The Role of the Church in Public Policy Advocacy

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KEYWORDS	ABSTRACT
Church; Public policy; Politics; Advocacy; Social justice; Prophetic theology	The growing complexity of social, political, and economic challenges—such as inequality, corruption, environmental degradation, and human rights violations—demands the active involvement of religious institutions in public policy discourse. Historically, churches have played key roles in justice movements, from civil rights to anti-apartheid struggles. In Indonesia, with its diverse religious context, the Church encounters both opportunities and constraints in exercising its prophetic role within governance. This study explores the theological foundations, opportunities, and challenges shaping the Church's engagement. Using a qualitative-descriptive approach, it synthesizes theological literature, policy analyses, and observations of church involvement in advocacy. Findings indicate that the Church's potential for influence rests on four pillars: (1) moral authority grounded in biblical mandates for justice (Micah 6:8; Isaiah 1:17); (2) wide social networks enabling community mobilization; (3) the capacity for prophetic critique of unjust structures; and (4) partnerships with civil society and government institutions. Yet, advocacy effectiveness is constrained by political instrumentalization risks, the challenge of operating within religious pluralism, and the difficulty of translating moral rhetoric into transformative action. The study concludes that the Church's theological commitment to justice, compassion, and human dignity, together with its organizational capacity, positions it as a vital moral force for promoting equitable public policies. Strengthening theological education, coalition-building, and sustained participation in policy processes is essential for enhancing its prophetic and participatory role in governance.

INTRODUCTION

The proverb you're looking for is "Every time has its own people, every person its own time" or "Every person has its own time, every time its own person." This proverb means that everything is temporary and nothing lasts forever; new generations or people will eventually take over positions or roles, and everyone has their own time or turn to shine or achieve something. This relates to human life—nothing is eternal, but change is certain (Howlett, 2024; John, 2012; Nugroho, 2021; Rodriguez, 2019).

The Church faces various challenges in an increasingly complex era. On the other hand, the Church also strives to withstand these challenges by continuing to carry out the Great Commission as stated in Matthew 28:19–20: "Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, the Son, and

the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the very end of the age."

This is not an easy task considering current developments and events. The role of the Church is significant in carrying out advocacy efforts for its members to be actively involved in providing input to the government in formulating public policies for society (Hill Frederic, 2021; Sjhthi Markus, 2024). What, then, are the opportunities and challenges for the Church in providing public policy advocacy?

Literally, theology can be said to be the science of knowing God, not through human reason but through divine revelation—who He is and how He relates to humans. Bradley C. Hanson defines theology as personal reflection within a religious faith. Karl Barth explains that theology, like other functions of the Church, is uniquely based on the fact that God speaks to humans and humans hear His Word through grace (Korenik Maria, 2020; Luther, 2019; Silva M.V., 2023). Theology is the fruit of a humble act of repentance. Stanley Grenz defines theology as "the study of God, His attributes, and His relationship to humanity and the universe." Hodge argues that theology is the presentation of biblical facts in their proper order, with general principles or truths embedded in the facts themselves, harmonizing the whole. Dooyeweerd defines theology as the study of human faith and truth. John Stott states that theology is a rich, multidimensional discipline that demands accountability.

From the definitions above, it can be concluded that theology is not only the study of God but also the study of God's absolute truth and all aspects of His work, salvation, and involvement in human life. This understanding also encompasses the elements of theology, namely the Word of God, wisdom, doctrine, biblical facts, disciplined faith, and science (Ongaro M., 2024; Satyavrata, 2024).

The Church is a fellowship of believers who live by the Word of God and are called to preach the gospel and be witnesses of Christ in the world. It is not a human institution but a creation of the Word (*Creatur Verbi*). Augustine (*St. Augustine*) said that the Church is the city of God (*Civitas Dei*), a spiritual community that lives in love and truth, in contrast to the city of the world (*Civitas Terrena*). He viewed the Church as the body of Christ chosen by God, though historically it has also contained unsaved individuals. John Calvin proposed that the Church is the mother of all believers—the birthplace and growth center of faith through the preaching of the Word and the sacraments (Ndlovu, 2025; Ndzi, 2025). The preaching of the pure Gospel and the correct administration of the sacraments constitute the true Church. Martin Luther described the Church as a communion of saints who live by faith and the Word of God, not by human hierarchy or tradition. He rejected the definition of the Church as a hierarchical institution and emphasized *the priesthood of all believers* (*the common priesthood of believers*). Louis Berkhof stated that the Church is the spiritual body of Christ—a community of believers united by the Holy Spirit and called to a holy life. David W. Shenk described the Church as a community of worship and witness that symbolizes new humanity, called to live in peace and justice. The Church must be an agent of social transformation and peace across cultures.

