

The Crisis of Local Autonomy in a Congregational Church Model: A Theological Reflection from the KGPM Context

Alva M.S Sondakh¹, Wolter Weol², Anita I. Tuela³

Institut Agama Kristen Negeri Manado

		Abstract
Received:	07 July 2025	<p><i>This study aims to evaluate the implementation of congregational church governance within KGPM “Eben Haezer” Pinabetengan and to assess the extent to which the local congregation exercises autonomy in church life. The research is motivated by the observed tension between the theological principles of congregationalism—which emphasize local church sovereignty, the priesthood of all believers, and collective deliberation—and the practical realities that reflect tendencies toward centralized authority. The research questions address: (1) how congregational governance is applied within KGPM, (2) what factors support or hinder its implementation, and (3) how the model is manifested in the case of the Eben Haezer congregation. A qualitative descriptive approach was employed, utilizing in-depth interviews, participant observation, and document analysis for data collection. Thematic analysis was conducted using the Miles and Huberman model, and data validity was ensured through methodological and source triangulation. Findings reveal that although KGPM structurally adheres to a congregational model, in practice, it has shifted toward a more hierarchical system. Congregants are not actively involved in decision-making processes, leadership evaluation, or ministry structuring. This lack of participation has led to a governance crisis, creating a growing disconnect between leadership and the congregation. While some church leaders justify top-down intervention as necessary for maintaining unity, such practices undermine the core values of congregationalism. This indicates a functional erosion of local church autonomy. The study concludes that a theological and structural reorientation within KGPM is urgently needed to reaffirm its foundational congregational principles—emphasizing participatory governance, spiritual equality, and servant leadership. Such reorientation is essential to preserve the church’s identity as an autonomous, Spirit-led community shaped through collective discernment.</i></p>
Revised:	16 July 2025	
Accepted:	23 July 2025	
Keywords:		<i>Congregationalism, Local Church Autonomy, Ecclesial Governance, KGPM</i>
(*) Corresponding Author:		alvajimilkysondakh@gmail.com
How to Cite:		Sondakh, A., Weol, W., & Tuela, A. (2025). The Crisis of Local Autonomy in a Congregational Church Model. <i>International Journal of Education, Information Technology, and Others</i> , 8(3.B), 266-277. Retrieved from https://jurnal.peneliti.net/index.php/IJEIT/article/view/12676

INTRODUCTION

The Church, as a fellowship of believers in Christ, is a body gathered by God out of darkness into His marvelous light, namely Jesus Christ (1 Pet. 2:9–10; John 8:12). As a witness to God's love in the world (Acts 1:8), the Church is entrusted not only with the task of serving but also with the mission of bringing Christ’s peace to all creation. Within this fellowship, the Church is called to live

in unity as the body of Christ—interdependent, mutually edifying, and spiritually interconnected (Rom. 12; 1 Cor. 12). Avery Dulles (1990) highlights that the Church, as the body of Christ, must exist in reciprocal relationships; however, many believers still perceive their faith primarily in individualistic terms (Singgih, 1997).

In the early Church, formal governance structures had not yet emerged. Nevertheless, democratic practices were evident—especially in the appointment of ministers such as deacons (Acts 6:5), in which the entire congregation actively participated. This collective involvement emphasized the dominant role of local congregations in choosing leaders and shaping ministerial direction. Over time, however, ecclesial structures evolved toward hierarchical models. What began as a participatory leadership framework shifted into centralized authority, particularly from the second to fifth centuries, when Church Fathers developed the episcopal system (Kuhl, 1998). This shift continued until the Great Schism of 1054, which divided the Church into the Western and Eastern branches (Halley, 1979).

The Protestant Reformation of the 16th century reintroduced alternative models of Church governance that resisted rigid hierarchies—specifically the Presbyterian and Congregational systems. KGPM (Kerapatan Gereja Protestan Minahasa), established on October 29, 1933, adopted the Congregational model, emphasizing local church autonomy and the authority of congregational assemblies to direct ecclesial life and ministry.

