




A contextual model of religious moderation in the 'Orang Basudara' Church: Insights from the Protestant Church of Maluku (GPM)



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The erroneous interpretations of religious teachings in societies are leading to extremism and liberalism, fostering animosity among religious adherents. This underscores the pressing need for religious moderation. Therefore, this study aimed to map and analyse the reception and responses of the local church to the government's call for religious moderation, particularly in local church in Maluku and North Maluku, Indonesia. It also explored the understanding of how religious moderation was implemented in church programmes and practices. Using qualitative methods, this study examined religious moderation in the context of the Maluku Protestant Church (GPM). Data were collected through church document analysis, interviews and reviews of news in print and electronic media. The results showed that GPM had long championed religious moderation, specifically in addressing the 1999–2002 communal conflict in Maluku and North Maluku with terminologies distinct from those promoted by the Ministry of Religious Affairs. Furthermore, various programmes and initiatives have been undertaken by GPM at the synodal, classis and congregational levels, which correlated with efforts to promote religious moderation. These included innovative methods customised to support interfaith harmony and social cohesion. This study implies that locally rooted religious moderation models, such as that of GPM, can serve as valuable alternatives or complements to state-driven narratives in promoting interfaith harmony.

Contribution: This study contributed to developing religious moderation from the 'grassroots' side. Therefore, the analysis was part of the government's socialisation and further driven by the local church, which played a crucial role as an agent of peace in Maluku and North Maluku.

Keywords: contextual theology; interfaith relations; pluralism; Protestant Church of Maluku (GPM); religious moderation; social peacebuilding.

Introduction

Erroneous interpretations of religious teachings have contributed to the rise of extremism and liberalism, fostering hostility among religious communities. This alarming situation underscores the urgent need for religious moderation, particularly within local churches in Maluku and North Maluku, Indonesia, where religious diversity and historical tensions persist (Al Qurtuby 2015). In response to such challenges, the church is called to be socially aware, recognising itself as an integral part of society (Yewangoe 2009, 2016). The church must collaborate with all sectors of the nation to promote the development of a civil and harmonious society. This vision aligns with other Christian reflections in Indonesia, such as Rante Salu's (2023) proposal of early church hospitality as a model for religious moderation in plural contexts. To realise this role, it must implement its social teachings by actively engaging, dialoguing and building solidarity with the wider community, thus fulfilling its missional vocation (Soetoprawiro 2003). From a broader theological perspective, the church is also called to public engagement, contributing to justice, peace and human dignity in fragmented societies (Smit 2007). Within this framework, society must be viewed as a dynamic system in which ideas, norms and values are continuously negotiated and expressed through individual and collective actions (Nanuru 2011, 2020).

Social awareness is crucial in Indonesia, a nation rich in cultural, ethnic, religious and linguistic diversity. Church cannot exist in isolation but should interact, contribute and actively participate in society. This interaction includes maintaining positive relationships with the government and other social institutions. Church should not also adopt an antagonistic stance towards the government but should collaborate to achieve shared objectives.

A key government initiative deserving church's attention is religious moderation programme launched by the Ministry of Religious Affairs of the Republic of Indonesia in 2019. This programme addresses the challenges posed by religious diversity and tolerance in the Indonesian society. In a culturally and religiously diverse nation such as Indonesia, religious moderation plays a crucial role in maintaining social stability and fostering unity among various societal groups. Maluku, with its history of inter-religious tensions, highlights the importance of religious moderation for long-term peacebuilding and reconciliation.

Religious moderation is also a global concern with many countries and international organisations emphasising tolerance and moderation as critical tools in addressing global challenges such as terrorism and religious conflicts (Mulyana 2023). In the Indonesian context, the concept of religious moderation has not only emerged as a state response to radicalism and intolerance but has also developed into a significant academic discourse. A recent bibliometric study reveals a substantial growth of scholarly publications in this field, showing how religious moderation has been conceptualised across social, cultural and educational dimensions in Indonesia (Zaluchu, Widodo & Kriswanto 2025). Indonesia which is home to the world's largest Muslim population also has the potential to serve as a model for religious moderation. As a religious institution, church can contribute to this effort by implementing initiatives and programmes that promote moderation.

Religious moderation aspires to cultivate a moderate outlook within the Indonesian society. The government's role in this context is to create public spaces that motivate interaction between religious communities to achieve the ideal. This context of religious diversity and the need for moderation raises several important questions that this study seeks to answer. Specifically, this study explores the role of the Maluku Protestant Church (GPM) as a faith-based community in responding to the call for religious moderation. It investigates how GPM educates its members about other religions to foster religious moderation, the extent to which GPM critically engages with the concept of religious moderation and the social and cultural resources GPM utilises to implement religious moderation initiatives. In addressing these questions, this study aims to achieve several objectives. Firstly, it seeks to identify and analyse GPM's programmes and initiatives that promote religious moderation. Secondly, it evaluates the effectiveness of these programmes in fostering interfaith harmony and social cohesion. Thirdly, it aims to identify the challenges faced by GPM in implementing religious moderation within its diverse contexts.

In a pluralistic society, religious moderation is a crucial concept. The success of government programmes promoting moderation relies not only on top-down policies but also on grassroots support including that of the local church. Efforts to promote religious moderation often face significant challenges without these supports. **However**, initial

observations suggest that religious moderation has not received adequate attention among many local churches. Certain churches remain confined to a narrow perspective, leading to limited participation in interfaith dialogue and religious moderation initiatives (Akhmadi 2019; Pipit Aidul Fitriyana et al. 2020; Rantung 2024). For instance, some churches prioritise internal activities over engaging with other faith communities, reflecting a limited understanding of religious coexistence (Jura 2020). This outlines the need for detailed mapping and analysis of how local church respond to the government's call for religious moderation. Moderation is not merely a slogan but an approach that requires commitment and action from all parties. As part of society, the local church holds a strategic role in advancing moderation by fostering dialogue and tolerance through its programmes. By embracing these values, church can create a harmonious environment and strengthen social cohesion.

