

Meninggalkan yang Berduka: Studi Teologis tentang Penghentian Pelayanan Duka bagi Keluarga yang Melaksanakan Arena Adu Kerbau Petarung pada Ritus Rambu Solo'

Leaving the Bereaved: A Theological Study of the Discontinuation of Bereavement Ministry for Families Conducting Buffalo Fighting Arenas in the Rambu Solo' Ritual

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Received: 17 October 2025 / Accepted: 4 May 2026 / Published: 30 May 2026

How to cite this article:

Basongan, Meisel Patandi, Robby Igusti Chandra, and Susanto Dwiraharjo. "Meninggalkan yang Berduka: Studi Teologis tentang Penghentian Pelayanan Duka bagi Keluarga yang Melaksanakan Arena Adu Kerbau Petarung pada Ritus Rambu Solo'". *Sangulele: Jurnal Teologi Kontekstual* 5, no. 1 (2026): 1-21.
<https://doi.org/10.47178/z8w8c562>.

Abstrak

Praktik penghentian pelayanan duka terhadap keluarga yang melaksanakan arena kerbau petarung dalam ritus Rambu Solo' telah menjadi kebijakan disipliner yang kontroversial di lingkungan Gereja Toraja di Indonesia. Meskipun kebijakan ini dimaksudkan untuk menentang praktik perjudian yang diasosiasikan dengan adu kerbau, kebijakan ini memunculkan pertanyaan teologis dan pastoral yang serius mengenai tanggung jawab gereja terhadap keluarga yang sedang berduka. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengkaji legitimasi teologis penghentian pelayanan duka dan mengevaluasi kebijakan tersebut melalui perspektif teologi pastoral dan teologi kontekstual. Menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif etnografi, data dikumpulkan melalui wawancara, observasi, dan analisis dokumen yang melibatkan keluarga yang terkena dampak kebijakan, pemimpin gereja, dan anggota jemaat di Tana Toraja dan Toraja Utara. Temuan menunjukkan bahwa penghentian pelayanan duka tidak memiliki dasar teologis yang memadai dalam tradisi Kristen; kebijakan tersebut lebih didasarkan pada pertimbangan moral mengenai praktik perjudian. Lebih jauh, kebijakan ini melemahkan panggilan pastoral gereja dengan menarik kehadiran gerejawi dari keluarga yang mengalami keduakaan dan kerentanan. Melalui lensa teologi kontekstual, penelitian ini berargumen bahwa gereja harus mempertahankan sikap profetisnya terhadap perjudian sambil secara simultan memberikan pendampingan pastoral. Kontribusi orisinal penelitian ini terletak pada kritiknya terhadap penghentian pelayanan duka sebagai praktik disipliner dan proposal model pastoral restoratif dan kontekstual untuk menghadapi ketegangan budaya dalam masyarakat Toraja.

Kata Kunci: *pelayanan duka; disiplin gerejawi; teologi pastoral; teologi kontekstual; ritus pemakaman Toraja.*

Abstract

The practice of suspending bereavement ministry toward families involved in buffalo fighting arenas (tedong petarung) during the Rambu Solo' funeral ritual has become a controversial disciplinary policy within the Toraja Church in Indonesia. While this policy is intended to oppose gambling practices associated with buffalo fighting, it raises serious theological and pastoral questions regarding the church's responsibility toward grieving families. This study aims to examine the theological legitimacy of suspending bereavement ministry and to evaluate the policy through the perspectives of pastoral theology and contextual theology. Using a qualitative ethnographic approach, data were collected through interviews, observations, and document analysis involving families affected by the policy, church leaders, and congregational members in Tana Toraja and North Toraja. The findings indicate that the suspension of bereavement ministry does not possess a sufficient theological foundation within the Christian tradition; rather, the policy is primarily grounded in moral considerations concerning

gambling practices. Furthermore, the policy weakens the church's pastoral vocation by withdrawing ecclesial presence from families experiencing grief and vulnerability. Through the lens of contextual theology, this study argues that the church should maintain its prophetic stance against gambling while simultaneously providing pastoral accompaniment. The original contribution of this study lies in its critique of bereavement ministry suspension as a disciplinary practice and its proposal of a restorative and contextual pastoral model for engaging cultural tensions within Torajan society..

Keywords: bereavement ministry, church discipline, pastoral theology, contextual theology, Toraja funeral ritual.

INTRODUCTION

The relationship between the church and culture consistently presents complex dynamics in the life of Christian communities worldwide. On one hand, the church is called to proclaim the Gospel contextually within the realities of people's lives. On the other hand, the church also bears a prophetic responsibility to critique cultural practices perceived as incompatible with Christian faith values. The tension between acceptance and critique of culture represents an unavoidable aspect of church life, particularly in societies with strong cultural traditions. In the context of Toraja society in South Sulawesi, Indonesia, one of the most contested spaces where church and culture intersect is the *Rambu Solo'* funeral ritual, especially concerning the presence of buffalo fighting arenas (*tedong petarung*) frequently associated with gambling activities.¹

Rambu Solo' occupies a central position in Torajan social and cultural life as one of the most significant death rituals. This ritual functions not merely as a final honor for the deceased but also serves to strengthen social solidarity, bind kinship relations, and affirm the cultural identity of the Toraja people. The ceremony typically lasts from three to seven days or more, depending on the social status of the family, and includes traditional dances, processions for receiving guests, buffalo and cock fighting, animal sacrifice, and large feasts.² In its development, various cultural elements embedded in the *Rambu Solo'* have undergone changes, both due to modernization and interaction with Christian values. One element that has generated considerable debate is the buffalo fighting practice, which has evolved into arenas frequently accompanied by gambling activities.

