The Role of the Al-Ikhlas Mosque Da'i in Enhancing Religious and Social Awareness in the Peripheral Community

Ikhwan Soleh Harahap[*)], **Muniruddin Muniruddin**
Universitas Islam Negeri Sumatera Utara
ikhwan0103213032@gmail.com

Abstract
Islam presents a moral framework in which spirituality and social responsibility are closely interconnected, encouraging individuals to embody religious values in everyday social life. However, in many peripheral communities, the presence of religious activities does not always lead to sustained ethical transformation or stronger social cohesion. This study aims to examine how da'i (Islamic preachers) in Gunung Tua, North Padang Lawas Regency, construct and implement dakwah strategies to enhance religious awareness and social engagement within a complex peripheral urban context. This research employs a qualitative case study approach to explore dakwah as a socially embedded practice shaped by relational, cultural, and structural dynamics. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, participant observation, and documentation involving twelve informants, including da'i, mosque administrators, congregants, and community leaders. The data were analyzed using open, axial, and selective coding. The findings reveal that the role of da'i extends beyond ritual preaching to function as relational moral mediators within the community. Religious awareness develops through sustained interaction, informal counseling, and active community involvement. While dakwah bil-lisan remains the dominant method, its effectiveness is enhanced through dialogical communication, the use of local language, and relatable narratives. Additionally, dakwah bil-haal, reflected in exemplary behavior and social participation, strengthens the credibility of religious messages. The effectiveness of dakwah is influenced by supporting factors such as community trust and institutional support, as well as challenges including economic constraints and digital influences.

Keywords: Community Engagement, Dakwah, Peripheral Communities, Religious Awareness, Religious Leadership.

Introduction

Islam articulates a moral vision in which spirituality and social responsibility are intrinsically interconnected. Devotion to God is not conceived as an isolated ritual performance, but as an ethical orientation that shapes interpersonal conduct, communal solidarity, and collective well-being (Ahmad et al., 2023; Handayani & Retnani, 2022). In principle, religious teachings aim to cultivate individuals who are spiritually grounded and socially responsible. Yet, in many contemporary peripheral communities, the presence of religious activities does not necessarily correlate with sustained ethical transformation. Ritual observance may remain visible, while broader social challenges such as youth vulnerability, weakening communal cohesion, and shifting moral orientations persist (Al-Razi, 2025). This apparent disjunction between religious symbolism and social embodiment invites critical reflection on the actual function of dakwah within specific socio-cultural environments.

Conceptually, dakwah is more than the verbal transmission of Islamic teachings. It represents a communicative and transformative social process through which

religious meanings are articulated, negotiated, and internalized within community life (Arsad et al., 2025; Ruhullah & Ushama, 2025). From the perspective of social change theory, religious actors may function as agents of transformation whose influence extends beyond doctrinal instruction to shaping collective consciousness and social norms (Jacinto et al., 2023). In this regard, da'i occupy a pivotal role. Their authority is not derived solely from theological knowledge but is constructed through relational legitimacy, contextual sensitivity, and the ability to address lived realities (Abd Ghafar Don & Aini, 2025). The effectiveness of dakwah therefore depends not only on what is conveyed but also on how it is embodied and operationalized within the social fabric of the community.

Peripheral urban communities such as Gunung Tua in North Padang Lawas Regency represent socio-religious contexts marked by structural and cultural complexity. Educational limitations, economic precarity, limited institutional religious guidance, and expanding exposure to digital media interact to produce transitional moral landscapes. While religious identity remains an important marker of social belonging, everyday practices do not always reflect integrated ethical consciousness. Issues such as early-age marriage, declining mutual cooperation, youth exposure to misinformation, and fragmented community participation illustrate that religious awareness cannot be assumed to automatically generate social resilience. Research on religion and youth has shown that exposure to diverse media environments may significantly shape religious interpretation and behavioral orientation (Hardy et al., 2019; Yilmaz, 2025). In such contexts, the presence of da'i becomes increasingly strategic, not merely as religious speakers but as social actors capable of bridging spiritual instruction with community empowerment.

