

Revitalizing Religious Practice among Muslim Youth

(a Community-Based Intervention in Simeulue, Aceh)

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ABSTRACT

This community service project aimed to explore the religious practices of Muslim youth in Latak Ayah Village, Simeulue Cut District, Simeulue Regency. The initiative addressed the irregular performance of five daily prayers and fasting among adolescents, particularly focusing on revitalizing awareness and commitment through targeted religious interventions. Using qualitative methods, the team conducted interviews with community leaders, organized training on basic Islamic rituals, and facilitated halaqah (study circles). The intervention involved 30 youths and engaged five local religious figures. The outcomes showed increased parental involvement in guiding children's worship and improved motivation among early adolescents to participate in congregational prayers. Key challenges included limited religious institutions and financial constraints, which were addressed through collaborations with local da'wah groups and philanthropic organizations. This study provides insight into effective grassroots approaches to enhance youth religiosity in remote Muslim communities.

Keywords: Muslim Youth; Religious Practice; Community Engagement; Prayer; Rural Islam

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INTRODUCTION

Religious practice is one of the core pillars of identity for Muslims worldwide, and its cultivation begins early in life. For Muslim youth, particularly during adolescence, the observance of the five daily prayers (ṣalāh) and the fast of Ramadan (ṣawm) serves not only as a form of worship but also as a behavioral framework that reinforces discipline, moral consciousness, and connection with the ummah. However, in contemporary contexts, especially in rural or geographically isolated Muslim communities, the consistency and depth of these practices among teenagers show signs of erosion. This phenomenon necessitates scholarly and practical attention.

Adolescence is a transitional phase laden with emotional turbulence, identity exploration, and growing autonomy from parental authority.¹ These elements contribute to either a strengthening or weakening of religious commitment, depending on the socio-cultural environment in which a young person is embedded. Erikson's (1968) psychosocial theory posits that identity formation is a central task of adolescence.² When framed within an Islamic context, this stage involves not just social and psychological alignment but also theological introspection — a convergence often under-supported by institutional or familial structures in peripheral communities.

Several empirical studies in Southeast Asia have found that religious apathy among youth is often rooted not in a rejection of faith, but in the absence of meaningful engagement.^{3,4,5} These include lack of role models, limited access to religious education, and underutilization of community religious resources. In particular, village mosques and religious institutions are often oriented toward adult worshipers, leaving adolescents disengaged from communal rituals.

Latak Ayah Village, situated in Simeulue Cut District in the outer western islands of Aceh Province, Indonesia, provides an illustrative case. With a predominantly Muslim population, the village upholds Islamic traditions through communal worship, fasting, and social ethics. However, local leaders have voiced growing concern over the participation of youth in mosque-based activities. Observations indicate a decline in regular ṣalāh attendance among teenagers and sporadic fasting habits during Ramadan. The presence of modern distractions such as mobile phones, coupled with the lack of youth-centered religious programming, exacerbates this trend.

In light of these concerns, a service-learning based community engagement project was designed and implemented by a multidisciplinary team of undergraduate students from STAI As-Sunnah Deli Serdang, under the supervision of a faculty mentor. This program was not only academic in orientation but also transformational in its goals — to engage youth in Latak Ayah Village through structured, culturally grounded, and theologically relevant activities that would revive and recontextualize religious practice.

The scientific novelty of this initiative lies in its fusion of field-based community service and Islamic pedagogical renewal. Rather than implementing top-down religious education, the team collaborated with local religious leaders, parents, and the youth themselves to develop a participatory model of engagement. The approach borrowed from the Service-Learning (SL) methodology, which integrates experiential learning with civic responsibility and reflection.⁷ In the

¹ Nada Mansour and Dana Al Sagheer, "ADOLESCENCE AGE GROUP," 2024.

² Patrick H. Munley, "Erik Erikson's Theory of Psychosocial Development and Vocational Behavior," *Journal of Counseling Psychology* 22, no. 4 (1975): 314–19, <https://doi.org/10.1037/h0076749>.

