



Pastoral Renewal in a Rural Catholic Community: The Case of St. Anthony Station, Tanjung Lima

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Abstract: This study examines the pastoral realities of St. Anthony Station, Tanjung Lima, within St. Stephen Parish, Malinau, Diocese of TanjungSelor, North Kalimantan, Indonesia, to identify factors influencing parishioner participation in Church life. Using the pastoral cycle methodology—participant observation, social analysis, theological reflection, and pastoral planning—data were collected through interviews with key informants, a parish census, and direct observation of liturgical and organizational activities. Findings indicate that weak ecclesial commitment is shaped by leadership challenges, socio-economic transitions, technological distractions, and limited intergenerational support. Social analysis revealed low participation rates in parish groups, particularly among youth and women, with discrepancies between reported and observed engagement. Theological reflection, grounded in Matthew 28:20, emphasized the enduring presence of Christ as the foundation for renewed pastoral energy and unity. In response, a collaboratively developed pastoral plan proposed targeted interventions, including altar server recollections, joint youth activities, mobilization of the Catholic Women’s Association, and lay leadership training in prayer and reflection. Implementation of a parish-wide youth recollection demonstrated partial success, highlighting the need for sustained, contextualized strategies. This research contributes to pastoral theology by offering a model for revitalizing rural Catholic communities through integrated empirical analysis, theological grounding, and practical planning rooted in the lived reality of the faithful.

INTRODUCTION

The pastoral cycle is a widely used framework in pastoral theology that connects faith and life through a process of reflection and action. It consists of four interconnected stages: participant observation, social analysis, theological reflection, and pastoral planning. This methodology ensures that pastoral responses are grounded in the real-life experiences of a community while remaining faithful to the Gospel and the Church’s mission. By beginning with a close observation of people’s lived realities, moving toward a critical analysis of social and cultural factors, interpreting these findings in the light of Scripture and Church teaching, and finally formulating concrete pastoral actions, the cycle provides a holistic and participatory approach to ministry. In the context of St. Anthony Station, Tanjung Lima—a rural Catholic community facing challenges of declining participation, socio-economic shifts, and

generational disengagement—the pastoral cycle offers a practical tool for understanding the roots of these issues and for designing strategies to renew parish life. This study applies the pastoral cycle to integrate empirical data with theological insights, aiming to create a pastoral plan that is both contextually relevant and spiritually transformative.

The Catholic community of St. Anthony Station, Tanjung Lima, is recognized as one of the earliest Catholic communities in the region, possessing a distinctive historical identity within the pastoral territory of St. Stephen Parish, Malinau. Situated in eastern Malinau Regency, the station borders the Respen and Lokasi Baru Stations and comprises 66 families, amounting to 359 individuals. The majority of parishioners belong to the Dayak Abai ethnic group, with smaller numbers from the Timorese, Lun Dayeh, Punan, and Kenya peoples. The community continues to uphold ancestral traditions, maintain customary laws, and preserve strong social cohesion. Most residents earn their livelihood through farming and gardening, while educational attainment ranges from high school to university level. This socio-cultural context makes St. Anthony Station an important locus for understanding the lived faith of rural Catholic communities in Kalimantan.

The urgency of this research arises from the pastoral demands placed upon diocesan priests, who, as indigenous clergy, are called to understand deeply the context in which they serve. Familiarity with the pastoral landscape, community characteristics, and the everyday realities faced by parishioners is essential for effective ministry. St. Anthony Station offers a particularly rich field of study because of its active liturgical life—especially the centrality of the Eucharist—its vibrant Marian devotion, and its deeply rooted communal values. At the same time, certain pastoral challenges emerge, such as the need to balance popular devotion with a Christ-centered faith. By examining these dynamics, the study seeks to contribute to more contextually grounded pastoral approaches.

While commemorative publications, such as the *40 Years Anniversary Book of St. Stephen Parish, Malinau*, provide valuable historical information, they do not offer a detailed, field-based analysis of the devotional life, faith practices, and social values specific to Tanjung Lima. Nor do they critically explore how these elements influence the station's pastoral priorities and identity. This research addresses that gap by integrating historical sources with qualitative fieldwork, thereby offering a richer and more nuanced understanding of the community.

This study is guided by the research question: *How do the faith practices, communal values, and socio-cultural characteristics of the Catholic community at St. Anthony Station, Tanjung Lima, shape their pastoral life and identity?* To address this, the research draws upon both documentary sources and primary data collected through interviews and questionnaires. The literature review provides the historical framework, while the fieldwork offers firsthand insights into community life, highlighting the central role of the Eucharist, the practice of lay-led liturgies, seasonal Marian devotions, and the lived values of cooperation, solidarity, effective communication, and compassion. Together, these perspectives aim to illuminate the interplay between faith, culture, and pastoral care in one of Kalimantan's notable Catholic stations.

