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A critical analysis of the sermon as an educational space in the Church

Yan Piter[1]
[1]Institut Agama Kristen Negeri (IAKN) Toraja, Indonesia
[1]yanpiter4231@gmail.com

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ABSTRACT

In the context of religious education, the effectiveness of sermons can be measured by how well the congregation can understand, remember, and apply the teachings delivered. Aspects such as the quality of delivery, the use of easy-to-understand language, the relevance of the topic to the congregation's life, and the frequency of attendance at services can be important factors that influence learning outcomes. This study explores the influence of Sermon Quality and Frequency of Congregation Attendance on Congregation Understanding and Knowledge in Tanah Toraja churches. Using the Structural Equation Modeling Partial Least Squares (SEM-PLS) method, this model testing was carried out to see the value of R Square, Q2, Model Fit, and the test of influence between variables, this study analyzed data obtained from a sample of 144 congregations selected purposively. The results showed that both sermon quality and frequency of attendance had a significant influence on increasing congregational understanding and knowledge, with sermon quality having a more dominant influence. These findings underscore the importance of high-quality sermon delivery and consistent congregational attendance to support a deeper understanding of religion. Based on these results, it is recommended that churches improve training for preachers and create an environment that encourages regular congregational attendance, in order to strengthen their religious knowledge and understanding.

INTRODUCTION

Sermons in the church have a central role in conveying religious and moral teachings to the congregation. The sermon, as part of the liturgy, is not only a means of verbal communication between the religious leader and the congregation, but it also serves as an educational medium. Through the sermon, biblical teachings and Christian values can be explained, interpreted, and applied in the context of daily life. The importance of the sermon raises questions about its effectiveness as an educational tool to influence congregational knowledge and understanding.

Despite the recognition of sermons as a crucial component of worship, research on their effectiveness as an educational medium remains limited, particularly when using quantitative approaches. Many previous studies have focused more on the theological and aesthetic aspects of preaching, neglecting the educational aspects it can offer. This has led to a knowledge gap regarding how sermons can support the learning process in an ecclesial context, as well as what factors can enhance or hinder their effectiveness as an educational tool.

The sermon's quality is an important factor that determines the effectiveness of delivering religious messages in the church. Clarity of delivery, use of easy-to-understand language, relevance of the content to the congregation's life, and the expertise of the preacher are key indicators that influence how the congregation receives and understands the message. Although sermons aim to convey religious teachings and guide congregants in their spiritual lives, not all sermons are able to achieve these goals well. Deficiencies in these aspects can reduce the effectiveness of the sermon as an educational tool, resulting in the congregation not gaining optimal understanding.

The frequency of attendance at church activities, such as weekly services and other events, as well as participation in post-sermon discussions, are also important factors that influence the congregation's level of understanding and knowledge. Congregants who attend services frequently and are active in church activities tend to have greater exposure to the teachings delivered through sermons. Consistent participation provides opportunities for congregants to delve into the material presented, discuss, and reflect on the teachings in their daily lives. However, variations in the frequency of attendance can lead to differences in the level of understanding and knowledge among congregants (Lefevor et al., 2021).

Congregants' understanding and knowledge of religious teachings, delivered through sermons, is an expected outcome of the interaction between sermon quality and frequency of congregational attendance. How well the congregation understands the sermon, how much they can learn about religion, and how they apply the teachings in their daily lives may indicate their understanding. As a result, this study focuses on the relationship between sermon quality, frequency of attendance, and congregants' understanding and knowledge, with the aim of identifying factors that may strengthen or weaken sermons' effectiveness as an educational medium in the church.

Sermons in churches have a crucial role not only as a means of delivering religious teachings but also as an educational medium that can influence congregational understanding and engagement. Study shows that the quality of sermons significantly influences the understanding of religious teachings, emphasizing the importance of clear and relevant delivery aspects for the effectiveness of religious education (Kittelmann Flensner, 2015). Demonstrated a direct correlation between congregational attendance frequency and their level of engagement in church activities, implying that regular attendance can enhance understanding and spiritual engagement (Hastings, 2016). Furthermore, examined the relationship between sermon quality and congregants' religious knowledge, finding that excellent delivery quality contributed to an increase in congregants' religious knowledge (Burnette, 2016).

