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The struggle for the construction of places of worship of minority religions in Indonesia

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Authors:
Warnis Warnis[1]
Kustini Kustini[1]
Fatimah Zuhrah[1]
Anik Farida[1]
Siti Atieqoh[1]

Affiliations:
[1]National Research and Innovation Agency, Jakarta, Indonesia

Corresponding author:
Warnis Warnis,
warn001@brin.go.id

The literature on the construction of places of worship has predominantly shown difficulties, rejection and disharmony among religious communities. This study aims to describe and analyzed the success story of the construction of the Santa Monica church in Tangerang. This is a qualitative study conducted over a month-long period using primary and secondary data. Primary data were obtained through observation and interviews, while secondary data were obtained through formal and informal policy reviews available online. The informants involved in this study amounted to eight people consisting of church leaders and administrators, local leaders, religious leaders, religious organizations and the Ministry of Religious Affairs. Data were analyzed using content analysis methods. The results of the study show that the ability of church leaders and administrators to build good social and cultural relations with the community was a key element in their success in obtaining permission to build the church. This was achieved through effective communication, dialogue and cooperation between the Catholic community, leaders and the predominantly Islamic local community. Active involvement in daily activities had a positive impact, fostering mutual trust and peaceful coexistence, ultimately resulting in the local community's support and approval for the establishment of the place of worship. Thus, the church construction committee was able to meet all administrative requirements as stipulated by government regulations. This study recommends the importance of good social and cultural relations as the fundamental basis and determinant of success for religious communities seeking to construct places of worship.

Contribution: This article contributes to the goal of *HTS Theological Studies* in promoting the transdisciplinary aspect of religious studies in the international theological arena, particularly in the study of religious harmony among communities in Indonesia.

Keywords: Santa Monica; success story; social relations; religious harmony; minority religions.

Introduction

Worship is an inherent spiritual need for every human being, reflected in the form of offerings of devotion and reverence to the Divine. Worship plays a vital role in fulfilling the spiritual needs of individuals and society. One aspect that cannot be overlooked in worship is the need for camaraderie and solidarity among religious communities (Atran & Henrich 2010; Mellor, Shilling & Shilling 1997; Warner 1997). Public worship plays a vital role in shaping social bonds, strengthening interpersonal relationships and fostering unity among religious communities. During public worship, congregants gather in the same place to collectively engage in spiritual acts (Bowie 2021; Sari, Rusnaini & Rejekiningsih 2019; Zimmer et al. 2016). Places of worship often hold sacred value and provide space for adherents to convey prayers, seek forgiveness and collectively celebrate their beliefs. Through public worship, religious communities collectively feel the presence of God, strengthen bonds with fellow followers and cultivate a sense of solidarity (Day 2020; Nagy 2016). Furthermore, public worship provides opportunities for religious adherents to share experiences, offer moral support and strengthen their faith. When congregating together, they can inspire one another, foster spiritual growth and deepen understanding of religious teachings. In the context of a pluralistic society, public worship also plays a role in promoting interfaith dialogue, mutual understanding and tolerance. Through interactions in public worship, religious adherents can become acquainted with one another, comprehend differences and build harmonious cooperation in maintaining peace and diversity.

Meanwhile, at present, the establishment of places of worship in Indonesia often becomes a potential conflict in society, especially when the place of worship is owned by a minority religion

in a community dominated by a majority religion. This phenomenon has garnered attention in academic studies (Fealy & Ricci 2019; Marshall 2021; Regus 2021). One of the reasons for conflicts that often arise regarding the establishment of places of worship for minority religions is the discomfort felt by some members of society regarding the presence and activities taking place in such places. Several factors that may influence this discomfort include lack of knowledge or familiarity with the religious practices and traditions of minority religions, negative perceptions that arise because of stereotypes or prejudices against such religions or fear of social and cultural changes that are perceived to come along with the establishment of new places of worship. Additionally, differences in values, beliefs and interests between the majority and minority religious groups can also trigger conflicts related to the establishment of places of worship (Hadžić 2022; Sumerau, Cragun & Mathers 2016; Wibisono, Louis & Jetten 2019). This conflict often stems from competition of interests, rejection or resistance to social and cultural changes or interfaith distrust caused by a lack of understanding and constructive dialogue.

