

Legal Literacy Training for Christian Church Leaders: A Community Development Program in Donomulyo, South Malang, Indonesia

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Abstract

Legal literacy plays a crucial role in helping religious leaders navigate legal frameworks related to religious freedom, public communication, and community relations in plural societies. However, many church leaders in local communities still have a limited understanding of legal regulations governing religious practices, which may lead to misunderstandings or potential social tensions. This study reports the implementation of a legal literacy training program for Christian church leaders in Donomulyo, South Malang, Indonesia. The program was designed as a community development initiative aimed at strengthening legal awareness among religious leaders through participatory education. The training involved more than 80 church leaders from various congregations and was conducted through seminars, interactive discussions, and a simple knowledge evaluation using pre-test and post-test instruments. The results indicate a significant improvement in participants' legal knowledge, with the average score increasing from 53.78 in the pre-test to 74.27 in the post-test. Participants also demonstrated strong engagement during discussions and expressed intentions to disseminate the knowledge gained within their congregations. These findings suggest that legal literacy training can serve as an effective community empowerment strategy by strengthening the capacity of religious leaders to navigate legal issues, promote responsible public communication, and support social harmony in pluralistic communities.

Keywords:

Legal Literacy Training; Church Leadership; Community Empowerment; Religious Freedom; Social Harmony.

Abstrak

Penguatan Literasi Hukum bagi Pemimpin Gereja Kristen: Program Pengembangan Masyarakat di Malang Selatan, Indonesia. Literasi hukum memiliki peran penting dalam membantu pemimpin agama memahami kerangka hukum yang berkaitan dengan kebebasan beragama, komunikasi publik, serta relasi sosial dalam masyarakat yang plural. Namun, banyak pemimpin gereja di tingkat komunitas masih memiliki keterbatasan pemahaman mengenai regulasi hukum yang mengatur praktik keagamaan, yang berpotensi menimbulkan kesalahpahaman maupun ketegangan sosial. Penelitian ini melaporkan pelaksanaan program pelatihan literasi hukum bagi pemimpin gereja Kristen di Donomulyo, Malang Selatan, Indonesia. Program ini dirancang sebagai inisiatif pengembangan masyarakat yang bertujuan untuk memperkuat kesadaran hukum di kalangan pemimpin agama melalui pendekatan pendidikan partisipatif. Kegiatan pelatihan melibatkan lebih dari 80 pemimpin gereja dari berbagai jemaat dan dilaksanakan melalui seminar, diskusi interaktif, serta evaluasi pengetahuan sederhana menggunakan instrumen pre-test dan post-test. Hasil kegiatan menunjukkan adanya peningkatan yang signifikan pada pengetahuan hukum peserta, dengan rata-rata skor meningkat dari 53,78 pada pre-test menjadi 74,27 pada post-test. Para peserta juga menunjukkan keterlibatan yang tinggi dalam diskusi serta menyatakan komitmen untuk menyebarkan pengetahuan yang diperoleh kepada jemaat masing-masing. Temuan ini menunjukkan bahwa pelatihan literasi hukum dapat menjadi strategi pemberdayaan masyarakat yang efektif dengan memperkuat kapasitas pemimpin agama dalam memahami isu-isu hukum, mendorong komunikasi publik yang bertanggung jawab, serta mendukung terciptanya harmoni sosial dalam masyarakat yang plural.

Kata kata kunci :

Pelatihan Literasi Hukum; Kepemimpinan Gereja; Pemberdayaan Masyarakat; Kebebasan Beragama; Harmoni Sosial.

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Introduction

The southern Malang region, particularly Donomulyo District, represents a socially diverse area where religious communities interact closely with local society. Christian churches and their leaders play an important role in guiding congregations while maintaining harmonious relationships with surrounding communities. However, preliminary discussions with local church leaders revealed that many of them had limited knowledge regarding legal frameworks related to religious freedom, regulations on places of worship, and legal aspects of public communication. This limited legal understanding may create potential misunderstandings, administrative difficulties, or social tensions when religious activities intersect with legal regulations and community relations.

