



Forgiveness Without Impunity: The Relationship between Ecclesial Discipline and Legal Process in Responding to Sexual Violence by Church Leaders

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ABSTRACT

Sexual violence by church leaders raises legal and theological concerns when forgiveness is used to silence disclosure, displace judicial proceedings, or accelerate reinstatement to ministry. This article examines how Christian forgiveness, ecclesial discipline, and legal accountability can be coordinated under Indonesian law, drawing on selected Indonesian church governance sources. It combines normative legal research, constructive theological inquiry, and an integrative literature review. The analysis distinguishes forgiveness from reconciliation, reinstatement, and immunity from consequences; examines relevant provisions of Law No. 12 of 2022 on Sexual Violence Crimes; and considers research on spiritual trauma, institutional betrayal, and victim protection. Three findings emerge. Forgiveness requires freedom and does not extinguish accountability or condition victims' access to assistance. Ecclesial discipline addresses ministerial integrity and institutional safety but cannot substitute for the competent legal process. A coordinated three-track model should connect victim protection and recovery, independent ecclesial examination, and referral to statutory services and legal authorities. The article proposes safeguards against coerced forgiveness, evidence preservation, conflict-of-interest management, and continuing safety review. Indonesian Protestant disciplinary provisions and Catholic complaint arrangements provide contextual examples rather than evidence of nationwide practice or effectiveness. The framework remains normative and requires empirical evaluation across denominations.

1. INTRODUCTION

Sexual violence committed by church leaders shows that religious standing does not in itself guarantee the responsible use of power. Pastoral relationships are built on trust, openness about personal matters, and recognition of spiritual authority. These conditions can support ministry, but they also create opportunities for abuse when a leader converts pastoral access into sexual access. The problem widens when an organization places the good name of the church above the safety of the person who reports. International studies identify spiritual harm as an important dimension of clergy-perpetrated violence, although definitions and measures of it remain varied (Durkin et al., 2025, page numbers not verified). Responding to such violence therefore

requires an account of the harm suffered by victims and of the limits of institutional power.

In the Christian context, this problem carries additional complexity because forgiveness is an essential part of the life of faith. Forgiveness can sustain a victim's life if it is understood and practiced freely. However, the command to forgive can become a form of pressure when it is delivered by a leader who controls the victim's access to the community, to ministry, or to financial assistance. Peisker (2026, page numbers not verified) shows how precarious the use of the concept of forgiveness is in responding to violence in churches, particularly when the concept is initiated by perpetrators or institutions to justify themselves. The research problem lies in the illegitimate shift from the conviction that sin can be forgiven to the assumption that legal and institutional accountability can be brought to an end.

The literature shows that sexual violence in religious communities cannot adequately be understood as a personal moral failure. Ross (2019, pp. 632–652) examines the connection between the clergy abuse crisis and patriarchal power that has acquired religious legitimacy. De Weger and Death (2018, pp. 227–257) stress the importance of examining the misuse of professional and spiritual power in violence against adults. These findings correct the tendency to assume that adult victims are always in an equal relationship. Adulthood does not remove pastoral dependence, while inequality does not automatically establish that every relationship is a criminal offense. The analysis must move from positions of power to the conduct, the concrete circumstances, and the relevant legal elements.

The connection among sexual violence, spiritual authority, and organizational response is also evident in the #ChurchToo movement. Bogen et al.'s (2022, pp. 1338–1366) analysis of Twitter discourse identifies disclosures of violence and community responses that can either support or silence. Colwell and Johnson (2020, pp. 183–198) connect the dynamics of the movement with a culture of shame and with restrictions on speaking about sexuality in the church. In the Indonesian literature, Saiya and Poerwandari (2024, pp. 1052–1070) caution that a hashtag movement alone is not sufficient to produce comprehensive prevention. Strengthening the community must be accompanied by reform of authority and complaint mechanisms so that the opportunity to speak does not depend on the courage of victims to face the public sphere.

Indonesia provides an important legal foundation through Law No. 12 of 2022 on Sexual Violence Crimes, hereinafter referred to as the Sexual Violence Crimes Law (UU TPKS). Its provisions on the abuse of position or dependency, the prohibition on settling cases outside the judicial process, and the rights of victims are relevant to the church setting. However, the existence of the regulation does not yet answer all problems of application in communities that have their own disciplinary systems. Nitha et al. (2024, pp. 90–100) underline the cultural challenges and the challenges of public participation in implementing the UU TPKS. This article develops that problem by

asking how ecclesial authorities can discharge their responsibilities without taking over judicial authority or sacrificing the freedom of victims.

Previous research has explained spiritual trauma, power inequality, and the failures of church responses. Williams and Zollner (2024, pp. 352–360), for example, place truth and justice as essential elements in accompanying survivors. Gleeson (2018, pp. 734–754) criticizes the way religious exceptions in law can sustain unaccountability for sexual harm. The space for development taken up by this article is the formulation of the conceptual and procedural relationship among Christian forgiveness, the disciplinary authority of the church, and the duty to respond under Indonesian law. The contribution offered consists of a normative argument and a governance design, not a claim to be the first study or evidence of the effectiveness of an intervention.

The Indonesian literature also provides an entry point for such a division of responsibility. Butar-butur et al. (2025, pp. 84–98) discuss the prevention of sexual violence against children through the church's functions of fellowship, witness, and service. Their contribution is to place protection as a responsibility of the community, not merely a matter for the victim's family. Ndolu et al. (2026, pp. 984–994) report a workshop on a government–church network in Kupang Regency that mapped roles and referral mechanisms. That report offers an example of local coordination, but it does not prove the effectiveness of the three-track model or represent all denominations. This article uses these sources as a contextual foundation for developing a normative framework.