METHOD

This study employed the *pastoral cycle* as its primary methodological framework, consisting of four interrelated stages: participant observation, social analysis, theological reflection, and pastoral planning. The pastoral cycle was selected because it integrates empirical engagement with the community and critical theological discernment, making it particularly suitable for pastoral research that seeks to understand and strengthen the lived faith of a Catholic community.

The first stage, participant observation, focused on identifying key pastoral issues within the community and probing their underlying causes. This was achieved through semi-structured interviews with parishioners of St. Anthony Station, Tanjung Lima, designed to gather insights into their faith life, devotional practices, communal values, and socio-cultural context. In addition, collaboration with parish leadership enabled the distribution of questionnaires for a population census. This ensured the availability of reliable demographic and pastoral data, providing a clear picture of the community's composition and challenges.

Four key informants were selected based on their leadership roles and active participation in the station: Stefanus Sidung (village head and traditional leader, born in Luso, 18 August 1956), Agustina (government-employed catechist and parish administrator, born in Tanjung Lima, 16 August 1981), Agustina Isodurus Jimmy (station head, born in Tanjung Lima, 12 June 1986), and Osi Paulina (Catholic youth member, born in Mansalong). These individuals represented diverse perspectives within the community, ensuring a more comprehensive understanding of parish life.

The second stage, social analysis, involved critically examining the collected data to identify social structures, cultural norms, and economic factors that shape the community's pastoral life. This step highlighted patterns such as the centrality of the Eucharist, the strong role of Marian devotion, the importance of communal cooperation, and the persistence of customary traditions. It also brought to light pastoral challenges, such as variations in participation between Eucharistic celebrations and lay-led services.

In the third stage, theological reflection, the findings from social analysis were interpreted in light of Catholic doctrine, Sacred Scripture, and pastoral theology. This interpretative process allowed for the discernment of how the community's lived experience reflects, deepens, or challenges the Gospel message and Church teaching. For example, the community's devotion to Mary was appreciated as a sign of deep piety but also examined in relation to maintaining a Christocentric focus in faith formation.

The final stage, pastoral planning, translated these theological insights into concrete recommendations aimed at fostering the growth of faith and strengthening community life. Proposed actions included enhancing catechetical programs to deepen Christ-centered spirituality, encouraging more active lay participation in non-Eucharistic liturgies, and building upon the community's strong traditions of mutual assistance and compassion. These recommendations are intended to serve as practical guidelines for future pastoral work in St.

Anthony Station, ensuring that pastoral interventions remain rooted in both the lived reality and the Gospel mission of the Church.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Interviews and field observations reveal that the Catholic community of St. Anthony Station, Tanjung Lima, is experiencing a noticeable decline in active ecclesial participation. Informants consistently described parishioners as having a weak sense of belonging to the Church, a lack of discipline in faith practice, and, in some cases, a lukewarm spiritual life. Analysis of the data suggests that these challenges stem from a combination of leadership dynamics, technological influence, socio-economic change, and specific barriers faced by different parish groups.

Pastoral Observation

Leadership participation emerged as a central factor. While the community originally embraced Catholicism as its first and only Christian affiliation—following limited earlier missionary contact from GKII—internal divisions over the years have led more than 25 families to convert to Protestantism. Reasons include interpersonal conflicts, differences of opinion, and dissatisfaction with overly rigid leadership styles. The presence of a resident Protestant pastor within the station reinforces this dynamic. Informants expressed a strong desire for more consistent pastoral engagement from priests, religious sisters, and seminarians, with equitable outreach to all parishioners rather than selective visitation.

Technological advancement was identified as another contributor to declining participation. Younger members, particularly children and teenagers, are increasingly drawn to smartphones, television, and personal leisure activities over involvement in Church life. This shift has resulted in reduced interest in altar server duties, church cleaning, and group activities, contrasting sharply with earlier times when parishioners were more easily mobilized.

Economic transformation has also reshaped priorities. Improved educational access has led many young people to seek employment in cities rather than remain in rural livelihoods. While this reflects positive socio-economic progress, it has weakened the attachment to village-based parish life, as many community members spend less time in the station.

Further analysis of specific parish organizations provides more detailed insight into patterns of disengagement. Within SEKAMI (the children's association), lack of parental support was a major reason for low participation. In REMAKA (the teenage association), some members felt embarrassed to continue serving as altar servers, believing the role to be more appropriate for younger children, while others were restricted by parental disapproval. OMK (Catholic youth) members reported feeling geographically isolated from the parish center and expressed that the central youth organization did little to integrate or support them. Additional barriers included lack of parental or community encouragement, early marriages, unappealing church activities, and competing demands from work or school. Within WK (the Catholic

women's association), members cited household responsibilities, employment obligations, and, in some cases, simple indifference as reasons for non-involvement.

