

Negotiating Religious Authority in Contemporary Aceh: Dayah Ulama and the TASTAFI Campaign

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Abstract: Aceh, known as *Serambi Makkah* of the archipelago, has a long history regarding Islamic civilization in Indonesia in which dayah (Islamic boarding school) institutions and the TASTAFI movement play a significant role in sustaining and strengthening the religious, intellectual, and spiritual traditions. This study examines the campaign of the Majelis Pengajian Tasawuf, Tauhid, and Fiqh (TASTAFI) conducted by dayah scholars in Aceh, focusing on organizational formation, dissemination methods, and instructional content. Using a qualitative approach based on observation, interviews, and document analysis, the study finds that the campaign is initially grounded in the charismatic and traditional authority of prominent dayah scholars, particularly the founding figure whose moral integrity and scholarly reputation legitimize religious leadership. Over time, this authority is routinized through the institutionalization of TASTAFI, reflected in structured programs, regular recitation schedules, and diversified outreach methods, including print and digital media. While this process indicates a shift toward rational-legal authority, religious authority remains embedded in embodied pedagogical practices, classical textual transmission, and ethical exemplarity. The study concludes that TASTAFI functions as a hybrid form of religious authority that strengthens Islamic religiosity and sustains Aceh's long-standing Islamic intellectual tradition amid contemporary social change.

Keywords: Religious authority; Aceh; Islamic theology; sufism; moral; dayah; Islamic education

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Introduction

Aceh, as an area known as the Serambi Makkah or the Veranda of Mecca,¹ has a strong and deeply rooted Islamic tradition.² One of the most remarkable manifestations of the influence of Islam in Aceh is the existence of dayah, or pesantren,³ which have become centers for the learning and development of Islamic religious knowledge.⁴ Dayah scholars in Aceh not only teach religious knowledge but also play the role of spiritual and moral leaders within the community.⁵ Islamic values that are studied and internalized by the community, such as those conveyed through Tasawuf, Tauhid, and Fiqh (TASTAFI) recitation activities, are particularly important because they constitute the core of Islamic understanding in Aceh.⁶

The name *Serambi Makkah* describes the role of Aceh as a gateway for the spread of Islam in the archipelago,⁷ as well as the similarities between the life of the Acehnese people and the traditions of Mecca, the first holy city of Muslims. Aceh was one of the first regions in Indonesia to accept Islamic teachings,⁸ which subsequently spread throughout the

¹ Saifuddin Duhuri, "Aceh Serambi Mekkah (Studi Tentang Peran Ibadah Haji Dalam Pengembangan Peradaban Aceh)," *Jurnal Ilmiah Islam Futura* 16, no. 2 (July 18, 2017): 188, <https://doi.org/10.22373/jiif.v16i2.750>.

² Sri Astuti, "Agama, Budaya Dan Perubahan Sosial Perspektif Pendidikan Islam Di Aceh," *Jurnal Mudarrisuna: Media Kajian Pendidikan Agama Islam* 7, no. 1 (September 24, 2017): 23, <https://doi.org/10.22373/jm.v7i1.1900>.

³ Rika Sartika and Zulmuqim Zulmuqim, "Islamisasi Dan Pertumbuhan Institusi-Institusi Islam, Khususnya Institusi Pendidikan Islam," *Jurnal Ilmiah Al-Furqan: Al-Qur'an Bahasa Dan Seni* 9, no. 1 (June 30, 2022): 156–77, <https://doi.org/10.69880/alfurqan.v9i1.55>.

⁴ Mashuri Mashuri, "Dinamika Sistem Pendidikan Islam Di Dayah," *Jurnal Ilmiah Didaktika* 13, no. 2 (February 1, 2013), <https://doi.org/10.22373/jid.v13i2.477>.

⁵ Evhy Sekarwangi Putri, Muh. Yusril Faudzi, and Kurniati Kurniati, "Peran Pemimpin Dalam Menangani Konflik Keamanan Nasional: Perspektif Etika Politik Islam," *Jurnal Mudarrisuna* 2, no. 2 (2024): 202–17, <https://doi.org/10.61292/eljbn.204>.