The research questions are formulated as follows: how can Christian forgiveness be distinguished from impunity; what is the relationship between ecclesial discipline and the state legal process in cases of sexual violence; and what response model can safeguard the safety, freedom, and recovery of victims without neglecting a fair examination? The aim of the study is to produce a framework that can serve as a basis for drafting church policy and for further research. The term church leader covers persons who exercise ministerial authority, whether ordained or not. The term victim refers to the context of rights and services, whereas survivor is used when discussing experience and agency; neither is intended to presuppose proof of anyone's guilt in a concrete case.

2. RESEARCH METHOD

This study is normative legal research combined with constructive theological inquiry and an integrative literature review. Its material object is the relationship among the norms for responding to sexual violence, the practice of forgiveness, and church disciplinary systems. Its formal object is the division of authority and accountability for the safety and rights of victims. The statute approach is used to read the provisions of the UU TPKS; the conceptual approach is used to distinguish forgiveness, reconciliation, repentance, restoration to office, and impunity; and the theological approach brings the reading of biblical texts together with questions of power and findings in the literature on trauma.

The literature corpus was selected through a targeted search of the Garuda portal, journal websites, and institutional repositories, with bibliographic verification through title, author, year, and DOI or publisher address. The Indonesian and English keywords included sexual violence in the church, forgiveness and impunity, ecclesial discipline, victim protection, clergy sexual abuse, spiritual abuse, forgiveness, institutional betrayal, and safeguarding. The inclusion criterion was direct discussion of the misuse of religious authority, responses to disclosure, forgiveness, discipline, victim recovery, or the implementation of the UU TPKS. International studies were included if they explained relevant mechanisms of power or organizational response, with the context of origin stated. Sources that merely repeated arguments, lacked a traceable bibliographic identity, or were unrelated to the relationship between authority and victims' rights were excluded. This review is integrative and targeted, not a systematic review; no claim is made to statistical representativeness, pooled prevalence estimates, or a comprehensive quality assessment of all the studies cited.

The bibliographic corpus comprises literature published in 2018–2026 that is listed in the reference list, together with primary normative sources and church documents. This range was chosen because it connects recent developments in spiritual trauma and institutional responsibility with the period in which the UU TPKS has been in force and with the 2026 legal changes. Foreign research is used to develop analytical categories concerning power relations, not to estimate prevalence or to draw conclusions about church practice in Indonesia. The validity of applying the framework still depends on testing it against organizational rules, access to services, and the experiences of Indonesian survivors.

The primary legal materials are Law No. 12 of 2022 on Sexual Violence Crimes (UU TPKS), particularly Articles 5–7, Article 15, Article 19, Articles 23–25, Articles 39–41, and Articles 66–70. The study also takes into account Government Regulation No. 30 of 2025 on the Prevention of Sexual Violence Crimes and the Handling, Protection, and Recovery of Victims of Sexual Violence Crimes; Law No. 1 of 2023 on the Criminal Code; Law No. 20 of 2025 on the Criminal Procedure Code; and Law No. 1 of 2026 on the Adjustment of Criminal Penalties. The national Criminal Code and the new Criminal Procedure Code have been in force since 2 January 2026. The norms of the UU TPKS are treated as special provisions to the extent relevant, while their application in concrete cases must consider transitional provisions, the applicable procedural law, and changes under the Law on the Adjustment of Criminal Penalties. Normative references were checked against the official texts of the regulations; this article does not replace the assessment of elements by law enforcement officials.

The Indonesian context is strengthened through Saiya and Poerwandari (2024, pp. 1052–1070), Nitha et al. (2024, pp. 90–100), Butar-butur et al. (2025, pp. 84–98), and the report of a referral network activity by Ndolu et al. (2026, pp. 984–994). Governance documents were chosen purposively because they are accessible through official channels and explain discipline or complaints: the Church Order and Implementing Regulations of the GKPS (2021), particularly Article 53, and the official

explanation of the Protocol for the Protection of Children and Vulnerable Adults on the website of the Jakarta Cathedral Parish. The GKPS document is read as internal Protestant regulation, while the Cathedral source is read as information on Catholic service arrangements in Indonesia. Neither is state regulation or evidence of the effectiveness of responses. The scope of the article is a normative construction based on Indonesian law with examples from selected denominations, not an empirical mapping of all churches. Biblical texts are used as material for theological interpretation without claiming agreement among all denominations.

To clarify the limits of the sources, Indonesian studies on #ChurchToo, the implementation of the UU TPKS, the prevention of sexual violence in churches, and the protection network in Kupang are treated as local context; the GKPS disciplinary rules and the service information of the Jakarta Cathedral Parish are merely examples of governance in two different church settings. The normative victimological perspective is read from victims' rights under Articles 66–70 of the UU TPKS and Government Regulation No. 30 of 2025. The limited literature on Indonesian survivors' experience that has been analyzed directly is not compensated for by generalizing findings from Europe or North America.