Congregational polity underscores the primacy of the congregation’s voice as the highest authority in the Church. This aligns with the democratic ecclesial ethos and the priesthood of all believers (Sunarto, 2013; Berkhof, 1997; Thiessen, 1979). The local congregation holds the freedom to determine its doctrine, leadership, worship practices, and resource management (Situmorang, 2016). This theological framework affirms the grassroots strength of the Church and insists that all members, regardless of status, possess equal spiritual value and a right to active participation in Church life (Siregar & Hermanto, 2023).

However, the practical reality within KGPM “Eben Haezer” Pinabetengan reveals a significant deviation from these foundational principles. The autonomy once cherished is now in decline. Church decisions increasingly originate from higher-level structures without proper regard for the specific context of the local congregation. Participation in forums such as annual meetings has declined markedly, and many congregants feel increasingly distanced from the evaluation and accountability processes concerning their spiritual leaders. This phenomenon suggests a movement away from genuine congregationalism toward a more centralized and exclusive model of Church governance.

If left unaddressed, this condition may lead to both spiritual and structural deterioration within the local Church. The congregation risks losing its sense of ownership and identity, and the Church's character as a participatory community may be replaced by passive observance. What is now unfolding represents a crisis

of local ecclesial autonomy, affecting not only governance but also the congregation's theological and spiritual identity.

This study therefore seeks to offer a critical theological reflection on the current state of Church governance in KGPM. It raises the fundamental question: does the current system remain faithful to the original spirit of congregationalism, or has it drifted into a top-down structure that contradicts KGPM's founding ideals? The aim of this research is to evaluate the theological implications of such shifts and to offer constructive directions for reorientation. By drawing on the doctrines of congregational sovereignty and the priesthood of all believers, this study endeavors to reestablish the local congregation as the primary agent of ecclesial life—ensuring that KGPM remains both theologically faithful and contextually relevant.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study employs a qualitative descriptive approach aimed at exploring in depth the realities surrounding the crisis of local church autonomy within the congregational governance model of KGPM “Eben Haezer” Pinabetengan. This approach is considered appropriate, as it allows the researcher to interpret complex social, spiritual, and structural phenomena directly through the lived experiences of informants. As noted by Bungin (2011) and Emzir (2011), qualitative research is inherently naturalistic and interpretive, enabling a contextual understanding of human interactions and institutional dynamics.

The research was conducted at KGPM Eben Haezer Pinabetengan, located in Pinabetengan Utara Village, Tompasso Barat District, Minahasa Regency, during the period of March to July 2025. The main focus of the study was to examine the practical implementation of congregationalism, identify both enabling and inhibiting factors of local church autonomy, and evaluate the theological implications of the observed shift in ecclesiastical governance.

Informants were selected through purposive sampling, targeting individuals with substantial knowledge of the church governance system—such as the lead pastor, elders, deacons, theological scholars, and prominent congregational figures. To broaden the range of perspectives, snowball sampling was also applied (Sugiyono, 2010; Asrulla, 2023). Data collection techniques included in-depth interviews, participant observation, and document analysis, which encompassed church regulations, synod meeting minutes, and internal KGPM governance documents.

Data were analyzed using a thematic analysis method based on the Miles and Huberman model, which involves three stages: data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing (Ratnaningtyas et al., 2022). To ensure the validity of findings, triangulation of data sources and methods was applied. Additionally, interpretative credibility was reinforced through peer debriefing and consultation with ecclesiological experts. Ultimately, this research is expected to present an authentic portrait of the shifting dynamics in congregational church governance

within KGPM, and to offer theologically grounded reflections that are relevant to the contemporary ecclesial context.