⁶ Muhamad Ridwan Effendi, "Mitigasi Intoleransi Dan Radikalisme Beragama Di Pondok Pesantren Melalui Pendekatan Pembelajaran Inklusif," *Paedagogic: Jurnal Pendidikan Dan Studi Islam* 1, no. 1 (June 30, 2020): 54–77, <https://doi.org/10.52593/pdg.01.1.05>.

⁷ Syamsun Ni'am, "Hamzah Fansuri: Pelopor Tasawuf Wujudiyah Dan Pengaruhnya Hingga Kini Di Nusantara," *Epistemé: Jurnal Pengembangan Ilmu Keislaman* 12, no. 1 (June 29, 2017). <https://doi.org/10.21274/epis.2017.12.1.261-286>.

⁸ A Hayani, "Penerapan Syari'at Islam Di Aceh Antara Kenyataan Dan Harapan (Menelusuri Budaya Masyarakat Aceh Masa Lampau Dalam Manuskrip)," *Jurnal Mudarrisuna* 1, no. September (2018): 77–83, <http://sunankalijaga.org/prosiding/index.php/kiiis/article/view/14>.

archipelago. Since its inception, Aceh has played an important role in the dissemination and development of Islamic teachings in Southeast Asia.⁹ In addition, many Islamic educational institutions in Aceh have produced prominent scholars who have contributed significantly to the advancement of Islam in Indonesia.¹⁰

TASTAFI represents the three main pillars of Islamic education taught in dayahs in Aceh.¹¹ First, sufism emphasizes spiritual development and the purification of the heart. Second, *tawhīd* focuses on the concept of monotheism and the oneness of Allah, and the third, *Fiqh* encompasses the principles of sharia law that govern the daily lives of Muslims. The campaign to disseminate these three disciplines is not only important in the context of learning but also plays a crucial role in strengthening the Islamic identity among Acehnese people.¹²

Sufism education is in the way to foster deep spiritual awareness and cultivate noble character.¹³ This includes practices such as *dhikr*, *muraqabah* (self-awareness and self-control), and *muhāsabah* (self-reflection). *Tawhīd* is a fundamental concept in Islam that emphasizes the oneness of Allah.¹⁴ It constitutes the main theological pillar affirming that Allah alone is worthy of worship and that He has no partners. In Islamic boarding schools, *tawhīd* is taught to reinforce students' belief in the oneness of Allah and to deepen their understanding of His attributes.¹⁵ *Fiqh* was taught in

⁹ Faizal Amin and Rifki Abror Ananda, "Kedatangan Dan Penyebaran Islam Di Asia Tenggara: Telaah Teoritik Tentang Proses Islamisasi Nusantara," *Analisis: Jurnal Studi Keislaman* 18, no. 2 (March 1, 2019): 67–100, <https://doi.org/10.24042/ajsk.v18i2.3069>.

¹⁰ Dahri Dahri et al., "Jejaring Pendidikan Islam; Proses Pembentukan Relasi Guru Dan Murid Pesantren Di Kabupaten Aceh Singkil," *At-Ta'dib: Jurnal Ilmiah Prodi Pendidikan Agama Islam*, December 30, 2023, 220–36, <https://doi.org/10.47498/tadib.v15i2.2532>.

¹¹ Iswandi Iswandi, "Pilar-Pilar Pendidikan Islam Di Kesultanan Aceh," *Educcena/ : Journal of Islamic Religious Education* 3, no. 2 (July 1, 2019): 109–21, <https://doi.org/10.30762/ed.v3i2.1740>.

¹² Mursyidin Ar-Rahmany, "Ulama Dan Dayah Dalam Nomenklatur Masyarakat Aceh," *Jurnal Mudarrisuna* 2, no. 12 (2022): 4101–22.

¹³ Muhaini, "Internalisasi Pendidikan Moderasi Beragama Dalam Sistem Pendidikan Dayah Tradisional Di Kota Langsa. (Studi Kasus Di Dayah Tradisional Raudhatun Najah Kota Langsa)," *Jurnal Mudarrisuna* 10, no. 2 (2021): 861–76, <https://doi.org/10.30868/ci.v10i02.1636>.

¹⁴ Aminuddin Busra Ellya Roza Dan, "Konsep Pendidikan Islam Berbasis Tauhid Pada Masa Rasulullah," *Jurnal Mudarrisuna* 4, no. 2 (2024): 1093–1103.