However, existing scholarship on dakwah in Indonesia has largely concentrated on theological discourse, charismatic leadership, or general preaching methods. Empirical studies that examine how dakwah operates within structurally vulnerable peripheral regions remain relatively limited. In particular, the interaction between local socio-cultural dynamics, communicative strategies, and the lived implementation of religious values has not been sufficiently explored. Digital transformations and social media have also introduced new dynamics in religious communication and authority (Akhter et al., 2025; Zhang, 2025). There is thus a notable gap in understanding how da'i function as contextual agents who negotiate between normative religious ideals and concrete social realities. Without such contextual analysis, discussions of dakwah risk remaining abstract and detached from the everyday experiences of peripheral communities.

Preliminary observations in Gunung Tua suggest that dakwah activities are predominantly concentrated in ritual-centered spaces such as Friday sermons and periodic religious gatherings. While these activities maintain religious continuity, broader social issues demand approaches that extend beyond sermon-based communication. The relevance of dakwah bil-ḥāl, which emphasizes preaching through action, participation, and exemplary conduct, becomes increasingly evident in addressing local challenges (Arsad et al., 2025). Yet, systematic analysis is required to determine how da'i conceptualize their roles, what methods they employ, and how structural conditions influence the transformative capacity of their engagement.

This study therefore approaches dakwah as a socially embedded practice situated within specific local dynamics. It seeks to examine how da'i in Gunung Tua construct

and interpret their role in fostering religious and social awareness, how they implement communicative strategies within a peripheral urban context, and how structural as well as cultural factors shape the possibilities and limitations of dakwah as a transformative instrument. By situating dakwah within the intersection of religious authority, community engagement, and social transformation, this research aims to illuminate how spiritual discourse is translated into lived ethical practice. Ultimately, the study contributes to broader academic conversations on contextual religious leadership and the capacity of dakwah to function as a catalyst for sustainable social development in peripheral Muslim societies (Jacinto et al., 2023; Ramlan et al., 2024).

Method

This study adopts a qualitative case study design to examine how da'i operate within a peripheral urban context and how their dakwah practices contribute to the enhancement of religious and social awareness in Gunung Tua, North Padang Lawas Regency. A qualitative approach was selected because the research seeks to explore lived experiences, interpretative meanings, and socially embedded processes rather than to measure variables statistically (Frechette et al., 2020; Kostere & Kostere, 2021). The case study design enables an in-depth and context-sensitive investigation of dakwah as a relational and context-bound social practice, allowing researchers to explore complex social phenomena within real-life settings (Cleland et al., 2021). The research was conducted in the peripheral area of Gunung Tua City, a setting characterized by socio-economic diversity, transitional cultural dynamics, and varying levels of religious participation. The site was selected purposively due to its relevance to the research focus, particularly the active involvement of local da'i in religious instruction and community-based social engagement. The area represents a peripheral urban environment in which structural limitations intersect with ongoing efforts to strengthen religious awareness and communal cohesion.

Participants were selected using purposive sampling with clearly defined inclusion criteria. Informants were required to have direct involvement in dakwah activities or sustained interaction with local da'i for at least one year. The study involved twelve primary informants, consisting of four active da'i, three mosque administrators, three regular congregants, and two community leaders. To deepen the analysis and capture varied perspectives, snowball sampling was subsequently employed to identify additional informants recommended by initial participants. Data collection continued until thematic saturation was achieved, indicated by recurring narratives and the absence of substantially new thematic insights, which is a common principle in qualitative inquiry to ensure conceptual completeness (Kostere & Kostere, 2021).