RESEARCH RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The findings of this study at KGPM “Eben Haezer” Pinabetengan reveal that, although the church formally adheres to a congregational governance model, significant deviations from its foundational principles are evident in practice. In-depth interviews conducted with the senior pastor, council members, and long-standing congregants indicate that many strategic decisions—such as the assignment of special ministers, the direction of ministry programs, and budget distribution—are predominantly determined by higher governing bodies, including regional or even synodal leadership. These decisions often occur without direct input or participation from the local congregation. Such top-down dominance reflects a vertical power structure that subtly undermines the participatory ethos central to congregational polity. Congregants reported that key information regarding the church’s direction is often withheld, and that no open forums exist where collective dialogue, critique, or feedback can be expressed constructively.

This condition has led to decreased participation in formal forums such as annual meetings, ecclesiastical assemblies, and decision-making gatherings. Several members admitted to withdrawing from these forums, citing a lack of influence, as decisions are often pre-determined outside the scope of congregational discourse. Moreover, mechanisms for evaluating spiritual leadership are largely unknown to the majority of the congregation. This reflects a lack of transparency within the leadership structure and a weakness in ecclesial education regarding the congregation’s rightful role in governance and accountability. Such mechanisms are, in fact, integral to the congregational tradition, which views the local church not merely as a passive recipient of ministry, but as an active subject in shaping its theological and institutional direction.

On the other hand, some church leaders perceive hierarchical oversight as a preventive measure to safeguard doctrinal consistency, organizational stability, and denominational unity. They argue that without structural coordination, local congregations may lose their sense of direction or fall into parochialism. However, the reality on the ground reveals that such a centralized approach has fostered a crisis of trust, distancing congregants from leadership and diminishing their sense of ownership over the church’s mission and identity. In effect, this over-centralized leadership model has created a psychological and spiritual divide between the congregation and church authorities. Thus, what is officially labeled as a congregational model within KGPM “Eben Haezer” Pinabetengan has, in practice, shifted substantially—now exhibiting characteristics of a hybridized or semi-episcopal structure. The current state signals a critical erosion of local church autonomy, demanding urgent theological and structural reflection to realign church governance with the original principles of congregationalism.

Congregational Church Governance in KGPM: Theological Foundations and Contemporary Crisis

Theologically and historically, congregational church governance is a model that places the local congregation at the center of all ecclesial decision-making processes. Louis Berkhof (1997) explains that this model emphasizes the autonomy of the local church, which is not subject to external ecclesiastical authorities but is directly accountable to Christ as the head of the Church. Similarly, Henry C. Thiessen (1979) asserts that within this model, the highest authority resides in the congregational assembly—not in synods, regional councils, or denominational leadership. Decisions pertaining to doctrine, ministry structure, leadership selection, and church policy should therefore be entrusted to the local congregation, reinforcing the notion that the entire faith community—not merely a privileged few—participates actively and responsibly in the life of the Church.

This strong emphasis on local autonomy also reflects the theological conviction of spiritual equality among all believers. Jonar Situmorang (2016) emphasizes that every believer has equal access to the guidance of the Holy Spirit and the Word of God. This aligns with the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers, in which each member of the congregation has equal standing in Christ and the right to shape the direction of church ministry. According to Ersada Siregar and Yanto Paulus Hermanto (2023), the congregational model allows theological freedom and encourages local churches to develop their own liturgies, internal policies, and leadership structures without external interference. These principles form the theological foundation upon which congregational governance is ideally constructed and implemented within KGPM.

However, field research reveals a substantial deviation from these ideals in the case of KGPM “Eben Haezer” Pinabetengan. While the church continues to operate under the formal label of congregationalism, actual governance practices increasingly reflect centralized control. Strategic decisions—including ministry appointments, program planning, and administrative actions—are frequently influenced, or even dictated, by regional or denominational authorities. Local congregations are often excluded from meaningful participation in these processes. Consequently, governance becomes top-down rather than bottom-up, contravening the original participatory spirit of congregationalism and signaling a semi-hierarchical shift within what should be an autonomous ecclesial body.