For many Toraja people, the buffalo fighting arena is understood as part of a tradition that has long existed within the cultural space of their society. The arena is viewed not merely as entertainment but also as a symbol of social prestige and an integral part of the entire *Rambu Solo'* ceremony. Buffalo fighting, known as *ma'pasilaga tedong*, serves as a means of meeting and kinship for the Toraja people and has persisted to the present day because it is considered entertainment and an integral part of culture.³ However, for the Toraja Church, the gambling practices accompanying buffalo fighting arenas

¹ For a comprehensive discussion of the relationship between church and culture in Toraja, see Kobong, *Injil dan Tongkonan: Inkarnasi, Kontekstualisasi, Transformasi* (Jakarta: BPK Gunung Mulia, 2008).

² On the significance of *Rambu Solo'* in Toraja society, see the Toraja Church documents on cultural practices.

³ The cultural significance of buffalo fighting (*ma'pasilaga tedong*) is well documented in Toraja ethnographic studies.

are considered contrary to Christian teachings because they potentially encourage speculative behavior, economic exploitation, and various other social deviations. Consequently, the Toraja Church has sought to provide guidance and control over these practices through various pastoral and institutional policies.

One policy that has generated extensive discussion is the discontinuation of bereavement ministry toward families that continue to conduct buffalo fighting arenas. This policy is understood as a form of church discipline aimed at providing a corrective effect to congregation members considered disobedient to church decisions. In practice, this discontinuation is manifested through the non-implementation of certain ecclesiastical services within the funeral sequence, whether worship services or forms of pastoral accompaniment normally provided to grieving families.⁴ This policy has raised serious questions regarding the limits of church discipline and the nature of pastoral ministry in the context of grief.

Theologically, bereavement ministry holds a very important position in the life of the church. This ministry is not merely a liturgical activity related to death but embodies the church's presence amid the experience of loss endured by its members. In the Christian tradition, grief is always understood as an existential experience requiring accompaniment, comfort, and faith strengthening. The church's presence in situations of grief reflects God's presence, who shares in human suffering. Therefore, ministry to the grieving has not only a social dimension but also a fundamental theological dimension. Switzer suggests that effective pastoral care for bereaved persons is based upon the capacity of the pastor to relate closely to persons undergoing intense emotion, a knowledge of the dynamics and stages and behavior of grief, and the needs of the bereaved.⁵

The Scripture demonstrates that concern for those experiencing suffering is an integral part of God's people's ministry. In the Old Testament, the tradition of lamentation serves as a means for people to express sorrow before God. The lament psalms show that grief and suffering are not experiences to be avoided but realities faced together in relationship with God. Similarly, in the New Testament, Jesus Christ repeatedly demonstrates His solidarity with those experiencing suffering. The account of Jesus weeping at the tomb of Lazarus (John 11:35) stands as one of the most powerful examples of God's involvement in human grief. Jesus' presence among grieving families is not based on moral assessment of them but on love and compassion.⁶

This perspective raises critical questions when the church discontinues ministry to families experiencing grief. If bereavement ministry represents the church's presence in human suffering, then the discontinuation of such ministry can be understood as a reduction or even withdrawal of the church's presence at the very moment grieving families most need accompaniment. This question becomes increasingly important when families receiving sanctions are not always the direct perpetrators of the

⁴ Toraja Church, *Surat Edaran Badan Pekerja Sinode tentang Penghentian Pelayanan Duka bagi Pelaksana Arena Kerbau Petarung* (Rantepao: Badan Pekerja Sinode Gereja Toraja).

⁵ Seward Hiltner, *Preface to Pastoral Theology* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1958), 89-92.

⁶ John 11:35; see also the broader context of Jesus' ministry to the suffering in the Gospels.

gambling practices that form the basis for the policy. Thus, the question arises whether the discontinuation of bereavement ministry genuinely possesses adequate theological legitimacy or whether it merely represents an expression of the church's moral norm enforcement.⁷

In the church tradition, ecclesiastical discipline indeed holds an important place. Since the early church, discipline has been understood as a means to maintain the purity of congregational life, correct deviant behavior, and restore relationships between congregation members and the faith community. Church discipline was instituted by Jesus Christ and exercised by the authority of local churches themselves. However, the primary purpose of church discipline is not punishment but restoration. Church discipline that loses its restorative orientation risks becoming an exclusion mechanism that contradicts the very nature of the church as a community of love and reconciliation. Therefore, every form of church discipline needs to be evaluated based on its conformity with the pastoral and theological purposes of the church. As Waruta and Kinoti assert, pastoral counseling is a religiously oriented approach to counseling, usually done by pastors with theological education. Thus, pastoral care includes discipline and in a broader sense can be viewed as synonymous with it.⁸

On the other hand, contextual theology provides an important framework for understanding this issue. Contextual theology affirms that the Gospel always exists in dialogue with culture. The Gospel cannot be separated from the social and cultural context in which the church exists, but at the same time, the Gospel also has a critical function toward that culture. Bevans explains that contextual theology is an effort to understand the Christian faith through creative interaction between Christian tradition and the context of human life.⁹ Within this framework, the issue of buffalo fighting arenas cannot be understood merely as an individual moral problem but as part of a complex cultural reality requiring a pastoral approach sensitive to context.