¹⁵ Nur Fahmi Hakim Halim, A. Alvian Fitriyanto, and Ahmad Muthohar, "Implementasi Nilai-Nilai Pendidikan Agama Islam Dalam Qs. An-Nas Terhadap Ketauhidan Santri Di

depth through the study of classical texts or *kitab kuning*.¹⁶ Students are trained to apply Islamic legal principles in their daily lives with the aim of living in accordance with the sharia.¹⁷

By integrating jurisprudential, theological, and spiritual teachings, this movement reflects the central role of dayah scholars as religious authorities whose legitimacy is initially grounded in charismatic and traditional forms of leadership. Over time, the TASTAFI campaign has developed into a more institutionalized initiative, characterized by organized programs, regular recitation schedules, and diversified dissemination methods, including print and digital media.

Even the province of Aceh have a strong Islamic heritage and the central role of dayah institutions in transmitting Islamic knowledge, there is a need to critically understand how the TASTAFI (Tasawuf, Tawhid, and Fiqh) recitation campaign functions as a structured movement to sustain and strengthen Islamic religiosity and religious authority amid contemporary social change, particularly as it shifts from traditional approach toward more institutionalized forms. The aim of this study is to analyze the TASTAFI recitation campaign conducted by dayah scholars in Aceh by focusing on its organizational formation, modes of dissemination, and instructional content, as well as its role in sustaining Aceh's Islamic intellectual tradition amid contemporary social change. Below are the research objectives; to explore the role of religious leadership in shaping TASTAFI's institutional direction and socio-religious engagement within Acehnese society; to explore the implementation and effectiveness of TASTAFI recitations as an interactive socio-religious learning practice among adult participants, and to identify the role and dynamics of Tasawuf, Tawhid, and Fiqh study circles (TASTAFI) in strengthening Islamic religious education and shaping religious authority among the Acehnese Muslim community.

Pondok Pesantren Bapenpori Al-Istiqomah Babakan Ciwaringin Cirebon,” *Jurnal Mudarrisuna* 1, no. 3 (2024): 299–309, <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.62017/jppi.v1i3.1117>.

¹⁶ Teuku Zulkhairi and Muzakir, “Pengembangan Kurikulum Berbasis Kitab Kuning Pada Ma’had Aly Di Aceh,” *Jurnal Mudarrisuna* 10, no. 2 (2020): 539–51.

¹⁷ Riza Rizkiyah Anur Azizah, “Peningkatan Religiusitas Santri Melalui Pembelajaran Fiqih Di Pondok Pesantren Miftahul Huda,” *Tafahus: Jurnal Pengkajian Islam* 3, no. 1 (2023): 80–98, <https://doi.org/10.58573/tafahus.v3i1.63>.

Methods

This study employs qualitative research with a socio-religious interactive approach¹⁸ to understand the recitation movement from the perspectives of the actors involved, including dayah leaders (pesantren heads), *teungku* (dayah teachers), education practitioners, participants of recitation sessions, and community leaders. The data were collected using three primary qualitative techniques; observation, semi-structured interviews, and document analysis. Observations were conducted during TASTAFI recitation sessions held in mosques, *meunasah* (community center), and *balee* to identify instructional processes, interaction patterns, and participant engagement. This observation process was recommended by Patton¹⁹ that should enable the researcher to understand the situation within the context. Next, the interviews were carried among the key persons, including dayah leaders (pesantren heads), *teungku* (dayah teachers), education practitioners, and community leaders, to obtain the perspectives on the objectives, implementation, and impact of the TASTAFI campaign. In addition, related documents, such as recitation materials, organizational records, and instructional content were analyzed to contextualize the data regarding research objectives. It will provide a behind-the-scenes perspective at the situation that may not be directly observable.²⁰ The purposive sampling technique was used in this research that employed the qualitative investigation. Respondents are selected on the basis of knowledge and experience in the research context.²¹ The collected data were analyzed thematically following an iterative process of categorization and interpretation to identify recurring themes related to organizational formation, modes of dissemination, and instructional content. To ensure data validity, the researcher applies data triangulation by comparing information obtained from interview, observation, and document analysis. Through this method, the study explores the TASTAFI campaign within the context of social change in Aceh and highlights its significance in keeping Islamic intellectual and religious traditions.