This phenomenon is especially disconcerting given KGPM’s identity as a struggle church (*gereja perjuangan*), born out of the Minahasan nationalist movement. Since its founding in 1933, KGPM has proclaimed itself independent from colonial ecclesiastical control and has embraced a theological and political ethos of autonomy and self-determination. The choice of a congregational polity was not incidental but a conscious expression of this historical and spiritual vision. Yet today, under increasingly centralized governance structures, that founding vision is fading. The congregation is no longer the subject of ecclesial

life but has become the object of decisions made elsewhere—often disconnected from the local context.

This shift cannot be separated from the pressures of modern ecclesial life. Doctrinal complexity, administrative demands, and the perceived need for uniformity are often cited to justify top-down intervention. However, without theological caution, such interventions risk eroding the spiritual foundation of local church life. As Avery Dulles (1990) reminds us, a healthy Church is a reciprocal fellowship that builds the body of Christ collectively—not a hierarchy dominated by ecclesiastical elites. When the Church’s function shifts from communion to control, the result is not merely structural tension but a profound spiritual crisis within the body of Christ.

The practical implications of this deviation are observable in the internal life of KGPM Eben Haezer. Participation in formal assemblies—such as annual meetings—has declined. Awareness of ministerial structures has weakened, and the relationship between leadership and congregants has become increasingly rigid. Several members report feelings of alienation and hesitation to voice concerns, believing their voices go unheard. This stands in stark contrast to the early Church model in Acts 6, where the apostles involved the congregation directly in selecting deacons and overseeing social ministry. The democratic character of the early Church provides a vivid example of shared authority and mutual accountability.

Thus, KGPM “Eben Haezer” Pinabetengan is currently experiencing a crisis of local church autonomy. This is not merely an administrative or organizational problem, but one that strikes at the theological roots of the Church itself. If this crisis is not addressed through honest reflection and meaningful structural reform, the Church will continue to drift further from the congregational principles that once defined its identity. What is needed is a reorientation—not only at the organizational level, but also a renewal of spiritual consciousness regarding congregational sovereignty, mutual ministry, and the Church’s calling as a living body of Christ, built upon shared service and Spirit-led discernment.

Enabling and Inhibiting Factors of Local Congregational Autonomy in KGPM

Within the ecclesiastical governance structure of KGPM, there are normative elements that theoretically support the principle of local congregational autonomy as mandated by the congregational model. The existence of two parallel leadership bodies—Badan Pimpinan Sidang (BPS) and Pimpinan Majelis Sidang (PMS)—reflects an intentional division of roles between administrative management and pastoral ministry. Both operate on an equal footing and hold authority limited to their respective congregations. This framework aligns with the core principles of congregational polity, which uphold internal autonomy while recognizing role differentiation. Louis Berkhof (1997) emphasizes that congregationalism is founded upon the belief that each local church constitutes a complete and autonomous ecclesial body, bearing full responsibility for the organization of its spiritual life and ministry.

Further reinforcing this model are the institutional remnants of ecclesiastical democracy—such as annual congregational meetings, the voting rights of members, and the formal involvement of the congregation in selecting church officers. These mechanisms, though variably practiced, still reflect the theological and structural commitment to congregational governance. As noted by Henry C. Thiessen (1979), the sovereignty of the congregation is exercised through the direct participation of all members in both spiritual and administrative matters. These instruments were designed to safeguard equity, shared responsibility, and prevent the concentration of power in the hands of a few.

Nevertheless, in practical terms, several inhibiting factors have emerged that gradually erode the spirit of local autonomy. Chief among these is the intervention of higher ecclesial structures in matters traditionally reserved for the local congregation. Strategic decisions—such as pastoral appointments, ministry direction, and financial management—are frequently made at the regional or denominational level without substantive consultation with the congregation. This top-down decision-making creates tension between the normative autonomy of the congregation and the increasingly centralized administrative practice. Many respondents reported that leadership rotations were mandated from above, rather than determined by congregational consensus, thus undermining the congregation's sense of ownership over their spiritual leadership.

