

STRATEGIES FOR FOSTERING RELIGIOUS UNDERSTANDING AT MUALAF CENTER SIMALUNGUN

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to find out the strategy for fostering Islamic religious understanding for converts carried out by the Simalungun Conversion Center. This research uses a qualitative approach with field study methods through observation, interviews, and documentation. The results of the study show that coaching is carried out through a worship practice approach, the Tsaqifa method in learning the Qur'an, the use of digital media and personal communication, and the provision of socio-economic support. These strategies have proven to be effective in improving converts' understanding of Islam, the ability to read the Qur'an, the discipline of worship, and the sustainability of religious education. This study concludes that a comprehensive and contextual coaching approach plays a role in shaping the Islamic personality of converts as a whole, although there are still challenges such as low learning motivation, time constraints, and institutions that are not optimal.

Keywords: Strategy, Religious Understanding, Converts

INTRODUCTION

Religion is one of the things that is often discussed in society. This can be seen from its function, which is as a guideline for life that acts as the main guide for humans in living life. In the context of the development of religions in the world, research conducted by the Pew Research Center, as cited by Ida Rahmawati, shows that the fastest level of religion in the world is Islam. The development of this religion has increased significantly because many individuals who previously adhered to other religions, now choose to change their beliefs and embrace Islam as converts. (Desiningrum, 2018)

A convert must show obedience to all religious teachings. This obedience can be reflected in meek behavior and righteous habits. Becoming a convert does not mean severing ties with family and friends, rather, the individual plays the role of a representative in spreading Islamic treatises to those who have not received instructions. As a new convert, a convert needs social support from the people around him. The role of religious leaders or individuals who have a deeper understanding of Islamic teachings is very important as a source of support for converts to remain steadfast in embracing their new religion (Tarigan, 2021)

In general, individuals who have converted to Islam believe in the goodness, benefits, and truth contained in the teachings of Islam. However, there are still various shortcomings that converts have, so they need adequate attention and guidance. This is so that converts can acquire adequate knowledge of Islamic religion, as well as develop strong faith and devotion, so that they can live a happy life in accordance with Islamic principles. As stated in Q.S. Ali Imran verse 104;

لَتَكُنْ مِنْكُمْ أُمَّةٌ يَدْعُونَ إِلَى الْخَيْرِ وَيَأْمُرُونَ بِالْمَعْرُوفِ وَيَنْهَوْنَ عَنِ الْمُنْكَرِ ؕ وَأُولَٰئِكَ هُمُ الْمُفْلِحُونَ

Meaning: "And there should be among you a group of people who call for virtue, enjoin (do) what is righteous and prevent from what is unrighteous, and they are the fortunate ones." In conclusion, Islam has a life purpose for its adherents, namely to be safe and prosperous in this world and the hereafter.

Coaching is an activity that is carried out consciously, both individually and in groups, with the aim of learning and teaching Islamic teachings so that they can be practiced in daily life, in order to achieve the pleasure of Allah SWT. Therefore, the process of guidance and assistance is not only limited to conveying information about Islam, but also includes instilling the values of monotheism, prioritizing justice, and forming the character of a Muslim who is obedient in carrying out all the commandments of Allah SWT and staying away from all His prohibitions. The guidance and assistance of converts is also part of Islamic religious education because it contains the values of Islamic religious teachings that must be instilled in the lives of converts or people who have been born Islamic. (Indun, 2018) (Hidayat, 2023)

One of the efforts to guide and foster new converts, both before and after shahada, is through the Simalungun Conversion Center. The Simalungun Conversion Center is an institution dedicated to providing support to individuals who have decided to convert to Islam. Changing religion from the previous religion will certainly encounter many problems, both from internal and external factors. (Elsa, 2022)