Several studies have explored religious moderation in Indonesia, including 'Dynamics of Religious Moderation in Indonesia' (Pipit Aidul Fitriyana et al. 2020), 'Patterns of Realizing Religious Moderation' (Rouf 2020), 'Religious Moderation in Indonesian Diversity' (Akhmadi 2019), and 'The Role of Christian Religious Education (PAK) in Religious Moderation Spirit for the Sake of Indonesia' (Jura 2020). While these studies provide valuable insights into the broader discourse of religious moderation in Indonesia, there is a gap in the literature concerning the specific role and practices of local churches. Furthermore, studies on religious moderation and interfaith relations in other contexts offer comparative perspectives that can enrich our understanding of the phenomenon. For instance, the work of John L. Esposito on Islam and pluralism (Esposito 1999) explores diverse interpretations of religious texts and their implications for interfaith dialogue. Similarly, studies on the role of religious actors in peacebuilding in post-conflict societies (Appleby 2000; Carlson 2001) provide valuable insights into how religious communities can contribute to reconciliation and social cohesion.

The study aimed to examine the extent of local church participation in promoting religious moderation in Indonesia, particularly by exploring how the GPM – the largest local church in Maluku and North Maluku – has responded to this call. Specifically, the research focuses on two key aspects: (1) the practices of religious moderation developed and implemented within the GPM; and (2) the challenges faced and strategies adopted by the GPM in sustaining and strengthening religious moderation. These two focuses are crucial because, firstly, they provide empirical evidence of how a local church engages in contextualised peacebuilding efforts beyond formal state frameworks and secondly, they reveal the underlying obstacles and adaptive strategies necessary for maintaining interfaith harmony in a pluralistic and post-conflict society. By examining both dimensions, the study offers a comprehensive understanding of grassroots religious moderation models and their potential contribution to national cohesion.

Methodology

The study used a qualitative method focusing on phenomena and examining the subject in depth. Qualitative analysis was used to emphasise processes and the meaning of outcomes, prioritising human elements, objects and institutions, as well as the relationships and interactions between these elements and events, behaviours or phenomena (Ardianto 2019; Maulid 2022). The primary subject of this study was the phenomenon of religious moderation, as initiated by the Ministry of Religious Affairs of the Republic of Indonesia in 2019. Specifically, the study aimed to map religious moderation in the context of the GPM as an institution and analyse the programme's empirical experiences and strategic steps. The study was conducted within the GPM service area comprising Maluku and North Maluku. This location was selected because of the predicted availability of relevant data, the time constraints for conducting the study, accessibility to sources of information and informants, and budget considerations. Because of the vastness of the study area, which spans multiple islands across Maluku and North Maluku, only selected locations were used as samples. The samples included selected classes and congregations in Ambon City (Ambon Island), Ternate (North Maluku) and the Kei Islands. These locations were chosen based on their historical experience of interfaith conflict and reconciliation, the diversity of religious composition and the active role of the church in promoting religious moderation. The selected areas were considered representative of broader patterns within the GPM service area, encompassing both urban and rural, as well as homogeneous and heterogeneous congregations.

Data collection included several methods, firstly, documents such as the Service Master Plan and Service Development Master Plan (PIP-RIPP) at the Synod level of GPM, as well as the Strategic Plan of selected Classis and Congregation were analysed. This document tracing was carried out both face-to-face and online when in-person access was not feasible. Secondly, semi-structured interviews were conducted with key stakeholders to gather in-depth perspectives on religious moderation practices. Participants were selected using a purposive sampling technique to ensure representation from diverse groups within GPM. These groups included church leaders at the synod, classis and congregation levels, responsible for policymaking and programme implementation; pastors and religious educators involved in delivering religious education and interfaith dialogue initiatives; and community members (both GPM members and members of other faiths) to understand the impact of GPM's initiatives on the wider community. The selection criteria included knowledge and experience with GPM's programmes related to religious moderation, representation of diverse geographical locations and socio-cultural contexts within Maluku and North Maluku and willingness to share their perspectives and experiences openly. Thirdly, relevant news articles about service activities found online were also examined.

The data analysis process was conducted simultaneously with data collection to allow iterative refinement. Adopting the Miles and Huberman (1994) model – comprising data reduction, data display, conclusion drawing and verification – data from document analysis, interviews and media reviews were systematically selected, categorised and condensed based on relevance to the study's focus on religious moderation in the GPM. Reduced data were organised into thematic matrices to identify patterns across classes and congregations, followed by interpretation of underlying meanings within the contextual realities of religious diversity. To enhance validity and reliability, data triangulation was employed by cross-verifying different sources, member checking was conducted with key informants and peer debriefing with colleagues was used to minimise bias and strengthen analytical rigour.

Ethical considerations

An application for full ethical approval was made to the Faculty of Theology, Universitas Kristen Indonesia Maluku, and ethics consent was received on 19 June 2024. The ethics approval number is 107/UKIM/H.6/N/2024.

Results and discussion

Religious moderation, as formally articulated by the Ministry of Religious Affairs of the Republic of Indonesia, emphasises four primary indicators: national commitment, tolerance, anti-violence and accommodation of local culture (Akhmadi 2019). Nevertheless, the findings of this study indicate that within the GPM, religious moderation practices predominantly focus on the aspect of tolerance. This emphasis can be theoretically justified as a contextual adaptation to the socio-historical realities of Maluku and North Maluku, particularly following the communal conflicts of 1999–2002, where rebuilding interfaith trust and coexistence became an urgent priority. Given that values such as national commitment, non-violence and cultural integration have long been internalised within traditional institutions such as *pela-gandong*, the church's strategic prioritisation naturally centres on promoting tolerance as a practical manifestation of religious moderation.