The contextual theology approach enables the church to see that culture should not always be totally rejected nor accepted without criticism. Rather, culture needs to be dialogued with the Gospel critically so as to produce transformation that builds community life. In the context of *Rambu Solo'*, the church can maintain a critical stance toward gambling practices without abandoning families experiencing grief. Thus, the focus of church ministry is not merely on sanctions but also on accompaniment, guidance, and transformation of congregational life.¹⁰

Studies on the relationship between the Toraja Church, *Rambu Solo'*, and buffalo fighting arenas have been conducted by several researchers. However, most of these studies focus on cultural, ethical, or religion-tradition relational aspects. Research on the discontinuation of bereavement ministry as a form of church discipline remains relatively limited. Specifically, few studies have examined whether

⁷ For a discussion on the theological basis of pastoral ministry, see Hiltner, *Preface to Pastoral Theology*.

⁸ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1960), Book IV, Chapter 12.

⁹ Stephen B. Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology*, rev. and exp. ed. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2002), 3-8.

¹⁰ Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology*, 15-20.

this policy possesses a strong theological foundation and how it impacts the church's pastoral ministry. This gap constitutes the space for this study's contribution.¹¹

Based on this background, this article aims to examine the discontinuation of bereavement ministry as a form of church discipline in the context of buffalo fighting arenas within the *Rambu Solo'* ritual. The main focus of the research is directed toward three questions: first, whether the discontinuation of bereavement ministry has an adequate theological foundation in the Christian faith tradition; second, how this policy is understood from the perspective of pastoral theology; and third, how contextual theology can provide alternative understanding and approaches to this issue.

This article argues that the discontinuation of bereavement ministry does not possess an adequate theological foundation in the Christian tradition. The primary basis underlying this policy is moral considerations regarding gambling practices rather than theological arguments concerning bereavement ministry. Consequently, this policy risks neglecting the very nature of the church's pastoral ministry, which should accompany families in their experience of loss. Through the perspective of contextual theology, this article offers the understanding that the church can maintain its prophetic function in rejecting gambling practices without having to withdraw its pastoral presence among grieving families. Thus, this research is expected to contribute to the development of a more restorative, pastoral, and contextual model of church discipline in the life of the Toraja Church.¹²

RESEARCH METHODS

This research employs a qualitative approach with an ethnographic design to investigate the discontinuation of bereavement ministry for families conducting buffalo fighting arenas in the *Rambu Solo'* ritual. The ethnographic approach was chosen because it enables the researcher to understand cultural phenomena from the perspective of the subjects being studied, particularly the meaning that families, church leaders, and communities attach to the policy of suspending bereavement ministry. This approach aligns with previous studies on Toraja rituals, such as the phenomenological, sociological, and theological analysis conducted by Sannang and Bulan on the Daro-Daro tradition within the Rambu Solo' ritual in the Toraja Bori' community, which demonstrates the value of integrating multiple disciplinary perspectives in understanding Toraja cultural and religious practices.¹³

¹¹ See, for example, the works of Kobong and Timo on contextual theology in Indonesia.

¹² This argument builds on the theological reflections of Bevans and Kobong.

¹³ The ethnographic approach follows standard qualitative research methods as outlined in contemporary social science research. Ferayanti Sannang, and Susanti Embong Bulan, trans. "Daro-Daro Dalam Ritus Rambu Solo': Analisis Fenomenologis, Sosiologis, Dan Reinterpretasi Teologis Di Masyarakat Toraja Bori: Daro-Daro in the Rambu Solo' Ritual: A Phenomenological, Sociological, and Theological Reinterpretation in the Torajan Bori' Community". *KINAA: Jurnal Teologi* 9, no. 2 (2024): 132–146.

The application of this ethnographic approach is integrated into the theoretical analysis presented in the findings and discussion sections. The data obtained from interviews, observations, and document analysis serve as the empirical foundation for examining the theological legitimacy of the policy, evaluating it from pastoral theology perspectives, and proposing alternative approaches through contextual theology. In the findings section, the data are organized thematically to present the perspectives of grieving families, the implementation of church discipline, the moral basis of the policy, and its impacts on families and congregations. In the discussion section, these empirical findings are analyzed through the lenses of biblical theology, pastoral theology, and contextual theology, incorporating relevant theories that both support and challenge the policy. This integration of empirical data with theological reflection enables a comprehensive understanding of the policy's implications and the development of constructive alternatives for the Toraja Church's pastoral practice.¹⁴

RESULT

Grieving Families as Pastoral Subjects in the *Rambu Solo'* Ritual

Field data demonstrate that families conducting *Rambu Solo'* consider church ministry as an essential part of their grieving process. For Toraja people who have embraced Christianity, bereavement ministry is understood not merely as the implementation of church liturgy but also as a symbol of the church's presence in accompanying families facing the experience of loss. The presence of pastors, church council members, and congregation members throughout the funeral sequence is viewed as a form of faith solidarity that provides psychological, social, and spiritual strength to the bereaved families. Families perceive this ministry as recognition that they remain part of the church fellowship despite being in a vulnerable condition due to the death of a family member. In situations of grief, the church's presence provides a sense of being accepted, accompanied, and cared for by the faith community.¹⁵

Field findings also indicate that grief in Toraja society cannot be separated from social and cultural dimensions. Death is not merely an event experienced by the nuclear family but a communal event involving relatives, neighbors, and the broader community. In this context, church ministry serves an important function as a bridge connecting cultural experience and faith experience. The church is present to affirm the meaning of death in the light of the Gospel while accompanying families facing social and emotional pressure due to loss. The *Rambu*

¹⁴ This integration of empirical and theological analysis is consistent with Bevans' model of contextual theology.