From these views, it can be concluded that the Church is a fellowship of believers called to live holy lives through faith and the Word of God and to be witnesses of Christ in the world. It serves as an agent of social transformation and cross-cultural peace (Grzymała-Busse, 2015; Lourdunathan F.V., 2025; Modood T., 2025).

The Chambers Dictionary defines policy as "a course of action, especially one based on some declared and respected principle." This definition views policy as something more than a decision—it embodies the idea of action, indeed rational action, insofar as it involves some principle. In everyday speech, we sometimes say things like "my policy is always to…." This book is, of course, about public policy. Comparatively, the Oxford English Dictionary describes the word "policy" as "a course of action adopted and pursued by a government, party, ruler, or statesman." In the next section, we return to the implications of the word "public." These definitions do not bring us much closer to identifying a policy. Perhaps we can only adopt the British pragmatism of Cunningham, a former senior civil servant, who argued that "policy is rather like the elephant—you recognize it when you see it but cannot easily define it". A similarly broad approach is adopted by Friend and his colleagues, who say that "policy is essentially a stance which, once articulated, contributes to the context within which a succession of future decisions will be made".

Public policy is closely related to regulation in legal terms and is connected to the ideology of the guaranteeing state. In legal analyses of public authority obligations, guarantees are understood dynamically, taking into account the interests of the beneficiaries within the system that oversees its own functioning (Boddie A., 2025; Fulton, 2016; Giorda L., 2025; Glatzer J., 2023).

The lack of unity in public policy studies reflects the nature of the topic. Public policy is difficult to study effectively because it is a complex process that spans multiple branches of government and involves many decision-makers. The task of studying decision-making processes in policy sectors is also highly complex. There are many types of policies, and the same policy can differ depending on the branch and level of government where it is decided. Subsets of issues exist within policies, and policy fields often intersect. It is sometimes difficult to differentiate between policy outputs and outcomes. Because of the difficulty of conducting policy-oriented research, many studies are descriptive, focusing on mapping relationships and organizational roles to reveal the nature of particular problems and interactions—for example, urban public interventions in city policy. Many policy-oriented studies, particularly in Europe, report policy-making processes in specific fields such as health (Ham, 2004; Weissert, 2006) or housing. Public policy researchers often gain insights from secondary documents and interviews with key decision-makers without relying on an explicit theoretical framework—and often achieve commendable success in this task.

Public policy, as a political and administrative process, consists of three main dimensions: formulation, implementation, and control. The final element involves policy monitoring and evaluation. Policy achievement depends on how a policy is monitored, evaluated, and adjusted—alongside the mechanisms of rewards, sanctions, and revisions. The most classical model was presented by Easton, who drew an analogy between public policy and biological systems, emphasizing the interaction between humans and their environment that culminates in relatively stable social change.

Designing public policy, as described earlier, is a difficult task in practice for many reasons, including resource constraints, corrupt or inefficient bureaucracies and other policy actors, crises, powerful veto players within the state and society, unclear goal definitions, and poor implementation and evaluation. These conditions create high levels of uncertainty in

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policy responses and outcomes. The modern policy studies movement began with the observation that public policy-making often results from the interactions of policymakers exercising power rather than knowledge—and even when based on knowledge, effectiveness is not guaranteed. Despite these concerns—or rather, because of them—modern policy design studies rest on the idea that accumulating and using knowledge of the effects and impacts of a well-known set of policy instruments, developed through years of state-building experience, can help mobilize and use governing resources more effectively. Through this, it aims to devise methods for achieving policy outcomes that enhance public value (Howlett & Mukherjee, 2014). This design orientation drives the field of policy design studies.