From a theological perspective, GPM's self-identity as the 'Gereja Orang Basudara' (Church of Brotherhood and Sisterhood) undergirds its emphasis on tolerance as an expression of Christian love and inclusive solidarity in pluralistic societies. This theological posture illustrates how the unity of the church is not undermined by contextual diversity but is enriched by it. As Siahaan and Siahaya (2023) emphasise, the dialectic between unity and diversity in the church should be seen as a mosaic or jigsaw puzzle, where each local expression contributes to the fuller image of ecclesial unity. This ecclesiological orientation manifests in various strategic programmes such as interfaith live-ins, dialogue forums, interreligious youth camps and tolerance tourism initiatives. These programmes reflect a deeply rooted theological conviction that tolerance is not merely a civic

virtue but a tangible act of living out the Gospel in multicultural contexts. Consequently, GPM's approach to religious moderation can be understood as a contextual praxis, emphasising tolerance as the most immediate and impactful response to the socio-cultural and religious dynamics within its archipelagic setting.

The importance of religious moderation for the Maluku Protestant Church

Theologically, the church is understood as a community called out of darkness into the marvellous light (Pt 1 2:9), tasked with manifesting the grace of God in society (Luji et al. 2022; Situmorang 2021). In the ecclesial context of GPM, religious moderation holds particular significance as it addresses both internal and external challenges arising from diversity within the body of Christ and in its interactions with wider society.

As a community of diverse individuals, church often encountered both internal and external conflicts. Christians although united by faith frequently held differing perspectives. Some individuals adopted exclusive viewpoints perceiving fellow believers or non-Christians as sinners which led to social rejection. These tendencies needed to be moderated by church to foster inclusivity, acceptance and reconciliation. Church should strive to bridge differences, embrace others' limitations and serve without boundaries, becoming a space for mediation and peacebuilding. Although achieving this was considered challenging, the study showed that it was possible. Biblical teachings provided numerous examples of attitudes and actions, specifically those of Jesus that exemplified limitless service and love. These teachings served as a foundation for church to internalise and implement religious moderation, fostering harmony within church, across denominations and among members of different religious communities (Luji et al. 2022).

For the GPM, religious moderation held particular significance concerning ecclesiology and theology. As 'Church of Brotherhood/Sisterhood' (*Gereja Orang Basudara*), the GPM maintained a public-facing orientation with congregations spread across various islands. The concept of the 'Archipelago Church', reflecting the GPM's contextual awareness had been a central theme since 1995. During the Lustrum of the Faculty of Theology at the Indonesian Christian University of Maluku (UKIM) in 1995, a seminal book titled *Gereja Kepulauan, Toma Arus Sibak Ombak Tegar* was published, emphasising theological reflections on church and archipelago ecclesiology (Sekretariat Umum Sinode GPM 2015).

Maluku Protestant Church encountered various societal entities, creating obstacles in service with the vast service area of the Archipelago Church. This required study and cultivating an attitude of acceptance and inclusivity towards the diverse societies it served. In this context, GPM showed

an openness to religious moderation, driven not only by government encouragement but also by an intrinsic awareness of its role as a local church committed to fostering harmony and unity as part of the nation. Maluku Protestant Church recognised the social and cultural capital as a blessing for nurturing communal life. This awareness was systematically and extensively expressed through various ecumenical programmes at the synodal, classis and congregational levels.

Religious moderation practices in the Maluku Protestant Church

The vision of GPM's service grounded in the real conditions and tailored to the challenges faced was 'to become church rooted in the Trinity of God and grow together to defend and care for life'. This vision underscored GPM's deep commitment to fellowship while emphasising the prophetic calling to protect life from destruction. The commitment was also reflected in pro-life practices including advocacy efforts that transcended denominational, religious, ethnic and social class boundaries, as seen in its religious moderation activities.

To operationalise this vision, GPM's 2015–2025 PIP-RIPP mission comprised of several objectives including: (1) developing contextual theology and pro-life spirituality, (2) striving to uphold justice, peace and prosperity, (3) building the GPM service area as a common home and sacrament of God, as well as (4) enhancing the stewardship function of GPM as God's co-worker. These efforts were inextricably connected to the ecumenical activities of GPM, guided by the Master Service Pattern (PIP) and the Master Service Development Plan (RIPP).

The GPM PIP was a comprehensive framework of basic services providing strategic guidelines for developing GPM services and stewardship over 10 years. Formulated through an in-depth analysis of service challenges and future projections, the PIP addressed real conditions and issues within GPM services. It articulated the vision and mission for planning and development, theological and ecclesiological foundations for service and strategies for achieving specified objectives and targets. The RIPP as an extension of the PIP translated these strategies into annual implementation stages, tailored to the characteristics and zoning of service development at each church level. The RIPP offered clear directions for programme development and provided measurable indicators of success for each planning initiative (Sekretariat Umum Sinode GPM 2015).

Based on the definition and scope of PIP and RIPP, both served as an integrated framework for compiling service plans at the synod, classis and congregation levels. The PIP-RIPP had crystallised GPM's central vision for its ministry over 10 years. Consequently, the vision and mission articulated within the PIP-RIPP inspired service planning under the movement of 'walking together' as a 'living church'. As a central vision, the PIP-RIPP comprised of the essential principles of being church and outlined how GPM

was positioned to fulfil the mandate of calling and service, as grounded in the Gospel of Jesus Christ. It also reflected church's accountability as a fellowship of believers called out from the world to return and serve within it (*ekklesia*). The PIP-RIPP showed how GPM systematised the Gospel's mandate into practical and contextual theology, addressing the internal functions as well as the responsibilities towards society, the nation and the broader world in which it existed and operated. Therefore, PIP-RIPP also included universal (am) and particular matters such as the growth dynamics of local congregations including territorial, special and categorical congregations in Maluku and North Maluku (Sekretariat Umum Sinode GPM 2015).