The analysis proceeded in four stages. First, the materials were grouped by the themes of abuse of power, forgiveness, discipline, legal process, and recovery. Second, the meaning and limits of each concept were examined so that spiritual decisions would not immediately be treated as legal decisions. Third, the theological implications were compared with the normative limits of the UU TPKS through grammatical and systematic interpretation. Fourth, the results of the synthesis were formulated into a three-track response model. The consistency of the argument was tested by considering victims' rights, the presumption of innocence, the independence of the examination, and the risk of recurrence. No interviews, surveys, field observations, or new case data were used in this study; the resulting recommendations have the status of normative proposals that require empirical testing.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1. Christian Forgiveness and the Theological Limits of Impunity

The first result of the synthesis shows the need to separate forgiveness, reconciliation, and release from consequences. Forgiveness relates to a moral or spiritual response to wrongdoing; reconciliation concerns the possibility of rebuilding a relationship; and legal accountability concerns the public authority to assess conduct under the law. The three may be related, but they have different subjects, conditions, and consequences. A victim may forgive while still reporting a criminal offense, claiming compensation, or declining to meet the perpetrator. Conversely, the absence of any forgiveness that the victim can express does not reduce the victim's right to receive help and protection.

This distinction is needed because the harm inflicted by a spiritual leader involves structures of meaning. Tobin (2019, page numbers not verified) analyzes

clerical violence as spiritual violence that can damage a victim's ability to live out faith. Prusak and Schab (2022, pp. 40–65) identify spiritual struggles in interviews with women who experienced violence by clergy or religious in Poland. Both studies support rejecting the notion that withdrawing from worship always signals a failure of faith. In pastoral care, such withdrawal needs to be understood as an experience that must be listened to, with attention to individual circumstances, not immediately treated as an object of doctrinal correction.

Spiritual harm is also related to identity and the capacity to make choices. Demasure (2022, article 509, no pagination) describes the experience of loss of self in spiritual abuse of adult women. Fernández (2022, article 427, no pagination) places institutional responsibility within the discussion of spiritual abuse and rejects placing blame on victims. On the basis of these two accounts, this article argues that recovery cannot be measured solely by the victim's return to the church. The measure needs to include the ability to set boundaries, obtain information, and make decisions about spiritual assistance. Churches must open the possibility of accompaniment by other persons or communities chosen by the victim.

The concept of moral injury helps explain why organizational action after disclosure carries its own ethical weight. Mescher (2023, pp. 75–91) develops a taxonomy of moral injury that includes betrayal, shame, loss of trust, and personal and communal dimensions. Within the framework of this article, an institution's failure to listen to victims can be understood as an additional violation of the relationship of trust. However, the term moral injury is not used as an automatic clinical diagnosis. Mental health assessment still requires competent professionals. The analytical value of the concept lies in its ability to redirect attention from individual fault toward the community's responsibility for the conditions that allow the injury to persist.

The reading of Matthew 18 needs to attend to the whole sequence of teaching on humility, protection of the little ones, communal correction, and forgiveness. Verses 15–17 on rebuke should not be turned into a universal duty for victims of violence to meet the accused privately before seeking help. In unequal relationships, direct confrontation can increase pressure and risk. Constructively, the procedure of rebuke must be read together with the responsibility to protect the vulnerable, and must not be made a barrier to medical services or competent authorities. This is an ethical interpretation proposed by the article, not a conclusion that the text itself regulates modern criminal procedure.

Theologically, forgiveness is not a synonym for the cancellation of justice. Volf (1996) places re-embrace in tension with the naming of wrongdoing, while Jones (1995) understands forgiveness as a communal practice that cannot be separated from truth and repentance. Both works are conceptual foundations, not empirical reports on Indonesian churches. A critical reading of Matthew 18 must distinguish ethical counsel to the community from safety procedures for people who have experienced violence; the

instruction to speak one-on-one cannot be imposed when power relations make such an encounter risky.

Likewise, the teaching on forgiveness in Matthew 18:21–35 does not give an organization a mandate to declare that someone has been forgiven on the victim's behalf. An organization may develop practices of confession and communal responsibility, but it may not take over the personal experience. Luke 19:1–10 shows the relationship between repentance and the repair of harm in the story of Zacchaeus. The analogy drawn is that repentance has social consequences that can be examined, without equating the context of extortion in that story with all dimensions of sexual violence. Willingness to undergo examination and to fulfill obligations of reparation may be part of accountability; a statement of remorse alone is not sufficient to determine the safety of others.

Institutional acceptance of this model cannot be assumed to be uniform. In a number of Reformed traditions, discipline emphasizes church order, the consistory, and the correction of membership; Lutheran traditions commonly situate confession and absolution within the ministry of the word, without making absolution a substitute for a state judgment. Pentecostal practice may emphasize repentance, spiritual restoration, and pastoral authority, and therefore needs additional safeguards against centralized decision-making. In Catholicism, confession and canonical discipline have a distinctive order of authority that is not identical to synodal oversight in Protestant churches. This is a comparative typology that requires verification against the rules of each denomination, not a uniform mapping of all congregations.

The literature on forgiveness reinforces the importance of pastoral caution. Rudolfsson and Portin (2018, article 421, no pagination) found that victims of sexual violence struggle with the meaning of forgiveness and need safe space and recognition. Their research addresses violence that occurred outside the church and is therefore not used as direct evidence of patterns of violence by church leaders. Its relevance is conceptual: worship and religious language can bring back traumatic experiences. Meanwhile, Williams and Zollner (2024, pp. 352–360) stress the need for humility on the part of the church in encountering survivors. Both sources direct accompaniment toward readiness to listen, not toward a quick target of producing a statement of peace.

Coerced forgiveness can arise through a request to sign a letter of reconciliation, a threat of losing ministry, or a statement that reporting shames the body of Christ. Normatively, such practices undermine the freedom required for meaningful forgiveness. Peisker (2026, page numbers not verified) cautions that the concept of forgiveness can be used to exert moral pressure on victims. This article draws the implication that who proposes forgiveness, within what power relationship, and with what consequences must be examined. Even activities called reconciliation need to be assessed by the freedom to decline, access to an advocate, and the absence of any demand to end the legal process.