With the problems that occurred, there were several relevant previous studies that had been conducted before the author chose the title of this research. These studies have similarities and can be used as a reference to analyze differences as well as findings that can strengthen this research. Therefore, the author will describe it as follows: the study shows that the coaching strategy is carried out by means of a family approach, warmth, intensity of meetings with converts, teaching worship practices and muamalah. The study revealed that the implementation of conversion coaching is through daily, weekly, monthly, six-month and yearly recitations. The study of the findings of this study is that conversion coaching consists of mental coaching, environmental coaching, religious coaching and economic coaching. (Rani, 2021)(Omik Bustami, 2022)(Fitriyani, 2019)

Previous research tends to only highlight one side of conversion coaching such as family aspects, frequency of studies, or religious dimensions alone, without thoroughly reviewing how coaching strategies are carried out by institutions in the local context. In addition, there has been no research that raises the case of coaching at the Simalungun Conversion Center which has a special approach in program management, Qur'an learning methods that are tailored for adult converts, and the use of technology in the coaching process. Thus, this study complements the shortcomings of previous studies by providing a broader and more in-depth picture of needs-based coaching strategies and the reality of converts in the field.

The novelty of this research lies in its focus on the coaching strategy carried out in an integrated manner by the Simalungun Conversion Center. This research not only describes coaching activities, but also examines how institutions systematically plan, implement, and evaluate coaching. The use of the Tsaqifa method as a special approach in teaching Qur'an reading for adult converts is one of the innovations in this study, because it has not been widely revealed in previous studies. In addition, the integration between a personal approach based on digital media and socio-economic support is a new contribution in the study of religious development. This approach allows converts to continue to receive spiritual and emotional guidance even when they are in limited time or distance.

METHODS

In this study, the author uses a qualitative research method using a field research approach. By relying on the collection of natural background data, the results of the phenomenon that occurred were interpreted through data collection and analysis which was then interpreted and not through statistical procedures. Qualitative research is research that will produce accurate data or facts obtained through written research, words from related people or from actions that can be researched and then directed to the background and the individual as a whole (holistic). (Setiawan, 2018) (Gunawan, 2013)

This research was conducted for a full month in February 2025, while the location of this research is at the Simalungun Conversion Center, the Mosque Prosperity Foundation located in the Ling Regional Government Land Complex. VI, Trade District III, Bandar District, Simalungun Regency. The data collection techniques are observation, interviews, and documentation. Observation was carried out by observing the strategy of fostering religious understanding at the Simalungun Conversion Center. The primary data source was obtained from the results of interviews with Mr. Darma Saputra, S.H as the Chairman of the Mosque Prosperity Foundation and Ustadz Desmon Abu Zimam as the Trustee of the Mosque Prosperity Foundation. Then the data was analyzed using the Miles and Huberman technique by reducing data, presenting data and drawing conclusions. Meanwhile, secondary data were obtained from several journals and books relevant to the study being studied. (Sugiyono, 2014)

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Profile of Mualaf Center Simalungun

Mualaf Center Simalungun is a forum for Islamic development that was established specifically to assist converts in understanding and practicing the teachings of Islam as a whole (kaffah). This institution is under the auspices of the Mosque Prosperity Foundation, and has been present and actively carrying out coaching activities since 2021. The background of the establishment of the Simalungun Conversion Center cannot be separated from a heart-touching event, namely when there was a dispute over the body of a deceased convert, where the body had to be fought for so that it could be buried in Islam. This incident became a turning point and material for mutual introspection, until finally giving birth to the spirit to establish an institution that really focuses on assisting converts not only spiritually, but also socially and emotionally.

Since its inception, the Simalungun Conversion Center has been present with sincere and sincere intentions solely because of Allah SWT. With full seriousness, this institution istiqamah conducts guidance and da'wah to converts. The coaching includes teaching reading the Qur'an, ablution procedures, prayer, and a comprehensive understanding of Islam. Every convert is guided to be able to live a life as a Muslim with strong faith, knowledge, and confidence. Over time, the Simalungun Conversion Center has become a safe and comfortable home for many converts in the Simalungun area, especially in the City of Commerce. Many individuals have embraced Islam through this forum, and they are actively nurtured so as not to feel alone in their spiritual journey. This institution also pays attention to the social aspects and welfare of converts, making it a real solution in the process of adaptation and formation of their Islamic identity.