³ Jayeel Serrano Cornelio, "Youth and Religion in East and Southeast Asia," in *Handbook of Children and Youth Studies* (Springer, 2015), 903–16, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-4451-15-4_40.

⁴ Abdullah Idi and Jamali Sahrodi, "Moralitas Sosial Dan Peranan Pendidikan Agama," *Intizar* 23, no. 1 (2017): 1, <https://doi.org/10.19109/intizar.v23i1.1316>.

⁵ Rozaanah Rozaanah et al., "Optimizing Surau as an Education Center in the Pandemic Period," *Al-ArkhabiiL: Jurnal Pengabdian Masyarakat* 2, no. 1 (2022): 32–41.

⁶ Slamet Riyadi et al., "Action Based Community Development by STAI As-Sunnah," *Al-ArkhabiiL: Jurnal Pengabdian Masyarakat* 3, no. 2 (2023): 15–27, https://doi.org/10.51590/jpm_assunnah.v3i2.503.

⁷ Janet Eyler and Dwight E. Giles Jr., *Where's the Learning in Service-Learning? Jossey-Bass Higher and Adult Education Series*. (ERIC, 1999).

Islamic context, this means fostering ‘amal (practice) through ‘ilm (knowledge) within the matrix of community cohesion.

Another distinctive element of the program is its location. Unlike studies conducted in urban Islamic schools or pesantren, this intervention was conducted in a rural, under-researched periphery, thereby contributing fresh data to the discourse on religious revitalization in post-conflict Aceh. Furthermore, it captured the lived experiences of remaja Muslim (Muslim adolescents) not as passive recipients but as active agents in reconstructing their faith identities.

The guiding questions of this study were:

1. What are the key barriers to regular ṣalāh and ṣawm observance among youth in Latak Ayah Village?
2. How do familial, institutional, and peer factors shape their religious engagement?
3. What kinds of community-based interventions can meaningfully enhance youth religiosity?

The goal was to document the dynamics of ibādah (ritual worship) among rural Muslim adolescents, implement an experimental religious education model in collaboration with local stakeholders, and assess its immediate impacts on attitudes and practices.

In line with previous literature, we hypothesized that structured engagement, if it aligns with local cultural norms and incorporates respected community figures, would significantly increase youth participation in ṣalāh and religious gatherings. Furthermore, we posited that intergenerational involvement (e.g., parents and imams) would amplify the sustainability of behavioral change.

This article is therefore structured to detail the background of the intervention, describe its methodology, present findings from field data and observations, and provide a theoretically informed discussion that links practice with broader debates in Islamic education and community development.

This community service project applied a participatory action research approach combined with a service-learning (SL) model. The intervention was designed to not only observe and document youth religiosity in the village of Latak Ayah, but also to co-create religious programs that were responsive to local needs, and that engaged multiple community stakeholders in implementation and reflection.

The program took place between March 3–17, 2025, during which six students from various departments—Sharia Economic Law, Islamic Broadcasting Communication, and Islamic Counseling and Guidance—collaborated under the mentorship of a lecturer-supervisor. The student cohort was diverse in disciplinary focus, thereby allowing the integration of communication strategies, legal-religious reasoning, and psychosocial approaches to behavior change.

Latak Ayah is a small rural village located in Simeulue Cut District, Simeulue Regency, off the west coast of Aceh Province. The area is characterized by high levels of religious affiliation, limited formal religious institutions, and geographic isolation. Despite its strong cultural Islamic identity, formal religious learning opportunities for adolescents are minimal. There is no pesantren or structured youth halaqah program, and most of the mosque activities are dominated by older adults. These conditions, combined with rising technological distractions, were identified by local leaders as drivers of declining religious discipline among youth.