More specifically, the situation in Donomulyo reflects a localized ‘legal-operational gap’ rather than merely a general lack of legal knowledge. Preliminary discussions and informal mapping revealed three recurring conflict triggers that distinguish this area from more administratively integrated regions. First, church leaders frequently encounter procedural ambiguity in complying with the Joint Ministerial Regulation (PBM 2006), particularly regarding community approval requirements, which often leads to delays or rejection in house-of-worship permit applications. Second, there is a lack of structured mediation mechanisms between religious leaders and local authorities, resulting in administrative bottlenecks and miscommunication during licensing processes. Third, the increasing use of digital platforms without adequate legal awareness has exposed leaders to risks related to defamation law and hate speech regulation, which may escalate into broader social tensions. These conditions indicate the presence of a practical legal vacuum at the grassroots level, where formal regulations exist but are not effectively translated into actionable knowledge for community leaders.

Indonesia is constitutionally recognized as a state governed by law, as stated in Article 1(3) of the 1945 Constitution, which affirms that Indonesia is a “*Rechtsstaat*” or rule-of-law state. This principle implies that all aspects of social life, including religious activities and institutions, must operate within the framework of national law. In addition, the constitution guarantees the right to freedom of religion and belief, ensuring that every citizen has the right to embrace a religion and practice worship according to their faith (UUD 1945 Articles 28E and 29). These constitutional guarantees reflect Indonesia’s commitment to religious pluralism and social harmony.

Despite these constitutional guarantees, the practice of religious freedom in Indonesia often faces complex social and legal challenges. Issues such as the establishment of houses of worship, religious intolerance, and the misuse of digital media related to religious discourse frequently become sources of tension within society. Several studies have shown that conflicts related to religious practices and places of worship remain a recurring issue in plural societies when legal literacy and public understanding of regulations are limited (Sofjan, 2016; Mietzner & Muhtadi, 2018). Therefore, strengthening legal awareness among religious leaders becomes an important strategy to prevent potential conflicts and promote social cohesion.

Religious leaders play a strategic role in shaping community attitudes and maintaining harmonious relationships among different social groups. In many communities, religious leaders are respected figures whose guidance influences public opinion and community behavior. In the context of Donomulyo, this strategic role extends beyond moral influence into concrete legal outcomes. Church leaders function as intermediaries who can facilitate compliance with administrative procedures, reduce delays in house-of-worship permit applications, and prevent escalation of disputes through legally informed communication with local stakeholders. Strengthening their legal literacy is therefore not only an educational objective, but also an institutional strategy to minimize administrative bottlenecks and enhance procedural legitimacy in religious governance. Consequently, their understanding of legal frameworks related to religious freedom, social responsibility, and public communication is crucial. Research indicates that strengthening legal literacy among community leaders contributes significantly to improving civic awareness, conflict prevention, and social harmony (Setha, 2024; Flora et al., 2025; Djafar et al., 2026; Rojak, 2021).

One important legal issue frequently encountered by religious communities in Indonesia concerns the regulation governing the construction of houses of worship. The Joint Ministerial Regulation of the Minister of Religious Affairs and the Minister of Home Affairs (2006) stipulates administrative and social requirements for establishing houses of worship, including support from local residents. While the regulation aims to maintain social harmony, insufficient understanding of the procedures often leads to misunderstandings or disputes within local communities.

In addition to institutional regulations, the increasing use of digital platforms has also created new challenges for religious leaders. Social media has become an important medium for disseminating religious teachings and engaging with communities. However, without adequate knowledge of legal boundaries, the use of digital communication may potentially violate laws related to hate speech, religious defamation, or the spread of misinformation. Previous studies highlight that digital literacy and legal awareness are essential competencies for community leaders in the era of digital communication.

In response to these challenges, a community service program entitled “*Legal Literacy Training for Christian Church Leaders*” was implemented in Donomulyo, South Malang. The program aimed to enhance legal literacy among church leaders by providing education on constitutional rights related to religious freedom, legal regulations governing religious institutions, and legal responsibilities in public communication. The training activities included seminars, interactive discussions, and knowledge evaluation through pre-test and post-test instruments.

This program contributes to community empowerment by strengthening the capacity of religious leaders to understand legal frameworks governing religious life in Indonesia. By improving legal literacy, church leaders are expected to navigate legal regulations more effectively, prevent potential conflicts, and promote responsible civic engagement within their communities. Furthermore, the program demonstrates how legal literacy training can function

as a practical model for strengthening social harmony and community resilience in plural societies.