¹⁵ Field interviews with families, conducted January-March 2026.

Solo' ceremony reflects the Torajan worldview on death, ancestral spirits, and social identity, in which ancestors are believed to actively influence the living. This understanding shapes how families perceive the role of the church in their grieving process.¹⁶

From the perspective of ritual anthropology, families conducting *Rambu Solo'* are in a liminal phase or threshold phase. In this phase, families experience a transition from the state before death toward a new state after the death of a family member. This situation is characterized by emotional instability, uncertainty, and a need for social support. Field data show that it is precisely in this phase that families most need the church's presence as a companion community. Therefore, bereavement ministry is viewed as one of the most fundamental forms of service in church life. The church's pastoral responsibility in this liminal phase cannot be overstated, as families navigate the complex intersection of cultural expectations and personal grief.¹⁷

However, the research found that families affected by the policy of bereavement ministry discontinuation experienced a different reality. Several informants stated that the discontinuation of ministry generated feelings of shame, disappointment, and alienation from the church. They felt that the church emphasized punishment over accompaniment. Some families admitted to experiencing difficulty understanding why church ministry was discontinued precisely when they were in the situation most needing spiritual support. The findings indicate that grieving families are essentially pastoral subjects requiring special attention. Grief places them in a vulnerable position, making the church's presence extremely important. Therefore, any policy related to bereavement ministry has significant implications for the spiritual and emotional lives of the families experiencing it.¹⁸

Discontinuation of Bereavement Ministry as a Form of Church Discipline

Research results show that the discontinuation of bereavement ministry is understood by church leaders as part of efforts to enforce church discipline. This policy emerged from concern over the development of gambling practices considered inherent to buffalo fighting arenas in the implementation of *Rambu Solo'*. In the view of church ministers, gambling is behavior contrary to Christian faith values and therefore needs to be firmly rejected. Church documents indicate that various ecclesiastical decisions and appeals related to buffalo fighting arenas essentially aim to encourage congregations to abandon practices considered contrary to church

¹⁶ Observations during *Rambu Solo'* ceremonies in Tana Toraja and North Toraja.

¹⁷ This liminal phase concept draws on anthropological studies of ritual.

¹⁸ Field interviews with affected families.

teaching. Within this framework, the discontinuation of bereavement ministry is viewed as a pastoral instrument to provide a corrective effect to the congregation. Several informants from church leadership stated that without firm action, the church would face difficulties in building congregational awareness regarding the dangers of gambling.¹⁹

Nevertheless, the research found that understanding of the policy's purpose and implementation is not always uniform. Some church leaders view the discontinuation of bereavement ministry as a necessary form of discipline to maintain the authority of church decisions. However, others acknowledge a pastoral dilemma because the policy is applied to families experiencing grief. In some cases, church leaders expressed struggles between the obligation to obey church decisions and the pastoral calling to accompany grieving families. Church discipline is an inseparable part of pastoral ministry in the congregation, yet its application in grief contexts raises particular tensions.²⁰

Field findings also show that most families understand that the church has the right to admonish or guide congregation members considered to have violated church teachings. However, they question the relevance of discontinuing bereavement ministry as a form of such guidance. According to them, bereavement ministry should still be provided because it relates to the spiritual needs of families facing loss. In their view, if the church wishes to provide guidance, it can be done through other means that do not eliminate ministry to grieving families. Church discipline should be understood as a brotherly duty, and the whole church bears responsibility. This understanding suggests that discipline and pastoral care are not mutually exclusive but should be integrated.²¹

The research found that the application of bereavement ministry discontinuation often creates the perception that the church emphasizes moral supervision over pastoral accompaniment. Consequently, the policy is not always understood as a guidance effort but rather as a form of punishment. This perception emerges especially because the discontinuation occurs when families are in an emotionally vulnerable condition. Thus, the research results indicate that the discontinuation of bereavement ministry is indeed understood as a form of church discipline, but its implementation presents various pastoral issues that cannot be ignored. The policy reveals a tension between the church's corrective function and its pastoral function in accompanying the congregation.²²

¹⁹ Toraja Church documents and interviews with church leaders.

²⁰ Interviews with church council members and pastors.

²¹ Field interviews with congregation members.

²² Research observations and interviews with church leaders.

The Moral Basis Underlying Church Policy

The research found that the primary reason underlying the discontinuation of bereavement ministry is the church's rejection of gambling practices. Almost all informants from church circles emphasized that the main issue is not the existence of buffalo as a cultural element but the gambling activities that often accompany buffalo fighting arenas. In their view, gambling contradicts the values of hard work, responsibility, and life management taught in the Christian faith. The analysis of church documents shows that the arguments used in various church decisions predominantly highlight the moral and social impacts of gambling. Gambling is viewed as potentially causing economic loss, social conflict, and various forms of behavior that damage family and community life. Therefore, the church feels the need to take a firm stance to prevent the spread of such practices.²³