¹⁸ Gary King, Robert O. Keohane, and Sidney Verba, *Designing Social Inquiry: Scientific Inference in Qualitative Research* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994).

¹⁹ Michael Quinn Patton, *Qualitative Research & Evaluation Methods*, 3rd ed. (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2002).

²⁰ Higher Education Commission of Pakistan, Research Methods, 2012, [https://www.hcc.gov.pk/english/services/universities/RevisedCurricula/Documents/2011-2012/Education/ResearchMethods Sept13.pdf](https://www.hcc.gov.pk/english/services/universities/RevisedCurricula/Documents/2011-2012/Education/ResearchMethods%20Sept13.pdf).

²¹ Uma Sekaran and Roger Bougie, *Research Methods for Business: A Skill-Building Approach*, 7th ed. (West Sussex: John Wiley & Sons, 2016).

Results and Discussion

Role of Religious Leadership in Shaping TASTAFI's Institutional

TASTAFI was initiated by a prominent and charismatic Acehnese scholar, Abu Shaykh Hasanoel Bashri, widely known as Abu MUDI, who is also the leader of Dayah Mudi Samalanga.²² As the founder of Majelis Pengajian Tasawuf, Tauhid, and Fiqh (TASTAFI), Abu MUDI envisioned an institution dedicated to the study of fiqh, Sufism, and monotheism, while also addressing contemporary religious and social issues faced by society.

The establishment of TASTAFI originated from Abu MUDI's concern over the increasing spread of theological deviations within Aceh in particular and Indonesia more broadly. He emphasized that dayah scholars should actively engage with society by directly contributing to religious education to all society. On several occasions, Abu MUDI stated that TASTAFI was founded to prevent misunderstandings and deviations in religious knowledge and creed (‘*aqīdah*’) that diverge from the *manhaj* of Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jamā‘ah (Aswaja) as transmitted by the Prophet. According to Tgk. Syahrial, an administrator of TASTAFI in Banda Aceh, the organization has existed for approximately seven years. However, during 2013 and 2014, it did not yet have a permanent organizational structure.

As mentioned in the documents, the primary objective of TASTAFI is to disseminate and institutionalize the teachings of Tasawuf, Tauhid, and Fiqh based on the principles of Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jamā‘ah. The organization also seeks to protect dayahs, study halls, *taklim* assemblies, and mosques from heretical teachings, liberalism, secularism, and radicalism, while contributing to the formation of a morally grounded civil society. To achieve these aims, TASTAFI implements various community-based programs, including religious recitations, *dhikr*, *da‘wah* activities, and religious research initiatives that are open to all segments of society. These activities employ instructional methods such as lectures, active discussion supported by structured learning materials. Given the diverse needs and varying levels of religious understanding within the community, the content and format of recitation and study sessions are adapted to the specific context, location, and participants of each *taklim* assembly.²³

²² Zulfikar and Muhibuddin, “Tastafi Organisasi Keagamaan Ulama Dayah Di Aceh,” *Ulii Albab: Jurnal Ilmiah Multidisiplin* 1, no. 11 (2022): 4120–4128.

²³ Zulfikar and Muhibuddin, “Tastafi Organisasi Keagamaan Ulama Dayah Di Aceh.”

The TASTAFI religious organization was established to strengthen religious education within the community by grounding Islamic teachings in the framework of Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jamā'ah. Through its programs, TASTAFI aims not only to safeguard religious educational institutions from ideological deviations but also to promote a social order aligned with the values of the Qur'an, the Hadith and the community norms.

The Implementation of TASTAFI Recitations

TASTAFI recitations are designed for adult participants, and are conducted through instructional sessions combined with active discussions. These recitations are generally held once or twice a week and the venues commonly include mosques, *musalla*, *balee*, and *meunasah*. The instructional materials are adapted to the needs of participants and typically cover topics such as *tawhīd*, Sufism, *fiqh*, faith, and contemporary socio-religious issues. The recitation methods employed include lectures (*tausyiah*), group discussion, and moral exhortation (*mau'izah*).²⁴

During the recitation process, the interactive question-and-answer method facilitates clearer understanding among participants and encourages active engagement. This approach stimulates participants to ask questions and engage critically with the material. In practice, scholars, such as *teungku*, *abu*, and *abi* explain the topic in a structured manner before the moderator opens the discussion.