Dougherty et al., (2015) added that congregational attendance has an effect on religious understanding, while Riaz et al., (2023) emphasized how sermon quality impacts the application of teachings in daily life. Lawton (2022) supports these findings by showing that consistent congregational attendance increases religious understanding, emphasizing the importance of active involvement in church activities. These findings underscore the importance of sermon quality and frequency of congregational attendance in influencing understanding and application of religious teachings, which forms the basis for this study in exploring the influence of these two variables on congregants' understanding and knowledge in the church context.

How well the congregation understands, remembers, and applies the delivered teachings can measure the effectiveness of a sermon in religious education (Creamer, 2014). Important factors that influence learning outcomes include the quality of delivery, the use of easy-to-understand language, the relevance of the topic to the congregation's life, and the frequency of attendance at services (Sumpter, 2019). Therefore, this study attempts to explore the relationship between these variables and the effectiveness of sermon education in the church.

RESEARCH METHODS

This study uses the SEM-PLS (Structural Equation Modeling—Partial Least Squares) method to analyze data and test the relationship between relevant variables. This approach allows more flexible modeling of complex relationships between latent and measured variables, especially when the data has a non-normal distribution or a limited sample size (Shi et al., 2021). SEM-PLS was used to evaluate the impact of sermon quality and frequency of congregational attendance on congregants' understanding and knowledge of religious teachings.

The study population consisted of church congregations in the Tanah Toraja region. The research sample was drawn using the purposive sampling technique, which involves selecting respondents based on certain criteria such as active attendance and mature age. To ensure valid and representative results, the sample was taken from the formula of Zehnalová & Kubátová (2019) N = (5-

10 x 18 indicators) N = 8 x 18 = 144 sample congregations were taken. This technique ensures that the sample reflects characteristics relevant to the research objectives.

Data collection was conducted through questionnaires specifically designed to measure sermon quality, frequency of congregational attendance, and congregants' understanding and knowledge of religious teachings. The respondents filled out the questionnaires, and SEM-PLS analyzed the collected data. This analysis includes an evaluation of the measurement model and structural model to test hypotheses and identify significant relationships between variables. The results of the SEM-PLS analysis are expected to provide in-depth insights into the effectiveness of preaching as an educational tool and the factors that influence congregants' religious understanding.

Research Framework

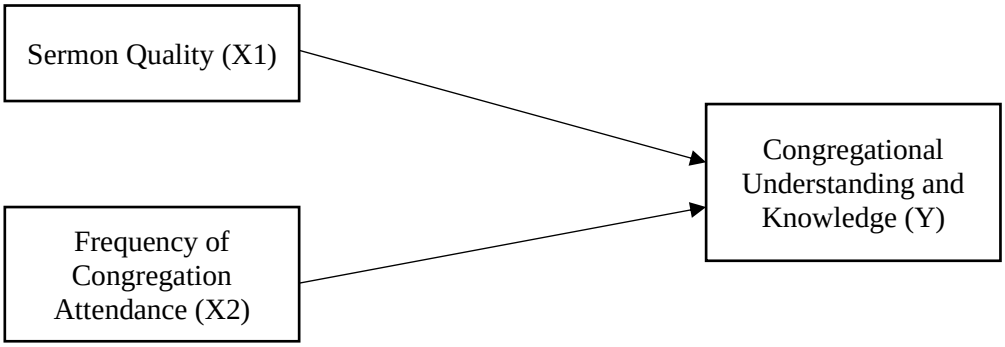

Figure 1. Research Framework

The following are three alternative hypotheses (Ha) and null hypotheses (Ho) based on the variables that have been explained:

1. Sermon Quality on Congregation Understanding and Knowledge
    a. Ha: Higher sermon quality significantly increases congregants' understanding and knowledge of religious teachings.
    b. Ho: Sermon quality does not have a significant influence on congregants' understanding and knowledge of religious teachings.
2. Frequency of Congregational Attendance on Congregational Understanding and Knowledge
    a. Ha: Higher frequency of congregational attendance significantly increases congregants' understanding and knowledge of religious teachings.
    b. Ho: Frequency of congregational attendance does not have a significant influence on congregants' understanding and knowledge of religious teachings.
3. Interaction between Sermon Quality and Frequency of Congregational Attendance on Congregational Understanding and Knowledge
    a. Ha: There is a significant interaction between sermon quality and frequency of congregational attendance in increasing congregants' understanding and knowledge of religious teachings.
    b. Ho: There is no significant interaction between sermon quality and frequency of congregational attendance in increasing congregants' understanding and knowledge of religious teachings.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Respondent profiles are extremely useful in providing context and an in-depth understanding of the sample characteristics involved in the study. By knowing the distribution of gender, age, employment status, education level, and frequency of church attendance, researchers can assess whether these demographic variables affect the results of the study and the generalizability of the findings. This information assists in interpreting the data more appropriately, as well as ensuring that the research results reflect the variations present in the target population. Respondent profiles also allow researchers

to identify patterns or trends that may be relevant in the analysis, as well as provide a solid basis for the formulation of recommendations and suggestions based on the specific characteristics of the respondent group under study.

Table 1. Respondent Profile

Characteristic	Respondent Amount	Percentage (%)
Gender		
- Male	60	41.67
- Female	84	58.33
Age		
- 18-25 years old	30	20.83
- 26-35 years old	45	31.25
- 36-45 years old	40	27.78
- 46 years old and above	29	20.14
Job Status		
- Work	90	62.50
- Student	30	20.83
- Unemployed	24	16.67
Education Level		
- Senior High School	50	34.72
- D3	30	20.83
- S1	40	27.78
- S2 and above	24	16.67
Frequency of Church Attendance		
- Weekly	80	55.56
- Monthly	50	34.72
- Rarely	14	9.72

Source: Data processed by researchers

This table presents a demographic description of the 144 respondents who participated in the study, including variables such as gender, age, employment status, education level, and frequency of church attendance. This data is important for understanding the sample characteristics and how these various factors might affect the study's results.

SEM Model Development

In the second step, the theoretical model built in the first step will be described in the SEM model diagram to facilitate the research of the cause-and-effect relationship to be tested. Arrows in this diagram specify the relationships between the constructs. Straight arrows indicate direct causal relationships between constructs.

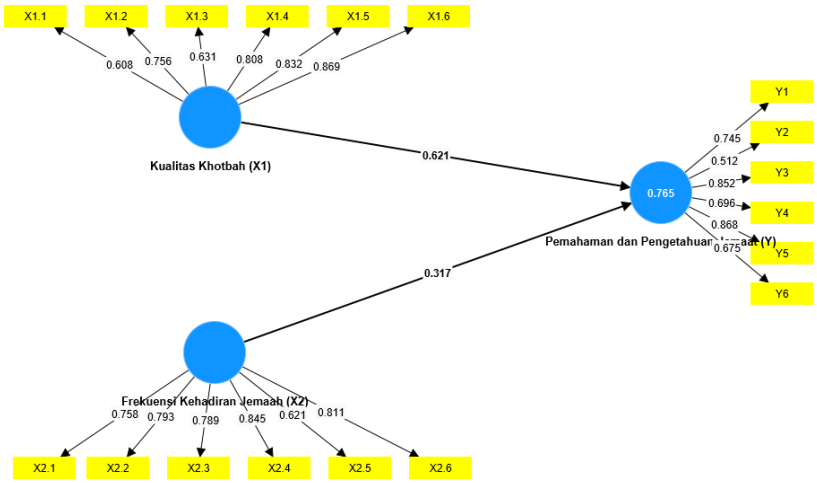

Figure 2. Causal Relationship Model between Variables

Outer Model

It serves as a technique for assessing the feasibility of measuring the latent link between variables and indicators. This assessment includes three types: convergent validity, reliability, and discriminant validity.