Method

The community development program employed a participatory educational approach to enhance legal literacy among Christian church leaders in Donomulyo, South Malang, Indonesia, and was conducted over two days (31 October–1 November 2025) with more than 80 participants, including pastors, church elders, ministry coordinators, and representatives of Christian community organizations. The implementation began with a needs assessment and coordination phase involving local church networks, using informal semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions to identify key legal challenges faced by participants, particularly concerning house-of-worship permits, community disputes, and digital communication risks. Based on these findings, contextually relevant training materials were developed, focusing on Indonesian legal frameworks related to religious freedom, establishment of houses of worship, public communication, and responsible digital media use. The program was delivered through seminars, interactive discussions, and case-based reflection sessions designed to promote active engagement and contextual understanding, where participants analyzed real or simulated cases, discussed them in small groups, and reflected collectively with facilitator guidance. The effectiveness of the program was evaluated using a pre-test and post-test design consisting of multiple-choice and scenario-based questions to assess participants' legal knowledge and practical reasoning. The results were analyzed descriptively by comparing mean scores to determine learning improvement, complemented by qualitative feedback collected through open discussions to capture participants' perceptions of the program's relevance and usefulness.

Result and Discussion

The community development program entitled "*Legal Literacy for Christian Leaders*" was successfully implemented in Donomulyo, South Malang, on 31 October – 1 November 2025. The program was attended by more than 80 participants, consisting of pastors, church elders, ministry coordinators, and Christian community leaders from several churches in the southern Malang region. The training activities were designed to enhance legal literacy among church leaders, particularly regarding constitutional guarantees of religious freedom, legal regulations concerning houses of worship, and legal responsibilities in public communication. The activities were conducted through lectures, interactive discussions, and evaluation sessions aimed at measuring participants' understanding of the training materials.

The training sessions began with the delivery of foundational materials related to the concept of the rule of law in Indonesia and the constitutional guarantees of religious freedom. Participants were introduced to the principle that Indonesia is a state governed by law, as stated in Article 1(3) of the 1945 Constitution, which emphasizes that all citizens and institutions must operate within the legal framework of the state. In addition, the discussion highlighted the constitutional protection of freedom of religion as stipulated in Articles 28E and 29 of the Constitution, which guarantee the right of every citizen to embrace and practice their religion according to their beliefs. These discussions were considered essential because many

participants previously had a limited understanding of the legal frameworks governing religious activities in Indonesia.

Another important topic discussed during the training was the legal regulation concerning the establishment of houses of worship in Indonesia. Participants were introduced to the Joint Ministerial Regulation of the Minister of Religious Affairs and the Minister of Home Affairs (2006), which outlines administrative and social requirements for building houses of worship. The discussion focused on practical issues frequently faced by churches, including community approval requirements and administrative procedures. This topic generated significant interest among participants, as many church leaders expressed concerns about potential conflicts or misunderstandings related to the construction of worship facilities in their communities.

The training also addressed legal issues related to religious expression and digital communication. In the era of social media, religious leaders increasingly use digital platforms to share sermons, religious teachings, and community messages. However, this practice may potentially lead to legal problems if it violates laws related to hate speech or religious defamation. Therefore, participants were encouraged to understand the legal boundaries of public communication and to promote responsible digital engagement. The discussion emphasized the importance of ethical communication and social responsibility in maintaining harmony within Indonesia's pluralistic society.

To evaluate the effectiveness of the training program, a simple knowledge assessment was conducted using pre-test and post-test instruments. The pre-test was administered before the training sessions began to measure the participants' initial level of legal knowledge. The post-test was conducted at the end of the training to assess the extent to which participants' understanding had improved after attending the program. The evaluation results indicate that the training contributed positively to improving participants' legal literacy.

A more detailed analysis of the post-test results indicates that the improvement in legal literacy was not entirely uniform across all domains and participant groups. When disaggregated by topic, the greatest improvement was observed in constitutional rights literacy (approximately +25%), followed by digital communication law (+21%), while knowledge related to the Joint Ministerial Regulation (PBM 2006) showed relatively lower improvement (+15%), indicating that administrative and procedural aspects of house-of-worship regulation remain the most challenging area for participants.

In terms of participant background, younger ministry coordinators demonstrated slightly greater relative improvement compared to senior church elders, particularly in digital law topics, suggesting generational differences in familiarity with legal issues related to online communication. However, all participant categories showed a positive increase in scores, confirming the overall effectiveness of the training program.

Table 1. Pre-test and Post-test Results

Indicator	Average Score
Pre-test	53.78
Post-test	74.27

Improvement	20.49 points
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Table 1 show a significant increase in participants' understanding of legal literacy topics after participating in the training. The average score increased from 53.78 in the pre-test to 74.27 in the post-test, indicating an improvement of approximately 20.49 points. This aggregate improvement, however, should be interpreted alongside the topic-specific variations discussed earlier, which reveal that procedural legal knowledge, particularly related to PBM 2006, remains comparatively less internalized than constitutional or digital law concepts. This improvement suggests that the educational activities were effective in enhancing participants' knowledge of legal frameworks related to religious practices and community interactions.