However, the research found that the foundations articulated in this policy are more moral than theological. In interviews with several church leaders, the arguments that emerged generally related to the negative impacts of gambling on social and moral life. Meanwhile, explanations regarding the theological basis for discontinuing bereavement ministry as a sanction against grieving families were relatively not found explicitly. This finding is significant because it demonstrates a distinction between rejection of gambling and discontinuation of bereavement ministry. Rejection of gambling can be understood as the church's moral and ethical stance toward a particular practice. However, the research found that the relationship between this moral rejection and the discontinuation of bereavement ministry is not always adequately explained. In other words, there is an argumentative gap between the moral reasons used and the form of pastoral action applied.²⁴

Several informants even acknowledged that this policy is more a form of affirming the church's stance against gambling than a result of theological reflection on bereavement ministry. This indicates that the discontinuation of bereavement ministry arose primarily from the need to enforce the church's moral norms in society. As a result, the policy orientation is more directed toward creating a deterrent effect than considering the pastoral needs of grieving families. In the Toraja Church regulations, it is explained that those subjected to church discipline should be given special pastoral care. The church regulations state that pastoral care for congregation members must be carried out with love and proper shepherding. This suggests

²³ Analysis of church documents and interviews.

²⁴ Interviews with church leaders and analysis of church decisions.

a gap between the church's stated pastoral principles and the implementation of this particular disciplinary policy.²⁵

The research findings show that the moral dimension has a very dominant influence in shaping the policy of bereavement ministry discontinuation. However, this dominance simultaneously raises questions about the extent to which the policy is truly rooted in theological reflection on the nature of the church, pastoral ministry, and accompaniment of those experiencing suffering. The findings indicate that while the church's moral concern is valid and important, it does not automatically justify the withdrawal of pastoral presence from grieving families. This distinction between moral judgment and pastoral responsibility requires deeper theological consideration.²⁶

Impacts of Bereavement Ministry Discontinuation on Families and Congregations

Research results show that the discontinuation of bereavement ministry produces various impacts on affected families. The most frequently appearing impact is the feeling of losing spiritual support at a time when families are in a period of grief. Many informants stated that the absence of church ministry made them feel abandoned by the faith community that had been an important part of their lives. This sense of abandonment compounds the already profound experience of loss from the death of a family member. The church's withdrawal creates a double loss: the loss of a loved one and the loss of spiritual community support.²⁷

Beyond spiritual impact, the research also found significant psychological effects. Families affected by this policy often experience shame for having been considered to have violated church decisions. This feeling intensifies when the discontinuation of ministry becomes known to the broader community and becomes a topic of conversation within the community. In some cases, families feel they experience social stigma that the emotional burden of a family member's death. The psychological weight of grief is thus amplified by the social consequences of the church's disciplinary action.²⁸

Another impact found is the emergence of relational distance between families and the church. Several informants admitted to becoming less active in church life after experiencing the discontinuation of bereavement ministry. They felt their relationship with the church had

²⁵ Toraja Church, *Tata Gereja dan Peraturan Khusus Gereja Toraja* (Rantepao: Badan Pekerja Sinode Gereja Toraja).

²⁶ This distinction is explored further in the discussion section.

²⁷ Field interviews with affected families.

²⁸ Ibid.

changed because the experience left wounds that were difficult to forget. Although not all families showed the same response, this finding indicates that the policy of bereavement ministry discontinuation can affect the quality of the relationship between congregation members and the church in the long term. This relational damage may persist long after the grief period has passed.²⁹

At the congregational level, the research found differing views regarding the effectiveness of this policy. Some congregation members assessed that firm action is necessary to demonstrate the church's consistency in rejecting gambling. However, others argued that the discontinuation of bereavement ministry potentially creates misunderstanding about the nature of church ministry. According to them, the church should remain present to accompany grieving families while providing guidance on practices considered problematic. Another interesting finding is that the discontinuation of bereavement ministry does not always produce the behavioral changes expected. Several informants stated that buffalo fighting arena practices continue despite the policy having been implemented. This indicates that the effectiveness of bereavement ministry discontinuation as an instrument of social and moral change remains an issue requiring deeper evaluation. Overall, the research results show that the discontinuation of bereavement ministry is a policy with wide-ranging impacts on family and congregational life. On one hand, the policy is intended to affirm the church's stance against gambling practices. On the other hand, the policy also produces pastoral consequences in the form of reduced church presence among families experiencing grief.³⁰

DISCUSSION

No Adequate Theological Foundation Found for Discontinuing Bereavement Ministry

One of the main findings of this research is that the discontinuation of bereavement ministry toward families conducting buffalo fighting arenas does not possess an adequate theological foundation in the Christian faith tradition. This finding is not intended to deny the church's right to exercise ecclesiastical discipline but rather to question the theological legitimacy of discontinuing bereavement ministry as a sanction against grieving families. Analysis of field data shows that the primary reason underlying this policy is rejection of gambling practices. However, rejection of a moral action cannot automatically serve as a basis for discontinuing pastoral ministry, which is one of the essential tasks of the church.³¹

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Field observations and interviews with congregation members.

³¹ This finding is central to the theological critique of the policy.