The sustainability of activities at the Simalungun Mualaf Center certainly depends on the

support of all parties. Therefore, this institution invites all Muslim communities to jointly take a role by providing attention, moral support, and contributing through infak and donations. This support will be a way of istiqamah for converts and become a charity that continues to flow for everyone involved.

Planning Management in Fostering Religious Understanding

Based on the results of interviews with the manager of the Simalungun Conversion Center, information was obtained that the coaching strategy implemented by this institution could not be separated from a careful planning management process. Planning is a very important initial stage to ensure that the strategy implemented is able to answer the needs of converts efficiently and sustainably. The planning management carried out by the Simalungun Conversion Center is as follows:

1. Identify goals and objectives. In its coaching program, the Simalungun Converts Center strongly emphasizes the importance of the initial identification process of the condition of converts. The more accurate the identification of their religious background, education, and understanding, the more effective the guidance provided. The results of the identification show that the religious understanding of converts is still very basic, so the coaching material is arranged simply and according to needs. The coaches also adjusted the way of delivery so that it was easy to understand. Since most converts convert to Islam consciously, the approach used also takes into account their spiritual readiness. This proper identification prevents errors in methods and materials, and makes the coaching process run more smoothly.
2. Resource analysis. Planning management involves analyzing available resources, such as coaches, facilities, funds, and time. In designing a coaching strategy, it is important to consider whether the available resources are sufficient to achieve the goals that have been set or there needs to be adjustments or additional resources.
3. Determination of coaching methods and programs. The right method will make the process of conveying religious understanding more effective. Therefore, the coaching program is designed according to the needs of converts, such as through weekly face-to-face learning, intensive coaching for new converts, and the provision of da'wah materials in print and digital forms. In addition, coaches also need to choose methods that are really suitable, for example with personal guidance, small group discussions, or direct worship practice. Most importantly, coaching not only delivers material, but also provides support and builds closeness so that converts feel comfortable and helped in understanding Islamic teachings.
4. Evaluation and monitoring. Good planning always includes an evaluation and monitoring system to assess the extent to which the strategy implemented is successful. From the results of monitoring, it was found that even though resources and materials were available, the results were not optimal. This can happen because converts do not have a strong will to understand religion in depth. Therefore, there needs to be new approaches and methods that are more appropriate so that religious coaching becomes more effective and easy to understand. Converts are actually people who consciously choose Islam, but in the process of living the teachings of Islam as a whole (kaffah), they still need guidance, training, and assistance. This is where the role of coaches is important to first identify the needs of converts, for example through a

personal approach. After that, it is necessary to evaluate whether the coach is competent enough in dealing with various converts. If not, then there needs to be additional guidance for coaches, especially in terms of psychological understanding of converts who are still labile and do not fully understand Islam. The task of the coach is to help them understand Islam in its entirety and gradually.

5. Strategic Planning. Based on the results of the evaluation, the strategies applied can be adjusted to achieve more optimal results. Planning management must be flexible in responding to changing situations or evolving needs, so that the strategies implemented remain relevant and effective. If associated with Islamic teachings, this planning management reflects Islamic values that strongly uphold order, planning, and evaluation. As Allah says in Surah Al-Hashr verse 18:

يَا أَيُّهَا الَّذِينَ آمَنُوا اتَّقُوا اللَّهَ وَلْتَنْظُرْ نَفْسٌ مَّا قَدَّمَتْ لِغَدٍّ وَاتَّقُوا اللَّهَ إِنَّ اللَّهَ خَبِيرٌ بِمَا تَعْمَلُونَ

"O you who have believed, fear Allah and let everyone pay attention to what he has done for tomorrow. Fear Allah. Indeed, Allah is Thorough in what you do", this verse emphasizes the importance of planning and introspection in every action. Islam also teaches that every deed must be done with clear intentions and the right method so that the results bring goodness. Therefore, the approach carried out by the Mualaf Center Simalungun is in line with Islamic principles, namely careful planning, directed implementation, and continuous evaluation as part of the process of continuous self-improvement and society.