Data were collected through semi-structured in-depth interviews, moderate participant observation, and documentation analysis. Interviews were guided by a flexible protocol aligned with the research objectives and lasted between 60 and 90 minutes. All interviews were audio-recorded with informed consent and transcribed verbatim to preserve linguistic nuance and contextual meaning. Moderate participant observation was conducted over a sustained period during Friday sermons, majelis taklim sessions, routine dakwah gatherings, and selected social initiatives. The researcher adopted an observer-as-participant role, maintaining social presence without intervening in the natural course of activities. Detailed field notes were

compiled immediately after each session to capture communicative patterns, interaction dynamics, leadership styles, and community responses.

Data analysis followed the interactive model of Miles and Huberman and was operationalized through systematic open, axial, and selective coding, which allows qualitative data to be organized into conceptual patterns and thematic structures (Salmona & Kaczynski, 2024). Open coding identified meaning units related to the construction of da'i roles, communicative approaches, community engagement, and contextual constraints. Axial coding connected related codes into broader conceptual categories, while selective coding integrated these categories into core themes representing the implementation and negotiation of dakwah within the peripheral community. Analytical memos and a structured coding matrix were maintained to ensure traceability between raw data and thematic interpretation.

To enhance credibility, dependability, and confirmability, this study employed multiple forms of triangulation. Rather than relying on a single data source or method, findings were systematically cross-validated through source triangulation, method triangulation, and analytical triangulation, which are widely recommended procedures in qualitative research to strengthen analytical rigor (Frechette et al., 2020; Cleland et al., 2021). Source triangulation was conducted by comparing narratives from different participant groups, including da'i, mosque administrators, regular congregants, and community leaders. Method triangulation was implemented by cross-checking interview data with participant observation and documentary evidence, including activity reports, sermon notes, and community program documentation. Observational findings were used to verify whether reported strategies and behaviors were consistent with actual practices in community settings.

Several validation procedures were applied to strengthen the trustworthiness of the findings. Member checking was conducted by sharing preliminary thematic interpretations with selected informants to confirm the resonance and accuracy of analytical conclusions. Peer debriefing was also carried out through discussions with academic colleagues to review coding logic and thematic coherence. Furthermore, an audit trail documenting sampling decisions, coding revisions, analytical reflections, and validation procedures was maintained throughout the research process to ensure methodological transparency. The triangulation procedures and validation strategies implemented in this study are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1. Triangulation Framework and Validation Procedures

Type of Triangulation	Data Sources / Procedures	Purpose	Outcome for Validity
Source Triangulation	Da'i (4), Mosque Administrators (3), Congregants (3), Community Leaders (2)	Compare multiple perspectives on dakwah roles and impact	Ensured credibility through cross-perspective verification
Method Triangulation	Interviews, Participant Observation, Documentation Analysis	Cross-check consistency between narrative claims and observed practices	Reduced single-method bias
Observational Validation	Friday sermons, Majelis Taklim sessions,	Directly observe communicative style,	Confirmed alignment between

Type of Triangulation	Data Sources / Procedures	Purpose	Outcome for Validity
	community social programs	participation patterns, and behavioral outcomes	discourse and practice
Member Checking	Preliminary thematic findings shared with selected informants	Validate interpretative accuracy	Strengthened confirmability
Peer Debriefing	Analytical review with academic colleagues	Examine coding logic and thematic coherence	Increased analytical rigor
Audit Trail	Documentation of coding stages, field notes, coding revisions, and analytical memos	Maintain transparency of research process	Enhanced dependability

Ethical considerations were strictly observed. All participants provided informed consent and were assured confidentiality through the use of pseudonyms. Digital recordings and transcripts were securely stored and accessible only to the researcher. Reflexivity was continuously practiced throughout the research process. The researcher acknowledges an academic background in Islamic studies, which may shape interpretative orientation toward dakwah and religious authority. Reflective journaling was therefore maintained during fieldwork and data analysis to critically examine assumptions and ensure that interpretations remained grounded in empirical evidence rather than normative expectations. Through these layered methodological and validation procedures, the study aims to produce a context-sensitive, empirically grounded, and analytically rigorous account of how da'i in Gunung Tua conceptualize and implement dakwah as a strategy for enhancing religious and social awareness in a peripheral urban community.