The problem of establishing houses of worship is not only dominated by certain religions but also experienced by almost all religious people. In the context of Catholicism, the parishioners of St. Monica in Tangerang have experienced issues related to the establishment of a place of worship, which has become a problem that disrupts the harmonious relationship between religious communities in Indonesia (Anwar 2021; Arafah & Basman 2021; Rachmawati et al. 2021). This arises because of the construction of places of worship causing conflicts and resistance among the community (Berger 2017; Jacoby 2015; Omer, Appleby & Little 2015). A group of community members and religious figures clashed with the church officials because of the discomfort felt by the majority Muslim community. Therefore, the establishment of places of worship has become a significant disruption to the harmony and peaceful coexistence between religious communities.

In the endeavour to address conflicts and create a more inclusive environment, the government and relevant institutions play a crucial role in promoting interfaith dialogue, safeguarding religious freedom and fostering understanding between religious communities. In response to conflicts related to the establishment of places of worship, the Indonesian government issued a policy to create religious harmony, as outlined in *Joint Ministerial Decree No. 9 of 2006* (Fidiyani 2017; Rokhmad 2016; Sulistiyo, Mashdurohatun & Wahyuningsih 2023). This regulation is intended to create religious harmony through the openness of society in accepting minority religious communities (Alam 2020; George 2016; Marshall 2018). However, after being implemented in society, the Joint Ministerial Decree (PBM) policy seems to restrict the religious activities of minority communities (Faqih 2021; Tampubolon & Aziz 2021). Minority communities are facing difficulties in establishing places of worship because of requirements stated in the PBM,

including the need for permits from the local community, worshippers and even a recommendation from the Ministry of Religion (Schneiderbauer et al. 2021).

So far, existing studies on the construction of places of worship tend to look at this issue from two perspectives. Firstly, a study that observes the refusal to establish places of worship that has an impact on the disharmony of interreligious relations (Xu 2018; Yasin & Mantu 2021). Secondly, a study that analyses community resistance to government policies related to the establishment of places of worship (Fasugba et al. 2015; Ropi 2017; Welch 2017). Studies that focus on the conflict side of the issue of places of worship in society do have a strong trend. However, it must be recognised that the successes and achievements that have been achieved by religious communities are often overlooked by scholars. This is an important and significant aspect that must be considered in conducting lessons for religious communities. Highlighting the success stories of religious communities can provide a more balanced and comprehensive picture of the role of religion in society. These achievements include various fields such as social service, education, health and conflict resolution efforts based on religious values. Expressing these success stories not only provides a more realistic picture of the role of religion in daily life, but also serves as a source of inspiration and learning for religious communities (McGuire 2008). Studying the successes achieved by religious communities can serve as a foundation for developing more effective strategies and actions to build harmonious and just societies (Bashori 2022; Knowles et al. 2020; McKeown & Dixon 2017). By considering the results of field observations on the establishment process, especially the Santa Monica Catholic Church in Tangerang, there is a strong dynamic of the influence of various elements in the development process, until it achieves success. The purpose of this study was to investigate the success stories of the establishment of places of worship in Indonesia, especially the Santa Monica Catholic Church in Tangerang. In line with this, there are three questions that have been answered in this study, namely: (1) How was the success of the construction of the Santa Monica church achieved?; (2) What are the factors that drive the successful construction of the church of Santa Monica?; (3) What are the implications of religious tolerance in Indonesia during the construction process of Santa Monica church? The focus of this research is important to examine strategies for successful construction of places of worship that have an impact on the implementation of religious tolerance in Indonesian society.

Research methods and design

The study on the construction of the Santa Monica Church was intentionally chosen because of the tendency of previous studies to focus too much on the difficulties and failures of religious communities in constructing places of worship. This has had a wide-ranging impact and gives the impression that the difficulties in construction indicate that harmony between religious communities is difficult to achieve. This study aims to assert that the construction of places of worship

can actually serve as a means to foster harmony between religious communities as demonstrated by the success of the Santa Monica Church in obtaining full support from both the local community and government entities. Given the social phenomenon being studied, a qualitative research method is deemed appropriate. This is in line with the nature of qualitative research, which emphasises natural phenomena data and does not focus on statistical data (Creswell 2012, 2014; Strauss & Corbin 1998; Vanderstoep & Johnston 2008).

