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Indonesian Societas Verbi Divini (SVD) Missionaries in the Netherlands

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Abstract

This article examines the deployment of Indonesian Societas Verbi Divini (SVD) missionaries to the Netherlands as a structured expression of "reverse mission," situating this contemporary phenomenon within a historical relationship spanning over a century. Based on fieldwork conducted in 2025, including semi-structured interviews with six Indonesian SVD priests currently serving in the Netherlands and participant observation in Dutch parishes, this study identifies 83 Indonesian missionaries active throughout the country, with the SVD emerging as the most numerically prominent male congregation. The article further argues that the current movement of Indonesian SVD missionaries to the Netherlands is not a spontaneous response to modern clerical shortages, but rather the latest chapter in a reciprocal relationship that began when Dutch SVD missionaries arrived in Indonesia in 1914. This reverse mission embodies a living theology of reciprocity, wherein the fruits of past evangelization return to revitalize an increasingly secularized Church. These findings contribute to the field of missiology by highlighting structured religious orders, rather than diaspora communities, as the primary institutional vehicles for reverse mission, and by demonstrating that historical missionary ties fundamentally shape contemporary currents of reverse mission.

Keywords: Indonesian Catholicism; missiology; reverse mission; society of the divine word; transnational religious orders

Abstrak

Artikel ini mengkaji penempatan misionaris Societas Verbi Divini (SVD) Indonesia ke Belanda sebagai ekspresi terstruktur dari misi balik, menempatkan fenomena kontemporer ini dalam hubungan historis yang berlangsung lebih dari satu abad. Berdasarkan penelitian lapangan yang dilakukan pada tahun 2025, termasuk wawancara semi-terstruktur dengan enam imam SVD Indonesia yang saat ini melayani di Belanda dan observasi partisipan di paroki-paroki Belanda, studi ini mengidentifikasi 83 misionaris Indonesia yang aktif di seluruh negeri, dengan SVD sebagai kongregasi pria yang paling menonjol secara numerik. Artikel ini selanjutnya menyatakan bahwa pergerakan misionaris SVD Indonesia ke Belanda saat ini bukanlah respons spontan terhadap kekurangan pendeta modern, tetapi merupakan babak terbaru dari hubungan timbal balik yang dimulai ketika misionaris SVD Belanda tiba di Indonesia pada tahun 1914. Misi balik ini mewujudkan teologi timbal balik yang hidup di mana buah dari penginjilan masa lalu kembali untuk memperbarui Gereja yang semakin sekuler. Temuan ini berkontribusi pada kajian misiologi dengan menyoroti ordo keagamaan yang terstruktur, alih-alih komunitas diaspora, sebagai wahana kelembagaan utama misi balik, dan dengan menunjukkan bahwa ikatan misionaris historis secara mendasar membentuk arus misi balik kontemporer.

Kata Kunci: *Katolisisme Indonesia; misiologi; misi balik; serikat sabda Allah; ordo religius transnasional*

INTRODUCTION

The global Catholic Church is undergoing a profound and historical demographic realignment. According to the Pontifical Yearbook 2025 and the *Annuarium Statisticum Ecclesiae* 2023, published by the Holy See in March 2025, the world's Catholic population grew by 1.15% between 2022 and 2023, rising from approximately 1.39 billion to 1.406 billion. Yet this aggregate figure conceals deep regional asymmetries. Growth has been concentrated in the global South: Africa recorded a 2.7% increase in priest numbers, and Asia a 1.6% rise. Europe, by contrast, experienced only marginal Catholic population growth of 0.2%, with many sub-regions showing outright decline. Parallel divergences are visible in vocations, parish vitality, and regular Mass attendance.[1]

Europe, once the uncontested heartland of world Catholicism, is now among the most rapidly secularizing regions on earth. Africa, Asia, and Latin America are emerging as the new demographic and spiritual centers of the faith. Scholars such as Hickman, Ilo, Anderson, or Jenkins, describe this transformation as a "shift in the center of gravity"[2] of global Christianity, or the rise of "global South Christianity."[3] This shift is not merely statistical. It signals a structural reconfiguration of how the Church understands itself, organizes its ministry, and deploys its missionary energies across the world.