Another critical impediment is the lack of transparency and accountability in financial management. Interviews revealed that many congregants were unaware of how church funds were allocated and rarely received open financial reports. This situation contradicts the congregational principle that resource stewardship must be collectively accountable and spiritually transparent (Jonar Situmorang, 2016). The lack of disclosure fosters mistrust and exacerbates a vertical dynamic in church life, marginalizing the laity from meaningful engagement in governance and oversight.

Theologically, this reflects what Avery Dulles (1990) identifies as a crisis of structural spirituality, where the Church no longer functions as a reciprocal fellowship but rather as a bureaucratic institution governed by hierarchy. Within the biblical image of the Church as the Body of Christ (1 Corinthians 12; Romans 12), each member plays a vital and interdependent role. In contrast, the lived experience at KGPM “Eben Haezer” Pinabetengan reveals a diminishing of these principles. The congregation is increasingly relegated to the role of passive recipients of decisions, rather than being active participants in discerning and embodying the will of God as a unified community. This trend undermines the foundational doctrine of the priesthood of all believers and the spiritual equality of all members.

A further inhibiting factor lies in the limited readiness of some congregants to engage with the participatory structures available to them. Some informants indicated that members often feel unqualified or unauthorized to speak in church forums, especially in the presence of ordained leaders or higher authorities. This behavior reflects lingering cultural patterns of hierarchical

ecclesial organization, which are at odds with the inclusive ethos of congregationalism. Ersada Siregar and Yanto Paulus Hermanto (2023) argue that in a truly congregational church, every member has both the right and the responsibility to articulate their voice and influence the direction of church life. The lack of theological education concerning these participatory roles further discourages engagement and strengthens structural elitism.

The convergence of these enabling and inhibiting factors places KGPM “Eben Haezer” Pinabetengan in a theological and organizational dilemma. On the one hand, the church retains formal allegiance to congregational polity; on the other hand, the day-to-day practices increasingly reflect centralized authority and weakened participation. This dissonance has produced a crisis of local autonomy that reaches beyond administrative concerns, striking at the heart of the Church’s identity as a fellowship of spiritual equals called to mutual ministry. Without intentional theological reflection and structural reformation, this crisis may continue to erode the vitality and authenticity of the congregation’s witness in its local and global context.

The Implementation of Congregational Governance in KGPM Eben Haezer: A Theological and Structural Assessment

In practice, the implementation of congregational church governance at KGPM Eben Haezer Pinabetengan no longer fully reflects the foundational principles of congregationalism. Structurally, KGPM formally adheres to a congregational model, where the local congregation holds authority over ministry direction, leadership decisions, and church stewardship. However, field research reveals that this autonomy is not effectively realized. Many strategic and administrative decisions—such as leadership appointments, ministry programs, and budget allocations—are made by upper-level church structures, often without open deliberation with the local congregation. This has led to alienation, particularly among younger members and lay participants, who feel voiceless in ecclesial decision-making processes. Interviewees frequently expressed unawareness of when annual congregational forums were held, and many were excluded from leadership evaluations involving the pastor or elders.

According to the theory of congregational governance, local church autonomy is non-negotiable and should remain free from external control. Louis Berkhof (1997) affirms that each congregation is a complete ecclesial body capable of managing its doctrinal, liturgical, and administrative affairs. Henry C. Thiessen (1979) further asserts that the congregation—not synods or denominational leadership—holds the highest authority in this model. However, the situation at KGPM Eben Haezer deviates from these theological principles: decisions regarding leadership rotations, ministry planning, and finances are often dictated by regional or central authorities. This practice aligns more closely with Presbyterian or even semi-Episcopal models, which vest authority in hierarchical structures above the local congregation.