Attention to inequality must also include gender, social conditions, and legal status. Reisinger (2022, article 198, no pagination) examines reproductive abuse in the context of clerical sexual abuse, including the pressure that follows a victim's pregnancy. Reynolds (2023, pp. 1–34) shows how uncertainty about immigration status can be used to silence victims in an immigrant community in the United States. Huh (2025, pp. 646–657) highlights the intersection of race, culture, and clerical abuse of adults. These studies do not prove the frequency of the same phenomena in Indonesia. However, together they give reason to examine layered forms of dependency before concluding that a victim's choice was entirely free.

The next distinction concerns the restoration of the person and fitness to hold office. A church may continue to recognize the dignity of a person who has committed violence and provide accompaniment in repentance, without returning that person to pastoral authority. Fortune (2021, pp. 317–327), through a critical reading of 1 Timothy, directs attention to expectations of leaders and the vulnerability of congregations. This article argues that office is a trust limited by requirements of safety and public confidence. Restoration of fellowship does not generate an automatic right to return to preaching, counseling, or access to children and people who depend on the ministry.

This proposal is not based on a conviction that people cannot change. It is based on the difference between the possibility of moral change and proof of fitness to resume a high-risk function. Amrom et al. (2019, pp. 686–706) show the limits of using personality measures to distinguish clergy who offend against children from other clergy. For this reason, institutional decisions cannot rest solely on psychological tests, personal impressions, popularity, or congregational support. As an ethical recommendation, a proven serious violation may serve as the basis for a permanent restriction on certain pastoral functions through clear, proportionate church rules that include procedures for examination and review.

From the theological analysis as a whole, impunity is understood as a condition in which responsibility for a violation is avoided or neutralized through institutional mechanisms. Forgiveness becomes a prop for impunity when it is used to erase facts, silence testimony, relieve the perpetrator of reparation for harm, or force the return of an unsafe relationship. Conversely, forgiveness can coexist with firm boundaries. This article does not prescribe a psychological sequence that victims must go through. What it prescribes are institutional limits: safety and services must not wait for the victim to forgive, while willingness to forgive does not give an institution authority to remove accountability determined by law.

3.2. Ecclesial Discipline and Legal Process in the Division of Authority

The second result of the synthesis is that the same event can give rise to accountability in more than one domain. Ecclesial discipline assesses compliance with the norms of ministry, the integrity of office, and the safety of the community. Criminal proceedings assess whether the elements of an offense are satisfied and determine accountability under the law. Recovery services focus on the needs of those affected.

The three cannot be reduced to a single process. A decision of a church council is not a court judgment; likewise, the discontinuation of a criminal case does not automatically prove that all ethical issues have been resolved. Each decision must be explained on the basis of the authority, the material examined, and the standards that actually apply in its domain.

This distinction is relevant when a sexual relationship is labelled an affair or a consensual relationship without examining the use of pastoral authority. De Weger and Death (2018, pp. 227–257) criticize explanations that concentrate on the vulnerability of the victim while overlooking the perpetrator’s abuse of power. Winters et al. (2022, pp. 923–947) found patterns of grooming behavior in archival data on alleged abuse of children by clergy. The use of trust, access, and isolation shows the importance of examining the process that precedes a sexual act. However, the concept of grooming in psychological research must not be directly equated with a separate offense without a legal basis; its function here is to help identify context and the need for examination.

Article 6(c) of the UU TPKS reads, in the author’s translation: “Any person who abuses a position, authority, trust, or influence arising from deception or from a relationship of circumstances, or who exploits a person’s vulnerability, inequality, or dependency, and who coerces or, through misleading, induces that person to commit or to allow the commission of sexual intercourse or obscene acts with him or her or with another person, shall be punished with imprisonment of up to 12 (twelve) years and/or a fine of up to Rp300,000,000.00 (three hundred million rupiah).” This formulation requires an examination of the subject (“any person”), the means, namely abuse of position, authority, or trust or the exploitation of the victim’s condition, the element of coercing or inducing through misleading, and the sexual act specified by the norm. The title of pastor alone is not an element that automatically proves an offense; what must be analyzed is the conduct, the context of dependency, the manner in which the will was influenced, and the causal link between the abuse of power and the act.

The use of the label “consensual” in a relationship between adults must not replace the examination of the elements of Article 6(c). Consent needs to be evaluated contextually: whether there was real freedom to refuse, a threat of losing ministry or support, spiritual misleading, and exploited dependency. Conversely, inequality of office alone does not automatically make a relationship a criminal offense without the satisfaction of the wording of the article. Article 15(1) of the UU TPKS also provides for an increase of one-third of the penalty in certain circumstances, among others conduct by a person who holds a mandate of protection, a manager toward a person entrusted to him or her, or a superior toward a person who works with him or her, as long as the elements of each point are proven; there is no automatic aggravation merely because of the title “religious leader.”

Religious reverence can narrow a victim’s ability to refuse or to leave a relationship. Spraitz and Bowen (2021, pp. 484–500) use the concepts of religious duress and reverential fear to explain experiences in files on clerical abuse. The

concepts help examine threats that do not always take the form of physical violence, such as the fear of being seen as opposing the will of God. In an ecclesial examination, the questions therefore need to be directed at how choices were shaped, not merely whether the victim ever said no. In legal proceedings, findings about religious pressure must still be connected to the elements of the offense and to valid evidence; theological explanation does not replace proof.