This demographic realignment has given rise to the term "reverse mission" or "return mission." It refers to the late-20th-century trend in which Christians from Africa, Asia, and Latin America begin sending missionaries to Europe and North America, effectively reversing the earlier historical flow of mission from the West to the Global South. This shift is tied to demographic changes in global Christianity and the migration of Christians from the Majority World to Western countries.[4]

The dominant missionary paradigm for much of modern history was encapsulated at the 1910 Edinburgh Ecumenical Mission Conference. It promoted a "from West to the rest" model in which European and North American churches carried the Gospel outward to Africa, Asia, and the Americas. That paradigm has now been fundamentally challenged.[5] Increasingly, it is churches in the global South that are dispatching missionaries to reinvigorate faith in Western contexts marked by de-churching, declining clergy numbers, and shrinking congregations. Reverse mission is driven by multiple forces.[6]

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[1] See: Vatican News, *New Church statistics reveal growing Catholic population, fewer pastoral workers*, Vatican News, 20 March 2025 (https://www.vaticannews.va/en/vatican-city/news/2025-03/pontifical-yearbook-2025-priests-religious-statistics.html#:~:text=The%20Vatican%20Publishing%20House%20%28LEV%29%20has%20published%20the,Statistics%2C%20a%20department%20of%20the%20Secretariat%20of%20State)

[2] Albert W. Hickman, "Christianity's shift from the Global North to the Global South." *Review & Expositor* 111.1 (2014): 41-47. https://doi.org/10.1177/0034637313517428 (Original work published 2014); Stan Chu Ilo, "Contesting the shifting center of world christianity to Africa: methodological reconsiderations." *Exchange* 52.1-2 (2023): 122-169. https://doi.org/10.1163/1572543x-bja10029; Allan Heaton Anderson, *To the ends of the earth: Pentecostalism and the transformation of world Christianity*. Oxford University Press, 2013.

[3] Elijah Jong Fil Kim, *The rise of the global South: The decline of Western Christendom and the rise of Majority World Christianity*. Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2012; Philip Jenkins, "The next Christendom: The coming of global Christianity." *Religious Educator: Perspectives on the Restored Gospel* 8.3 (2007): 28.

[4] *Matthew Ojo 2007. "Reverse Mission". In Bonk, Jonathan J. (ed.). Encyclopedia of Mission and Missionaries. London: Routledge. pp. 380–382,* 2007

[5] Greg Young Paek, *Toward a relevant and practical partnership between foreign missions and the indigenous mission forces*. Fuller Theological Seminary, School of World Mission, 1996; Phan Peter C, (2010). The World Missionary Conference, Edinburgh 1910: Challenges for Church and Theology in the Twenty-First Century. *International Bulletin of Missionary Research*, *34*(2), 105-108. https://doi.org/10.1177/239693931003400211

[6] Rev Israel Oluwole Olofinjana, Reverse Mission: Towards an African British Theology. *Transformation*, 37.1 (2019): 52-65. https://doi.org/10.1177/0265378819877902; Richard Burgess, "Bringing Back the Gospel: Reverse

These include the transnational mobility generated by economic migration and diaspora formation, the organizational strength of religious orders whose membership has shifted southward, and above all a deeply held theological conviction that Southern Christianity carries a divine calling to re-evangelize the secularized West. Reverse mission is therefore not simply a pragmatic response to clergy shortages in European dioceses. It is a theologically grounded reorientation of the global missionary enterprise, one that challenges long-standing assumptions about who sends and who receives, who teaches and who learns.

Despite the growing scholarly literature on reverse mission, the field remains uneven. Most studies have focused on the broad sociological dynamics of migration and diaspora religion, or on the experiences of African and Latin American communities in Western Europe. The specific role of religious orders as structured, transnational institutions with deep historical roots in both sending and receiving countries has received comparatively little attention. Furthermore, the relationship between historical missionary ties and contemporary reverse mission flows has rarely been examined systematically. There is a risk that reverse mission is theorized as a rupture with the past, a dramatic reversal, when in reality it often unfolds along pathways first opened by earlier missionary endeavors. The historical dimensions of these transnational religious relationships, and the way they continue to shape contemporary mission, constitutes an important and underexplored area of inquiry. This article addresses that gap.

This study makes an original contribution to the scholarship on reverse mission. It shifts the analytical focus from diaspora communities and individual migrant believers to a structured religious order, the SVD, as the primary unit of analysis. This allows for a more institutionally grounded understanding of how reverse mission is organized, sustained, and theologically motivated. It also integrates historical and contemporary analysis within a single framework, demonstrating that the current presence of Indonesian SVD missionaries in the Netherlands is not a spontaneous response to modern circumstances but the latest chapter of a relationship that spans more than a century.

Indonesia offers a uniquely instructive case for understanding both the dynamics of global South Catholicism and the specific mechanisms of reverse mission. Despite Catholics constituting only 2.9% of Indonesia's population, approximately 8.2 million out of 281.6 million people in 2024, the Indonesian Catholic community has made a contribution to the universal Church that is disproportionate to its size. Its resilience and vitality were publicly recognized when Pope Francis visited in 2024. This visit underscored the significance of vibrant minority Catholic communities in largely non-Christian national contexts.

