

Church Council Leadership for Congregational Economic Empowerment: A Qualitative Case Study at Imanuel Botang Church

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Abstract

Churches in rural communities increasingly face expectations to respond not only to spiritual needs but also to socio-economic vulnerability. Recent studies show that faith-based organizations can support community empowerment when leadership, participation, and local resources are integrated. This study examines how the church council leadership model at Imanuel Botang Church supports congregational economic well-being. A qualitative single-case study was conducted using semi-structured interviews with 10 key informants, participant observation, and analysis of church minutes, financial reports, program records, and the 2023–2027 strategic plan; data were analyzed through iterative reduction, thematic display, verification, source/technique/time triangulation, and member checking. The findings show a participatory, servant-oriented, and contextual leadership pattern expressed through shared decision-making, productive-skills training, joint business groups, a congregational cooperative, and family financial education. Documentary evidence indicates that 15% of church income in the first semester of 2024 was allocated to economic diaconia, while joint-business-group membership increased from 18 members in 2023 to 31 in 2024. Internal strengths included solidarity, spirituality, and local resources, whereas limited capital, market access, and external partnerships constrained sustainability. The study concludes that church leadership can function as transformative diaconal leadership when spiritual service is connected with participatory economic empowerment and institutional collaboration.

Keywords

Church Leadership; Congregational Economic Empowerment Participatory; Leadership; Servant Leadership; Transformative Diaconia



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INTRODUCTION

Churches are religious institutions, but in many local communities they are also durable social institutions that mobilize trust, collective action, networks, and material resources. This dual role is particularly visible in rural settings where formal development institutions may be distant and where households depend on small-scale agriculture, livestock, and informal enterprise. Recent research on faith-based community development shows that religious organizations can contribute to capacity building and local agency when they move beyond

charitable assistance toward participatory and sustainable forms of empowerment (Tarpeh & Hustedde, 2021; Boorse & Jablonski, 2024). In Indonesia, studies of religious organizations similarly indicate that social entrepreneurship, community-based finance, and locally grounded economic initiatives can connect spiritual values with practical improvements in livelihoods (Nugroho et al., 2023; Punuh & Sirine, 2024).

Within Christian organizations, leadership is central to whether this social role becomes sustainable. Contemporary servant-leadership research consistently emphasizes follower development, empowerment, trust, participation, listening, and community orientation rather than leader-centered control (Canavesi & Minelli, 2022; McQuade et al., 2021; Zarei & Supphellen, 2024). Cross-cultural evidence also suggests that servant leadership remains relevant across different cultural environments, although its expression is shaped by local norms of power, collectivism, and humane orientation. Recent studies link servant leadership with psychological empowerment, voice, commitment, thriving, collaboration, and organizational performance (Saleem et al., 2022; Zeng et al., 2022; Coun et al., 2023; Bai et al., 2023; Jiang & Wei, 2024; Xu et al., 2024). These findings are important for churches because congregational leadership depends heavily on voluntary participation, moral credibility, relational trust, and a sense of shared ownership.

The Indonesian church context adds a further dimension: the relationship between ministry and economic empowerment. Several recent studies argue that congregational welfare should be understood as part of holistic ministry rather than as an activity external to the church's mission. Research in Indonesian churches has documented entrepreneurship support, revolving funds, agriculture-based empowerment, handicraft development, social entrepreneurship, and church-based cooperatives as practical expressions of economic diaconia (Pane et al., 2021; Pauranan & Limbongan, 2021; Santosa et al., 2022; Setiawan & Harita, 2022; Baali, 2023; Kalalo, 2024; Sarimbangun, 2024; Uly et al., 2024; Punuh, 2024; Kusni, 2025). More recent work in Toraja and comparable settings continues to show that local resources, congregational participation, and institutional partnerships are decisive for sustainability (Padang et al., 2026).

Nevertheless, the state of the art remains fragmented in three ways. First, many studies describe church economic programs but give less attention to the leadership process through which congregants are invited into decision-making, resource allocation, and program ownership. Second, studies on servant leadership are dominated by organizational and employee settings, while qualitative evidence from local congregations—where participation is voluntary and spiritual authority interacts with community relations—remains comparatively limited (Canavesi & Minelli, 2022; Zarei & Supphellen, 2024). Third, economic-empowerment studies often focus on program outputs, whereas fewer studies integrate leadership practice, economic empowerment mechanisms, contextual enablers and constraints, and theological meaning in a single case. This gap is especially important in rural Toraja, where communal solidarity can support collective enterprise but limited capital, market access, and external partnerships may restrict scale and continuity.