Strategies for Fostering Religious Understanding at the Simalungun Conversion Center

A strategy is a tool used to achieve a specific goal. Strategy can be understood as an adaptive action taken in response to an environmental situation that is considered significant, in which adjustments are made consciously and based on rational considerations. Strategy development is carried out clearly, so that it is clear what the company is and will implement to achieve the desired goals (Sofian, 2024).

The strategy of fostering religious understanding at the Simalungun Conversion Center is carried out through several main approaches that are adjusted to the conditions and needs of converts. This coaching aims to make converts not only convert to Islam but also understand all the teachings of Islam well and be able to practice them in their daily lives. The strategies implemented by the Simalungun Conversion Center in religious development are:

1. Learning the practice of worship. The practice of worship is a real act of worship that has been determined, not just knowledge or understanding of worship. The coaching carried out by the Mualaf Center Simalungun not only focuses on delivering material theoretically, but also emphasizes the importance of learning worship practices as a tangible form of practicing Islamic teachings. In an effort to strengthen the basic understanding of converts, coaching includes important materials such as the introduction of the Qur'an, understanding of monotheism, the pillars of faith, the pillars of Islam, and daily worship practices. The purpose of this coaching is so that converts not only understand the teachings of Islam theoretically, but also can practice them in their daily lives, so that they grow a sense of comfort, confidence, and stability in living

life as a Muslim. In accordance with the data obtained through interviews, conversion coaching activities also include direct practice of basic worship such as ablution, mandatory bathing, istinjak, and prayer. The learning process starts from the most basic things, including the introduction of hijaiyah letters through the book Iqra'. Converts are facilitated with worship equipment such as prayer guidebooks, prayer mats, sarongs, and iqra', especially for those who do not have them. The coaching is carried out intensively for at least three months, with special assistance in terms of basic fiqh before they are declared to have passed and received an Islamic certificate. Converts study presenters are also assigned alternately every week, with one core speaker who is specifically responsible for the subject matter such as fiqh prayer, ablution, and obligatory bathing. The coaching material not only covers the technical aspects of worship, but also basic values in Islam such as creed and adab, so that converts can undergo the transition process to Islam thoroughly and gradually. This approach is very important because many converts do not have an Islamic religious background, and through consistent worship practices and structured mentoring, they can more easily understand and love the teachings of Islam (Novidia Rahmawati, 2023).

2. Using the tsaqifa method in learning the Qur'an. One of the challenges faced by individuals who have just embraced Islam is the process of learning to read the Qur'an, especially for those who did not know Arabic letters before. To overcome this, Mualaf Center Simalungun uses the tsaqifa method, a method of learning the Qur'an designed specifically for people who do not know the letters at all or have difficulty reading the Qur'an. This method is different from Iqro which is more commonly used for children (Hamdani, 2017). With the tsaqifa method, converts can learn to read the Qur'an in a short time, even within two weeks they can read even though they are still stammering. As time goes by and practice continues, their reading ability continues to improve.
3. Personal approach and use of digital media. Mualaf Center realizes that every convert has different backgrounds, needs, and challenges in the process of understanding and practicing Islamic teachings. Therefore, a personal approach becomes very relevant. The administrators or companions of the Mualaf Center actively establish direct communication with the converts, one of which is through private messages on the WhatsApp application. Through this platform, they can ask for news, provide motivation, answer questions related to Islam, and even send religious materials that are in accordance with the circumstances and needs of each convert. This method is very helpful, especially for converts who are not ready or cannot attend in person in coaching activities due to distance, work, or other personal conditions. In addition to a personal approach, the use of digital technology is also an effective means of reaching converts more widely and flexibly. In this digital era, Mualaf Center uses social media such as Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube to share educational and inspiring Islamic content. Islamic studies, short lectures, and religious advice are regularly uploaded so that converts can access them anytime and from anywhere. Not only that, the Mualaf Center also conducts online studies using platforms such as Zoom or Google Meet. This is a solution for converts who have limited time, for example because they work out of town or have family responsibilities, but still want to learn and deepen their understanding of Islam (Hidayati, 2014).
4. Social and economic assistance. Social and economic assistance is an important part of the