1. Convergent Validity Test

Specifically, the factor loading number, owned by the latent variable on its indicator, serves to determine the validity of a construct. Theoretically, an indicator loading factor value of less than 0.7 is considered valid. However, in model development, an agreement on the loading factor value between 0.5 and 0.6 is still tolerable (Asmelash & Kumar, 2019; Kim et al., 2016; Schreiber, 2021). In this study, we used a limit of 0.5, so indicators with a loading factor value above 0.5 are declared valid. The results of the validity test

Table 2. Convergent Validity Test Results

Item	Frequency of Congregation Attendance (X2)	Sermon Quality (X1)	Congregational Understanding and Knowledge (Y)
X1.1		0,608	
X1.2		0,756	
X1.3		0,631	
X1.4		0,808	
X1.5		0,832	
X1.6		0,869	
X2.1	0,758		
X2.2	0,793		
X2.3	0,789		
X2.4	0,845		
X2.5	0,621		
X2.6	0,811		
Y1			0,745
Y2			0,512
Y3			0,852
Y4			0,696
Y5			0,868
Y6			0,675

Source: Data processed with SmartPLS 4.0, 2024

In this study, construct validity was tested using the loading factor value to determine how well the indicator reflects the latent variable being measured. Based on the theory put forward by Yaminn and Kurniawan in Cheung et al., (Cheung et al., 2024), indicators with a loading factor value ≥ 0.7 are considered valid. However, the loading factor value between 0.5 - 0.6 is still tolerable in model development, so in this study a limit of 0.5 is used as a validity criterion.

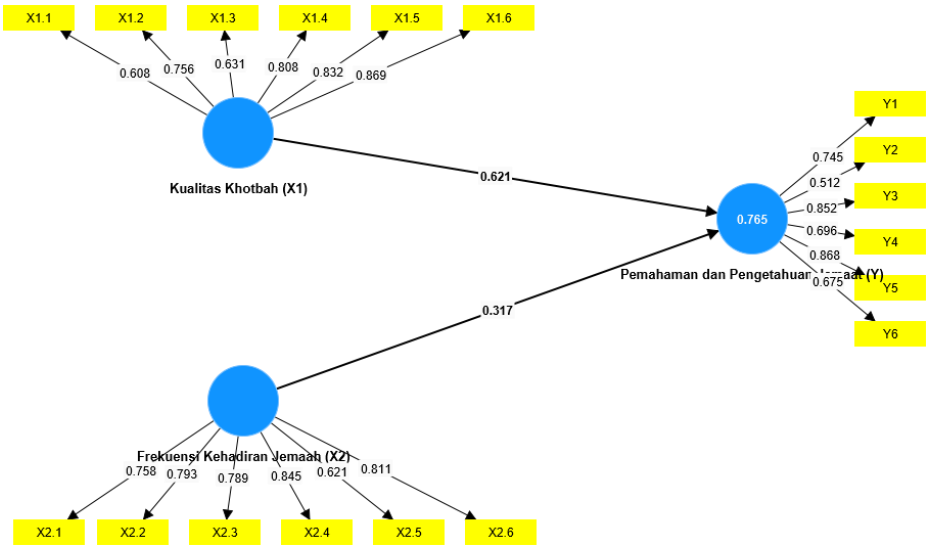

Figure 3. Test Result

The validity test results show that for the latent variable Sermon Quality (X1), indicators X1.1 to X1.6 have factor loading values of 0.608, 0.756, 0.631, 0.808, 0.832, and 0.869, respectively. All of these indicators meet the validity criteria, with factor loading values above 0.5, indicating that they are valid for measuring sermon quality.