Imanuel Botang Church provides an analytically relevant case because its congregation has developed economic initiatives while retaining a strong ecclesial and communal orientation. Earlier research at the same congregation identified the role of the church council in horticulture and livestock-based empowerment (Pauranan & Limbongan, 2021). The present study extends that line of inquiry by examining the leadership model as an integrated process rather than describing isolated economic activities. It focuses on how participatory decision-making, servant-oriented leadership, church resource allocation, congregational economic programs, and contextual constraints interact in practice.

Accordingly, this study addresses one central research question: How does the church council leadership model at Imanuel Botang Church operate to support congregational economic well-being? The objective is to construct a context-sensitive explanation of the leadership model by integrating evidence on leadership practices, empowerment strategies, enabling and constraining conditions, and the social-theological implications of the model. The study contributes to recent servant-leadership literature by grounding leadership in a faith-based community setting, and to church economic-empowerment scholarship by showing how leadership processes shape participation, institutional commitment, and program sustainability.

METHODS

This study employed a qualitative single-case study design. The design is appropriate because the research question concerns how a leadership model operates within one bounded ecclesial and socio-economic context, and because the relevant processes shared decision-making, service, participation, trust, program implementation, and perceived change cannot be adequately understood through decontextualized measurement alone. The case-study approach enabled the researcher to combine participant perspectives, observed practices, and institutional documents in order to build a contextual explanation of the leadership model.

The research was conducted at Imanuel Botang Church, a local congregation within the Gereja Toraja service area. The site was selected purposively because the congregation had implemented several economic-empowerment activities and therefore provided an information-rich setting for examining the relationship between church leadership and congregational well-being. The congregation is located in a hilly rural area in which many households rely on agriculture and small-scale livestock activities.

Participants were selected through purposive sampling on the basis of direct experience with church leadership and economic programs. Ten key informants were interviewed, representing the pastor, elders, deacons, church financial leadership, and congregational members involved in the cooperative, training activities, and joint business groups. The study also used institutional documents, including annual church reports, minutes of church-council meetings, financial records, cooperative and joint-business-group records, activity documentation, the 2024 program evaluation, and the 2023–2027 church strategic plan.

Data collection combined semi-structured interviews, participant observation, and

document analysis. Interviews explored leadership practices, member participation, economic-program implementation, perceived effects, and enabling or constraining conditions. With participant permission, interviews were recorded and transcribed. Participant observation was conducted during skills-training sessions, economic meetings, and group-enterprise activities; field notes focused on interaction patterns, role distribution, participation, communication, and the practical involvement of church leaders. Documentary evidence was used to corroborate program decisions, resource allocation, membership development, and strategic commitments.

The research proceeded through five stages. First, the researcher refined the single research question and prepared an interview and observation guide around leadership, participation, empowerment, and contextual conditions. Second, informants and relevant church documents were selected purposively. Third, interviews, observations, and documentary data were collected in overlapping cycles so that emerging issues could be checked across sources. Fourth, the data were coded and organized into thematic matrices covering leadership practice, economic-empowerment mechanisms, outcomes, and contextual factors. Fifth, interpretations were verified through source, technique, and time triangulation and through member checking with selected informants before the final synthesis was developed.

Data analysis followed an interactive qualitative process of data condensation, data display, conclusion drawing, and verification. Initial coding identified recurring actions and meanings; these codes were then grouped into broader categories such as shared decision-making, serving by example, skills development, collective enterprise, institutional financing, solidarity, market constraints, and external partnerships. The analysis did not treat the 15% church allocation or the increase in joint-business-group membership as causal proof of improved household income; instead, these documents were interpreted as evidence of institutional commitment and growing participation. Credibility was strengthened through triangulation, member checking, and comparison between interview claims, field observations, and written records.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

Participatory and Servant-Oriented Leadership Practice

Across interviews, observations, and meeting records, the church council displayed a leadership pattern characterized by consultation, service, and direct involvement. Monthly meetings provided opportunities for congregants to contribute ideas and criticism, and economic-program decisions were recorded as collective decisions rather than unilateral pastoral directives. Minutes from May–July 2024 documented that the formation of the Joint Business Group (Kelompok Usaha Bersama/KUB) and productive-skills activities emerged through congregational proposals and council deliberation.

The relational character of this leadership was also visible in participant accounts. The

pastor explained, “Leadership in our church is centered on togetherness. We learn from Jesus, who led by serving. Decisions are made by involving the congregation so that they feel that the programs belong to them” (Pastor interview, 16 June 2024). An elder similarly stated, “The council does not work alone. We always open space for discussion. Sometimes the best ideas come from ordinary members” (Elder A interview, 14 June 2024). Field observations supported these statements: church leaders did not only open activities ceremonially but worked alongside participants during training and group-enterprise activities.