Reading and adhering to the PIP-RIPP placed GPM in an ecumenical relationship with all churches, religions and nations worldwide, reflecting GPM's tangible presence in Maluku and North Maluku across all aspects of human life, congregations, societies and the broader universe. Therefore, the PIP-RIPP served as the concretisation of GPM as a living church, continually embodying its identity ('being church') and consistently reflecting and serving within the context of its theology in the archipelago and pluralistic, multicultural societies (Sekretariat Umum Sinode GPM 2015). The realities of religiosity and ecumenism represented internal truths for church and needed to remain central in service planning including in the PIP-RIPP and other operational documents. Interfaith relations were a crucial religious context in Maluku and North Maluku. The relationships of brotherhood (*pela* and *gandong*) among *negeri* of Salam and Sarane of which GPM congregations were a part constituted a divinely given reality for GPM and other religions in the region. Genealogical ties had long been a sociological characteristic of all traditional *negeri* in Maluku and North Maluku. This affirmed that the development of harmonious coexistence in the multicultural societies of Maluku and North Maluku could be nurtured on personal, communal and inter-*negeri* levels.

There were ups and downs in the ecumenical relationship of GPM with member churches of the Communion of Churches in Indonesia (PGI) and non-PGI churches across several classes and congregations. This reality showed that implementing church Unity Document had not been entirely effective. However, in other congregations, the ecumenical relationship showed signs of growth and improvement. Maluku Protestant Church continued to foster a good and dynamic relationship with the Catholic Church to realise a universal and apostolic church. In several classes, such as the South and North Tanimbar Classes GPM, the Catholic Church was required to act as living agents of *missio Dei* [God's Mission] and to develop the unity of the body of Christ in multicultural societies. Maluku Protestant Church's role in ecumenical institutions at national, regional and international levels within the ecumenical movement in Indonesia needed continuous development (Sekretariat Umum Sinode GPM 2015).

Various programmes aimed at increasing the ecumenical spirit among PGI and non-PGI member churches initiated at

the synodal, classis and congregation levels showed that GPM had been implementing religious moderation within Christianity. These efforts predated religious moderation programme introduced by the Ministry of Religion. For example, GPM undertook activities such as providing and distributing church Unity Document (DKG) to 32 classes and 726 congregations in 2017. To prepare GPM servants for responding to pluralism in Maluku and North Maluku in heterogeneous congregations and classes, GPM held workshops and trained delegated pastors on how to address pluralism in 2018. Furthermore, since 2017, a joint forum of GPM-GMIH (The Maluku Protestant Church–The Evangelical Christian Church of Halmahera) was established every 2 years to address social problems at the classes where churches were in close contact such as Bacan, Obi, and Ternate.

Regarding interfaith and denominational cooperation, GPM implemented several effective practices. These included workshops on the role and calling of GPM servants in responding to diversity, which were held every 2 years including 32 classes (later expanded to 34) since 2017. In addition, between 2016 and 2022, GPM conducted training for trainers (ToT) to develop facilitators at the classis level who focused on interfaith and denominational cooperation, with five delegates attending from each classis. A follow-up to these ToT activities between 2018 and 2022 (and planned for 2024) included joint actions with other religious communities to address social issues such as interfaith relations, human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) and/or acquired immunodeficiency syndrome (AIDS), environmental problems and violence against children and women. From 2017 to 2021, GPM also organised live-in activities for its servants to reside with families of other faiths at the classis level, further fostering interfaith understanding and cooperation.

Since 2016 and still continuing as planned until 2025, GPM had conducted harmony and tolerance tourism activities. These activities included visits to Islamic boarding schools and mosques, as well as face-to-face meetings with religious leaders, institutions and societal organisations (*ormas*). An activity was outlined on the official portal of the Central Java Provincial Government's website, jatengprov.go.id. A news report dated 11 September 2022, titled *Puluhan Pendeta dari Maluku Datangi Ganjar, Belajar Rawat Toleransi Antarumat* [Dozens of Pastors from Maluku Visit Ganjar, Learning to Maintain Interfaith Tolerance], described how 75 GPM pastors engaged in learning about managing tolerance within the framework of religious moderation in Central Java. This location was selected for these activities based on the suggestion of the Chairperson of the GPM Synod stating that the area was a province with many cities ranking highly in tolerance categories for 2021–2022. In addition, the social typology closely resembled that of Maluku. During the visit, the pastors met with the Governor of Central Java and the Central Java FKUB (Forum of Religious Harmony). The pastors also visited the Edi Mancoro Islamic Boarding School, where mentoring and leadership for students as agents of tolerance was studied (Humas Jateng 2022).

Since 2016 and continuing as planned until 2025, GPM initiated and facilitated regular meetings of religious leaders to address social issues such as HIV and/or AIDS, poverty, environmental concerns and radicalism. These meetings held every 4 months led to the formulation of cooperative agendas and the creation of interaction cells among religious communities in each classis to address local social issues. Additional initiatives included delivering 'peace sermons' on social challenges within religious communities and organising interfaith youth workshops to empower young people to tackle issues such as interfaith relations, HIV and/or AIDS, environmental protection and radicalism. Every 2 years, exchanges of residences for interfaith youth have also been conducted which fostered deeper mutual understanding. Joint agendas to address social issues for interfaith youth were also established, and a particularly significant initiative was the interfaith dialogue between religious education teachers. This dialogue focused on developing concepts for multicultural education in schools.