These teachings emphasize the cultivation of noble character and ethical conduct. Meanwhile, *tawhīd* recitations concentrate on the doctrine of the oneness of Allah, including an understanding of His attributes, His existence, and the centrality of monotheism in worship and daily Muslim life. Fiqh recitations address Islamic legal rulings governing various aspects of life, ranging from acts of worship and *mu'āmalāt* (social and economic transactions) to criminal law. In the Acehnese context, *fiqh* is closely linked to the practical implementation of Islamic sharia in both social life and governance.²⁵

²⁴ T. Faizin and Iain Lhokseumawe, "Strategi Tastafi Dalam Pembinaan Pendidikan Islam Masyarakat Aceh," *PASE: Journal of Contemporary Islamic Education* 2, no. 1 (2023): 14–32, <https://journal.iainlhokseumawe.ac.id/index.php>.

²⁵ Quin Tara Audia and Zulfiana Herni, "Pembelajaran TASTAFI (Tasawuf, Tauhid , Dan Fikih) Dan Pembinaan Karakter Islami Kaum Ibu Di Majelis Taklim Berkah Sekumpul," *Jurnal Ilmu Pendidikan Islam* 7 (2024): 8–20.

Sufism instruction in Aceh often begins with strengthening *‘aqīdah* and deepening the understanding of *tawḥīd* as the foundation of spiritual development. Classical texts such as *Iḥyā’ ‘Ulūm al-Dīn* and *Bidāyat al-Hidāyah* by Imam al-Ghazālī, as well as *al-Risālah al-Qushayriyyah* by Imam al-Qushayrī, are frequently used as primary references in Sufism recitations in Aceh. Local Sufi works, including those authored by the renowned Acehnese scholar Shaykh ‘Abd al-Ra‘ūf al-Singkīlī—such as *Mir‘āt al-Ṭullāb* and *Durr al-Nafīs*—also remain widely studied in religious assemblies.

The study of *tawḥīd* in Aceh emphasizes a comprehensive understanding of Allah’s oneness and firm belief in the pillars of faith. Classical theological texts commonly used in *tawḥīd* studies include *al-‘Aqīdah al-Ṭaḥāwiyyah*, *Umm al-Barāhīn (Jawhar al-Tawḥīd)*, *al-Ḥikam*, and *Sharḥ al-Kharīdah al-Bahiyyah*. These works are foundational texts in Islamic theology that systematically articulate Sunni creed based on the teachings of Imam Abū Ḥanīfah and are widely used due to their clarity and accessibility, particularly within the framework of Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jamā‘ah.

Fiqh studies are conducted in various settings, including dayahs (Islamic boarding schools), mosques, *meunasah (balee)*, and cafés, where students and community members study Islamic legal principles related to daily life. These include acts of worship, *mu‘āmalāt* (human relations), *munākahāt* (marriage), and *jināyāt* (criminal law). Commonly used *fiqh* texts in Aceh include *Fath al-Mu‘īn*, *Minḥāj al-Qawīm*, *Safīnat al-Najāḥ*, *al-Maḥallī*, and *I‘ānat al-Ṭālibīn*. The strengthening of *fiqh* learning is achieved not only through textual study but also through practical application, discussion, and direct guidance from experienced scholars. Students are trained to understand the social and cultural context of Aceh in applying Islamic law and to adapt *fiqh* teachings to the needs and realities of the local community.

Role and Dynamics of TASTAFI in Strengthening Islamic Religious Education

Aceh is a society that strongly upholds Islamic sharia values, as reflected in the province’s special autonomy to implement Islamic sharia *qanun*.²⁶ Strengthening these values requires not only legal frameworks

²⁶ Munawar Rizki Jailani and Mohammad Taqiuddin Mohamad, “Analisis Penerapan Syariat Islam Dalam Sektor Perbankan Pasca Pelaksanaan Syariat Islam Di Aceh, Indonesia,” *Jurnal Syariah* 27, no. 2 (August 30, 2019): 261–80, <https://doi.org/10.22452/js.vol27no2.3>.

but also the deepening of religious substance through comprehensive and well-structured educational materials. Consequently, the community has a strong need for recitation materials on Sufism, *tawhīd*, and *fiqh*, which constitute the core components of Islam. Sufism recitations generally focus on inner spiritual development, the relationship between humans and God, and the moral foundations of Islam.