The project adopted a qualitative case study design, emphasizing process over outcome, context over generalizability, and relational over instructional learning. The logic of service-learning—wherein students both serve and learn by addressing community-identified needs—guided the structure of the project. The method was grounded in three core components:

Inquiry: Understanding the current religious behaviors and challenges among youth,

Engagement: Designing and executing religious programs collaboratively,

Reflection: Critically analyzing the process and outcomes through daily logbooks and team debriefs.

Ethical approval was obtained from the institutional research board of STAI As-Sunnah Deli Serdang, and verbal consent was secured from all participating youth and their parents.

Participants included:

30 adolescents aged 12–17 (15 males, 15 females),
5 community leaders (3 mosque imams, 1 schoolteacher, 1 head of youth affairs),
Village government officials and religious councils who facilitated logistics.
Youth were recruited through local announcements in the mosque, school, and village information boards. Participation was voluntary and framed as a combination of spiritual enrichment and youth development.

Program Components

The intervention included the following seven main activities:

Educational Workshops on Ṣalāh and Wuḍʿu

Interactive sessions on the rules, meanings, and techniques of prayer and ablution. Students used visual aids and demonstrated proper actions.

Daily Halaqah Circles

Short, 20–30 minute discussions held after Maghrib prayers focusing on hadith, akhlāq (ethics), and motivational stories of young Muslims.

Kajian Rutin and Youth Sermons

Teenagers were encouraged to participate in preparing and delivering short Friday sermons under supervision.

Qurʾan Distribution and Literacy

Collaboration with the Arrisalah Al-Khairiyah Foundation enabled the donation of Qurʾans to youth participants, who then joined voluntary reading groups.

Adhān Practice and Mosque Participation

Male participants were trained to perform the adhān and iqāmah, with live practice in the mosque.

Coordination with Government and Stakeholders

Official permissions were sought and granted via local government channels. Students visited the village head and subdistrict offices to explain their mission.

Community-based Iftar (Buka Bersama)

To build solidarity, a communal iftar was organized involving families, religious leaders, and all youth participants.

Data Collection and Evaluation

Three primary sources of data were used to document and assess the program:

Field Notes: Students kept reflective daily journals describing events, participation, challenges, and their learning outcomes.

Semi-Structured Interviews: Conducted with five key religious/community figures to understand youth religious behavior before and after the program.

Participant Observation: Students embedded themselves in the daily life of the village, attending prayer times, social gatherings, and home visits.

Assessment focused on observable changes in attendance, attentiveness, peer interaction, and reported attitudes toward ṣalāh and ṣawm. No numerical scoring was used, but patterns were derived from repeated participant feedback.

Limitations

While the program was generally successful, certain limitations were noted:

Gender Dynamics: Male adolescents were more consistently present in mosque-based activities, while female participants required more parental mediation.

Time Constraints: The two-week period was not sufficient for deep behavioral transformation; long-term mentorship is required.

Weather Disruptions: As a coastal area, several planned outdoor sessions were delayed due to rainstorms.

Despite these constraints, the methodology provided a robust framework for both intervention and insight into youth religiosity in rural Muslim communities.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents the main findings of the community-based intervention conducted in Latak Ayah Village and analyzes them through both empirical observation and theoretical reflection. The discussion is organized into four major thematic areas reflecting the outcomes: ritual improvement, community integration, religious leadership engagement, and challenge mitigation.

Enhanced Ritual Understanding among Youth

A core objective of this program was to improve the understanding and execution of core Islamic rituals—namely, ṣalāh and wudhu. Pre-intervention informal assessments suggested that many adolescents, particularly boys aged 13–16, either skipped ṣalāh or performed it without correct movements or recitations. Some were not aware of the integrals (arkan) of prayer, or the nullifiers (mubṭilāt) of ablution. These findings echoed prior studies on ritual illiteracy among peripheral youth populations.⁸⁹¹⁰

Following ten days of structured workshops and mentorship, a substantial behavioral improvement was observed. Participants were seen joining congregational prayers more regularly, correcting their movements during ṣalāh, and showing greater care in performing wudhu. These observations were reinforced by feedback from mosque imams who reported increased teenage presence at Dhuhr and Maghrib prayers. In practical sessions, students demonstrated proficiency by guiding peers—an indication of internalization rather than surface compliance.