At the level of children and adolescents, GPM evolved as a pioneer of religious moderation in Maluku by organising the *Bakudapa for Children and Adolescents Across Religions* (BADAR). Initially held in 2018 for GPM children and adolescents, the programme expanded in 2023 to include participants from various faiths. On 04 July 2023, the BADAR Across Religions event was held in the South Tanimbar Classis, specifically in Saumlaki City. The event was attended by 24 groups (354 participants) including 20 groups from GPM congregations in the South Tanimbar Classis, three groups of Catholic children and adolescents and one group from the Saumlaki Mosque Youth. This initiative showcased GPM's commitment to nurturing the concept of the *Orang Basudara* Church, beginning with children:

The learning of tolerance and religious moderation is instilled through children, implying the people of the Tanimbar Islands are saying Indonesia still exists and is still long. The community is committed to fostering a culture of tolerance and peace among children or different faiths [*Chairperson of GPM Synod – Rev. Elifas Tomix Maspaitella*]. (Redaksi KlikMaluku 2023b:1)

The presence of children from different religious backgrounds in the Tanimbar Islands signified the evolution of a special generation, nurtured early to embrace a life of tolerance. During the opening remarks of the BADAR Across Religions activity, the Chairperson of the GPM Synod addressed the children stating:

My children, you are showing Indonesia that peace among religious communities endures. You are showing that you are the main actors today in building tolerance, peace, and religious moderation. Share within your tents as brothers and sisters. Today, you have experienced living alongside siblings of different faiths. Enjoy the atmosphere of the tent, and show everyone that living side by side as religious communities in one place is possible – together in the same tent, one house, one land, on this Earth of Duan Lolat. (Redaksi KlikMaluku 2023a:1)

The South Tanimbar Classis in Ternate, North Maluku, held a similar activity, namely the BADAR Fun Summer Camp of

the Ternate Classis. Christian children and teenagers were taught to love the environment through sessions including resource persons from Eco Bhinneka Muhammadiyah North Maluku. Eco Bhinneka Muhammadiyah North Maluku (Ternate) implemented a programme focused on harmony and environmental sustainability, maintaining a consistent approach to educating, socialising and campaigning on issues related to harmony and environmental preservation in North Maluku, particularly in Ternate City. Eco Bhinneka Muhammadiyah North Maluku (Ternate) contributed significantly to the success of the BADAR Fun Summer Camp of the Ternate Classis. This regional-level activity was hosted by the GPM Imanuel Ternate Congregation and was held over 4 days, from 19 June to 22 June 2023. Eco Bhinneka Muhammadiyah (Ternate) participated as a speaker, presenting to students from Soa Tabanga, Mayau (Batang Dua), Tifure (Batang Dua) and Ternate, with a total of 60 participants (Syahril 2023). Based on the various activities outlined, GPM's practice of religious moderation has been ongoing for an extended period. While these initiatives demonstrate a commitment to interfaith harmony and social cohesion, a critical analysis reveals both strengths and limitations. Maluku Protestant Church's initiatives are deeply rooted in local contexts and cultural values, such as *pela-gandong*, which fosters a strong sense of *orang basudara* [brotherhood and/or sisterhood]. The involvement of children and youth in programmes such as BADAR is particularly commendable for cultivating tolerance from a young age. However, the effectiveness of these programmes in achieving long-term behavioural change requires further evaluation. Limited data are available on the sustained impact of interfaith dialogues or training on reducing prejudice or promoting collaboration on social issues. While there is significant emphasis on interfaith dialogue, there is less focus on addressing internal challenges within GPM, such as potential resistance from conservative factions or the need for more inclusive theological interpretations.

Maluku Protestant Church's approach to religious moderation shares similarities with other Christian organisations in Indonesia that emphasise dialogue and social engagement. However, GPM's unique context in Maluku, with its history of conflict and strong cultural traditions, necessitates a distinct approach. Compared to other Christian organisations, GPM's initiatives can be characterised by a stronger emphasis on leveraging local cultural values for interfaith harmony. This aligns with broader findings that emphasise the role of local wisdom as an effective medium for promoting religious moderation and interreligious tolerance across Indonesia (Pajarianto, Pribadi & Sari 2022). A similar approach can be observed in other Christian communities, such as the Pamona Church in Central Sulawesi, where Christological concepts are contextualised through local mechanisms of reconciliation such as *giwu*. This indicates the broader relevance and adaptability of religious moderation when grounded in indigenous cultural systems (Sunkudon et al. 2025). While other Christian organisations may focus on broader national-level ecumenical dialogues, GPM's efforts are deeply

embedded in the *negeri* system and *pela-gandong* relationships. Further research is needed to systematically compare and contrast GPM's model with other approaches to religious moderation in Indonesia and beyond.

While the study highlights various activities, identifying measurable outcomes is crucial for assessing the impact of GPM's religious moderation efforts. Potential indicators of success include increased participation rates in interfaith programmes and activities, documented examples of collaborative projects between GPM and other religious communities to address social issues, qualitative data (e.g. testimonies, surveys) demonstrating changes in attitudes and perceptions among GPM members and the wider community, and a reduction in reports of inter-religious tensions or conflicts in areas where GPM actively promotes moderation. Future research should focus on developing and utilising such indicators to provide a more robust evaluation of GPM's impact.