The most direct limit on internal resolution is found in Article 23 of the UU TPKS. That provision prohibits settling TPKS cases outside the judicial process, with an exception for child perpetrators as provided by law. Accordingly, confession, church sanctions, family meetings, or letters of reconciliation cannot be positioned as a substitute for resolving a case under the law. The exception for child perpetrators likewise does not mean that every case involving a child perpetrator can automatically be ended through an informal agreement. The special provisions of juvenile justice and the applicable requirements must still be met. A victim's willingness to accept an apology does not give a church council new authority to terminate a case (Republic of Indonesia, 2022, Article 23).

The provisions on complaint-based offenses must be read precisely. Article 7(1) of the UU TPKS stipulates that only non-physical sexual harassment under Article 5 and physical sexual harassment under Article 6(a) are complaint-based offenses. Article 7(2) excludes child victims and victims with disabilities from that provision. Accordingly, Article 6(c) cannot simply be treated as a complaint-based offense. The withdrawal of a complaint by an adult victim needs to be assessed by legal officers according to the type of offense and the applicable procedural law; a pastoral letter of reconciliation does not automatically withdraw a criminal report or end an investigation. Church administrators must explain the difference between internal disclosure, a complaint that is a condition for prosecuting a complaint-based offense, and a report to the authorities, without promising that a case will be discontinued.

Article 19 of the UU TPKS is also important because it regulates acts that intentionally prevent, obstruct, or frustrate investigation, prosecution, and examination at trial. Intimidating witnesses or destroying evidence can give rise to legal consequences if the stipulated elements are satisfied. However, administrative error or poor pastoral handling does not automatically satisfy that offense. A distinction must be made between ethical criticism of an institution's response and proof of the intent and conduct defined by the statute. This clarity prevents the article from using the threat of criminal liability excessively, while still affirming that protecting an organization's reputation cannot justify obstructing legal process.

The rights of victims are the axis of the relationship between the two systems. Articles 66–70 of the UU TPKS regulate the rights to handling, protection, and recovery. Churches can support access to legal aid, health care, psychological accompaniment, and social recovery without taking over the obligations of the state. Government Regulation No. 30 of 2025 provides context for a more integrated

regulation of services. An offer of spiritual counseling is not sufficient if medical needs or legal aid are ignored; spiritual assistance must still be available if the victim wishes (Republic of Indonesia, 2022, 2025).

Article 39(1) opens reporting to the UPTD PPA (Regional Technical Implementation Unit for the Protection of Women and Children), social units, community-based service institutions, and/or the police; paragraph (2) regulates the duty of medical or health personnel to provide information. Article 40 obliges the named service providers to provide accompaniment and integrated services. Article 41 regulates safety, confidentiality, psychological strengthening, and the forwarding of reports to the police no later than 3×24 hours after the victim reports through such service providers (Republic of Indonesia, 2022, Articles 39–41). For this reason, a complaint to a church council must not be made a mandatory gateway before access to state services. The deadlines and special obligations of service providers are not automatically attached to every church administrator; the legal standing of the institution and the capacity of the recipient of the report must be examined.

At the organizational level, the presumption of innocence must be distinguished from the duty to manage risk. Temporary restrictions on the accused person's access to individual counseling or children's ministry can be designed as proportionate protective measures, not as an announcement that a criminal offense has been proven. The basis, the period of review, and the opportunity for the accused to provide an explanation need to be regulated. Such measures have the status of governance recommendations, not automatic sanctions imposed by the UU TPKS on all churches. Waiting for a final judgment without assessing risk may place others in danger; taking action without reasons and procedures may also violate fairness of examination.

The basis for temporary restrictions in the church is not the authority to punish criminally, but organizational rules, the duty of administrators to safeguard members, and the mandate of office and the applicable church order. Before acting, administrators must document the risk assessment, the authority of the decision-making official, the form of the proportionate restriction (for example, temporarily suspending pastoral contact and access to children), the review deadline, the opportunity for the accused to respond, and the channel for objection. The decision must be explained as a preventive administrative measure and not as a verdict of guilt. Information is limited to personnel who need to know; the public dissemination of allegations before they are verified can create risks of violations of privacy and reputation and of legal disputes. Conversely, ignoring a report or transferring a church worker without safeguards can prolong institutional risk. Where the conduct is linked to organizational structure, the rules on corporate liability in the UU TPKS and the applicable criminal law should be examined by legal counsel, without assuming that every personal act automatically burdens the legal entity of the church.

Ecclesial handling must avoid transferring the accused as a resolution that merely shifts the risk. Więcek-Durańska (2022, pp. 137–152) discusses patterns of

action and responses by the surrounding environment in cases of clergy abuse of children in Poland. Tamarit and Balcells (2022, pp. 806–829) identify discourses of neutralizing responsibility in interviews with clergy in Spain. Both studies are used to show the kinds of problems that must be anticipated, not to conclude that Indonesian churches have the same patterns. Church policy needs to ensure that a change of ministry assignment does not erase records of examination, restrictions on function, or the duty to provide safety information through legitimate mechanisms.

Separating the domains also does not justify treating religious autonomy as immunity. Gleeson (2018, pp. 734–754) shows the tension between recognition of religious autonomy and accountability for sexual harm in the Australian legal context. Huh and Yancey (2025, pp. 646–657) discuss institutional power and legislative resistance in clerical abuse of adults in the United States. Their relevance for Indonesia is argumentative: respect for belief does not eliminate the examination of conduct prohibited by law. Church order may regulate office and discipline, but it cannot form a domain closed to the protection of citizens' rights.

