

The Professional Responsibility of Nurturing Faith in Christian Education: An Exegetical Study of Matthew 19:14 at SMP Negeri 19 Pekanbaru

Yosua Harapan Nduru

Pendidikan Profesi Guru, Fakultas Ilmu Pendidikan Kristen, IAKN Tarutung

*correspondence: yosuaharapan@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

This study explores the professional responsibility of nurturing faith in Christian education through an exegetical analysis of Matthew 19:14 and its implementation in a public-school context at SMP Negeri 19 Pekanbaru. The research employs a qualitative design integrating historical-grammatical exegesis with a field-based case study. Data were collected through classroom observations, semi-structured interviews with three Christian teachers, and document analysis involving lesson plans and learning records. The research context involved 218 Christian students served by a limited number of Christian educators, presenting both pedagogical and pastoral challenges. The exegetical findings reveal that Matthew 19:14 establishes a theological mandate for educators to actively welcome, protect, and nurture the faith of children as rightful participants in the kingdom of God. The empirical findings show that faith nurturing is practiced through contextual biblical instruction, pastoral care within the classroom, relational mentoring, and collaborative spiritual support among teachers. Despite structural limitations, pluralistic school policies, and external challenges from digital culture, Christian educators demonstrate a strong sense of professional calling grounded in theological conviction. This study concludes that professional responsibility in Christian education is fundamentally a theological vocation rather than merely a technical obligation. Nurturing faith emerges as the core of professional identity for Christian educators, especially within pluralistic public-school environments. The study contributes to the development of a holistic model of Christian education that integrates biblical theology, pedagogical practice, and pastoral ministry in shaping students' spiritual and moral formation.

Keywords: Professional Responsibility, Christian Religious Education, Faith

INTRODUCTION

The professional responsibility of teachers in contemporary education is increasingly defined not only by technical competence and pedagogical skill but also by ethical integrity, relational sensitivity, and formative commitment to students' holistic development. In the context of Christian Education, this responsibility extends beyond cognitive instruction toward the intentional nurturing of faith, character, and spiritual

identity. Christian Religious Education (CRE) teachers are therefore positioned not merely as transmitters of religious knowledge but as spiritual mentors entrusted with fostering students' relationship with God in the midst of complex social and cultural challenges. In Indonesian public schools, the task of nurturing faith carries particular significance. Christian students often live and learn within pluralistic environments where religious identity must be formed through dialogue, personal conviction, and daily practice rather than through cultural dominance. This reality places a profound professional and spiritual demand on CRE teachers, who must integrate pedagogical excellence with pastoral sensitivity. Such a context is clearly visible at SMP Negeri 19 Pekanbaru, located in the city of Pekanbaru, where there are 218 Christian students and 3 Christian teachers, including one Christian Religious Education teacher. This demographic condition highlights both the strategic importance and the pastoral complexity of faith formation in a public-school setting. From a biblical perspective, the responsibility of nurturing faith is not a human invention but a divine mandate. One of the most profound New Testament affirmations of this calling is found in Matthew 19:14, where Jesus declares, *"Let the little children come to Me and do not hinder them, for to such belongs the kingdom of heaven."* This statement is not merely a tender expression of Jesus' compassion for children but a theological proclamation about the value of children in God's redemptive plan and the moral obligation of adults to facilitate, rather than obstruct, their access to spiritual life. Within this text lies a strong foundation for understanding faith nurturing as a sacred trust and a professional responsibility. Matthew 19:14 is situated within a broader narrative in which the disciples attempt to prevent children from approaching Jesus, likely reflecting prevailing social assumptions about children's marginal status in the ancient world. Jesus' rebuke of His disciples reverses these assumptions and affirms children as rightful participants in the kingdom of God. This reversal carries significant pedagogical implications: nurturing faith in children is not secondary to "serious" ministry but is central to the mission of God. For Christian educators, this text establishes a biblical imperative that transforms teaching from a neutral profession into a vocation of spiritual stewardship. In modern educational discourse, teacher professionalism is often defined in terms of accountability, competence, and adherence to ethical standards. However, in Christian education, professionalism must also be understood theologically, as faithfulness to God's calling and responsibility for the spiritual well-being of learners. Several studies have shown that teachers' spiritual awareness, moral commitment, and relational engagement significantly influence students' faith development and character formation. Yet, many CRE teachers in public schools still struggle to balance administrative demands, curriculum targets, and the deeper pastoral mission of nurturing faith.