This study explores the theological foundations, opportunities, and challenges shaping the Church's role in public policy advocacy within contemporary pluralistic societies. It aims to define the biblical and theological basis for the Church's mandate and moral authority in policy engagement, analyze opportunities such as moral legitimacy, social capital, and partnership potential, assess constraints including political instrumentalization risks, pluralism navigation, and the rhetoric–action gap, and propose strategic approaches to enhance the Church's prophetic and participatory involvement in governance and policy reform.

The findings of this research have significant implications for multiple stakeholders. For ecclesial leaders and theologians, the study provides conceptual frameworks that integrate theological commitments with strategic advocacy practice, enriching preaching, teaching, and congregational formation. For policymakers and government officials, understanding churches' potential contributions to policy development and evaluation may foster more inclusive and participatory governance that harnesses civil society's moral and organizational resources. For civil society organizations and advocacy networks, insights into churches' unique capacities and constraints can inform coalition-building strategies that leverage religious institutions' strengths while respecting their distinct characteristics and limitations. For academic scholars in theology, political science, and public policy, this interdisciplinary study contributes to the theoretical understanding of the role of religious actors in democratic governance and policymaking processes.

METHOD

This study employed a qualitative-descriptive design with a theological-interpretative framework to examine the Church's role in public policy advocacy. The methodology was chosen to investigate complex social phenomena involving meanings, values, and interpretative processes shaping ecclesiastical engagement, integrating theological analysis with social scientific description to connect the Church's public calling with its actual advocacy practices. Data were collected from documentary sources, including biblical and theological writings from key historical figures, policy studies literature, government documents, media reports, and observations of church participation in public consultations, providing evidence of church–government interactions and advocacy efforts. The analysis used content, thematic, comparative, and critical discourse methods to identify biblical mandates, recurring opportunities and challenges, and to compare theological principles with practical outcomes. The interpretive-theological process progressed from describing church actions, to interpreting theological motivations, to evaluating them against ethical standards, and concluding with

pragmatic recommendations for greater effectiveness, while maintaining ethical integrity, respect for religious convictions, and sensitivity to pluralistic contexts.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Ruben Rodriguez highlighted that religion and politics influence each other in historical and contemporary contexts, he also stated the importance of dialogue between various groups in facing global challenges. This indirectly conveys that the role of the church is very influential in political life in a country. Our footing is very strong where Christian theology teaches human values, social justice based on the concepts presented in the Bible. For example, Micah 6:8 God's people are called to "do justice, love faithfulness, and live humbly before God". This emphasizes that social justice is not an obligation but a command that must be carried out and realized in everyday life by followers of Christ. In another passage, Matthew 22:39, Jesus commanded His community to "Love your neighbor as yourself". Love does not look at people, but love is carried out through real actions in our lives.

Jurgen Moltmann (1926-2024) an influential theologian of the 20th century emphasized that he believed that theology should be actively involved in social and political issues, such as justice, oppression and peace. This also provides an illustration that the role of theology and the church must play an active role in responding to social, political issues such as justice, oppression and peace. Gustavo Guitérez encourages Christians to be fighters in socio-economic and political transformation, as well as being involved in unjust structures. He emphasized the church's siding with the poor as a spiritual act that imitates Christ. In the Bible Deuteronomy 15: 11 "open your hand to your neighbor who is poor and needy" and Proverbs 31: 8-9 "defend the rights of the poor and needy". Oppressing the poor means insulting the creator while doing the best for him is a form of glory to God or doing the same as himself.

The Church's Opportunity in Public Policy Advocacy
Public Morals and Ethics

The church can be a moral voice on issues such as poverty, inter-gender justice, climate change, and human rights. Amidst the changing times and progress toward Industrialization 5.0, the church plays a crucial role in overseeing these changes. Every advancement is accompanied by development issues that the church can observe and highlight.

In Micah 7:3 it states: "Their hands are quick to do evil; a ruler demands a reward, a judge takes a bribe, a great man reveals his evil desires, and they plot it together." This is in line with the current condition of the nation where corruption is very damaging to the civilization of the nation's life. The application of this teaching in the daily lives of the people can help shape attitudes and behaviors that reject corruption. The church can also play a role in advocating anti-corruption policies and encouraging transparency and accountability at various levels of government and the public sector. Through social and community programs, the church can help strengthen the capacity of society to fight corruption and support victims of corruption.