The neglect of participatory processes has eroded the congregation's sense of ownership. Many members reported feeling "left behind" by the ecclesial

system that was supposed to represent them. Interviewees noted that they had become passive recipients of ministry, rather than active co-creators of the church's direction. This violates the theological foundation of spiritual equality, a core tenet of congregationalism. As Jonar Situmorang (2016) emphasizes, in a congregational system, every believer is spiritually equal before God and should be empowered to participate actively in church life. Ersada Siregar and Yanto Paulus Hermanto (2023) add that such equality—expressed through shared priesthood and congregational freedom—should be guided collectively by the Holy Spirit and the Word of God in local contexts.

Historically, the early Church operated without rigid or hierarchical structures. Major decisions, such as the appointment of deacons (Acts 6:5), were made through full congregational participation based on spiritual criteria. Despite the strong role of the apostles, the early Church exhibited a profoundly democratic ethos. Dietrich Kuhl (1998) notes that although oversight roles emerged over time, they were rooted in the original participatory structure of the Christian community. As a struggle church (*gereja perjuangan*), KGPM should mirror this historical and theological foundation—especially since its founding in 1933 marked a break from colonial, centralized ecclesial models in favor of ecclesiastical independence and contextual expression.

Today, however, that autonomy is fading. There is a significant discrepancy between KGPM's formal structure and its actual practice, with bureaucracy and hierarchy increasingly dominating local decision-making. This shift has resulted in a spiritual malaise where congregants no longer perceive themselves as living and active members of the Body of Christ. According to 1 Corinthians 12, every member of the Church plays an essential, complementary role. When one member is silenced or sidelined, the entire body suffers imbalance. Thus, the problem is not merely structural but represents a deeper ecclesiological and spiritual crisis.

This situation demands an urgent reorientation of congregational governance in KGPM—not merely at the administrative level but also at the theological and ecclesiological core. Congregational participation must be reawakened, not as an organizational obligation, but as a spiritual vocation—a response to the call of Christ, the head of the Church. Active involvement by the laity must be framed as an essential part of discipleship and communal discernment. Reforming leadership models and rekindling dialogical relationships between leaders and members are crucial steps toward reclaiming the authentic spirit of biblical congregationalism.

In conclusion, the current implementation of congregational governance in KGPM Eben Haezer requires critical theological and structural evaluation. Without such realignment, KGPM risks losing its identity as a church committed to autonomy, equality, and participatory discipleship. Reorientation must begin with organizational restructuring, improved theological literacy among members, and a robust revitalization of ecclesial democracy as grounded in Scripture. Only through such renewal can KGPM recover its theological distinctiveness as a

contextual, Spirit-led, and Scripture-rooted struggle church faithful to its congregational heritage.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that the congregational model of church governance, which theologically positions the local congregation as the center of authority and decision-making, has undergone a significant deviation in practice within the KGPM context—particularly at the Eben Haezer congregation in Pinabetengan. Although the formal structure continues to affirm congregational principles, the practical reality reveals a top-down dominance in strategic decisions, ministry oversight, and organizational structuring. This has resulted in a crisis of local autonomy, where congregants no longer perceive themselves as empowered agents of ecclesial life, a fundamental hallmark of authentic congregationalism. The crisis is marked by declining participation in strategic forums, the absence of evaluative mechanisms for spiritual leadership, and a widening relational gap between leaders and members. While some church leaders perceive top-level intervention as necessary for institutional stability, such measures have instead weakened congregational agency and fostered spiritual alienation. These imbalances indicate a structural drift from the original vision of KGPM as a *struggle church*—one founded upon ecclesial democracy and local sovereignty.

From a theological perspective, such deviations represent a critical challenge to the Church's identity as the Body of Christ, which ought to embody equality, participation, and mutuality among all its members. Therefore, a comprehensive reorientation is urgently required—structurally, spiritually, and practically—to restore KGPM's fidelity to its congregational heritage. This reorientation must center on congregational deliberation, the guidance of the Holy Spirit, and contextual attentiveness to the voices and realities of local faith communities. Only by doing so can KGPM recover its vocation as a participatory, Spirit-led, and theologically grounded ecclesial body.

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