To provide a clearer illustration of the knowledge improvement achieved through the program, the comparison between pre-test and post-test scores is presented in Figure 2. The figure shows that participants experienced a noticeable increase in their understanding after attending the training sessions.



Figure 1. Seminar on Legal Literacy for Christian Leaders

Figure 2. shows the implementation of the legal literacy seminar attended by Christian leaders in Donomulyo, South Malang.

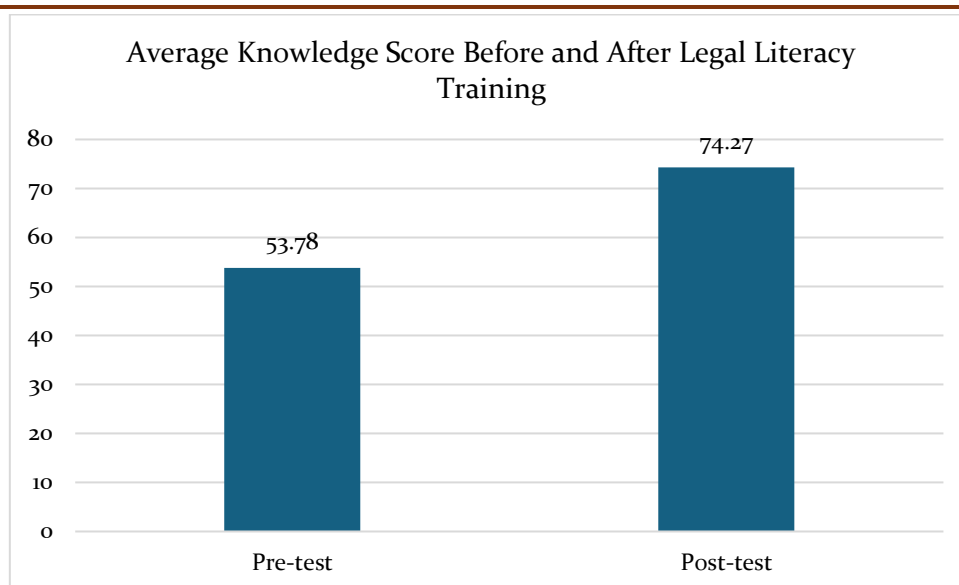


Figure 3. Average Knowledge Score Before and After Legal Literacy Training

Figure 3 shows the comparison between pre-test and post-test results illustrates the improvement in participants' legal literacy after attending the training program.

In addition to the quantitative evaluation results, qualitative observations during the training also indicated high levels of participant engagement. Participants actively participated in discussions and asked questions related to real-life legal challenges encountered in their ministry contexts. This high level of engagement is further reflected in participants' direct responses during the sessions. One participant (church elder) stated, 'We often do not reject regulations, but we simply do not understand the exact procedures required, especially when applying for church permits.' Another participant (youth ministry coordinator) expressed concern regarding digital communication, noting that 'Sometimes we share religious messages online without realizing that certain expressions could be interpreted as offensive or even violate the law.' These statements highlight that the primary challenges faced by participants are not rooted in resistance to legal frameworks, but rather in limited access to practical and contextual legal knowledge. Many participants shared experiences regarding administrative procedures for building churches, community relations, and the use of social media in religious communication. These discussions allowed participants to connect theoretical legal knowledge with practical situations they encounter in their daily ministry activities.



Figure 4. Delivery of Legal Literacy Training for Christian Leaders

Figure 4 shows the presentation session was where the facilitator delivered educational materials regarding the legal framework governing religious activities in Indonesia. Then, Figure 5 shows the participants engaged in interactive discussions addressing legal challenges related to religious practices, social relations, and digital communication.

The community development program demonstrated positive outcomes in strengthening legal literacy among Christian leaders in South Malang. The improvement in participants' knowledge, combined with their active engagement during discussions, indicates that the training successfully addressed the needs of the target community. Furthermore, participants expressed their intention to disseminate the knowledge gained during the training to their congregations and local communities. This indicates that the impact of the program has the potential to extend beyond the immediate participants and contribute to broader community awareness of legal frameworks related to religious life.



