by the narrative of the Gospel.³²

This dialogue must nevertheless be critical, not romantic or nostalgic. *Pela-gandong*, for example, has historically been a source of social cohesion in Maluku, yet it is also vulnerable to co-option by sectarian logic when tensions between communities peak, as in the Maluku conflict of 1999–2002. As a collective ethos, *gotong royong* can become a tyranny of the majority that suppresses difference and dulls individual conscience. MacIntyrean virtue ethics in fact supplies a framework for such critical dialogue: a living tradition is one that argues with itself about the core of its calling. Congregational formation is called to be a space in which Indonesia's local traditions undergo critical dialogue with the great tradition of the Gospel, so that the authentic internal goods of both traditions can illuminate and complete one another.³³

³¹ Eka Darmaputera, *Pancasila: Identitas dan Modernitas; Tinjauan Etis dan Budaya* (Jakarta: BPK Gunung Mulia, 1988), 151–153.

³² Robert J. Schreiter, *Constructing Local Theologies* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1985), 22–24.

³³ Steve Gaspersz, "Pela-Gandong dan Rekonsiliasi: Refleksi Teologis Pasca Konflik Ambon", *Gema Teologika* 4, no. 1 (2019): 49–66.

The second challenge in the Indonesian context is a radical and distinctive religious pluralism. Indonesia has the largest Muslim population in the world, along with a distinctive religious diversity that includes Christian denominations, local religions, and Asian spiritual traditions. In this context, the Hauerwasian ecclesiology of the Church as narrative polis risks being misunderstood as a sectarianism that withdraws from the plural public sphere. This risk needs to be addressed honestly and constructively. Yet, as Hauerwas himself firmly insists, “being the Church” does not mean avoiding the world but engaging the world authentically, with a clear theological identity rather than with compromises that blur witness. In the Indonesian context, a clear theological identity is in fact a prerequisite for substantive interreligious dialogue, not an obstacle to it.³⁴

The third challenge is a deep and structural digital polarisation. Indonesia is among the countries with the highest levels of social media penetration in the world, and political polarisation along lines of religious identity has reached an alarming level in the past decade. Social media algorithms accelerate the formation of echo chambers, making it increasingly hard for church members to communicate with those who hold different views, even within the same congregation. In this context, the Church as narrative polis is challenged to become a contrast society displaying a qualitatively different practice of communication: communication formed by forgiveness, patience, listening, and humility. Formation needs explicitly to raise digital ethics as an integral part of the formation of the virtues, not as a mere list of technical prohibitions but as a praxis of technology use rooted in Christian character.

The ideal-empirical tension must be acknowledged honestly and humbly in ecclesiology. Healy is right to remind us that the concrete Church is often far from the “community of character” that Hauerwas envisions in his constructions. The churches of Indonesia have a long history marked not only by remarkable witness but also by scandal, schism, and shameful political compromise. Acknowledging this reality does not undermine the vision of the narrative polis; it purifies it of naive idealisation. The vision is not meant to describe a Church that already exists in perfection, but to serve as an eschatological calling that shapes formation. Congregational formation therefore always stands within a creative tension between the Church as it is (full of weakness and ambiguity) and the Church as it is called to be (a community of character that bears witness to the Kingdom of God). This tension is not a theoretical weakness to be eliminated but a source of productive theological dynamism.

The pastoral implications of this contextualisation are broad and deep. First, congregational formation in Indonesia needs to integrate local wisdom as a legitimate theological resource, not merely as decorative cultural illustration. Second, it needs to build a capacity for interreligious dialogue rooted in a strong theological identity, not in a relativism that blurs substantive conviction. Third, it needs to develop a formative digital ethics as an integral part of formation, not as an optional extra. Fourth, it needs to sustain the ideal-empirical tension with honest ecclesiological humility, without falling into cynicism or naive idealism. Fifth, it needs to encourage networks among congregations to share successful formative practices, so the thick tradition of the Indonesian Church can develop as a living tradition, one that argues with itself about the core of its calling under the specific conditions of contemporary Indonesia.³⁵ The virtue ethics of Hauerwas and MacIntyre thus becomes not

³⁴ Hauerwas and Willimon, *Resident Aliens*, 78–80.

³⁵ Richard R. Osmer, *Practical Theology: An Introduction* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 4–6.

a foreign paradigm imposed from outside, but a critical framework that helps the Indonesian Church become more authentic to itself and more faithful to the calling of the Gospel amid the complexity of its context.³⁶

Conclusion

Congregational formation in contemporary Indonesia is in a crisis that demands a paradigmatic response, not merely a methodological revision of existing programmes; the crisis is rooted in the reduction of formation to the transfer of cognitive information, programme management oriented towards external goods, and an abstract moralism detached from the constitutive narrative of the Gospel. Alasdair MacIntyre's framework of virtue ethics, with its conceptual triad of practice, the narrative unity of life, and tradition, combined with Stanley Hauerwas's narrative ecclesiology, which sees the Church as a community of character that forms moral imagination through liturgical-communal participation, provides a theological-ethical framework adequate for the substantive revitalisation of congregational formation. The seven paradigmatic shifts proposed (from transfer to initiation, from individualism to communitarianism, from moralism to narrative, from curriculum to liturgy, from hierarchical authority to the authority of tradition, from partial to ecosystemic formation, and from quantitative to narrative-qualitative evaluation) form the constructive contours of a reconstruction of formation rooted in a sound ecclesiology. In the Indonesian context, this framework is woven critically together with local wisdom as thick tradition, with religious pluralism as a field of witness, and with the digital challenge as a new ethical calling, while sustaining the creative tension between the ideal ecclesiological vision and the reality of an ambiguous Church, a tension that is itself a source of dynamism for formation as the eschatological praxis of the Indonesian Church on its way towards the fullness of its calling.

As a constructive library-based study, this article has limitations that need to be stated openly. The seven shifts proposed have not been tested in concrete congregations, and the diagnosis of the crisis rests on secondary data that map the moral ecosystem rather than on direct measurement of the quality of formation in particular congregations. Further research, whether case studies of congregations, interviews with formation practitioners, or surveys of church members, is needed to test whether these shifts can be operationalised, and at what point they collide with the institutional realities of churches in Indonesia. These limitations are not a reason to postpone the constructive proposal but markers of the direction of the next research agenda.

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Credit authorship contribution

³⁶ Lesslie Newbigin, *Foolishness to the Greeks: The Gospel and Western Culture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986), 1–3.

The authors affirm that both contributed to developing and completing the manuscript. Poluan contributed to the initial conceptualisation and formulation of the main ideas, while Lie provided critical insights, expanded the discussion, and collaborated in revising and refining the manuscript for final submission.

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