The situation at SMP Negeri 19 Pekanbaru reflects this tension clearly. With a relatively large number of Christian students (218 learners) and a very limited number of Christian teachers (only three, including the CRE teacher), the responsibility of faith nurturing becomes heavily concentrated. CRE teachers are required not only to deliver formal religious instruction but also to provide spiritual accompaniment, moral guidance, and emotional support to students who face various academic, social, and personal challenges. This condition raises an important question: how is the professional responsibility of nurturing faith understood and practiced by CRE teachers in such a demanding context, and how can it be theologically grounded in Scripture? Previous

studies on Christian education in Indonesia have largely focused on curriculum implementation, pedagogical strategies, and character education. However, limited scholarly attention has been given to the explicit integration of biblical exegesis with the lived professional responsibilities of CRE teachers in public-school contexts. In particular, Matthew 19:14 has often been treated devotionally, rather than examined as a theological foundation for professional accountability in faith formation. This gap indicates a need for research that bridges biblical theology and educational praxis. This study aims to examine the professional responsibility of nurturing faith in Christian Education through an exegetical analysis of Matthew 19:14 and its practical manifestation at SMP Negeri 19 Pekanbaru. By integrating biblical interpretation with empirical observation of educational practice, this research seeks to offer a theological-pedagogical framework for understanding faith nurturing as both a spiritual mandate and a professional obligation of CRE teachers. Ultimately, this study contributes to the strengthening of Christian teacher identity and the enhancement of faith-based education in Indonesia's public-school environment.

METHODS

A qualitative research design with an integrated exegetical and case study approach was used to examine the professional responsibility of nurturing faith in Christian Education as grounded in Matthew 19:14 and its practical implementation at SMP Negeri 19 Pekanbaru, located in Pekanbaru. The qualitative design was selected because the study seeks to explore meanings, theological interpretations, professional experiences, and lived educational practices rather than to test variables quantitatively. The research context involved 218 Christian students and 3 Christian teachers, including one Christian Religious Education (CRE) teacher, situated within a pluralistic public-school environment. This site was purposively chosen due to its representativeness of the challenges and responsibilities faced by CRE teachers in nurturing faith with limited human resources. An exegetical analysis of Matthew 19:14 was undertaken using the historical-grammatical method. This stage involved an examination of the Greek text, analysis of key terms such as *aphēte* (let), *mē kōluete* (do not hinder), and *basileia tōn ouranōn* (the kingdom of heaven), as well as an exploration of the literary and socio-historical context of the pericope. The analysis was supported by reputable New Testament commentaries and theological works to construct a robust biblical understanding of faith nurturing as a divine mandate and moral responsibility. A field-based qualitative case study was conducted to investigate how the professional responsibility of nurturing faith is understood and practiced by CRE teachers in the school context. Data were collected through classroom observations and semi-structured interviews. Classroom observations were carried out during Christian Religious Education lessons to capture teaching methods, teacher-student interactions, expressions of pastoral care, and the integration of faith-nurturing practices within instructional activities. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with the CRE teacher and two other Christian teachers to explore their perceptions of professional responsibility, theological motivations, practical strategies for nurturing faith, and challenges encountered in a public-school setting. The study applied a theological–pedagogical integration process, in which exegetical findings from Matthew 19:14 were dialogically connected with empirical data from the field. This process aimed to identify points of convergence between the biblical mandate to welcome and nurture