These patterns indicate that participation functioned as a practical mechanism of leadership. Members were not positioned solely as beneficiaries; they were involved in proposing, implementing, and evaluating activities. This participatory arrangement is central to the model because it connects ecclesial authority with member agency and creates the social basis for collective economic programs.

Economic-Empowerment Mechanisms and Institutional Commitment

The church council supported economic well-being through four interconnected mechanisms: productive-skills training, joint business groups, a congregational cooperative/savings-and-loan mechanism, and family financial education. Observed activities included training related to processing local agricultural products and collective enterprise. Products associated with training, including coconut oil, organic soap, and woven products, had begun to be sold in the surrounding community. One participant explained, “After the church training, we learned to make soap from coconut oil. We sell it in the small market and use some for church needs” (Member M interview, 20 June 2024). The church treasurer added that the congregational cooperative was established to provide a shared financial mechanism and small-scale access to business capital (Treasurer interview, 22 June 2024).

Documentary evidence demonstrates that economic empowerment was supported institutionally rather than left entirely to individual volunteers. The church financial report for the first semester of 2024 recorded an allocation of 15% of church income to economic diaconia, including initial cooperative capital and skills-training activities. Program records also showed that KUB membership increased from 18 members in 2023 to 31 members in 2024. These figures do not by themselves demonstrate a causal rise in household income, but they do show increasing participation and a concrete institutional commitment to economic empowerment.

The 2023–2027 strategic plan reinforces this interpretation. It identifies the development of congregational well-being through love and economic cooperation as a ministry priority. Economic empowerment was therefore not treated as a temporary project detached from the congregation's mission, but as part of its longer-term service agenda.

Enabling and Constraining Conditions

Three internal conditions enabled the programs: strong communal solidarity, spiritual motivation, and the use of local resources. Group meetings were attended regularly, and communal work was used to develop church agricultural activities. An elder described the enabling environment in explicitly relational and spiritual terms: “What supports us is the

spirit of togetherness and prayer. Everything is done voluntarily, but with responsibility” (Elder B interview, 15 June 2024). These internal resources reduced the distance between leadership and membership and strengthened voluntary participation.

At the same time, the programs faced structural constraints that internal solidarity could not fully solve. Observations and interviews identified limited production equipment, restricted capital, and narrow market access. A KUB member stated, “Our constraints are capital and marketing. Our products are still sold only around here” (KUB member interview, 21 June 2024). The 2024 program evaluation similarly noted limited collaboration with microfinance institutions and village government and recommended stronger inter-congregational and external business networks. The model therefore depends on both internal social capital and external institutional linkages.

Discussion: Leadership as a Mechanism of Empowerment

The findings support recent servant-leadership research while extending it into a local church setting. Servant leadership is often associated with empowerment, trust, commitment, voice, and collective effectiveness (Saleem et al., 2022; Zeng et al., 2022; Bai et al., 2023; Coun et al., 2023; Jiang & Wei, 2024; Xu et al., 2024). At Imanuel Botang, similar mechanisms were visible, but they operated through congregational rather than employment relationships. Leaders strengthened participation by sharing decision-making space, working alongside members, and linking authority to service. This is important because voluntary church participation cannot be sustained primarily through contractual authority; it depends on moral credibility and the perception that members' contributions matter.

The case also illustrates the community dimension of servant leadership. Recent scholarship argues that servant leadership should not end with individualized follower development but should include the communities affected by leadership practice. The Imanuel Botang model aligns with this broader understanding because leadership is expressed through collective economic activities, cooperative structures, and shared resource use. The finding also corresponds with Yousofi and Rahimzad's (2024) emphasis on empowerment as an important consequence of servant leadership and with Han and Zhang's (2024) argument that learning orientation and agility can mediate collective outcomes. In this case, training and group enterprise function as practical learning environments through which members acquire skills and experiment with local production.

The economic-empowerment findings are consistent with Indonesian studies that position churches and other religious organizations as potential facilitators of entrepreneurship and local economic development. Pane et al. (2021) found that religious institutions can combine training, mentoring, access to capital, and spiritual guidance; Santosa et al. (2022) highlighted the role of institutional credit support in the Toraja Church context; and Punuh and Sirine (2024) showed that religious organizations can integrate social entrepreneurship with spiritual values. Comparable church studies have also emphasized agriculture, handicrafts, revolving funds, and locally grounded economic initiatives (Baali, 2023; Kalalo, 2024; Sarimbangun, 2024; Uly et al., 2024). The Imanuel Botang case adds an

explicit leadership-process explanation: such programs are more than a list of activities because they are held together by participatory decision-making, institutional allocation, leader involvement, and congregational ownership.