The study was conducted for a duration of 5 months. Data collection was done through observation, interviews and document review. Observation was used to observe the church leaders and the community's response to the rejection of the church's establishment by the local community. Document studies related to the issue of building places of worship were conducted and supplemented with a review of formal policies ratified by the Ministry of Religious Affairs and the Ministry of Home Affairs. Additionally, the researcher also examined informal policies that were socialised through online media. Interviews were conducted with church leaders and officials, the chairman of Forum for Religious Harmony (*Forum Kerukunan Umat Beragama* [FKUB]) the chairman of the Indonesian Ulema Council (MUI), the community, community leaders, religious figures, religious organisations and the Ministry of Religion. This was done because they were directly involved in the process of obtaining permits for the construction and to obtain complete, accurate and comprehensive information to map the success of the establishment of the place of worship effectively.

The validity of the data is ensured through two methods. Firstly, the necessary data is examined in comparison with the level of knowledge, values and practices, where the relationship and synchronisation of data can be established. Secondly, validity is also determined by various categories of information that allow for comparison and testing of data. The data used is not only objective but also subjective; thus its accuracy can be obtained. Data analysis is carried out through three stages, namely data reduction, data display and data verification. (Miles & Huberman 1994). The analysis methods used include restatement of data, description to identify patterns and trends and interpretation to understand the meanings of the data used.

Ethical considerations

Ethical clearance to conduct the study was obtained from National Research and Innovation Agency (clearance number: NUMBER.021/BRIN.EC/IV/2023).

Results

This study aims to investigate: (1) the successful strategies in building the Santa Monica place of worship; (2) the driving factors behind the success of the Santa Monica place of worship construction; (3) the implications of the success of the Santa Monica place of worship construction on religious harmony among communities in Indonesia. The research

findings will be presented in an inductive form, starting with the presentation of research findings; followed by a discussion of theory with interpretation and concluded with the research conclusion.

Political factors

The success of the Santa Monica church construction because of political factors includes compliance with regulations, administrative requirements and approval from religious institutions and government authorities. Compliance with regulations is indicated by the issuance of a permit to establish the Santa Monica church, which was obtained by meeting the requirements stipulated in the *Joint Decree of the Minister of Religion and the Minister of Internal Affairs No. 9 and 8 of 2006*, especially articles 14 and 15. Past failures, despite obtaining the building permit, were challenged by the community because of the presence of documents with allegedly invalid signatures from supporting citizens. Therefore, the process of fulfilling all administrative requirements was carried out again through a persuasive approach to gain the trust of the surrounding community as shown in the following interview excerpt:

> All the necessary requirements have been fulfilled and all necessary correspondences have been completed. The Ministry of Religious Affairs has already provided recommendations, as has the Forum for Religious Harmony, and the mayor has issued the necessary building permits. The local community also has no objections to the establishment of the Santa Monica church. (Interview with official at the district ministry of religion office at Tangerang, 18 October 2021)

The church construction committee has successfully fulfilled all administrative requirements, obtained approval from the Forum for Religious Harmony and local government and received recommendations from religious organisations. This was revealed in an excerpt from an interview with the Forum for Religious Harmony:

> During the interview with the Chairman of the Forum for Religious Harmony, it was mentioned that the Forum for Religious Harmony approached the local head to inquire about how a recommendation could be issued from the sub-district. The head explained that there were no longer any reasons to reject the application, as the neighborhood and community had already agreed and all necessary requirements had been met. The Forum for Religious Harmony also approached the district head, who was asked how a recommendation had already been issued. They were also members of the community, and the recommendation was issued because all requirements had been met and there was no reason to reject it. As a result, the Forum for Religious Harmony also issued a recommendation. (Interview with official at the district ministry of religion office at Tangerang, 18 October 2021)

The same idea was also expressed by the Chairman of the MUI, as seen in the following interview excerpts:

> Based on my experience, it is my understanding that individuals have the right to their own lives and as far as we know, they have been obedient to the regulations. We have heard that recommendations have been issued by the Forum for Religious Harmony and the MUI. I have heard that the mayor

has issued the necessary building permits and, in general, the process has been completed. (Interview with Chairman of the MUI, 19 October 2021)

By accommodating various regulations, the construction of the Santa Monica place of worship can be carried out. In this regard, there are two institutions that need to be considered in obtaining legitimacy for the construction of the place of worship. The presence of the Forum for Religious Harmony as a mediator and the MUI as a religious organisation that provides good support are important factors for the success in obtaining the permit for church construction.