Central to Indonesian Catholicism's global reach is the Societas Verbi Divini (SVD), the Society of the Divine Word. Founded in the Netherlands in 1875, the SVD established its first mission in Indonesia in 1914, most notably on the island of Flores, which over subsequent decades came to be known as the "Catholic Island." Through more than a century of missionary activity, the SVD built schools, hospitals, parishes, and seminaries, cultivating a local Catholic identity of extraordinary depth and durability.[7] Today, the Indonesian SVD

Mission among Nigerian Pentecostals in Britain". *Journal of Religion in Europe* 4.3 (2011): 429-449. https://doi.org/10.1163/187489211X593499; Paul Freston, "Reverse mission: a discourse in search of reality?." *PentecoStudies* 9.2 (2010): 153-174. https://doi.org/10.1558/ptcs.v9.i2.8948

[7] Fransiska Widyawati, *Catholics in Manggarai, Eastern Indonesia*, Geneva, Swiss: Globethics. Net, 2018; Karel A. Steenbrink, *Catholics in Indonesia, 1808-1942: The spectacular growth of a self-confident minority, 1903-1942*. Vol. 2. Brill, 2003; Sabine Zurschmitten, "Regulating Succession: The Challenge to Secure the Future of Long-Term Catholic Development Cooperation in Western Flores, Eastern Indonesia." *Churches, Mission and Development in the Post-colonial Era*. Academia-Verlag (2019): 111-134. https://doi.org/10.5771/9783896658210-111

province is among the most dynamic in the congregation worldwide. It sends its members to missionary assignments across Asia, Africa, and increasingly to Europe and the Americas.[8]

The Netherlands presents the reverse of this story. Once a bastion of Catholic vitality and a global exporter of missionaries and missionary institutions, including the SVD itself, the Netherlands now ranks among the most secular countries in the world.[9] Trends of de-churching have accelerated, regular mass attendance among self-identified Catholics has fallen to historically low levels, and the local clergy has aged and diminished sharply.[10] In response, Indonesian SVD missionaries have been strategically assigned to Dutch parishes and communities. Their role is to support pastoral life, renew congregational energy, and serve the needs of a Church struggling to sustain its presence and witness.

This article analyzes the historical ties between SVD missions in the Netherlands and Indonesia from the early twentieth century to the present. It also examines the current activities, challenges, and impacts of Indonesian SVD missionaries serving in the Netherlands today. It argues that the contemporary movement of Indonesian SVD missionaries to the Netherlands is best understood not as a disconnected modern phenomenon but as a new expression of a long and shared history. This is a history in which the Dutch founded the SVD, sent it to Indonesia, and now receive its fruits in return. The research draws on a combination of historical and literature review with field studies. These include semi-structured interviews with Indonesian SVD missionaries currently serving in the Netherlands, and participant observations of their pastoral and community activities in Dutch parishes.

An Overview of the Society of the Divine Word

Founded on 8 September 1875 in Steyl, the Netherlands, the Societas Verbi Divini (SVD), or Society of the Divine Word, emerged from one of European Catholicism's most turbulent political moments. Its founder, Arnold Janssen (1837–1909), was a German-born educator and apostolic activist. He responded decisively to Bismarck's Kulturkampf, a legislative campaign that dissolved religious orders, closed seminaries, and severely curtailed Catholic institutional life in Germany.[11] By establishing the SVD just across the Dutch border in Steyl, Janssen deliberately placed the nascent society beyond the reach of these repressive policies. This strategic choice secured an institutional foothold from which a global missionary enterprise could develop.

Janssen's vision extended beyond a refuge from persecution. His 1874 publication, Little Messenger of the Sacred Heart, signaled a broader evangelizing ambition. The SVD's early structural decisions reflected this global outlook. In 1878, the society began admitting lay brothers, expanding its operational capacity in administrative and technical domains. This was followed by the founding of two affiliated women's congregations: the Missionary Sisters

[8] Apud Curiam Generalitiam SVD Romae, *Catalogus Sodalium Societatis Verbi Divini,* 2025.