Taken together, these findings portray a complex interplay of personal, familial, and structural factors contributing to diminished engagement in the ecclesial life of St. Anthony Station. They indicate that revitalizing participation will require pastoral strategies that address leadership presence, adapt activities to different age groups, strengthen intergenerational support, and account for the socio-cultural and economic realities of the community.

Social Analysis

The social analysis was conducted through direct observation of parish life during Sunday liturgical activities, with particular attention to the engagement of different parish groups. The focus was on the participation of the Catholic Youth Organization (*Orang Muda Katolik / OMK*) in their activities, the presence of children in the *Sekolah Minggu Anak Misioner* (SEKAMI), the involvement of teenagers in altar server duties through REMAKA, and the participation of the Catholic Women's Association (*Wanita Katolik / WK*) in their organizational roles. This approach allowed for a first-hand assessment of the community's actual level of engagement, beyond self-reported data from interviews.

The findings revealed a notable discrepancy between the participation figures provided by informants and the observations recorded in the field. Out of a total of 355 registered parishioners, only 150 were observed to be actively participating in Sunday Church life, while 201 showed no active involvement. Within specific groups, SEKAMI had 64 registered members, but only 20 attended regularly on Sundays, leaving 44 inactive. REMAKA demonstrated relatively higher engagement, with 25 of its 30 members active and only 5 inactive. OMK displayed the lowest level of participation, with just 2 of its 13 members involved, while 11 remained inactive. WK had 51 members, of whom 17 participated actively, with 34 not involved in Sunday activities.

These figures underscore a consistent pattern of low engagement, particularly among youth and adult women, and confirm earlier qualitative findings that identified weak parental support, limited outreach from central parish structures, and competing demands from work, school, or domestic responsibilities as contributing factors. The higher level of engagement in REMAKA compared to OMK suggests that as members transition from adolescence to young adulthood, there is a sharp drop in participation, possibly linked to increased mobility, work obligations, and a lack of appealing church programs for their age group.

The divergence between informant reports and observed data also highlights the importance of field-based social analysis in pastoral research. While interview data can provide valuable perceptions and explanations, direct observation offers a more precise measurement of actual participation rates, enabling a more accurate diagnosis of pastoral realities. This analysis suggests that any pastoral intervention in St. Anthony Station must address both the structural and relational factors influencing group participation, with special attention to engaging OMK and strengthening parental and intergenerational support.

Theological Reflection

The words of the Lord, “*I am with you always, to the end of the age*” (Mt 28:20), were spoken by Jesus to His disciples as they received their missionary mandate. This promise does not imply immunity from trials, temptations, or conflicts, but rather assures the constant presence of Christ amid the challenges of discipleship. For the Catholic community of St. Anthony Station, Tanjung Lima, this assurance of divine accompaniment is a foundational truth that should inspire confidence and perseverance in living out their faith.

The lived reality of the Church, in every place and time, includes both internal and external challenges. The situation in Tanjung Lima—marked by fluctuating participation, social and economic changes, and the influence of modern technology—reflects the same dynamic experienced by the wider Church throughout history. These realities do not diminish the Church’s mission; rather, they become opportunities to rediscover the depth of Christ’s promise and to reaffirm that God remains present and active in the midst of His people.

For pastoral workers—priests, religious, and lay leaders—one of the most important tasks is to awaken in parishioners the awareness of God’s abiding presence. This theological consciousness can serve as a catalyst for renewed commitment to the life of the Church. When parishioners recognize that Christ Himself journeys with them, participation in liturgy, community activities, and pastoral initiatives becomes not merely a duty, but a joyful expression of faith and unity. In this way, the pastoral emphasis on God’s accompaniment can nurture both personal spirituality and communal solidarity, enabling the Church in Tanjung Lima to grow as a living witness of the Gospel.

Pastoral Plan

The pastoral plan designed for St. Anthony Station, Tanjung Lima, is the result of collective discernment through consultations with key informants and with the approval of the parish priest. It is not the product of individual decision-making, but rather a collaborative process aimed at addressing the pastoral realities identified in the research. The plan focuses on revitalizing participation, strengthening community bonds, and nurturing faith through targeted initiatives.

First, a recollection for altar servers (*misdinar*) will be organized. As those who serve closest to the altar, altar servers have a unique proximity to the sacred mysteries through their service alongside the priest. A recollection will serve both as catechesis and as formation in liturgical service, deepening their understanding of the Mass and strengthening their spiritual commitment.

Second, an outbound activity for SEKAMI, REMAKA, and OMK will be implemented. Recognizing that children and young people are the future of the Church, this joint event will serve as a platform for building unity across age groups, fostering relationships, and encouraging active participation. While outwardly recreational in nature, such activities are

designed with intentional pastoral objectives—entering into the world of the youth to draw them more deeply into the life of the Church.