In the biblical tradition, ministry to those experiencing suffering and grief is an integral part of the life of God's people. The Old Testament shows how God is present in the experience of His people's suffering. The Psalms, in particular, demonstrate that lamentation is not something to be avoided but rather a space for encounter between suffering humanity and a listening God. Lamentation becomes an expression of faith that reveals human openness before God in situations of loss and sorrow. Thus, the experience of grief is never understood as a condition that causes one to lose God's attention and presence.³²

The same principle is visible in the ministry of Jesus Christ. The Gospels show that Jesus consistently approaches those experiencing suffering, alienation, and social rejection. His presence is not based on a person's moral worthiness but on God's gracious love that reaches humanity even in their most fragile condition. When Lazarus died, Jesus was present with Mary and Martha in their grief. This presence is not merely a social action but a theological statement that God does not withdraw from humanity experiencing suffering. In light of Jesus' ministry, it is difficult to find a theological basis that can justify the withdrawal of the church's presence from grieving families.³³

Furthermore, the church in the Christian tradition is understood as the body of Christ called to continue Christ's ministry in the world. One concrete form of this ministry is accompaniment of those experiencing suffering. Pastoral ministry arises from the conviction that God is present through the faith community to comfort, strengthen, and restore the lives of the people. Therefore, the discontinuation of bereavement ministry raises serious theological issues because it touches one of the most fundamental functions of the church's existence.³⁴

Research results show that church leaders supporting this policy predominantly present arguments about the dangers of gambling rather than theological arguments about bereavement ministry. This condition reveals an imbalance between the reasons used and the action taken. If the main issue is gambling, then the focus of guidance should be directed at the gambling practice itself, not at discontinuing ministry to grieving families. Thus, this research finds a gap between the moral goal to be achieved and the theological basis used to justify the pastoral action. In ecclesiological perspective, bereavement ministry cannot be understood merely as a privilege that can be given or withdrawn based on congregation members' compliance with certain rules. Bereavement ministry is an expression of the church's identity as a community called to embody God's love. When this ministry is discontinued, what is at stake is not only

³² See the Psalms of lament, particularly Psalms 22, 42, and 88.

³³ John 11:35; see also the broader Gospel witness.

³⁴ 1 Corinthians 12:12-27; see also Hiltner's pastoral theology.

the relationship between church and congregation but also the church's witness regarding a compassionate God. Therefore, this research argues that the discontinuation of bereavement ministry does not possess a sufficiently strong theological foundation to be maintained as a form of church discipline.³⁵

Discontinuation of Bereavement Ministry as an Expression of Church Morality

Although no adequate theological foundation was found, this research shows that the policy of bereavement ministry discontinuation has strong roots in the church's moral considerations. The Toraja Church views gambling as a practice contrary to Christian life values. Gambling is considered to encourage dependence on luck, damage work ethics, create social conflict, and potentially cause economic loss for families and communities. Within this framework, the church's rejection of gambling is a moral stance that can be understood and justified.³⁶

The problem arises when this moral stance is translated into the form of discontinuing pastoral ministry. This research finds that there is an argumentative leap between rejection of gambling and discontinuation of bereavement ministry. These two matters exist in different domains. Rejection of gambling exists in the domain of Christian ethics and morality, while bereavement ministry exists in the domain of pastoral care and spiritual accompaniment. When these two domains are mixed without adequate theological reflection, there is a risk that pastoral ministry will be sacrificed for the enforcement of moral norms.³⁷

This phenomenon can be understood through the tendency of some religious communities to equate the church's holiness with the ability to impose sanctions on those considered to have violated norms. In this perspective, church discipline is viewed primarily as an instrument of social control aimed at maintaining the boundary between acceptable and rejected behavior. Consequently, the success of discipline is measured by the level of congregation members' compliance with church rules. Yet the Christian tradition understands the church's holiness more broadly. The church's holiness is manifested not only through rejection of sin but also through the ability to embody love, forgiveness, and restoration. The church is indeed called to be critical of practices that damage human life, but this criticism

³⁵ This theological conclusion draws on both biblical and ecclesiological sources.

³⁶ Toraja Church documents and interviews.

³⁷ This argumentative gap is a key finding of the research.

must not eliminate the church's calling to serve. When the moral function overwhelms the pastoral function, the church risks losing the balance between truth and love.³⁸

This research shows that the discontinuation of bereavement ministry is more appropriately understood as an expression of church morality than as a consequence of deep theological reflection on bereavement ministry. This is evident from the dominance of narratives about gambling in informants' arguments compared to narratives about the nature of church ministry. In other words, the primary basis of this policy is not a new understanding of bereavement ministry but rather the desire to affirm the church's position regarding gambling. The problem is that when morality becomes the sole basis for pastoral action, the church can become trapped in a legalistic approach. A legalistic approach tends to evaluate human actions based on compliance with rules, while concrete human needs often receive less attention. In the context of this research, grieving families end up being treated as objects of sanctions rather than as pastoral subjects needing accompaniment.³⁹

This finding indicates that the church needs to clearly distinguish between moral function and pastoral function. The church can firmly reject gambling without having to discontinue bereavement ministry. In fact, it is precisely through pastoral ministry that the church has a greater opportunity to provide guidance, dialogue, and transformation of congregational life. Thus, rejection of gambling need not be manifested through reduction of the church's presence in situations of grief. The integration of moral witness and pastoral care represents a more holistic approach to church discipline. This integration requires the church to maintain its prophetic voice while simultaneously embodying the compassionate presence of Christ to those who are suffering.⁴⁰

Loss of the Pastoral Dimension in the Practice of Church Discipline

Research findings show that the most fundamental issue with the discontinuation of bereavement ministry lies not only in the weakness of its theological foundation but also in the loss of the pastoral dimension in the practice of church discipline. In the church tradition, discipline has a clear purpose: the restoration of relationships between congregation members and God, others, and the faith community. Discipline is not intended to punish for punishment's sake but to bring a person back into a life more aligned with God's will. Calvin (1960) emphasizes that church discipline is one of the important signs of a healthy church life.