The approval of religious institutions and government authorities plays an important role in obtaining permits for the construction of places of worship. In this case, the Tangerang City Ministry of Religious Affairs took into account the approval letter from the head of the sub-district, recommendations from the Forum for Religious Harmony and the MUI, leaving no reason for the Official of Ministry of Religion Office to not grant permission as expressed in the interview excerpt below:

> The Santa Monica case has indeed been ongoing for some time. The mayor has already granted permission for the construction of the building, the building permit has been issued, and we have also issued recommendations, as have the Forum for Religious Harmony. It has now been informed that the matter has been resolved, and the mayor has also conveyed this. (Interview with the Official of Ministry of Religion Office, 18 October 2021)

With all the administrative requirements fulfilled in accordance with the Joint Regulation of the *Ministry of Religious Affairs and the Ministry of Home Affairs No. 9 and 8 of 2006*, the Santa Monica church has successfully obtained a Building Permit issued by the Mayor of Tangerang.

Social factors

Success in establishing social relationships with the surrounding community is achieved through formal and informal means and effective communication patterns. In a formal context, the success of establishing good relationships with the surrounding community is exemplified in the interview excerpt with Pastor Lamma, the leader of the Santa Monica church, as shown below:

> Pastor Lamma attends invitations from neighborhood associations and participates in activities organized by the neighborhood associations, such as Independence Day celebrations. Similarly, Pastor Lamma always invites and involves the community whenever he holds events and social services such as celebrations and social aid. Pastor Lamma establishes good relationships with the community, the Forum for Religious Harmony, the Ministry of Religious Affairs, and neighborhood associations, and carries out community activities. Pastor Lamma directly engages with the community, and the relationship with the community is no less important than administrative requirements. (Interview with Pastor Lamma, 20 October 2021)

In an informal context, the Pastor of the Santa Monica church is deeply concerned about the surrounding community and environment. The Pastor often sits with the neighbourhood association officials while having coffee and is always involved in activities organised by the neighbourhood association. Establishing informal relationships with the surrounding community is always carried out by the Pastor, as expressed in the interview excerpt below:

> The Pastor emphasized that we are a part of the community and requested that all congregation members and officials participate in neighborhood activities such as cleaning up the drainage system, which is usually done on Sundays when people are off work. However, as our congregation usually attends church on Sunday mornings, the Pastor suggested changing the way we worship by offering the option of attending church on Saturday afternoons so that there would be no excuse not to participate in neighborhood activities. The Pastor conveyed this message during his sermon and always encourages his congregation to be involved in any events organized by the neighborhood association. (Interview with the Pastor, 20 October 2021)

In addition, effective communication patterns play an important role in fostering relationships between individuals in diverse communities. The communication approach used by the church in obtaining building permits is in line with what was conveyed by the chairman of the Forum for Religious Harmony. Therefore, by establishing good social relations with the surrounding community, both formally and informally, and utilising appropriate communication patterns, support from the community can be obtained. This was one of the successes of the Santa Monica church in obtaining permission to build a place of worship.

In this regard, field observations show that effective communication occurs when church administrators are deeply involved in social activities. For example, on Saturday, when residents carried out mutual aid activities to clean the environment, the church management was present at the moment. This mutual aid activity was attended by residents without identity boundaries, both ethnicity, religion and social class. This meeting room makes it easier to grow mutual understanding and understanding of each citizen's problems.

Cultural factors

Shared spaces or communal areas inclusively and accommodating are used for various purposes such as sports activities, wedding ceremonies and parking. The church has set up a common space that serves as a sports facility for futsal and badminton, children playing and fathers gathering to discuss local issues in the afternoon. In addition, a common room is also provided for locals to hold weddings for free. Those who want to celebrate any event can use the common space as a venue for their activities, allowing community children to engage in a variety of activities without any cost.