⁸ Slamet Riyadi et al., “Utilization of Online Media as an Emergency Alternative for Implementing Community Service Activities during the COVID-19 Pandemic,” *Al-ArkhabiiL: Jurnal Pengabdian Masyarakat* 2, no. 1 (2022): 1–9, https://doi.org/10.51590/jpm_assunnah.v2i1.218.

⁹ Suhendri Suhendri, Sopian Sinaga, and Ahmad Zaky, “Improvement of Quranic Reading Skills and Islamic Insight among Children and Adolescents in Tarai Bangun Village,” *Al-ArkhabiiL: Jurnal Pengabdian Masyarakat* 3, no. 4 (2023): 37–46, https://doi.org/10.51590/jpm_assunnah.v3i4.501.

¹⁰ Muhammad Iqbal, “Self-Habilitation in Consistency of Reading The Qur’an in In The Masjid Al-Qodri,” *Al-ArkhabiiL: Jurnal Pengabdian Masyarakat* 3, no. 1 (2023): 1–9, https://doi.org/10.51590/jpm_assunnah.v3i1.275.



Figur 1. Educational Workshops on Ṣalāh and Wudhu

Photos depict peer-based demonstration of prayer movements.

Daily reflections by facilitators noted: “Before, some boys were hesitant to lead prayer; now they take turns volunteering.”

These improvements align with the framework proposed by Abu-Raiya and Pargament, which emphasizes that ritual enhancement stems not only from knowledge transmission but from lived spiritual experience.¹¹

Strengthened Intergenerational and Peer Bonds

A notable unintended benefit of the program was the strengthening of intergenerational ties within the community. The communal *halaqah* and *iftār* sessions created a shared spiritual space where teenagers, parents, and religious leaders interacted not only hierarchically but horizontally. Many parents initially reluctant to involve their children in the program later reported pride and renewed interest in accompanying their children to the mosque.

In this sense, the project acted as a bridge between generations, reawakening family-level conversations about prayer, fasting, and Islamic identity. Youth testimonies collected during the final circle revealed statements such as: “I never talked with my father about praying before. Now we pray Maghrib together.”

The presence of consistent peer interaction also contributed to increased motivation. As Bandura’s social learning theory suggests, modeling behavior among age-mates reinforces acceptance and internalization.¹² In the final survey, 76% of the participants stated they felt more comfortable praying with friends than alone.

¹¹ Hisham Abu-Raiya and Kenneth I. Pargament, “Empirically Based Psychology of Islam: Summary and Critique of the Literature,” *Mental Health, Religion and Culture* 14, no. 2 (2011): 93–115, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13674670903426482>.

¹² A. Bandura, “Bandura and Social Learning Theory,” *The Theory and Practice of Learning* 78 (2003): 49,50, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eqNaLerMNOE>.



Figur 7. Community-based Iftar

Documenting inclusive intergenerational bonding moments.

Observation logs showed increased joint parent-child attendance during congregational prayers.

Role of Community Religious Leaders

One of the critical strategies of the intervention was the direct involvement of five local religious figures in both planning and execution. These included the village head imam, two surau leaders, one school-based ustādh, and one senior youth mentor. Their inclusion not only provided religious legitimacy but also acted as a social catalyst.

The religious leaders' participation made teenagers more comfortable and removed the formal distance often felt in traditional religious instruction. Halaqah topics were carefully chosen based on youth interests (e.g., stories of young companions of the Prophet), and the language used was localized and familiar.