Third, a meeting with the Catholic Women’s Association (WK) will be convened. With 51 registered members, this group holds significant potential for pastoral involvement. While the community is known for its responsiveness when mobilized, informants have noted a lack of leadership to initiate such engagement. The planned meeting aims to inspire and mobilize WK members to take on active roles in parish activities, thereby strengthening the communal and liturgical life of the station.

Finally, training in prayer leadership and scriptural reflection will be offered. With only one catechist in the station, the lack of prepared lay leaders has sometimes led to a sense of monotony in communal prayers and services. By equipping willing parishioners to lead prayers and offer brief reflections, the plan seeks to enhance the quality and diversity of liturgical and devotional gatherings, while fostering a greater sense of ownership among the laity.

This pastoral plan is intended to be both practical and formative, responding directly to the identified challenges while building on the strengths of the community. By prioritizing youth engagement, lay formation, and leadership development, the initiatives aim to foster a more vibrant, participatory, and Christ-centered parish life in St. Anthony Station.

Strategic Pastoral Initiatives to Revitalize Youth Participation in St. Anthony Station

In light of the various challenges identified in St. Anthony Station, this discussion focuses on formulating and implementing pastoral initiatives aimed at fostering a deeper love for the Church among parishioners. As a pastoral seminarian, my primary goal was to design activities that would at least encourage active participation in parish life. Among the four proposed plans, only one was successfully realized: organizing a youth recollection for all teenagers from St. Stephen Parish, Malinau, hosted in St. Anthony Station. The choice of location was intentional, serving as both a pastoral intervention and a symbolic act to energize the local community—particularly the youth—by positioning their station as a center of parish activity.

The strategy employed involved securing the approval of the parish priest and pastoral supervisor, while engaging lay leaders, youth coordinators, and other parish stakeholders to ensure broad participation and shared ownership of the event. This collaborative approach was critical in mobilizing resources, building trust, and fostering enthusiasm across different segments of the parish.

The implementation process began with presenting the program proposal to the Parish Pastoral Council (DPP) for approval. Upon receiving endorsement, a small organizing committee was formed, consisting of members from the Parish Youth Commission (KKMK), the Antioch team, and SEKAMI coordinators. A joint meeting with all station leaders determined the event’s details: the youth recollection would be held on Monday–Tuesday, 4–5 February 2019, in St. Anthony Station. Each station was required to send as many teenage participants as possible, with a participant fee of Rp. 25,000 and a one-kilogram rice contribution.

The event ran smoothly and was well-received. According to the secretariat, the recollection gathered 197 participants from the five urban communities and 11 rural stations, supported by 25 Antioch team members and 10 members of the Parish Youth Commission. The atmosphere was lively, and participants engaged enthusiastically in the program.

However, the evaluation revealed a significant limitation: despite hosting the event, participation from St. Anthony Station's own youth was relatively low. In particular, older teenagers—especially those in senior high school—showed reluctance or disinterest in joining. This indicates that while the initiative succeeded in creating a vibrant parish-wide event, it did not fully achieve its goal of reactivating local youth engagement. Future pastoral strategies will therefore need to address the specific barriers faced by older teenagers in the station, possibly by offering programs more closely aligned with their interests, life stage, and perceived needs.

CONCLUSION

This study of St. Anthony Station, Tanjung Lima, reveals that the community's pastoral challenges stem from a combination of leadership dynamics, socio-economic change, technological influence, and varying levels of participation across parish groups. While the station has a rich Catholic heritage and strong communal traditions, participation in ecclesial life is uneven, with notable disengagement among youth and adult women. Social analysis confirmed discrepancies between perceived and actual participation, highlighting the need for more accurate pastoral assessments that integrate both qualitative insights and direct observation.

The theological reflection grounded these findings in the enduring promise of Christ's presence—"I am with you always, to the end of the age" (Mt 28:20)—reminding both pastoral leaders and parishioners that God accompanies His people even amid difficulties. This awareness calls for pastoral approaches that not only address structural and logistical issues but also renew the community's spiritual motivation to participate in the life of the Church. Strengthening this awareness can inspire unity, deepen commitment, and transform parish involvement from mere obligation into joyful discipleship.

The pastoral plan developed in this study offers concrete, collaborative initiatives aimed at revitalizing parish life, including recollections for altar servers, joint youth activities, mobilization of the Catholic Women's Association, and training in prayer leadership. While some initiatives, such as the parish-wide youth recollection, have achieved partial success, the experience demonstrates that sustainable pastoral renewal requires long-term commitment, contextual adaptation, and intergenerational collaboration. Moving forward, the lessons from this research can serve as a model for other rural Catholic communities facing similar challenges, showing that pastoral revitalization is possible when rooted in both the lived reality of the people and the guiding vision of the Gospel.

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