An Indonesian Protestant example shows why the limits of authority need to be explained. Article 53 of the Church Order and Implementing Regulations of the GKPS regulates rebuke, suspension of duties, restoration of authority, and the possible removal from the office of pastor or evangelist through ecclesial authority (GKPS, 2021). The termination of church discipline (*siasat*) on account of repentance under that rule is an internal decision, not the discontinuation of a state case. For allegations of sexual violence, the model in this article proposes that the assessment of repentance be separated from the safety of the victim and from access to legal process. A personal rebuke is not to be interpreted as an obligation for the victim to meet the accused. This example shows the need to adjust disciplinary order to the rights of victims, without claiming that the document already provides a specific protocol for sexual violence or that all Protestant churches use the same procedures.

As a comparison with another denomination in Indonesia, the official website of the Jakarta Cathedral Parish describes the Protocol for the Protection of Children and Vulnerable Adults as a guideline for prevention, handling, and recovery, accompanied by a Complaint Reception Team and several complaint channels (Paroki Katedral Jakarta, n.d.). Its contribution to the model is as an example of separating the receipt of complaints from ordinary pastoral conversation. This information is not used to conclude that the services are successful, that examiners are independent in every case, or that Catholic practice in Indonesia is uniform. Both the GKPS and the Cathedral examples show institutional instruments that need to be examined according to their function and limits, not used as a substitute for proof or for the authority of law enforcement officials.

Pastoral confidentiality requires more careful regulation than a simple choice between disclosing all information and keeping every disclosure secret. Guerzoni (2018, pp. 258–280) shows the dilemma of confessional confidentiality in the experience of

Tasmanian Anglican clergy. That research does not establish rules of Indonesian law. The implication developed here is the need to distinguish confessional information, administrative complaints, and safety information, and then to seek appropriate legal advice on the limits of confidentiality. Church officers should not promise absolute confidentiality that cannot be fulfilled. Information is shared according to authority and need, with protection of identity and attention to the safety of the victim.

A written policy does not guarantee change without clarity about who examines and who supervises. Sidebotham (2021, pp. 190–199) identifies problems of definition and accountability through an analysis of the Church of England’s safeguarding policy. That finding supports the need to separate the examiner from relationships of dependency with the accused. Independence includes access to documents, freedom to report findings, and management of conflicts of interest. The party that receives a complaint should not at the same time serve as a personal advocate for the accused. Small churches can cooperate with inter-church bodies or external professionals, while ensuring that referral to the authorities does not depend on the permission of internal leadership.

The conclusion of this subsection is that ecclesial discipline has legitimacy when it addresses the authority it actually holds and respects the limits against the authority of the state. Discipline serves to protect ministry, to assess the integrity of office, and to demand organizational accountability. Legal process serves to assess alleged criminal offenses through competent mechanisms. A spiritual decision cannot remove legal obligations; a legal decision likewise does not exhaust all pastoral responsibility. The appropriate relationship is coordination with clear boundaries, including the provision of accurate information to the victim and the accused and written reasons for every institutional action.

3.3. A Victim-Centered Three-Track Response Model

The third result of the synthesis is a three-track model operating in coordination: victim protection and recovery, ecclesial examination and discipline, and referral to services and legal process. The term track does not indicate a sequence requiring one process to be completed before another begins. Medical help may be needed from the outset, an ecclesial examination may regulate access to ministry, and legal process follows the applicable authority and provisions. The model addresses the error of a church placing spiritual resolution as a mandatory gateway before a victim seeks help. No data in this study prove the effectiveness of the model; what is proposed is its normative coherence and the feasibility of its principles for further testing. The tracks, responsible persons, SOP targets, and audit indicators are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1. Coordination of the Three Response Tracks: Responsible Persons, SOP Targets, Actions, Referral, and Audit Indicators

Track and responsible persons	Target time (SOP)	Actions and records	Referral/decision	Audit indicators
Protection: trained complaint recipient, protection officer	0–24 hours	Record the minimum disclosure, safety needs, and the victim's choices; store separately	Immediate danger: emergency services/authorities; the victim is offered the option of UPTD PPA	Response time; evidence of access to accompaniment
Church order: conflict-free team, competent church board	Initial assessment within 72 hours; review every 30 days	Risk register; decision on administrative restrictions; right to respond; restricted access	The church board/synod decides on internal measures; does not replace criminal proceedings	Conflict-of-interest register; review of measures
Legal/services: referral officer + competent authorities/institutions	Immediately, according to needs and legal obligations	Documentation of referrals; consent to data sharing; simple chain of custody	The police and official services handle the case in accordance with the law; mandatory reporting conditions are assessed under specific rules	Referrals recorded; follow-up; no pressure to reconcile

Source: Author's normative design; time targets are proposed SOP targets, not mandatory deadlines under the Sexual Violence Crimes Law (UU TPKS)

The protection track begins with receiving a disclosure without judgment. Officers record the essential information, assess urgent needs, explain the service options, and avoid unnecessary repeated interviews. Supporting the victim does not mean drawing criminal conclusions without examination. The initial response can acknowledge that the disclosure is serious and that the person reporting has a right to assistance, while reserving the term accused for a person who has not been declared guilty. Outland et al. (2023, pp. 235–264) stress the problem of a culture of silence in how clerical violence is understood. Rejection of that culture needs to be embodied in easily accessible intake procedures, not merely in moral messages from the pulpit.

Complaint channels should be available in several ways that are not all controlled by the superior of the accused. Children, persons with disabilities, persons with limited literacy, and economically dependent victims need different forms of access. Oakley et al. (2018, pp. 144–154) show the need to clarify the concept of spiritual abuse and to develop protection policy and practice. Oakley et al. (2019, pp. 27–38) highlight the importance of inter-agency work and faith literacy in protecting children from abuse linked to faith or belief. This article develops the implication that complaint channels must explain what the church can handle, when referral is needed, and to whom victims can complain if internal officers are themselves part of the problem.