³⁸ For a discussion of legalism in church discipline, see Calvin, *Institutes*.

³⁹ Field interviews and analysis of church documents.

⁴⁰ This proposal is developed further in the contextual theology discussion.

However, such discipline must be exercised within the framework of love and restoration. When discipline loses its restorative orientation, it becomes an instrument of exclusion that contradicts its fundamental purpose.⁴¹

In the context of this research, the discontinuation of bereavement ministry shows this tendency because the impacts that emerge are more alienation than restoration. Field data show that families affected by this policy experience various forms of pastoral wounds. They feel abandoned by the church at the very time they need support. This experience reveals that the discontinuation of ministry has not only administrative or institutional impact but also deep spiritual and emotional impact. For grieving families, church ministry is not merely a ritual but a symbol of God's presence through the faith community.⁴²

In the perspective of pastoral theology, the experience of grief is one of the most important moments for the church's presence. Hiltner (1958) explains that pastoral ministry has the functions of healing, sustaining, guiding, and reconciling. All these functions become highly relevant in situations of grief. When bereavement ministry is discontinued, these pastoral functions cannot be optimally performed. The church's withdrawal from the grieving context represents a failure of pastoral responsibility. Furthermore, this research finds that the discontinuation of bereavement ministry potentially hinders the very guidance goals it seeks to achieve. Instead of encouraging reflection and change, the policy in some cases generates disappointment and emotional distance between congregation members and the church.⁴³

This situation shows that an overly sanction-oriented approach is not always effective in producing transformation in congregational life. The policy's ineffectiveness is compounded by the fact that buffalo fighting arena practices continue despite the policy having been implemented. This suggests that the church's disciplinary approach may be addressing symptoms rather than root causes. In light of these findings, church discipline needs to be reunderstood as part of pastoral ministry. Healthy discipline is not discipline that distances the church from the congregation but discipline that enables the church to be present critically yet full of love. This presence can be manifested through dialogue, accompaniment, ongoing guidance, and various forms of ministry that help congregation members understand the issues they face without feeling abandoned by the faith community. Thus, this research affirms that the discontinuation of bereavement ministry reveals a tendency toward the loss of the pastoral dimension in the practice of church discipline. The policy emphasizes the corrective function

⁴¹ Calvin, *Institutes*, Book IV, Chapter 12.

⁴² Field interviews with affected families.

⁴³ Hiltner, *Preface to Pastoral Theology*; field interviews.

over the accompaniment function, potentially obscuring the church's identity as a community embodying God's love and comfort amid human suffering.⁴⁴

Reconstruction Through Contextual Theology and Restorative Pastoral Care

The issue of bereavement ministry discontinuation cannot be resolved merely by pitting culture against church. A more nuanced approach is needed that can understand the complexity of the relationship between Christian faith, Toraja culture, and the church's pastoral life. In this regard, contextual theology offers an important framework for reconstructing the church's response to the phenomenon of buffalo fighting arenas. According to Bevans (2002), contextual theology arises from the awareness that the Gospel is always lived in a particular context. Therefore, the church cannot proclaim the Gospel without paying attention to the cultural reality in which the church exists. However, paying attention to culture does not mean accepting all cultural elements uncritically. Contextual theology actually invites the church to engage in critical dialogue between the Gospel and culture so that a mutually enriching transformation process occurs.⁴⁵

In the Toraja context, this approach means that the church needs to distinguish between cultural elements and practices considered contrary to Gospel values. The buffalo fighting arena cannot be understood simply as a cultural symbol or merely as a gambling arena. This phenomenon is part of a complex social reality with various cultural, economic, and symbolic dimensions. Therefore, the church's response also needs to consider this complexity. This research proposes a restorative pastoral approach as an alternative to the discontinuation of bereavement ministry. The restorative approach proceeds from the conviction that the primary purpose of church ministry is the restoration of relationships and transformation of life. In this model, the church maintains a critical stance toward gambling but does not withdraw its presence from grieving families.⁴⁶

The restorative approach can be realized through several steps. First, the church needs to strengthen Christian ethical education regarding gambling and its impacts on congregational life. Second, the church needs to develop dialogue spaces involving traditional leaders, church leaders, and the community to discuss the position of buffalo fighting arenas in Toraja cultural

⁴⁴ This conclusion draws on both empirical findings and theological reflection; .

⁴⁵ Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology*, 3-8.

⁴⁶ The restorative approach draws on the work of Bevans and Kobong. Comp. Sannang and Bulan, "Daro-Daro Dalam Ritus Rambu Solo': Analisis Fenomenologis, Sosiologis, Dan Reinterpretasi Teologis Di Masyarakat Toraja Bori": 136–142.

life. Third, the church needs to prioritize pastoral ministry in situations of grief, so that families continue to receive accompaniment even when there are issues requiring further guidance. This approach allows the church to exercise prophetic and pastoral functions simultaneously. The church can still convey criticism of practices considered contrary to the Gospel, but this criticism is delivered from within pastoral relationships, not through withdrawal of ministry. Thus, the church does not lose the opportunity to be a dialogue partner and spiritual guide for the congregation.⁴⁷

Ultimately, contextual theology reminds us that faithfulness to the Gospel is not measured by how harshly the church imposes sanctions but by its ability to embody God's love concretely in the context of people's lives. In situations of grief, this presence becomes increasingly important because it is at such times that humans most need comfort, hope, and accompaniment. Therefore, the reconstruction of church discipline through a restorative pastoral approach is a step more aligned with the nature of the church as a faith community called to embody Christ's love in the world. This reconstruction requires the church to hold together its prophetic and pastoral identities, recognizing that these are not contradictory but complementary dimensions of its mission.⁴⁸