Based on the various aforesaid programmes and initiatives, a number of essential points can be synthesised regarding the practice of religious moderation within the GPM. The findings of this study underscore several key points regarding the practice of religious moderation within the GPM. Firstly, GPM's long-standing commitment to religious moderation, predating national initiatives, is deeply rooted in its ecclesiological identity as a 'Church of Brotherhood/Sisterhood' (Gereja Orang Basudara) and articulated through strategic frameworks such as the PIP-RIPP 2015–2025. Secondly, religious moderation has been operationalised through various contextualised programmes including interfaith training workshops, live-in experiences across religious communities, interfaith youth camps (BADAR), tolerance tourism and periodic forums among religious leaders. Thirdly, the use of indigenous cultural capital, particularly the *pela-gandong* tradition, serves as a critical resource in promoting interreligious harmony. However, the study also reveals persistent challenges related to geographical fragmentation, socio-economic disparities and internal conservatism that require sustained attention. Lastly, the study recommends strengthening interfaith collaborations, promoting inclusive theological interpretations, empowering women and youth, and systematically evaluating programme's impact to ensure the continued advancement and institutionalisation of religious moderation within GPM. These findings affirm GPM's strategic role as a grassroots agent of peace and social cohesion within Indonesia's pluralistic society.

Challenges and strategies for developing religious moderation in the Maluku Protestant Church

Archipelago context

The Maluku archipelago comprised of GPM congregations structured within subcultures in *negeri* with personal cultural institutions and symbols. These subcultural units formed

part of larger cultural entities such as Lease, Ambon, South Seram, West Seram, East Seram, North Seram, Southeast Maluku (Kei Besar and Kei Kecil, Lemola, Babar, Kisar, Aru, Halmahera, Ternate, Tobelo, Bacan, Obi, Buru, and others). The varying sizes of these subcultural areas further influenced the characteristics and uniqueness of GPM congregations. This diversity was a defining feature of GPM's ecclesiology in the archipelago (Ruhlessin 2015).

Although universal cultural elements existed across subcultures, specific social ideas and institutions including the idea of brotherhood and/or sisterhood [*orang basudara*] framed in various institutions such as *pela-gandong*, *kakawai*, *larvul-ngabal* represented socio-cultural systems that shaped congregational life (Ruhlessin 2015). Other cultural systems related to cooperation patterns such as *masohi*, *maren* and *sosoki* could also be a framework for understanding and collaboration within church service systems. In addition, communal mechanisms such as *soa*, *mata rumah*, *marga* and *tiga batu tungku* [three hearthstones] reflected shared values that contribute to solidarity (Maspaiteella 2001; Ruhlessin 2015). The solidarity dimension of archipelago societies that varied slightly between mountain and coastal communities was important for developing the character of church including the congregations, servants and institutions. This variation in mobility also influenced the understanding of solidarity specific to each community (Ruhlessin 2015).

The implementation of religious moderation initiatives within the GPM faces several significant challenges stemming from the unique context of the region. The spread of GPM's service areas across the Maluku archipelago presents geographical obstacles. The vast expanse of sea and limited transportation infrastructure hinder effective coordination and communication between congregations, particularly those in remote and isolated areas. This can limit access to resources, training and opportunities for interfaith dialogue. Furthermore, significant socio-economic disparities exist between urban and rural congregations. Urban congregations often experience an accumulation of human resources and development opportunities, while rural congregations face poverty, limited access to education and healthcare, and outmigration of human resources, which can hinder their capacity to engage in moderation efforts. This imbalance highlights the need for the church to coordinate development and partnership relations to ensure that central development areas can support peripheral areas (Ruhlessin 2015). The rich cultural diversity of Maluku, while a strength, also presents challenges. Different cultural norms and traditions can sometimes lead to misunderstandings or conflicts, requiring culturally sensitive approaches to religious moderation. In addition, there may be resistance to religious moderation initiatives from conservative factions within some congregations who prioritise maintaining traditional boundaries and identities.

While the study mentions the involvement of children and youth in some programmes, the specific roles and

contributions of women and youth in GPM's religious moderation efforts require further attention. It is important to explore how women are involved in interfaith dialogue, peacebuilding initiatives or religious education within GPM. Furthermore, the extent to which GPM empowers youth to become agents of change in promoting tolerance and understanding should be investigated. The specific challenges and opportunities faced by women and youth in contributing to religious moderation in their communities also warrant further research.

To enhance the effectiveness of religious moderation in GPM, several solutions and policy recommendations are proposed. These include strengthening interfaith collaboration by developing more structured and sustainable partnerships with other religious organisations and community groups to address shared social concerns. Capacity building is also crucial, involving the provision of training and resources to equip GPM leaders, pastors and members with the knowledge and skills necessary to promote religious moderation effectively. Contextualised approaches are needed, with the development of tailored programmes and initiatives that are sensitive to the specific cultural, social and economic contexts of different congregations. Promoting inclusive theology, with theological interpretations that emphasise inclusivity, tolerance and respect for religious diversity, is also important. Creating opportunities for women and youth to play leadership roles in religious moderation efforts and providing them with the necessary support and resources is essential. Finally, strengthening collaboration with government agencies and initiatives to promote religious moderation at the local and regional levels can be beneficial.

Sociological characteristics

Sociological characteristics as listed as follows:

- The service area of the GPM was an archipelago stretching from Tifure in North Maluku to Liswatu in Wetar, covering groups of islands such as Sula, Bacan, Obi, Seram, Buru, Ambon and Lease (Saparua, Nusalaut, and Haruku), Kei Besar and Kei Kecil, Aru, Tanimbar, Leti-Moa-Lakor, Babar, Damer, Kisar and Wetar Islands. Maluku Protestant Church congregations grew in rural and urban areas exhibiting both homogeneous and heterogeneous attributes. These special characteristics were also detailed in the GPM PIP-RIPP 2015–2025 (Sekretariat Umum Sinode GPM 2015) as follows:
 - Homogeneous congregations in rural and mountainous areas were formed within customary state units. Some of these congregations had previously lived alongside Muslim societies (the Buton tribe) but because of the social conflict of 1999, the congregations became homogeneous in terms of religious adherents.
 - Heterogeneous congregations in urban areas and new growth centres (second-order cities) developed because of population density in older urban centres. Examples of these congregations included Passo,
- Poka-Rumahtiga-Wayame, Pandan Kasturi, Tual, Ternate, Sanana, Bacan and Laiwui. The 1999 social conflict also led to the creation of segregated settlements in urban areas, displacing the mixed settlements that had existed for a long time. However, in several congregations in the North Ambon Island Classis, mixed settlements were rebuilt including Nania, Negeri Lama, Waiheru, Hunut-Durian Patah, Poka, Rumahtiga, Wayame, Tawiri and Laha. Similar rebuilding efforts occurred in North Maluku and the classis centres of Ternate, Bacan, Obi and Sula. Furthermore, some congregations in the Sula Islands Classis, which were unaffected by the conflict continued to live in socially integrated communities.
- Large congregations and small congregations were categorised based on the number of households and total population. These congregations were served by two to five organic priests while small congregations often remained 'empty', as the assembly lacked a dedicated organic priest. In addition, several congregations in the interior of Seram and Buru islands were spread across two or more service sectors and were served by a single priest.
- Classis on the archipelagos presented unique and challenging circumstances for service coordination. For instance, there were three congregations in the Ternate Classis namely, one in Ternate City and two on the minor islands of Tifure and Mayaau (Batang Dua Island). The Ternate City Congregation was a 'transition congregation' as its members who were mostly employees or National Army and/or Police personnel frequently faced transfers. Bacan, Obi and Sula also represented unique island classis areas. Although congregations in these areas had resumed living alongside the 'Basudara Muslim' (Muslim brotherhood and/or sisterhood), the Obi and Sula Classis centres remained outside the old classis centres because of the lingering effects of conflict. Communication between congregations in these areas was further hindered by a lack of land transportation facilities and extreme weather conditions.
- On Seram Island, the West and East Seram Classes exemplified typical archipelago challenges. Small island congregations separated from the Seram plains and established during the 1999 Maluku social conflict had since returned to live alongside the 'Basudara Muslim'.
- In the Lease Islands Classis, congregations showed unique attributes. On Saparua Island, most congregations were homogeneous and existed within traditional *negeri* units (territorial units governed by customary laws), sharing genealogical ties with Muslim *negeri* such as Sirisori, Iha and Ihamahu. On Haruku Island, congregations including Kariuw which had experienced social conflict rebuilt lives within *negeri* and renewed relations with the 'Basudara Salam' through cultural awareness. On Nusalaut Island, all seven *negeri* were GPM congregations, a characteristic unique to this area.
- Archipelago classes in areas such as the Central Aru and South Aru Islands, South Tanimbar, North Tanimbar, Babar Island, East Babar, Damer, Kisar, Wetar and Leti-Moa-Lakor faced significant transportation challenges.

These challenges arose not only from weather factors but also from the lack of adequate sea transportation facilities, which severely impacted service coordination. Similar difficulties were observed in the Kei Besar, Buru and South Buru Classes where the absence of land transportation infrastructure necessitated sea travel under extreme weather conditions, complicating inter-congregational communication.

- Congregations in industrial and core plantation areas (PIR) and Forest Management Rights (HPH) regions reflected an old phenomenon that had resurfaced. Furthermore, the Obi and Sula Island Classes located in HPH areas were long abandoned by companies such as Limited Company (Ltd) (PT) Djati Group Timbre. Despite this abandonment, the companies had not constructed permanent roads to connect villages during operations.

Currently, congregations in industrial areas – such as those near the Nickel Company in Kawasi, Obi, and Tolong in Sula, nickel companies in West Seram, oil and gas companies in Maluku Tenggara Barat (MTB) and Maluku Barat Daya (MBD), as well as HPH areas in nearly all congregations on Taliabu Island (Sula), Buru Island, Seram and Yamdena were experiencing significant environmental and social challenges. Similar issues were observed in congregations near PTP XII Awaia (rubber and coconut plantations in Masohi Classis), PT Sumber Daya Wahana (cocoa plantations in North Seram), HPH companies in Buru and South Buru, and PT Nusa Ina Group, which operated oil palm plantations in North Seram. These challenges included floods, droughts, landslides, river and well water pollution, declining groundwater and river levels, industrial waste disposal and deforestation. The environmental and social realities also underscored the urgent need for integrated and sustainable management solutions.

Cultural characteristics

Cultural characteristics were unique to GPM congregations and played an important role in service planning, as the cultural approach was a key method for church to contextualise theology and service. In the multicultural societies of Maluku and North Maluku, the cultural paradigm was an essential aspect that could not be ignored. This was because church was responsible for fostering an awareness of brotherhood and transformative *koinonia* in the context of religion, society and nation.

In the GPM service area, various societal cultures existed including the Halmahera, Lease, Ambon, Seram Island, Southeast Maluku (Kei Besar and Kei Kecil), Lemola, Babar, Kisar, Aru, Banda, Ternate, Sula, Tobelo, Bacan, Obi and Buru societies. In addition, there were ethnic Chinese, Javanese, Batak, Manado, Toraja and others. Cultural diversity (multiculturalism) characterised the societies within GPM, leading to distinct cultural perspectives between congregations.

Tribal and sub-tribal units in Maluku and North Maluku comprised of societies with more than 1000 ethnic language

units (native languages). Each society included various socio-cultural institutions, rituals and cultural symbols. Ideas of brotherhood, such as *pela-gandong*, *kaka-wait* and *larvul-ngabal*, as well as cultural practices related to environmental preservation and creation integrity such as *sasi*, *masohi*, *maren*, *babalu* and *sosoki* provided strengths for church in promoting service within the perspectives of the 'family of God' and 'integrity of creation'. Local wisdom such as *soa fellowship*, *mata rumah*, and *tiga batu tungku* contained important shared values (Sekretariat Umum Sinode GPM 2015).