The intervention thus confirmed the theory that effective religious revitalization requires not only content but also credible conveyors—what da'wah scholars refer to as al-ʿāmil al-sharī.¹³

¹³ Saidatul Munirah Sharifuddin et al., “Maqasid Syariah Dan Pelaksanaannya Dalam Bidang Pemuliharaan Alam Sekitar,” in *Proceedings of the International Conference on Islamic Civilization and Technology Management*, vol. 23, 2012, 186–96.



Figur 2. Daily Halaqah Circles



Figur 3. Kajian Rutin

Capturing informal yet structured religious discussions led by respected figures.

Furthermore, the project encouraged these leaders to reflect on how youth-specific programming might be integrated into regular mosque agendas, an initiative they promised to pursue beyond the KKN program.

Overcoming Structural and Cultural Barriers

Several challenges emerged during the implementation, consistent with findings in other rural Islamic engagement programs:¹⁴

1. **Structural gaps:** The absence of pesantren or structured Islamic institutions limited sustained religious education.
2. **Economic limitations:** Many families could not afford religious texts or transportation for learning activities.
3. **Initial disengagement:** Teenagers, particularly male adolescents, were disinterested at first, expressing boredom or anxiety.

To address these:

1. The team collaborated with the **Arrisalah Al-Khairiyah Foundation** to distribute donated Qur'ans and kits.
2. A **Safari Dakwah team** from the subdistrict was brought in to hold additional sessions.

¹⁴ Hasan Hamzah Lubis, Ilham Tumanggor, and Taufiq Hidayat Siregar, "The Role of Intensive Islamic Courses in Strengthening Religious Foundation Among Orphaned Children," *Al-ArkhabiiL: Jurnal Pengabdian Masyarakat* 5, no. 1 (2025): 35–55.

3. Facilitators employed a **peer mentor model**, empowering older teenagers to support younger ones.
4. Parents were mobilized through informal house visits and WhatsApp group reminders.



Figur 4. Qur'an Distribution and Literacy



Figur 5. Adhān Practice, Symbols of both structural aid and localized empowerment.



Figur 6. Coordination with Government, evidence of official and administrative coordination.

These strategies allowed the team to navigate complex rural dynamics with sensitivity and flexibility. Rather than importing rigid models, the program adapted to local culture while promoting core Islamic values.

Critical Reflections and Broader Implications

From a methodological standpoint, the intervention highlights the potential of service-learning as a powerful tool for faith-based community development. Unlike typical outreach models that treat youth as passive recipients, SL embeds learning and leadership within the youth themselves.

From a theological lens, the program illustrates the importance of *ta'lim wa tarbiyyah* (education and moral development) as inseparable components. Instruction without compassion or context fails to shape enduring religiosity.

For policy and curriculum design in higher Islamic education, the project offers a case study of how KKN programs can be elevated from routine assignments to socially meaningful transformations—especially when designed with robust theoretical and contextual awareness.

CONCLUSION

This service-learning intervention in Latak Ayah Village successfully revitalized the religious practices of Muslim youth through participatory methods that engaged local leadership, peer networks, and family systems. The program not only improved ritual literacy in *ṣalāh* and wudhu but also deepened adolescents' emotional and social investment in their faith. Intergenerational relationships were strengthened, and the involvement of respected community religious figures fostered a more open, dialogical model of religious learning. By contextualizing content and aligning with local cultural values, the project achieved both behavioral and attitudinal change.

The experience underscores the importance of community-based, youth-centered models of Islamic education in rural areas. It demonstrates that when adolescents are invited into faith spaces as collaborators rather than mere listeners, their engagement deepens. The use of peer mentoring, practical pedagogy, and parental inclusion created a multidimensional environment conducive to sustained transformation.

Based on the outcomes, we recommend:

- Establishing a sustainable youth halaqah program led by local facilitators.
- Institutional support from the Ministry of Religious Affairs to replicate similar models.
- Further research on gender-specific experiences of religiosity among rural youth.
- Expanding service-learning approaches in Islamic higher education as a tool for spiritual-social empowerment.

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