The common space is also used as a parking area for members of the congregation attending services on Saturday afternoons and Sundays. The parking area is managed by local residents to ensure the comfort and safety of congregation members who park their vehicles there. This condition signifies

a harmonious relationship between the surrounding community and church members who come to worship, as revealed by the Official of Ministry of Religion Office in the interview excerpt below:

> The surrounding community is actually relatively amicable, and the church provides a lot of social assistance, which is not refused as it is needed. The parking area is also managed by the local community. This signifies that they have become closer, and the surrounding community has accepted the presence of the Santa Monica church. (Interview with the Official of Ministry of Religion Office, 18 October 2021)

The common room was also used as a vaccination centre for the community during the COVID-19 pandemic, as stated by the Head of the Tangerang City Police Vaccination Acceleration Team below:

> I express my utmost gratitude to the organizing committee of the Santa Monica Church for successfully achieving a participation target of more than 1,000 participants. Furthermore, the flow arrangement from table to table during today's event was very neat and orderly. If there are other churches planning to organize vaccination drives, they are encouraged to adopt the best practices already implemented by the Santa Monica Church. (Interview, 22 October 2021)

Therefore, common spaces or communal areas have contributed to the success of the construction of the Santa Monica church, as well as being a valuable lesson in achieving inter-religious harmony.

In the context of Indonesian culture, the activities and interactions between Santa Monica church and the surrounding community reflect the basic cultural values of Indonesian society such as gotong royong, harmony and social solidarity. It shows how diversity in Indonesia can be a strength, not a division, and how institutions such as churches can play an important role in strengthening relationships between groups in society. Santa Monica Church is not only an example of how a religious institution can contribute to its surrounding community, but also how people, with possibly different backgrounds, can accept and support each other. Basically, this story is a reflection of the essence of Indonesia, where diversity is valued and considered as an asset, not an obstacle.

Discussion

Applicable regulations are used as administrative requirements as they are used to promote interfaith harmony in diverse communities (Madakir et al. 2022; Putri et al. 2021; Yusoff et al. 2018). The impact of regulations used as administrative requirements is to safeguard and protect the rights of citizens, resolve disputes and conflicts arising in society fairly and regulate governance and state affairs. The law is binding and mandatory to be obeyed by all citizens. When a law is enacted in the state gazette, every individual is considered to have knowledge of it (Fauzia, Hamdani & Octavia 2021; Jamaluddin et al. 2023; Maggs, Schwartz & Burnham 2015). Thus, it is highly imperative to comply with and implement all existing norms and regulations. In the

event of a violation, a person can be prosecuted in court and sanctioned (Arlen 2016; King & Pasquarella 2016). In the case of permits for the construction of the Santa Monica church building, full compliance is granted to the *Joint Decree of the Minister of Religious Affairs and the Minister of Home Affairs No. 9 and 8 of 2006*. By completing all the necessary administrative requirements as outlined in the aforementioned decree, the church of Santa Monica successfully obtained its building permit.

After all, the local community is a subject that church administrators and priests always encounter. Maintaining good relations with the local community is an obligation for the church and priest administrators. This means that peace and goodwill in the community, living together with unity of heart and agreeing to coexist without conflict are paramount. Community relations are comprehensive communication efforts undertaken by the church and priest administrators to influence the perceptions, opinions, beliefs and attitudes of various community groups towards the construction of the Santa Monica church. Therefore, the implementation of harmony is evident in religious life, which includes activities carried out by individuals, groups and their relationship with God (Aryani 2018; Dewi, Madjid & Fauzan 2020; Kawangung 2019). The importance of practising good public relations and church administration is the ability to maintain a positive impression of various parties that can affect the construction of a place of worship (Bernays 2015; Djupe & Neiheisel 2022; Vieten & Lukoff 2022). Therefore, clear and unbiased communication and information have been shown to be an effective means of winning sympathy. As a result of maintaining good relations with the local community, mutually beneficial cooperation has been achieved. In addition, local communities can also provide assistance in overcoming problems and fostering solidarity among the faithful (Archick 2016; Lukiyanto & Wijayaningtyas 2020; Sibarani 2018). Thus, clear and unbiased communication is key to gaining support and sympathy from the community. A harmonious relationship with the local community results in a collaboration that benefits both parties. Local communities, when approached correctly, become a valuable source of assistance in solving.