For the latent variable Frequency of Congregational Attendance (X2), indicators X2.1 to X2.6 have factor loading values of 0.758, 0.793, 0.789, 0.845, 0.621, and 0.811. All of these indicators are also valid with factor loading values above 0.5. For the latent variable Congregational Understanding and Knowledge (Y), indicators Y1 to Y6 have factor loading values of 0.745, 0.512, 0.852, 0.696, 0.868, and 0.675. Despite having the lowest factor loading value (0.512), we still accept indicator Y2 as valid because it exceeds the minimum limit of 0.5. These results indicate that all indicators used in this study are valid to measure each latent variable.

2. Construct validity and reliability test

This test is used to measure stable, constant, and reliable measurement results. The answer to a question indicates consistency or stability across multiple tests using the internal consistency method, the composite reliability feature, and the Cronbach's alpha coefficient.

Cho dan Kim (2015) state that Cronbach's alpha and composite are the values used to obtain reliability. Reliability must exceed 0.70 for confirmatory research, and a value of 0.60–0.70 is still acceptable for exploratory research. The results of this test are as follows:

The manifest variable's variance in the latent construct is indicated by the value displayed; a value of 0.5 signifies strong convergent validity and can be regarded as an average that exceeds the indicator variance. The standard value of variable AVE is 0.50 or above (Purwanto & Sudargini, 2021). The research data processing results indicate that all variables possess exceptional validity properties.

Table 3. Construct validity and reliability test

	Cronbach's alpha	Composite Reliability (rho_a)	Composite Reliability (rho_c)	Average Variance Extracted (AVE)
Frequency of Congregation Attendance (X2)	0,862	0,866	0,898	0,597
Sermon Quality (X1)	0,847	0,866	0,888	0,573
Congregational Understanding and Knowledge (Y)	0,824	0,851	0,872	0,539

Source: Data processed with SmartPLS 4.0, 2024

Construct validity and reliability testing is carried out to ensure that the measuring instruments used in this study are stable, consistent, and reliable. In this context, validity is measured by looking at average variance extracted (AVE), whereas reliability is measured by Cronbach's alpha and composite reliability. According to Ghozali and Latan (Hair Jr et al., 2020), Cronbach's alpha and composite reliability values above 0.70 are considered to show good reliability for confirmatory research. Meanwhile, for exploratory research, values between 0.60 and 0.70 are still considered acceptable.

According to the data processing results, the variable frequency of church attendance (X2) has a Cronbach's alpha value of 0.862, a composite reliability value (rho_a) of 0.866, and a composite reliability value (rho_c) of 0.898. The construct can explain more than 50% of the indicator variance, meeting the minimum standard of 0.5 for good convergent validity, as indicated by the AVE value of 0.597 for this variable.

The Sermon Quality variable (X1) shows a Cronbach's alpha value of 0.847, a composite reliability value (rho_a) of 0.866, and a composite reliability value (rho_c) of 0.888. Additionally, the AVE value of 0.573 demonstrates good convergent validity, suggesting that the used indicators adequately represent the construct under measurement. As for the Congregation Understanding and Knowledge variable (Y), the Cronbach's alpha value is 0.824, with a composite reliability value (rho_a) of 0.851 and a composite reliability value (rho_c) of 0.872. The AVE value of 0.539 indicates that this variable has sufficient construct validity.

All variables tested in this study show an adequate level of validity and reliability. The Cronbach's alpha and composite reliability values that exceed 0.70 for all variables indicate that the instruments used are reliable, while the AVE value that exceeds 0.50 indicates that the indicators validly measure the intended construct.

3. Inner Model Test

This model testing is carried out to see the value of R square, Q2, model fit, and test the influence between variables.

a. R Square Analysis

This approach seeks to quantify the proportion of inherent construct variability that can be accounted for by external construct variability. This analysis also seeks to ascertain the goodness of the structural equation model. A higher R-square value indicates a stronger ability of the exogenous variable to explain the endogenous variable, therefore indicating a better structural equation. The R square value is provided in the output.