children in faith and the professional practices of CRE teachers. Interview transcripts and observation notes were coded thematically, categorized into key themes such as professional calling, pastoral responsibility, instructional care, and faith accompaniment, and displayed in narrative matrices to facilitate interpretation.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Matthew 19:14 stands as a powerful theological foundation for understanding the responsibility of nurturing faith in children and young people. The verse emerges within a narrative where the disciples attempt to prevent children from approaching Jesus. The Greek imperative *aphēte* (let/allow) and the prohibition *mē kōluete* (do not hinder) form a strong double command. Jesus does not merely tolerate the presence of children; He actively commands their welcome and forbids any action that obstructs their access to Him. This linguistic construction emphasizes that access to Jesus is not optional or conditional but a matter of divine priority. The declaration, “*for to such belongs the kingdom of heaven,*” does not imply that children possess an automatic, unreflective faith. Rather, it affirms that the kingdom is characterized by qualities embodied by children-dependency, trust, openness, and receptivity. Theologically, this places children not at the margins of God’s redemptive work but at its very center. Consequently, any educational or pastoral practice that neglects or trivializes children’s faith formation stands in tension with Jesus’ explicit instruction. From an educational perspective, this exegetical insight reframes nurturing faith as more than a supplementary activity within Christian education. It constitutes a divine mandate that carries moral and professional accountability. Teachers, as adult representatives of authority in the school environment, are implicitly included in those whom Jesus addresses. Thus, the command “do not hinder them” can be interpreted as a warning against pedagogical negligence, spiritual indifference, and structural barriers that deprive students of meaningful faith formation. Field findings at SMP Negeri 19 Pekanbaru reveal that CRE teachers perceive their professional role as inseparable from their spiritual vocation. Interviews with the Christian Religious Education (CRE) teacher indicate a strong sense of calling (calling as ministry), rather than mere occupational duty. The teacher consistently described teaching as “a trust from God” that must be carried out with sincerity, patience, and moral integrity. This perception closely corresponds with the theological message of Matthew 19:14, where responsibility for children’s access to Jesus is placed upon adults. The limited number of Christian teachers, only three for 218 Christian students, intensifies this sense of responsibility. Teachers reported feeling that they did not merely represent an academic subject but also a spiritual presence within the school. This dual identity as educator and faith mentor shaped their sense of accountability. Professionalism, in this context, is not reduced to mastery of curriculum or assessment techniques but includes spiritual attentiveness, ethical modeling, and pastoral sensitivity. This finding supports a theological reinterpretation of teacher professionalism within Christian education: professionalism is not value-neutral competence but faith-informed stewardship. The professional identity of CRE teachers at this school reflects a lived integration of pedagogical duty and spiritual mission, resonating strongly with Jesus’ mandate to welcome and care for children’s spiritual lives.

Pedagogical Practices of Nurturing Faith in the Classroom

Classroom observations demonstrate that nurturing faith at SMP Negeri 19 Pekanbaru is implemented through both explicit and implicit pedagogical strategies. Explicit strategies include structured Bible teaching, guided prayer, moral reflection, and contextual application of biblical values. Lessons often begin with short devotional moments that connect students' everyday experiences with scriptural principles. These practices intentionally create spiritual space within the formal instructional setting. Implicit strategies are equally significant. Teachers consistently model Christian virtues such as patience, humility, justice, and compassion in their daily interactions with students. Observations showed that teachers frequently provide personal encouragement, listen to students' struggles, and offer moral guidance outside formal lesson hours. Such relational engagement functions as a practical embodiment of Jesus' welcoming posture toward children. Document analysis of lesson plans indicates that faith nurturing is deliberately embedded in instructional objectives. Learning outcomes consistently integrate three dimensions: cognitive understanding of Christian doctrine, affective development of moral attitudes, and behavioral expression of faith in daily life. This holistic approach reflects a pedagogical alignment with the theological vision of Matthew 19:14, where children are not merely informed but personally guided toward the life of the kingdom. Students' responses also confirm the impact of these practices. Many students reported that CRE lessons helped them "feel closer to God," "understand how to live as Christians at school," and "gain confidence to pray and share their faith." These testimonies suggest that nurturing faith is not merely a theoretical goal but a lived experience within the learning process.