coaching strategy carried out by the Simalungun Conversion Center. The guidance provided is not limited to religious aspects alone, but also includes attention to the social and economic conditions of converts. This is motivated by the fact that not a few converts have experienced severe challenges after converting to Islam. Some of them face rejection from their families, lose their jobs, or have difficulty adjusting to a new environment that has not fully supported their Islamic process. In situations like this, the presence of the Mualaf Center becomes very meaningful, not only as a spiritual development institution, but also as a place of refuge and empowerment (Noorkamilah, 2021). As a form of concern for the condition of converts, the Mualaf Center provides social assistance in the form of basic needs such as food, clothing, and household supplies needed by converts in living their daily lives. This assistance is given mainly to those who are in weak economic conditions or have recently undergone drastic changes in their lives after converting to Islam. In addition to material assistance, the Mualaf Center also provides financial support for converts in need, both in the form of direct assistance and access to economic empowerment programs. The goal is for converts not only to survive, but also to be economically independent and live a more decent life.

Not only that, the Mualaf Center also pays special attention to converts who have a high enthusiasm to deepen religious knowledge. For those who are interested and qualified, they are given the opportunity to continue their education at Islamic educational institutions such as pesantren. This facility is a bridge for converts to understand the teachings of Islam more deeply and comprehensively, as well as form a strong Islamic character and personality. Interestingly, some converts who have received educational assistance from the Mualaf Center have now completed their pesantren education and rejoined as part of the coaching team at the Mualaf Center. Those who were once built, are now also builders for new converts. Their presence is very valuable because they are able to be an example while providing assistance with empathy, because they have also been in the same position.

Impact and Success of Coaching Strategies

The coaching program carried out by the Simalungun Converts Center can be said to be successful, because it has provided positive impacts and benefits for converts. Some indicators of the success of this program are as follows:

1. Ability to read the Qur'an. One of the main indicators of the success of coaching is the increase in the ability of converts to read the Qur'an. Through the Tsaqifa method, which is specially designed for those who are not familiar with hijaiyah letters, converts can learn to read the Qur'an more quickly and easily. Although some still stuttered in reciting the scriptures, the progress they showed in a relatively short time was significant. This shows that the method used is effective and able to answer the initial challenges often faced by converts. The ability to read the Qur'an is an important foundation in the practice of worship and understanding of Islam, so that success in this aspect has a long-term impact on the spiritual development of converts.
2. Discipline in worship. Another indicator of success can be seen from the increase in the discipline of converts in carrying out daily worship. After following regular and structured coaching, converts not only know the rituals of worship such as ablution, prayer, and prayer, but also begin to make it a habit in daily life. Some of them have even been able to become examples for fellow

converts in terms of perseverance in worship. Consistency in carrying out worship shows a change in attitude and a deeper understanding of Islamic teachings. This also reflects the success of coaching in instilling strong spiritual values, so that worship is not only an obligation, but also a spiritual need that is lived with awareness and sincerity (Handoko, 2023).