Table 4. R square value result

	R-square	Adjusted R-square
Understanding and Knowledge (Y)	0,765	0,761

Source: Data processed with SmartPLS 4.0, 2024

Based on the analysis results, the table shows the R-squared and R-squared adjusted values for endogenous variables in the structural model. For the job satisfaction variable (Z), the R square value is 0.535, and the adjusted R square is 0.526. This indicates that the exogenous variables in the model can explain 53.5% of the variability in job satisfaction. The higher this value indicates that the model has a fairly adequate ability to explain variability in job satisfaction.

Meanwhile, for the career development variable (Y), the R square value is 0.216, and the adjusted R square is 0.207. The exogenous variables in the model can only explain 21.6% of the variability in career development. This value is relatively lower than the job satisfaction variable, indicating that the model is less able to explain the variability of career development as a whole. Overall, the R square value gives an idea of how well the proposed structural model can explain the variability in the endogenous variables studied.

b. Effect size

This formula is used to explore whether endogenous latent variables are strongly influenced or not by exogenous latent variables (Aguirre-Urreta & Marakas, 2014). Can be processed as follows:

$$f^2F^2 = \frac{R^2include - R^2exclude}{1 - R^2include} \quad (1)$$

If the f² number produces a value of 0.02, then the effect is small, the value of 0.15 is medium, and the value of 0.35 indicates the influence of large exogenous latent variables (Adusei & Gyapong, 2017). The output results are as follows:

Table 5. f-square

	Frequency of Congregation Attendance (X2)	Sermon Quality (X1)	Congregation Understanding and Knowledge (Y)
Frequency of Congregation Attendance (X2)			0,213
Sermon Quality (X1)			0,820
Congregational Understanding and Knowledge (Y)			

Source: Data processed with SmartPLS 4.0, 2024

The results of the f-square table analysis show the effect size of each exogenous latent variable on the endogenous latent variable, Congregation Understanding and Knowledge (Y). The frequency of congregational attendance (X2) has an f-square value of 0.213, which shows a medium effect on congregational understanding and knowledge. Based on the criteria provided by Ghozali and Latan (2015), this value is between 0.15 and 0.35, thus indicating a significant but not dominant influence.

On the other hand, sermon quality (X1) has an f-square value of 0.820, which indicates a very large influence on congregational understanding and knowledge. This value is well above the 0.35 threshold, indicating that sermon quality plays an important and dominant role in influencing congregational understanding and knowledge. The analysis concentrated on the impact of exogenous variables on endogenous variables, leaving no f-square value for the reverse effect (the influence of endogenous latent variables on exogenous variables). These results confirm that both exogenous variables contribute significantly to the endogenous variable, with sermon quality having a much stronger influence.

c. Fit Model Test

The SRMR value is used to assess the estimation outcomes of the SmartPLS output. The Standardized Root Mean Square Residual (SRMR) is the mean residual covariance, calculated by transforming the sample covariance matrix and the projected covariance matrix into a relationship matrix. If the obtained number is less than 0.10, it is deemed suitable (Antweiler, 2015). The output results are as stated below:

Table 6. Model Fit Test Results

	Saturated Model	Model Estimation
SRMR	0,099	0,099
d_ULS	1,674	1,674
d_G	2,498	2,498
Chi-square	915,474	915,474
NFI	0,559	0,559

Source: Data processed with SmartPLS 4.0, 2024

The results of the model fit test using SmartPLS show several indicators of model fit. The standardized root mean square residual (SRMR) for the saturated model and the estimated model are both 0.099, which is below the threshold of 0.10. This indicates that the proposed model has a satisfactory level of fit, as the covariance residuals between the sample covariance matrix and the predicted covariance matrix are within acceptable limits (Schuberth et al., 2018).