Results and Discussion
The Role of Da'i in Enhancing Religious Awareness in the Peripheral Community of Gunung Tua

Findings indicate that the role of da'i in the peripheral community of Gunung Tua extends beyond ritual preaching and functions as a relational form of moral mediation. Religious awareness in this context is not constructed through doctrinal transmission alone, but through sustained interaction between da'i and community members within everyday social settings. Informants consistently described da'i not merely as sermon deliverers, but as accessible figures 1 who participate in family discussions, mediate local conflicts, and provide informal counseling.

Figure 1. Emergent Codes of Da'i

One community member explained:

"If there is a family problem, people don't always go to formal institutions. They usually ask the ustaz first. He listens before giving advice." (Male, 47)

This indicates that religious authority in Gunung Tua is relational rather than hierarchical. The enhancement of religious awareness occurs through proximity and trust, not solely through formal religious forums. Observational data during majelis taklim sessions also revealed that sermons were frequently followed by open dialogue sessions in which congregants raised practical questions about family, youth behavior, and economic challenges.

Rather than emphasizing theological abstraction, da'i framed Islamic teachings as applicable to daily concerns. One da'i stated:

"If religion is only spoken in the mosque and not connected to people's struggles, they will not feel its benefit." (Da'i, 38)

This suggests that religious awareness is cultivated through contextualization. The data show that da'i consciously adapt their approach by acknowledging local customs before introducing normative correction (Murshed et al., 2025; Putra et al., 2025; Waheeda et al., 2025). In several observed gatherings, references to local traditions were used as entry points before gradually reorienting practices toward Islamic ethical standards. This strategy minimized resistance and facilitated gradual internalization rather than confrontation.

Changes in religious behavior were reported, particularly increased participation in congregational prayer and routine religious gatherings. However, rather than claiming direct causality, the data suggest incremental shifts influenced by sustained engagement. A youth participant stated:

"Before, I only went to the mosque during Ramadan. Now I try to attend weekly gatherings because it feels relevant." (Male, 22)

Thus, religious awareness appears to develop through repeated relational exposure rather than singular preaching events. Nevertheless, the data also reveal limitations. Some community members acknowledged that structural constraints such

as work schedules and economic pressures limited consistent participation (Canizales, 2023; Mannan & Pek, 2024). This indicates that religious transformation operates within broader socio-economic conditions.

Dakwah Methods in Guiding the Peripheral Community

The findings demonstrate that da'i in Gunung Tua employ multiple methods dynamically rather than relying on a single preaching model. Dakwah bil-lisan remains the dominant approach, but its effectiveness lies in dialogical delivery rather than monologic instruction. Observations show that sermons frequently incorporated local language, humor, and relatable anecdotes.

One congregant noted:

"He speaks in our language, not in complicated terms. That makes it easier to accept." (Female, 41)

This linguistic adaptation functions as a communicative bridge, reducing symbolic distance between preacher and audience. The oral method becomes effective when integrated with two-way interaction, particularly in informal settings such as coffee stalls or neighborhood gatherings.

Equally significant is dakwah bil-haal. Field observations indicate that community perception of religious credibility is strongly linked to personal conduct. A mosque administrator stated:

"People observe how the ustaz lives. If his actions are consistent with his words, they respect him more." (Male, 52)

Exemplary behavior modesty, social involvement, and conflict mediation operates as embodied preaching (Belhaj, 2025; Claudine, 2025). Rather than abstract instruction, religious values become visible through social participation. This supports the interpretation that moral modeling reinforces discursive preaching.