Based on the moral foundation of Micah 7:3, the church can play a significant role in combating corrupt practices. The church can remind leaders and congregations of the importance of integrity and justice, and encourage them to shun bribery and corruption. This

verse can also be used as a reflection and meditation in church sermons, continually reminding congregations of the dangers of corruption and the importance of living in truth and honesty.

The church must always speak out against any gaps that arise between the community and the government. Several Bible verses speak to this issue.

Yesaya 1:17 - 'Learn to do good, seek justice, save the oppressed, defend the orphan, defend the widow.'

Mazmur 82:3 - 'Give justice to the weak and orphans, uphold the rights of the oppressed and the destitute.'

Amsal 31:8-9 - " Speak for the mute, defend the rights of all who are oppressed. Speak, judge justly, defend the rights of the poor and needy.."

Yeremia 22:3 "Thus says the LORD: Do justice and truth. Deliver from the hands of exploiters the deprived of their rights, do not oppress or treat strangers, orphans and widows harshly, and do not shed the blood of innocent people in this place"

Repetition 15:11 'Because there will always be needy people on earth, I command you: Open your hand to your poor and needy neighbors in your land..'

Social Networks and Associations

The church has a broad community and can foster social solidarity and engage in collective action. Responsive actions and concern for others can be demonstrated by the church in response to various social disasters occurring in society. Diakonia is the church's effort to provide assistance to those in need. The social assistance provided by the church includes providing logistical assistance (basic necessities, clothing, food, and medicine) to those in need, providing financial assistance for medical expenses or urgent needs, organizing empowerment programs through skills training, providing assistance to disaster victims, and providing spiritual and moral support to those experiencing hardship.

The Church as a Strategic Partner in Public Policy

The Church can collaborate with civil society organizations and the government to enhance the impact of its advocacy. In the development of regional planning and the dissemination of regional legal products, the Church plays a role in providing input, suggestions, proposals, and insights so that each product produced can have a positive impact on society. This involvement is evident in the Church's presence in conveying its views in the development of the Medium-Term Development Plan (RPJM), the Regional Medium-Term Development Plan (RPJPD), and several other legal products, such as the Regional Regulation on Public Order and Security, the Regulation on the Distribution and Control of Alcoholic Beverages, and so on. The Church and government have a strategic position; not only as partners, but also as critics in improving the laws and policies enacted by the government.

Digital technology offers new opportunities for the church to convey theological values more broadly and inclusively. The church's role is vast in today's developments. The church can use online media to voice the truth to everyone, especially in providing considerations and assessing the current state of the country.

Church Challenges in Public Policy Advocacy
Political Instrumentalization and Loss of Independence:

Church support for public policy can be misinterpreted as partisan political support. Therefore, the church must maintain its independence to avoid being entangled in political projects and maintain its moral witness. This has resulted in the church's reluctance to provide input and advice to the government, as this would appear to be providing political support to the government.

Pluralism and Differences of Faith:

In a pluralistic society, the church must be able to navigate interactions with other religions and ensure that public policy advocacy is non-discriminatory, avoiding prejudice and stereotypes. The church's presence lies at the heart of a diverse society. Therefore, it is a challenge to ensure that the church's stance does not undermine existing diversity, particularly when providing input, suggestions, or criticism of government policies. For example, the implementation of regional regulations (Perda) on the control and distribution of alcoholic beverages.

Moving Beyond Rhetoric to Real Action:

There is a tendency for the church to focus solely on moral rhetoric. For effective advocacy, the church must embody its prophetic calling in concrete actions, disrupt structures of injustice, and actively engage in society. The church should not simply provide advice or suggestions to the government but should take concrete action in community life. It should actively engage in the struggle for justice.

CONCLUSION

Christian theology positions social justice as a central element of the Church's calling to address global inequality, emphasizing the biblical mandate to love others, defend the oppressed, and challenge unjust systems. Theological perspectives from Gustavo Gutiérrez, Reinhold Niebuhr, and John Stott highlight the Church's prophetic role in advocating for just policies and supporting the marginalized through practical action. As a transformative agent, the Church is morally responsible for confronting structural injustices and fostering equal opportunities within society. Future research should explore how contemporary churches can integrate theological principles with effective advocacy strategies to strengthen their partnership with governments and civil society in promoting sustainable social justice and equitable development.

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