Figure 4. Interactive Discussion Session with Christian Leaders

The findings of this community development program indicate that legal literacy training can function as an effective intervention for strengthening the capacity of religious leaders in plural social settings. The increase in the average score from 53.78 in the pre-test to 74.27 in the post-test suggests that the training did not merely transfer information, but also improved participants' practical understanding of legal norms governing religious life in Indonesia. This result is consistent with broader scholarship on community empowerment, which argues that participatory educational interventions are most effective when they move beyond one-way dissemination and instead build community capacity through reflection, discussion, and contextual problem-solving. In this sense, the present program confirms that legal education can serve as a form of empowerment when it equips community actors with usable knowledge for navigating public life (Laverack & Labonte, 2000).

The positive outcomes of this training also align with recent scholarship on legal awareness in Indonesia, especially studies emphasizing that legal literacy must be made accessible, contextual, and responsive to community needs. Serah's study on web-based legal counseling in West Kalimantan, for example, shows that communities need legal education platforms that are interactive and closely connected to everyday legal issues, rather than abstract legal formalism. The Donomulyo program followed a similar logic by translating constitutional principles, regulations on houses of worship, and digital communication law into practical issues directly faced by church leaders. The strong participant engagement observed during the discussion sessions suggests that contextual relevance was one of the key reasons the program achieved measurable learning gains (Serah et al., 2025).

A major contribution of this program lies in its focus on religious leaders as strategic community actors. In the Indonesian context, religious freedom is constitutionally guaranteed, yet its implementation is often shaped by political interests, bureaucratic procedures, and social tensions. Sofjan argues that politico-religious intolerance in Indonesia persists despite formal commitments to pluralism (Sofjan, 2016), while Mietzner and Muhtadi show that religious intolerance can be mobilized within wider political accommodation and identity-based contestation (Mietzner & Muhtadi, 2018). Against this background, strengthening the legal literacy of church leaders becomes especially important because it positions them not only as recipients of legal information, but as mediators who can translate legal norms into peaceful social practice at the grassroots level. The present findings therefore support the view that legal awareness among religious leaders is not only a matter of compliance, but also a preventive mechanism for conflict reduction and social cohesion (Rijal et al., 2025).

The discussion on the establishment of houses of worship was one of the most salient components of the training, and this is understandable given the continuing controversy surrounding PBM 2006. Recent legal scholarship has criticized the current regulatory framework for being insufficiently protective of equal religious freedom. Suhadi, Muhtada, and Amal argue that the current framework remains inadequately codified and contains discriminatory effects that do not fully align with Indonesia's constitutional ideals of justice and religious freedom. Their analysis reinforces the relevance of the Donomulyo program, since many participants specifically needed practical guidance on the legal and social procedures surrounding church buildings. The present program thus addressed a concrete gap between

constitutional guarantees in principle and regulatory complexity in practice (Suhadi et al., 2024).

Importantly, the challenges related to house-of-worship regulation cannot be fully separated from the dynamics of digital communication. In many cases, misunderstandings or disputes surrounding the construction of houses of worship are amplified by the circulation of misinformation, provocative narratives, or decontextualized religious content on social media platforms. Digital discourse often precedes and shapes public perception at the local level, which may escalate administrative disagreements into broader social tensions. In this sense, weak digital literacy not only creates online risks but also contributes to real-world conflict escalation related to religious infrastructure. Therefore, integrating legal literacy with digital communication awareness is essential, as both domains are increasingly interconnected in shaping religious coexistence in contemporary Indonesian society.

This interpretation is further supported by earlier scholarship on worship-house policy in Indonesia. Ruslan, Mawardi, and Anshori's work on the deconstruction of houses-of-worship policy, demonstrates that the issue has been debated critically in Indonesian religious studies and legal scholarship (Ruslan et al., 2022). Likewise, Arvante, Nugraha, and Arifin show that formal constitutional guarantees do not automatically result in substantive religious freedom, because social and institutional barriers can still undermine minority rights in practice (Arvante et al., 2022). The Donomulyo training responds directly to this problem by helping participants understand the legal architecture they must navigate, while also encouraging non-confrontational, constitutionally grounded engagement with local communities and authorities.