In addition, the success of this story is also influenced by inclusive and accommodating communal spaces. Communal spaces can trigger the desire of local communities to become one community regardless of race, ethnicity and religion (Ratzmann 2019). The function of communal space is also to accommodate community activities outside the building, both individual and collective activities. In this sense, communal space is an integral part of the social system of a diverse community, which cannot be separated from social dynamics that strengthen harmony for the community around the church of Santa Monica. Because, in a diverse community, if harmony cannot be realised, it has the potential to create friction and conflict among fellow citizens (Muhammad, Suryani & Ardianto 2020; Prabawa & Astuti 2021; Sayadi 2019). For this reason, communal spaces have a multifaceted function. In addition to functioning as a

forum for individual and collective activities, communal spaces also function as symbolic media that realise harmony and unity in the community. Conceptually, communal space transcends its physical function and acts as a link between individuals and groups in the community. When communal spaces are designed with inclusivity in mind, it can create an atmosphere in which every individual, regardless of racial, ethnic or religious background, feels accepted and valued. However, to achieve this goal, the design and management of communal spaces must take into account the needs and aspirations of all members of the community. This requires active involvement from community members in the planning and development process. Community participation in designing communal spaces creates opportunities to hear different voices and adapt the space according to their needs. It can be an effective platform to educate people about the importance of tolerance and respect for diversity. Thus, it is important to remember that although communal spaces have great potential in advancing harmony and unity within the community, their success depends largely on the commitment and goodwill of all parties involved. This requires a collaborative and inclusive approach that values and recognises diversity as a wealth, not as an obstacle.

Conclusion

In the context of the development of the Santa Monica Church, regulations were used as administrative requirements to create interreligious harmony and protect the rights of citizens. The implementation of these regulations also helps to fairly resolve disputes among communities and regulate the functioning of the government and the state. The importance of maintaining good relations with the surrounding community is also evident in the success of church construction, where church officials and pastors have a duty to maintain peace and goodwill with the community. Through clear and unbiased communication, as well as social interaction in inclusive communal spaces, Santa Monica Church has succeeded in achieving interfaith harmony, garnering support and sympathy from the surrounding community and strengthening solidarity among diverse communities. It shows how diversity in Indonesia can be a strength, not a division, and how institutions such as churches can play an important role in strengthening relationships between groups in society. In addition, communal spaces also play an important role in accommodating socio-economic activities and facilitating dialogue, discussion and interaction that help promote openness, recognition of differences and conflict avoidance. Thus, communal space is an important factor in the successful construction of the Church of Santa Monica and the strengthening of inter-community harmony in diverse societies.

Through the implementation of regulations and maintaining good relations with the surrounding community, the development of Santa Monica Church has succeeded in creating inter-religious harmony and has a positive effect in several aspects. Firstly, meeting administrative requirements ensures the protection of citizens' rights and resolves disputes fairly, creating a safe and harmonious environment for diverse communities. Secondly, good relations with the surrounding community have a positive impact on interfaith solidarity, mutual assistance in problem solving and the creation of strong social ties. In addition, the success of the construction of the Santa Monica church is also influenced by inclusive and accommodating communal spaces. Through communal spaces, it is hoped that it can help strengthen social bonds among citizens, reduce potential conflicts and facilitate dialogue and discussion that helps in understanding and acknowledging religious differences. Overall, the implementation of regulations, good relations with the surrounding community and inclusive and accommodating communal spaces are key factors in the success of the construction of the Santa Monica church. Through these efforts, the church has been able to create interfaith harmony, strengthen solidarity between communities and maintain harmony in diverse societies. An important implication of this research is that the development of Santa Monica Church can help identify the needs and aspirations of the community, as well as understand the social dynamics and diversity that exist in Indonesia as a vision of global religious harmony.

Data availability

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no new data were created or analysed in this study.

Disclaimer

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