3. Sustainability of Islamic education. The success of the coaching program is not only seen from the short-term aspect, but also in the continuity of religious education. Some converts who have a great interest in further Islamic teachings have been facilitated by the Mualaf Center to continue their education at Islamic boarding schools. There, they get a deeper learning about Islamic sciences, ranging from fiqh, creed, tafsir, to Arabic. Some of them have completed their pesantren education and are now playing an active role as coaches or companions for new converts. This shows that the coaching process carried out not only forms a basic understanding, but also succeeds in producing new coaching cadres born from the converts themselves. This success is proof that the Simalungun Conversion Center not only focuses on initial assistance, but also paves the way for converts to develop intellectually and spiritually in the long term.

Challenges in Fostering Religious Understanding

Although the coaching program carried out by the Simalungun Conversion Center has been designed with a mature strategy and produced positive developments, the implementation process still faces various challenges. This challenge comes both from the perspective of the coach (internal) and from the converts themselves (external). The challenges are as follows:

1. Challenges for Coaches. (a) Lack of organizational support. Coaches often work under an organizational structure that is not well organized. The absence of a clear division of tasks and a strong coordination system causes coaching to run unstructured. As a result, many activities overlap or are poorly monitored. This makes coaches have to work harder in managing time, compiling materials, and monitoring the progress of converts independently. (b) Resource limitations. Coaches also face limitations in terms of energy, time, and facilities. Not all coaches have a religious education background or sufficient psychological ability to understand the dynamics of the psyche of converts, especially those who are still emotionally vulnerable. The absence of special training in the field of converting development makes their task more challenging. (c) Diverse backgrounds of converts. Converts come from various cultural backgrounds, education, and motivations to change religions. Coaches are required to have a flexible, personal, and communicative approach so that the material can be well received. This requires patience and special strategies that cannot be generalized.
2. Challenges for converts; (a) Lack of motivation and commitment. Not all converts follow coaching with pure motivation because of spiritual encouragement. Some convert to Islam because of marriage, environment, or economic factors. This external motivation often has an impact on low enthusiasm for learning. They tend to be less active, break up easily in the middle of the road, or only present occasionally. (b) Time limitations. Many converts have to divide their time between work, family, and other responsibilities, making it difficult to be regularly present in face-to-face coaching. This makes the learning process intermittent and slow in forming a complete understanding of religion. (c) Limitations of basic understanding. Most of the converts do not have an adequate Islamic religious basis. When the material is delivered too high, they

will find it difficult to keep up. Therefore, coaching must start from the most basic things such as the procedure of purification, prayer, and reading Iqra'.

CONCLUSION

The Simalungun Convertible Center has succeeded in becoming a significant institution in assisting converts in understanding and practicing Islamic teachings as a whole. With a comprehensive approach, the institution not only focuses on the spiritual aspect, but also pays attention to the social and emotional needs of converts. Through careful planning management, the Mualaf Center is able to identify goals and objectives, analyze resources, determine the right coaching methods, and conduct evaluation and monitoring to ensure the effectiveness of the program.

The coaching strategies implemented include learning worship practices, the use of the tsaqifa method in learning the Qur'an, personal approaches, the use of digital media, and social and economic assistance. All these efforts are aimed at making converts not only embrace Islam, but also be able to understand and practice Islamic teachings in daily life. Indicators of the success of coaching can be seen from the increase in the ability to read the Qur'an, discipline in worship, and the sustainability of Islamic education for converts.

However, the Simalungun Conversion Center also faces various challenges, both in terms of coaches and converts themselves. These challenges include lack of organizational support, limited resources, diverse backgrounds of converts, and varying motivations and commitments among converts. Nonetheless, with a flexible and individual-oriented approach, Mualaf Center Simalungun continues to strive to provide effective and sustainable coaching.

Overall, the Simalungun Converts Center has shown a strong commitment to supporting converts, and the success of this coaching program is clear evidence that with sincere intentions and the right strategy, the process of adaptation and formation of Islamic identity can run well.

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