A Cultural Approach Model as an Alternative to Ecclesiastical Guidance

One important finding of this research is that the discontinuation of bereavement ministry has not succeeded in resolving the root problem the church sought to address. Buffalo fighting arena practices continue despite the discontinuation policy having been implemented. This condition indicates that a sanction-oriented approach has not been able to produce the expected cultural transformation. Therefore, a different approach is needed that is not merely corrective but also transformative through the church's active involvement in the cultural space of Toraja society.⁴⁹

In the perspective of contextual theology, culture is not understood as something to be completely rejected or accepted without criticism. Bevans (2002) affirms that the Gospel always exists in dialogue with human context and therefore the church is called to carry out a process of transformation from within culture itself. This approach enables the church to exercise its prophetic function without losing closeness to the community. In the Toraja context, a cultural approach becomes important because the buffalo fighting arena does not stand merely

⁴⁷ For a similar approach in Indonesian context, see Timo and Putrawan.

⁴⁸ This conclusion reflects the integration of contextual and pastoral theology.

⁴⁹ Field observations and interviews.

as a gambling practice but exists within a network of social, symbolic, and cultural meanings that have long lived in society.⁵⁰

The cultural approach referred to in this research is a guidance strategy conducted through dialogue, education, and value transformation from within the cultural community. The church does not position itself as opposed to culture but as a critical partner present within community life. Through this approach, the church still conveys criticism of gambling practices but does not reject the entire cultural element surrounding them. Thus, the church can distinguish between cultural values that can be maintained and practices that need to be transformed in light of the Gospel. The cultural approach can be realized through several steps. First, the church needs to build dialogue forums involving traditional leaders, community figures, and church leaders to discuss the position of buffalo fighting arenas in Toraja community life. Such dialogue enables the creation of mutual understanding regarding cultural elements that need to be preserved and those that need renewal. Second, the church needs to develop Christian ethics education based on local culture so that the guidance process is not understood as rejection of cultural identity. Third, the church needs to encourage the emergence of forms of cultural expression that still respect Toraja traditional values without opening space for gambling practices.⁵¹

This approach aligns with the thinking of Kobong (2008), who sees that the Gospel does not come to destroy culture but to transform it so that culture can become a means of Christian faith witness. Within this framework, the church does not lose its prophetic identity but also does not lose closeness to the community it serves. The cultural approach enables the church to be present as an agent of transformation working through relationships, dialogue, and ongoing guidance. Through the cultural approach, church discipline is no longer understood primarily as a punishment mechanism but as a process of faith consciousness formation that takes place participatively.⁵² Thus, the church can maintain its commitment to Gospel values while fulfilling its pastoral responsibility to grieving families. This integrated approach represents a more constructive way forward for the Toraja Church as it navigates the tensions between Christian faith and cultural tradition.

⁵⁰ Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology*, 15-20.

⁵¹ This model is proposed based on the research findings and theological reflection.

⁵² Kobong, *Injil dan Tongkonan*.

CONCLUSION

This research, which aimed to examine the theological legitimacy of discontinuing bereavement ministry for families conducting buffalo fighting arenas in the *Rambu Solo'* ritual, has produced several significant findings that directly address the three research questions posed in this study. First, regarding the theological foundation of the policy, this research finds no adequate theological basis within the Christian tradition to justify the discontinuation of bereavement ministry to grieving families, as the primary rationale underlying this policy is predominantly moral—the church's rejection of gambling practices—rather than theological reflection on the nature of bereavement ministry. Second, from the perspective of pastoral theology, this research demonstrates that the policy potentially obscures the nature of pastoral ministry, as grieving families in their vulnerable condition experience feelings of abandonment, loss of spiritual support, and alienation from the faith community, revealing that discipline intended as a corrective instrument can produce impacts contrary to the fundamental purpose of church ministry. Third, through the lens of contextual theology, this research affirms that the church's response to buffalo fighting arenas should not be manifested through withdrawal of ministry but through a dialogical, critical, and transformative approach that maintains pastoral relationships while critiquing cultural elements contrary to Gospel values, thereby enabling the church to exercise both prophetic and pastoral functions simultaneously.

The implications of this study are significant for the Toraja Church and similar contexts where churches face tensions between cultural practices and Christian values. The study suggests that church discipline must always be exercised within a pastoral framework that prioritizes restoration over punishment and accompaniment over exclusion, and that moral concerns regarding gambling should be addressed through educational and dialogical approaches rather than through the withdrawal of pastoral presence from grieving families. The limitation of this research lies in its focus on the Toraja Church context in South Sulawesi, Indonesia, which may limit the generalizability of findings to other cultural settings or Christian traditions with different dynamics between faith and culture. Future research should explore similar dynamics in other Indonesian churches or cross-cultural contexts where traditional practices intersect with Christian faith, and comparative studies examining how different Christian traditions navigate cultural tensions in funeral practices would also be valuable. Additionally, further investigation into the effectiveness of restorative pastoral approaches in transforming gambling practices within cultural rituals, as well as longitudinal studies examining the long-term impact of disciplinary policies on congregational life and faith

formation, would contribute significantly to the development of more constructive models of church discipline and cultural engagement that are both theologically sound and contextually relevant.

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