The d_ULS and d_G indicators had values of 1.674 and 2.498, respectively, indicating the difference between the observed and estimated models. Meanwhile, the Chi-square value was recorded at 915.474, providing information about the overall fit of the model. The Normed Fit Index (NFI) showed a value of 0.559, which gives an idea of how well the model fits the data compared to the null model. Overall, SRMR values below 0.10 suggest a good fit of the model to the data, while some other indicators suggest further improvement for an even better fit.

d. Hypothesis Testing (Effect between variables)

The purpose is to identify a strong relationship between the independent factors and the dependent variable by analyzing the path coefficients. These coefficients indicate the parameter coefficients and the statistical significance of the T statistics. The parameters' significance is calculated to provide insight into the correlation between the variables being studied. The conventional criterion for rejecting or accepting the suggested hypothesis is to choose a significance level of 0.05. The following table displays the results of the estimation for testing the structural model.

Table 7. Path Coefficient

	Original sample (O)	Sample mean (M)	Standard deviation (STDEV)	T statistik (|O/STDEV|)	P values
Frequency of Congregation Attendance (X2) -> Congregation Understanding and Knowledge (Y)	0,317	0,313	0,088	3,581	0,000
Sermon Quality (X1) -> Congregation Understanding and Knowledge (Y)	0,621	0,627	0,082	7,605	0,000

Source: Data processed with SmartPLS 4.0, 2024

The results of hypothesis testing using path coefficient analysis show a significant influence between the independent variables and the dependent variable. The frequency of congregational attendance (X2) has a path coefficient of 0.317, a statistical T value of 3.581, and a P value of 0.000. The P value of less than 0.05 indicates that the frequency of congregational attendance has a statistically significant effect on congregational understanding and knowledge (Y). This means that there is a positive and significant correlation between the congregation's attendance at church and the increase in their understanding and knowledge. Meanwhile, Sermon Quality (X1) has a path coefficient of 0.621, a statistical T value of 7.605, and a P value of 0.000, which is also very significant. The larger coefficient value indicates that sermon quality has a stronger influence on congregational understanding and knowledge than frequency of attendance. Since both P-values of variables X1 and X2 are well below the 0.05 threshold, the hypothesis stating that there is a significant influence of sermon quality and frequency of congregational attendance on congregational understanding and knowledge is accepted. This finding confirms that both sermon quality and frequency of congregational attendance have a significant impact on congregants' understanding and knowledge of religious teachings.

Discussion

This study aims to investigate how sermon quality (X1) and congregational attendance frequency (X2) affect congregational understanding and knowledge (Y) in churches. The Tanah Toraja region's churches use attendance frequency (X2) to measure the congregation's understanding and knowledge (Y). The results demonstrated that both independent variables significantly and positively influence the dependent variable, with sermon quality (X1) and the dependent variable exerting a stronger influence than congregational attendance frequency.

Sermon quality proved to be a key factor in improving congregants' understanding and knowledge of religious teachings. This is in line with previous research that shows that clarity of delivery, the use of easy-to-understand language, the relevance of the content to daily life and everyday life, and the expertise of the preacher contribute significantly to audience comprehension (Hayes, 2018; Khachula et al., 2021; Mannerfelt, 2022). The congregation can better understand and apply religious

teachings in their lives when a good sermon explains complex theological concepts in an easy-to-understand manner.

On the other hand, frequency of congregational attendance was also found to have a significant influence, although smaller than sermon quality. This finding is consistent with previous research, which states that the more frequently congregants attend services and other church activities, the greater their opportunity to deepen religious knowledge (McClendon & Beatty Riedl, 2021; Whitehead & Stroope, 2015). Consistent attendance at services not only provides more time to hear and reflect on religious teachings, but also increases opportunities to participate in discussions and activities that deepen religious understanding.

CONCLUSION

This research shows that the quality of sermons and the frequency of church attendance have a significant influence on their religious understanding and knowledge. Skilled preachers deliver sermons that are clear, relevant, and easily understood, significantly aiding congregants in understanding and internalizing religious teachings in their daily lives. Although the frequency of congregational attendance is less important than sermon quality, regular attendance still contributes positively to increased religious understanding. Therefore, churches are advised to focus on developing preachers' abilities through training in rhetoric and more effective use of language, as well as creating interesting and relevant programs to encourage regular congregational attendance, in order to deepen their knowledge and involvement in church life.

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