Faith Nurturing in a Pluralistic Public School Context

The public school setting of SMP Negeri 19 Pekanbaru introduces complex dynamics into the task of nurturing faith. Christian students learn within a diverse religious environment, which requires sensitivity to interreligious harmony while maintaining clear Christian identity. Teachers emphasized that nurturing faith must be carried out without coercion, exclusivism, or social isolation. Creative contextualization emerged as a key strategy. Teachers frequently relate Christian values to universal moral principles such as honesty, responsibility, respect, and compassion, values that are also affirmed across religious traditions. This approach enables faith formation to occur in ways that strengthen Christian identity while fostering social harmony. In this sense, nurturing faith becomes both a spiritual and civic responsibility. This contextual approach reflects an incarnational pedagogy that mirrors the ministry of Jesus Himself. In Matthew 19:14, Jesus welcomes children into His presence without imposing rigid social barriers. CRE teachers strive to create inclusive learning spaces where Christian students can grow spiritually without generating conflict within the broader school community. This practice demonstrates that nurturing faith in public schools must balance theological faithfulness with social wisdom. Teachers also face significant structural and emotional challenges. The most prominent challenge is the disproportionate ratio between students and Christian teachers. With 218 Christian students and only three Christian teachers, individualized pastoral attention becomes difficult to sustain. Teachers often feel that their time and emotional energy are stretched beyond capacity. Time constraints within the formal curriculum also limit the

depth of faith nurturing. CRE instructional hours are relatively short compared to the breadth of spiritual, moral, and personal issues students face. As a result, teachers frequently extend their ministry beyond formal class time, engaging students during breaks or through informal counseling. While this demonstrates high commitment, it also risks burnout. Another challenge lies in the diverse socio-economic backgrounds of students. Teachers reported encountering students from broken families, those experiencing emotional neglect, and those influenced by digital media culture that often contradicts Christian values. These conditions require not only teaching competency but also emotional resilience and spiritual discernment. These challenges can be theologically interpreted in light of the tension present in Matthew 19:13-15 itself. The disciples' attempt to prevent the children from approaching Jesus may symbolize structural and cultural barriers that hinder faith access. In today's educational context, those barriers take the form of limited resources, time constraints, and social pressures. Jesus' command "do not hinder them" thus functions as a continual prophetic challenge to educational structures that unintentionally obstruct faith formation.

One of the most significant findings of this study is the teachers' understanding of professional responsibility as spiritual accountability before God. Teachers consistently expressed that their ultimate accountability is not only to school administrators or educational authorities but also to God. This vertical dimension of accountability shapes their ethical decision-making, disciplinary practices, and relational conduct with students. Teachers reported that they frequently pray for students by name, especially those facing serious personal struggles. This practice illustrates how professional responsibility transcends contractual obligation and enters the realm of spiritual intercession. Theologically, this reflects the welcoming and protective posture of Jesus toward children in Matthew 19:14. This spiritual accountability also influences how teachers approach student discipline. Rather than emphasizing purely punitive measures, teachers aim for restorative correction that aligns with Christian principles of grace and repentance. Discipline is understood not as control but as guidance toward moral and spiritual maturity. Such findings confirm that nurturing faith cannot be reduced to curricular delivery. It involves the ethical, relational, and spiritual dimensions of the teacher's professional life. In this sense, teacher professionalism in Christian education operates within a theological horizon that is fundamentally different from secular conceptions of professionalism.

The integration of exegetical insights from Matthew 19:14 and the empirical findings from SMP Negeri 19 Pekanbaru yields a theological-professional model of nurturing faith consisting of four interrelated dimensions. Teachers are called to create learning environments where students feel accepted, valued, and spiritually safe. This reflects Jesus' welcoming of children as legitimate recipients of the kingdom. Teachers must identify and minimize barriers to faith, whether structural (time, policy), pedagogical (rigid methods), or relational (lack of empathy). Faith nurturing is intentional, ongoing, and relational. It involves guiding students toward mature Christian identity through teaching, modeling, and accompaniment. Professional responsibility is grounded in accountability to God, shaping teachers' ethical integrity and pastoral commitment.