Protection must also recognize that the effects of violence are not uniform. Pinto-Cortez et al. (2025, article e70030, no pagination) identify emotional, cognitive, interpersonal, behavioral regulation, and spiritual consequences through qualitative

research with victims in Chile. That finding encourages assessment of individual needs, without assuming that all survivors experience the same symptoms. Pastoral accompaniment needs to be distinguished from psychotherapy and medical services. Church leaders who lack clinical competence should not take on the role of diagnosis or direct that treatment be stopped. Spiritual support can run alongside professional services, to the extent that the victim chooses it and it does not reinforce feelings of guilt.

The ecclesial examination track requires a written mandate, examiners free of conflicts of interest, notification of the process to the relevant parties, and documentation of the reasons for decisions. Administrators who have family relationships, financial relationships, or prior involvement need to disclose them and, where relevant, refrain from decision-making. Churches must determine what is assessed as an ethical violation, how information is tested, and how objections are examined. These arrangements are normative recommendations, not a description of practices already operating in a particular church. Discipline loses credibility when standards shift in line with a leader's popularity or the size of the contributions he or she makes.

Article 24 of the UU TPKS recognizes electronic information or documents and several other forms of evidence, including medical records and statements from clinical psychologists or psychiatrists. Article 25(1) requires that the testimony of a witness and/or the victim be accompanied by one other valid piece of evidence and by the judge's conviction; subsequent provisions regulate certain supporting evidence (Republic of Indonesia, 2022, Articles 24–25). The implication is that churches need to preserve the authenticity of messages and documents without themselves determining the sufficiency of criminal evidence. The absence of a second eyewitness does not automatically close access to legal process. Churches also must not demand complete evidence before providing help. The collection and submission of documents must protect privacy and follow legitimate authority.

In applying Articles 24–25 of the UU TPKS, church officers do not themselves assess the admissibility or probative strength of criminal evidence. They merely safeguard original documents, record the source and time of receipt, restrict access, avoid editing conversations or recordings, and hand over relevant material through legitimate procedures. Reading Article 19 on obstruction of process does not justify calling every difference of opinion an obstruction of investigation; the evaluation must rest on the relevant conduct and intent. The prohibition in Article 23 on settlement outside the judicial process is also not a reason to eliminate voluntary pastoral support, so long as that support is not used to frustrate the legal process.

The legal and service track is built through real cooperation, not a contact list that is never tested. Churches need to know the service institutions in their area, explain costs and access, and ensure that assistance does not come with a demand to withdraw the complaint. Lafferty et al. (2026, pp. 399–414) found barriers of communication and

understanding of roles in the relationship between faith-based organizations and statutory services. From that context, this article proposes joint training, clarity of contact points, and periodic review of referral procedures. Willingness to cooperate does not give a church organization authority to control the content of a victim's statement or to determine the outcome of an investigation.

The example of the network in Kupang Regency reported by Ndolu et al. (2026, pp. 984–994) clarifies the need to divide roles among government services, the church, shelters, and health facilities. The workshop's results, in the form of a mapping and referral agreements, provide material for designing contact points and workflows. However, that activity report does not provide a comparison of long-term recovery outcomes. For this reason, the three-track model uses it as an example of local coordination worth examining, not as empirical validation that every network is safe or effective.

Institutional responses need to take institutional betrayal into account. PettyJohn et al. (2023, page numbers not verified) show that witnessing the mistreatment of other survivors can reduce trust in the institution and the willingness to report. This means that the way one complaint is handled has an influence beyond the parties involved. Smidt et al. (2023, page numbers not verified), in the context of workplace sexual harassment, found a relationship between institutional courage and several better outcomes. Because the context differs, that result does not prove the success of a church intervention. Its conceptual transfer value lies in the importance of openness, supportive responses, and the institution's readiness to correct its own actions.

This form of courage includes acknowledging failures, providing a budget for recovery, and separating reputational interests from the examination. Beste (2021, pp. 29–54) places solidarity with survivors and prevention as moral demands on the church's response. Del Villar Tagle (2026, article 20250078, no pagination) reads the testimony of women survivors in Chile as a challenge to bureaucratic silence and as a call to ecclesial conversion. On the basis of both studies, an organizational apology should name the conduct in question and the remedial actions taken, to the extent that the facts have been established and privacy is protected. General language about human weakness is inadequate if it obscures who made the decisions, the harm, or the organization's responsibility.

In this model, survivor participation is voluntary and does not become free labour for repairing the institution that injured them. Harris (2024, page numbers not verified) discusses strategies for cultural change led by survivors and allies through the LOUDfence movement. The principle that can be developed is the provision of space for lived experience to influence policy, accompanied by options of anonymity, support, and the freedom to withdraw. Not all victims wish to testify before the congregation or sit on a reform team. Their confidentiality must be respected, while the responsibility to change governance remains with the institution. Consent to one activity must also not be taken as consent to disclose the whole history of their experience.

The term “victim-centered” in this article is a normative standard: safety, choice, access to information, confidentiality, and the right to recovery are made criteria for decision-making, not a claim that Indonesian survivors have approved this design. The involvement of survivors in later testing must be voluntary, based on consent that can be withdrawn, with reasonable compensation, protection of identity, a mechanism for stopping interviews, and a prohibition on requiring unnecessary repetition of traumatic narratives. Experience that is published ethically must not be used to reconstruct survivors’ identities or to assume that all survivors have the same needs.