Building on the interconnected nature of offline regulatory challenges and online communication dynamics, another important implication of the results concerns digital communication. Another important implication of the results concerns digital communication. The training identified that legal literacy for religious leaders today cannot be separated from digital literacy. Sanityastuti, Virga, and Zahra found that the rapid development of social media in Indonesia has not always been matched by adequate digital literacy, and that controversial or poorly contextualized religious content may trigger hostility and even crime. Their findings are highly relevant to this program, since participants also raised concerns regarding sermons, public religious statements, and online dissemination of religious messages (Sanityastuti et al., 2024). The Donomulyo training therefore extends the meaning of legal literacy beyond conventional legal texts by connecting it with ethical and legally responsible digital communication. This is a valuable contribution, because religious leadership in contemporary society increasingly operates both in offline congregational spaces and online public spheres (Sanityastuti et al., 2024).

The findings also suggest that the effectiveness of this program derived not only from the legal content delivered, but from the pedagogical model used. The combination of lectures, interactive discussion, and case-based reflection created a participatory learning environment in which participants could relate abstract norms to lived realities. This echoes empowerment-based scholarship arguing that community education works best when participants are given space to interpret knowledge through their own experience rather than being treated as passive audiences. In the Donomulyo case, the interactive format appears to have strengthened both

comprehension and confidence, as shown by the post-test improvement and by participants' stated intention to disseminate the knowledge within their congregations.

At the same time, the results should be interpreted with appropriate caution. First, the program measured short-term knowledge improvement rather than long-term behavioral change. It is therefore not yet possible to conclude whether improved legal literacy will translate into sustained institutional practice, better conflict management, or improved compliance with legal procedures over time. To address this limitation, future interventions should incorporate sustainability mechanisms that extend beyond one-off training sessions. These may include periodic follow-up workshops, the establishment of peer-learning forums among church leaders, and the development of simple legal guidance modules that can be continuously accessed and disseminated within congregations. In addition, collaboration with local government agencies, such as the Ministry of Religious Affairs, could institutionalize legal literacy programs as part of ongoing religious harmony initiatives. Digital platforms may also be utilized to maintain engagement, for example, through moderated discussion groups or legal advisory channels that allow participants to consult on emerging issues in real time. Such mechanisms would help transform short-term knowledge acquisition into long-term behavioral change and institutional practice. Second, the evaluation relied on descriptive pre-test and post-test comparison, which is suitable for community service reporting but still limited for stronger causal claims. Future programs could incorporate follow-up assessments, participant interviews, and comparative designs involving multiple locations to better capture the long-term social effects of legal literacy interventions among religious communities. This would strengthen the evidence base for legal education as a model of community development in plural societies.

The discussion demonstrates that this program contributes to three important areas at once: community empowerment, protection of religious freedom, and responsible digital citizenship. The Donomulyo case shows that legal literacy training for church leaders is not merely a supplementary educational activity; rather, it is a strategic intervention for strengthening constitutionally informed leadership in a socially diverse environment. In this respect, the program offers a practical model that can be replicated in other regions of Indonesia, especially in areas where religious communities face legal uncertainty, administrative barriers, or heightened risks of misunderstanding in public and digital communication (Serah et al., 2025).

Conclusion

This community development program demonstrates that legal literacy training can effectively strengthen the capacity of Christian church leaders to understand legal frameworks related to religious freedom, the establishment of houses of worship, and responsible public communication in Indonesia. The significant improvement in participants' knowledge, reflected in the increase of average scores from the pre-test to the post-test, indicates that the program successfully enhanced participants' legal awareness and practical understanding of legal issues relevant to their ministry and community engagement. Beyond improving individual knowledge, the program also highlights the strategic role of religious leaders as agents of social harmony and responsible civic engagement within plural societies. By strengthening legal

literacy among community leaders, similar initiatives can contribute to reducing potential misunderstandings related to religious practices, encouraging constructive community relations, and promoting peaceful coexistence in diverse social settings. These findings position legal literacy training not merely as a replicable community empowerment model, but as a strategic intervention for strengthening legally informed leadership and governance in plural societies, where the intersection between law, religion, and public communication continues to evolve. From a policy perspective, these findings highlight the need for local government institutions, particularly the Ministry of Religious Affairs and regional interfaith coordination bodies, to institutionalize legal literacy training as part of structured religious harmony programs. Rather than treating such initiatives as ad hoc community service activities, integrating legal education into formal capacity-building frameworks for religious leaders could significantly reduce administrative bottlenecks, improve compliance with regulatory procedures (especially concerning house-of-worship permits), and mitigate potential conflicts in both offline and digital contexts. This institutional approach would ensure continuity, scalability, and long-term impact of legal literacy interventions across diverse regions in Indonesia.

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