The research findings indicate that the campaign of Tasawuf, Tauhid, and Fiqh study circles (*pengajian*) conducted by Acehnese *dayah* ulama initially relied heavily on charismatic authority, as conceptualized by Max Weber (1978). The figure of Abu Syekh Hasanoel Bashri (Abu MUDI) emerged as the central source of religious legitimacy, recognized for his profound scholarly mastery, moral exemplarity, and personal charisma as the leader of Dayah Mudi Samalanga. The trust placed in his leadership by congregants and fellow ulama reflects what Weber describes as belief in the extraordinary qualities of an individual that transcend formal structures and codified rules. This authority was not merely personal in nature but was deeply embedded in the long-established *dayah* scholarly tradition in Aceh. Consequently, Abu MUDI's charisma was intertwined with traditional authority grounded in chains of transmission (*sanad*), the teaching of *kitab kuning*, and inherited practices of religious instruction passed down across generations. In this context, the TASTAFI study circles functioned as a space for the articulation of moral and spiritual religious authority, in which congregational compliance arose not from formal regulations but from recognition of the integrity and scholarly competence of *dayah* ulama.

Nevertheless, this study also reveals a process of the routinization of charisma, as outlined by Weber, particularly through the institutionalization of TASTAFI as an organization with a formal administrative structure, defined programs, regular schedules of study sessions, and the expansion of *da'wa* methods into print and digital media. This transformation marks a shift toward rational-legal authority, whereby legitimacy no longer rests solely on a charismatic figure but increasingly on organizational rules, role differentiation, and relatively impersonal procedures. However, in line with the critiques advanced by Talal Asad and John Bowen, the findings demonstrate that TASTAFI's religious authority cannot be reduced to bureaucracy alone. Rather, this authority continues to be animated through discursive and performative practices, including the teaching of classical Islamic texts, an emphasis on moral cultivation (*akhlāq*), *dhikr*, and the embodied exemplarity of ulama in their direct interactions with congregants. Thus, the campaign of Tasawuf, Tauhid, and Fiqh study

circles in Aceh reflects a hybrid form of religious authority, in which organizational rationalization operates alongside the reproduction of moral-traditional authority, enabling the sustained influence of *dayah* ulama amid social change and the challenges of modernity.

Conclusion

The TASTAFI (Majelis Pengajian Tasawuf, Tauhid, and Fiqh) recitation campaign conducted by Islamic scholars in Aceh is directed toward both the wider community and students in dayahs and is held in various venues, including dayahs, mosques, *balee*, and cafés. The recitation activities are carried out by alumni of traditional dayahs and are organized through the TASTAFI organization, which was initiated by Abu MUDI. The recitation methods include lectures (*tausyiah*), question-and-answer sessions or discussions, and moral exhortation (*mau'izah*). The instructional content of TASTAFI encompasses Sufism, which aims to strengthen Islamic moral values; *tawhīd*, which focuses on deepening faith in Allah, angels (*mala'ikah*), messengers, and prophets; and *fiqh*, which addresses Islamic legal rulings, procedures of worship, and the regulation of social life in daily practice. Together, these three fields of study aim to guide Muslims toward a virtuous life in this world and the hereafter in accordance with divine commands and prohibitions

The research findings indicate that the campaign of Tasawuf, Tauhid, and Fiqh study circles in Aceh is grounded in the charismatic authority of *dayah* leaders, particularly Abu MUDI, who is recognized for his profound scholarly knowledge and moral exemplarity. This authority is closely intertwined with the well-established *dayah* scholarly tradition. As TASTAFI developed into an organization, a process of charismatic routinization emerged through the formation of institutional structures, programs, and more systematic methods of *da'wa*, marking a shift toward rational-legal authority. Nevertheless, this authority continues to be sustained through discursive practices, the teaching of classical Islamic texts, and the moral exemplarity of ulama in their interactions with congregants.

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