Figure 2. Dakwah Strategy Visualization

Figure 2 the bil-qalam method and limited digital engagement were also observed, particularly through WhatsApp groups used to circulate prayer reminders and announcements. Although less dominant, this method demonstrates adaptation to technological shifts. However, digital usage remains supplementary rather than transformative. Furthermore, bil-hikmah and mau'izhah hasanah approaches were evident in the avoidance of confrontational rhetoric. Da'i consistently framed advice

empathetically, especially when addressing sensitive issues such as youth behavior. This communicative restraint appears to foster receptivity and reduce defensive resistance. Importantly, the integration of methods reflects contextual flexibility. Rather than doctrinal rigidity, dakwah in Gunung Tua operates as a layered strategy combining oral communication, moral exemplification, limited digital reinforcement, and culturally sensitive dialogue.

Supporting and Inhibiting Factors Affecting Dakwah Effectiveness

The effectiveness of dakwah in Gunung Tua is shaped by intersecting structural and relational factors. Supporting factors include the personal credibility of da'i, community trust, institutional support from mosques and majelis taklim, and collaborative relationships with local leaders. Informants repeatedly emphasized that trust is foundational.

"If people trust the ustaz, they listen. Without trust, even good advice is ignored." (Community Leader, 55)

Relational legitimacy thus emerges as a key enabling factor. Institutional backing, though modest, provides logistical stability for gatherings and programs.

However, inhibiting factors are equally evident. Low literacy levels limit engagement with written materials. Economic precarity reduces consistent attendance at religious programs (Ishchuk et al., 2024; Palumbo et al., 2025; Stewart, 2024). Youth exposure to external digital influences creates competing narratives that da'i struggle to counter fully.

One da'i reflected:

"Sometimes we explain something today, but tomorrow they see different messages online." (Da'i, 40)

Additionally, certain local traditions create subtle tension when religious reform is perceived as cultural disruption. Rather than open resistance, negotiation and gradual adjustment are more common.

Figure 3. Patterns of Dakwah Communication

Figure 3 these findings indicate that dakwah effectiveness is neither linear nor absolute. It is mediated by social trust, structural capacity, economic stability, and communicative adaptation. Religious awareness emerges incrementally within a web of contextual constraints rather than through unilateral influence. The findings demonstrate that the role of da'i in Gunung Tua functions through relational authority, contextual communication, and embodied moral presence. Religious awareness is

enhanced not through doctrinal imposition but through sustained interaction, cultural sensitivity, and gradual internalization. At the same time, structural limitations and socio-economic pressures moderate the scope of transformation. Rather than portraying dakwah as uniformly transformative, the data suggest a processual and context-bound model in which effectiveness depends on alignment between message, method, and local realities. This nuanced understanding contributes to broader discussions on religious leadership and community-based social change in peripheral Muslim settings.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that dakwah in the peripheral community of Gunung Tua operates as a socially embedded process shaped by relational, cultural, and structural dynamics. The findings reveal that the role of *da'i* extends beyond the conventional function of delivering religious sermons. Instead, *da'i* act as relational mediators who engage with community members through everyday interactions, informal counseling, and conflict mediation. Religious awareness in this context emerges gradually through sustained interpersonal engagement rather than through isolated preaching events. The study also indicates that effective dakwah communication relies on contextualized strategies. While dakwah bil-lisan remains the dominant method, its effectiveness is strengthened by dialogical interaction, the use of local language, humor, and relatable narratives that bridge the communicative gap between preacher and audience. At the same time, dakwah bil-haal, manifested through personal integrity, modest behavior, and active community involvement, reinforces the credibility of religious messages and enhances moral influence.

The integration of bil-qalam and limited digital communication illustrates adaptive responses to contemporary technological changes, although digital media currently functions primarily as a supplementary tool rather than a transformative platform. The study also identifies several supporting and inhibiting factors shaping dakwah effectiveness. Community trust, institutional support from mosques and *majelis taklim*, and collaboration with local leaders serve as enabling conditions. Conversely, structural constraints such as economic precarity, low literacy levels, and the proliferation of digital information create challenges that limit consistent engagement and introduce competing narratives. Consequently, the effectiveness of dakwah cannot be understood as a linear process. Instead, it unfolds incrementally within a network of social trust, cultural negotiation, and structural limitations.

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