This model demonstrates that faith nurturing is both a theological mandate and a professional obligation. It bridges biblical theology and educational praxis in a way that strengthens the identity of CRE teachers in public schools. Several implications emerge from this study. Teacher education programs for Christian Religious Education must integrate biblical exegesis with professional ethics and pastoral skills. Teachers need not only methodological training but also deep theological grounding for their vocation. School leadership and educational policy should provide greater structural support for faith nurturing, including adequate instructional time, counseling facilities, and opportunities for spiritual mentoring. Without institutional support, the burden of faith nurturing becomes excessively dependent on individual teacher sacrifice. This study highlights the importance of collaboration between church and school. Given the large number of Christian students and limited number of teachers, partnership with local churches could enhance pastoral care and spiritual guidance for students. Matthew 19:14 provides a powerful theological lens for understanding the professional responsibility of nurturing faith in Christian education. The command to welcome children and remove obstacles to their access to Jesus finds concrete expression in the pedagogical, relational, and pastoral practices of CRE teachers at SMP Negeri 19 Pekanbaru. Teachers embody their professional responsibility as spiritual stewardship grounded in obedience to Christ. This study affirms that nurturing faith is not an auxiliary function of Christian Religious Education but its very core. Professional responsibility in CRE, therefore, must be understood not only in terms of competence and accountability but also in terms of faithfulness to the divine mandate articulated by Jesus Himself.

CONCLUSION

This study has demonstrated that the professional responsibility of nurturing faith in Christian education is deeply rooted in the theological mandate of Matthew 19:14 and finds concrete expression in educational practice at SMP Negeri 19 Pekanbaru. The exegetical analysis confirms that Jesus' command, *"Let the children come to me and do not hinder them,"* establishes a binding moral and spiritual obligation for all Christian educators to actively facilitate, protect, and nurture the faith of students. Faith nurturing, therefore, is not an optional pedagogical activity, but an essential dimension of professional identity grounded in divine calling. The findings reveal that despite the limited number of Christian teachers in relation to the large population of Christian students, faith nurturing continues to be carried out through intentional instructional strategies, pastoral care, and collaborative spiritual mentoring. The CRE teacher's role is not confined to cognitive transmission of biblical knowledge but extends to relational accompaniment, moral guidance, prayerful support, and character formation. These practices reflect a holistic model of professional responsibility in which pedagogy, spirituality, and pastoral sensitivity are inseparably integrated. The integration of exegetical and field data also shows that the challenges faced, such as structural limitations, pluralistic educational policies, and the pressures of secular digital culture, do not negate the possibility of faithful and effective spiritual formation. Instead, these constraints demand greater theological depth, pedagogical creativity, and spiritual resilience from Christian educators. In this context, the biblical prohibition "do not

hinder” acquires contemporary relevance as a call to dismantle not only interpersonal obstacles but also systemic and cultural barriers that may impede students’ spiritual growth. This study contributes to the discourse on Christian education by reaffirming that professional responsibility is fundamentally a theological vocation before it is a technical competency. The teacher’s profession is not merely a contractual role defined by administrative standards but a ministry of faith accompaniment within the educational ecosystem. This perspective challenges functional and mechanistic views of teaching and invites a renewed understanding of education as participation in God’s redemptive work through the formation of young lives. The findings suggest that schools, education authorities, and Christian education stakeholders should provide stronger institutional and structural support for faith-nurturing initiatives in public-school contexts. While maintaining respect for religious diversity, educational systems are called to ensure that Christian students’ spiritual rights are not structurally marginalized. Furthermore, ongoing professional development for CRE teachers should integrate biblical theology, pastoral skills, and contextual pedagogy to strengthen their capacity for holistic ministry in pluralistic environments. This study affirms that nurturing faith is the core of professional responsibility in Christian education, not a peripheral task. Rooted in the authority of Matthew 19:14 and embodied in the lived practices at SMP Negeri 19 Pekanbaru, the professional calling of Christian educators is revealed as a sacred trust: to welcome, guide, protect, and spiritually empower students as rightful participants in the kingdom of God. This calling remains urgent and indispensable in shaping a faithful, resilient, and morally grounded generation amid the complexities of contemporary education.

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