Protection becomes sustainable when it is placed as part of everyday ministry. Kwiatkowski (2019, pp. 19–39) develops an understanding of safeguarding as a ministry that involves the whole church. Russell and Higgins (2026, page numbers not verified) synthesize concepts for preventing organizational sexual abuse and emphasize multidimensional conditions of safety. The implication is that training is not enough when conducted once, as a case arises. Churches need to review recruitment, counseling supervision, digital communication, overnight activities, and the boundaries of pastoral relationships. Oversight serves to limit opportunities for abuse and, at the same time, to protect church workers who act properly through rules that can be understood and applied consistently.

Evaluation also requires caution about complaint figures. A small number of reports does not automatically indicate a small amount of violence because it may reflect barriers to disclosure. Sadlon and Nowotny (2026, pp. 379–385) emphasize the limits of estimating prevalence through notification data in a study of the Catholic Church in Poland. Churches should therefore monitor access to complaint mechanisms, the speed of referral, victim safety, the implementation of restrictions, and compliance with decisions, not only the number of cases. An increase in reports after a channel opens needs to be interpreted together with other information. Evaluation data must be anonymized so that the need for accountability does not turn into the dissemination of victims’ identities.

As testable evaluation standards, churches can record: the proportion of reports that receive an initial safety response within 24 hours; the proportion of written risk assessments within 72 hours; the proportion of conflicts of interest identified and addressed; the proportion of cases that receive information on legal and recovery services; the timeliness of review of temporary restrictions every 30 days; and reports of revictimization and satisfaction with access to services, collected safely. These time limits are proposed SOP targets, not mandatory deadlines under the UU TPKS. For small congregations without independent examiners, the examination track can be transferred to an inter-congregational or synodal team or to external professionals; referral access can use the UPTD PPA or available government services according to the region, including remote consultation where it is safe and feasible.

The application of the model can be tested through an analytical illustration, not a factual case. If an adult congregant discloses that a pastoral counselor used spiritual

threats to obtain sexual acts, the recipient of the report first assists with safety needs and access to services. The administrators then assess a restriction on counseling access, secure documents, and appoint an examiner free of conflicts of interest. Legal referral is provided without waiting for a reconciliation meeting. If the accused expresses remorse, the accompaniment provided to him or her is kept separate from the victim's advocate. An apology does not become a basis for closing the examination. The determination of a criminal offense still follows the competent process and proof, while fitness for office is assessed through the applicable church order.

This illustration is not equivalent to testing against court decisions. The study has not included numbered, verified judgments that specifically apply Article 6(c), Article 19, Article 23, and Articles 24–25 of the UU TPKS in the context of spiritual authority. Therefore, the fit between the argument and the practice of proof, temporary restrictions, or prosecution outcomes cannot yet be concluded. Further research must search the Supreme Court Decision Directory and examine judges' reasoning without disclosing victims' identities.

Several objections need to be answered. First, the model may be judged too legalistic for a faith community. This objection is answered by distinguishing responsibilities: the law deals with public authority, while the church continues to provide spiritual accompaniment and moral correction. Second, there is concern that temporary restrictions stigmatize the accused. For this reason, restrictions must be risk-based, accompanied by reasons, reviewed, and communicated without prejudging the outcome. Third, small churches may lack resources. External cooperation and service networks can help, but limited funds do not justify closing a complaint or shifting risk to other congregations.

The limitation of the model lies in its normative character and in the large contribution of international literature, especially from the Catholic context. The addition of Indonesian literature, the GKPS disciplinary order, and the Cathedral's service information broadens the contextual foundation, but it does not yet represent episcopal, synodal, presbyterial, and congregational structures, nor the diversity of Pentecostal and independent churches. Written rules also do not prove implementation or effectiveness. For this reason, the Indonesian context in the article refers to the legal basis and selected examples of governance, not a claim about the practice of all churches. Further research needs to compare denominational documents, involve survivors ethically, and test the coordination of the three tracks through indicators of safety, freedom of decision-making, and access to recovery.

4. CONCLUSION

First, Christian forgiveness is distinguished from impunity through the freedom of the victim and the continuity of accountability. Forgiveness is not identical to reconciliation, restoration to office, or release from legal consequences. Victims remain entitled to protection and services without having to forgive; willingness to forgive

likewise does not give an institution the right to silence disclosure or to eliminate legal obligations.

Second, ecclesial discipline and legal process have different objects and authorities that need to be coordinated. The church assesses the integrity of ministry and fitness for office, while the competent institutions determine criminal responsibility. Article 23 of the UU TPKS restricts the replacement of judicial process with internal settlement, taking into account the statutory exception for child perpetrators. The GKPS and Cathedral examples show forms of internal regulation that must be read within those limits, not as authority to terminate a case.

Third, the proposed response model coordinates victim protection and recovery, a conflict-free ecclesial examination, and referral to services and legal process. The safeguarding of documents and referrals are read together with Articles 24–25 and 39–41 of the UU TPKS, without making the church an assessor of the sufficiency of criminal evidence or a gatekeeper of the victim's access. The contribution of the model is limited to a normative construction based on Indonesian law and selected denominational examples. Empirical testing across traditions is still needed before conclusions can be drawn about its effectiveness.

The practical implication is the separation of the functions of safeguarding, disciplinary examination, and legal process, with referral, recording, and evaluation mechanisms that can be audited. This framework has not been validated through interviews with Indonesian survivors or through testing against court decisions; application across denominations requires policy adjustment and empirical evaluation.

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