A further contribution lies in distinguishing participation from demonstrated economic impact. The original program records show a rise in KUB membership and an institutional allocation of funds, and participants reported useful skills and access to small-scale capital. However, the available data do not include longitudinal household-income measurements, enterprise profitability, or comparison groups. It is therefore more defensible to interpret the evidence as showing strengthened participation, capability, and institutional support rather than claiming a precisely measured increase in economic welfare. This distinction responds to a common weakness in empowerment research, where program activity is sometimes treated as equivalent to proven livelihood impact.

The constraints identified in this case also mirror previous research. Church-based and faith-based empowerment initiatives frequently possess strong internal trust but face limitations in financing, market linkages, technical mentoring, and stakeholder coordination. Punuh and Sirine (2024) emphasize the importance of collaborative stakeholders in religious social entrepreneurship, while Boorse and Jablonski (2024) show the broader value of partnership between faith-based organizations and external actors. The Imanuel Botang findings therefore suggest that solidarity is necessary but insufficient: the next stage of development requires institutional partnerships that connect the congregation with microfinance, local government, markets, and business-support organizations without turning the church itself into a profit-seeking enterprise.

Theologically, the model can be interpreted as transformative diaconia. Recent Indonesian theological discussions distinguish between temporary charity and empowerment that strengthens dignity, productive capacity, and social agency (Setiawan & Harita, 2022; Punuh, 2024; Kusni, 2025). Imanuel Botang's combination of spiritual accompaniment, skills development, cooperative mechanisms, and shared economic activity reflects this movement from relief to capability. The council's leadership is therefore best described as participatory servant leadership expressed through transformative diaconia: leadership serves, shares voice, mobilizes resources, and enables members to become economic actors rather than passive recipients.

Taken together, the findings produce a four-part model. First, servant-oriented and participatory leadership creates trust, voice, and shared ownership. Second, that relational foundation enables concrete empowerment mechanisms such as training, KUB activities, cooperative finance, and financial education. Third, church policy and resource allocation institutionalize the programs beyond individual leadership initiatives. Fourth, contextual conditions determine sustainability: solidarity and local resources strengthen the model, while capital, market access, and weak external partnerships limit its expansion. This integrated explanation is the main analytical contribution of the study.

Limitations and Future Research

This study has several limitations. It is a single-site qualitative case study and therefore does not claim statistical generalizability to all Gereja Toraja congregations or other denominations. The data capture leadership and program processes in a bounded period, while economic well-being is a long-term outcome. In addition, the study did not collect standardized household-income data, enterprise profit-and-loss records, or longitudinal indicators that would permit causal assessment of economic change. The researcher also worked with a relatively small purposive group of key informants, which is appropriate for an in-depth case study but may not capture every congregational perspective.

Future studies should compare several rural and urban congregations, include a wider range of member and non-participant perspectives, and combine qualitative process data with longitudinal economic indicators such as household income, business survival, savings, market expansion, and repayment performance. Further research could also examine how gender, youth participation, digital marketing, credit-union partnerships, and village-government collaboration shape the effectiveness and sustainability of church-based economic empowerment.

CONCLUSION

This study answers the central research question by showing that the church council leadership model at Imanuel Botang Church operates through the integration of participatory decision-making, servant-oriented leadership, institutional resource commitment, and practical economic-empowerment mechanisms. The leadership relationship is not primarily top-down: congregants contribute ideas, leaders work alongside members, and programs are organized through productive-skills training, joint business groups, a congregational cooperative, and financial education. The 15% allocation of church income to economic diaconia and the growth of KUB membership from 18 to 31 members provide documentary evidence of institutional commitment and expanding participation, while the qualitative data show that solidarity, spirituality, and local resources are important enabling conditions.

The model is best understood as participatory servant leadership expressed through transformative diaconia. Its contribution lies in connecting spiritual ministry with the development of congregational agency and economic capability without reducing the church to a business institution. At the same time, limited capital, market access, and external partnerships constrain sustainability, and the available evidence does not justify a causal claim about long-term household-income improvement. Future development should therefore strengthen collaboration with microfinance institutions, local government, business-support actors, and inter-congregational networks, while future research should test the model comparatively and with longitudinal economic indicators.

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