The inter-negeri relationship between Sarane (GPM Congregation) and Salam was one of the cultural characteristics of GPM congregations, along with genealogical relationships between clans across different societies. Furthermore, congregations that belonged to Indigenous Tribes referred to as 'Isolated Tribes' in the Government nomenclature of the Ministry of Social Affairs in Buru and North Seram maintained connections with the brothers and sisters who remained within tribal religious systems and lived nomadic lifestyles. These brothers and sisters still tied to tribal religions often became subjects of the gospel message (Sekretariat Umum Sinode GPM 2015).

Social reality

Changes in the social context in Maluku, Indonesia, and the world needed to be studied concerning the ecclesiology of GPM. Issues surrounding poverty, isolation, and backwardness were ecclesiological challenges tied to implementing the 'church's calling'. Becoming church for the poor was an ecclesiological formulation that gained significant attention. This terminology gave rise to a new understanding that the great commission was not solely articulated in Matthew 28:19–20 with the command to 'baptize and teach', as many instances carried proselytising and triumphalist undertones.

The paradigmatic expansion of the great commission made church more functional. For church, the responsibility to humanise humans was a dimension of Christ's Gospel that remained open to the world. Biblical formulations such as Luke 4:18–19 or Matthew 25:35–40 became paradigms of the great commission that prioritised welfare, liberation, freedom, restoration, and humanity. A more advanced paradigm addressed the question of 'Who is my neighbor?' This question was crucial in the pluralistic context of Maluku and Indonesia. Church's social calling in pluralistic societies included fostering pluralism awareness and strengthening the people's social resilience. In this context, socio-political integration and harmony were ideal aspirations and manifestations of *koinonia* and the universal ecumene of churches in Maluku, Indonesia, and the world (Sekretariat Umum Sinode GPM 2015).

Church with others' paradigm marked progress in the design of GPM ecclesiology. This paradigm did not tend to be syncretic, although people were reminded not to fear or be naive about syncretism. John Hicks asserted that churches

could not deny the reality people lived within cultural circles (cultural borders) and ecclesiastical circles (ecclesiastical borders). These two circles placed church in the circle of religions (religious borders), which intersected in various ways, specifically regarding mission or *da'wah*. However, whether one was born to Muslim parents and became Muslim, Christian parents and became Christian, or Jewish parents and became Jewish, these different faiths were phenomenological. The most significant and unavoidable reality was that these circles were not a justification for fundamental conflict (Hicks 1999; Ruhlestin 2015).

The paradigm outlined church's inclination towards fellowship and togetherness. Consequently, church fulfilled the calling to convey the good news to the world and humanity. Church served as a tool of reconciliation and love for the world and humanity, as well as a tool for nation-building. In this context, ecclesiology was also a form of national consciousness within church (GPM). Any ecclesiology composed needed to acknowledge church's existence within the nation. Church's presence within the nation reflected God's action in placing church within the history and civilisation. Therefore, church within the nation functioned as an agent of the nation's morality.

Consequently, church-country relationship was viewed dialectically. Indonesian democracy recognised church-country relationship in terms of the instrumental dimension namely equal rights for every citizen, regardless of differences in religion, ethnicity, race, ethics, language, or other social backgrounds. Therefore, church was neither subordinate to nor a structural part of the country (e.g. under the Ministry of Religion). Church-country dialectic gave church a special role in contributing to prophetic criticism of the country. This role was not confined to church as an institution but extended to church as an organism (humans). In this context, ecclesiology was connected to the responsibility of church members within the country. The functional ecclesiology emphasised church's social responsibility for the continued strength of Indonesia. In this ecclesiology, GPM was called to respond to the 'invitation' of religious moderation from the country as part of the social responsibility.

Conclusion

This study aimed to understand how the GPM, as a major local church in Maluku and North Maluku, perceives and implements religious moderation within its programmes. The findings reveal GPM's enduring commitment to religious moderation, particularly in its response to the 1999–2002 conflict, demonstrating efforts that align with religious moderation principles despite using different terminology than the Ministry of Religion. Maluku Protestant Church has undertaken various programmes at synodal, classis, and congregation levels to foster religious moderation, efforts that warrant continued recognition and development.

To enhance these initiatives, strengthened collaboration between the GPM, the Ministry of Religion, affiliated civil

society organisations, and academic institutions is essential to align grassroots efforts with broader national frameworks for religious moderation. The recent recognition of the GPM's commitment, such as the Umar bin Khattab Award presented to Synod Chair Rev. Elifas T. Maspaitella, highlights the church's constructive contribution to interreligious peacebuilding. It is expected that the GPM will continue to advance religious moderation through contextually grounded models that reflect its theological identity and civic responsibility. Future research could critically examine the long-term effects of these efforts, particularly in relation to theological, cultural, and generational dynamics, while comparative studies involving other churches in Indonesia and Southeast Asia may offer deeper insight into how diverse Christian communities shape public theology in pluralistic and post-conflict societies.

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Authors' contributions

All the authors contributed significantly to this research. However, the specific contributions of each author are as follows: R.F.N. was responsible for the conceptualisation of the research, methodology development, formal analysis, project administration and drafting the initial manuscript. R.F.N. also contributed to the supervision and revision of the manuscript. J.C.R. contributed to the research design, data collection, validation and critical revision of the manuscript. In addition, J.C.R. participated in academic discussions to refine the scientific arguments in the manuscript. A.A.R. played a key role in investigation, data curation and visualisation of research findings, and provided critical input to the manuscript writing and supported project administration.

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Data availability

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

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