[9] Erik Sengers, "Religion in the Netherlands." *Annual Review of the Sociology of Religion* (2010): 439-459. https://doi.org/10.1163/ej.9789004187900.i-488.132; Hans Knippenberg, "Secularisation and the rise of immigrant religions: the case of the Netherlands." *AUC GEOGRAPHICA* 44.1 (2019): 63-82. https://doi.org/10.14712/23361980.2015.63

[10] James C. Kennedy, "Recent Dutch religious history and the limits." *The Dutch and their Gods: Secularization and Transformation of Religion in the Netherlands since 1950* 3 (2005): 27; Todd H Weir, "Heritage and religious change in contemporary Europe: interactions along three axes." *Trajecta. Religion, Culture and Society in the Low Countries* 30.2 (2021): 217-242. https://doi.org/10.5117/TRA2021.2.001.WEIR

[11] Andrzej Miotk, "Thomas Tien Keng-hsin, SVD: The historical greatness of the first Cardinal of China and the Far East Part one." *Annales Missiologici Posnanienses* 23 (2018): 55-76. https://doi.org/10.14746/amp.2018.23.4; Bernhard Scheid, "Wilhelm Schmidt and his East Asian Legacy." *Korea Europe Review: an interdisciplinary journal of politics, society, and economics* 6 (2024); 1-19. https://doi.org/10.48770/ker.2024.no6.41

Servants of the Holy Spirit (SSpS) on 8 December 1889, and the Missionary Sisters Servants of the Holy Spirit of Perpetual Adoration (SSpSAP) on 8 September 1896. Together, these bodies created a diversified and interdependent missionary network with both active and contemplative dimensions.[12]

International mission work began almost immediately. In 1879, Johann Baptist Anzer and Joseph Freinademetz departed for Shandong, China. There they established schools and catechetical centers while engaging seriously with local cultural practices. Freinademetz's inculturated approach to ministry would later earn him canonization. Subsequent decades saw SVD missionaries reach the United States (1895), Togo, Papua New Guinea, Indonesia (1914), and India (1932). In the United States, the society notably founded a seminary serving African American communities in Bay St. Louis, Mississippi (1923). This commitment to marginalized populations differentiates the SVD from more conventional colonial missionary models.[13]

By the early twentieth century, the SVD had evolved from a small community housed in a former Dutch inn into one of the Catholic Church's most geographically extensive missionary societies. Its institutional breadth encompasses educational institutions, seminaries, social development projects, and interfaith engagement. This breadth reflected Janssen's founding conviction that missionary activity demanded intellectual rigor, cultural sensitivity, and structural sustainability. The Dutch province, in particular, served as an organizational and spiritual hub. It channeled resources and personnel toward emerging missions across Asia, Africa, and the Americas.

The SVD's historical trajectory illustrates how institutional resilience, born of political adversity, can generate enduring transnational religious movements. This legacy continues to shape Catholic missionary practice globally.

The SVD Mission in Indonesia: Historical Expansion and Social Transformation

Although Catholics constitute a small minority within Indonesia's religiously plural landscape, the Society of the Divine Word (SVD) has exercised a disproportionately significant influence on Catholic institutional development, particularly in Eastern Indonesia. Understanding the contours of that influence requires more than a chronological account of missionary arrivals and baptismal statistics. It demands a critical examination of the structural conditions that enabled missionary expansion, the entanglements of evangelization with colonial power, and the long-term social transformations that followed from a century of SVD presence. The SVD mission in Indonesia is, in this sense, a case study in what missiologists have increasingly termed "integral mission," that is, the inseparability of spiritual proclamation and material transformation. It is also a story shaped by the ambiguities of a mission operating within, and sometimes against, the grain of colonial order.

Catholicism's introduction to the Indonesian archipelago is itself bound up with the history of European imperial expansion. While scholarly debate continues regarding earlier traces of Christian presence as far back as the seventh century, the systematic propagation of Catholicism is widely associated with Portuguese maritime expansion in the sixteenth century, culminating in the recorded baptisms in Halmahera in 1534. Dominican missionaries reached Solor and Flores by 1562, rapidly developing twenty-seven stations and claiming approximately fifty thousand Catholics within a short period. This rapid expansion, however, cannot be understood apart from its political scaffolding. Portuguese commercial and

[12] Eric Lacandula, "Andrzej Miotk SVD, 2022, The Untiring Missionary of the Word and the Spirit, Vol. 1, Arnold Janssen: From the Sacred Heart to World-Wide Vision, 646 p.; Vol. 2, Arnold Janssen's Spiritual Journey, 331 p., Collegium Verbi Divini, Roma. EAN: 97." *Nurt SVD* 152.2 (2022): 296-300.

[13] Miotik, *Ibid*.

territorial interests in the spice trade created the infrastructure and political conditions under which missionaries could operate.[14] The mission was not merely accompanying colonialism. In important respects, it is structurally dependent upon it.

The subsequent Dutch displacement of the Portuguese in the seventeenth century illustrates how profoundly missionary fortunes were tied to colonial geopolitics. When the Dutch expelled the Portuguese from Flores, the Catholic mission was severely weakened. This occurred not through any failure of evangelization per se, but because the mission had lost its colonial patron. The Dutch operated predominantly as Protestants under the Dutch East India Company (VOC), and their political dominance created an uncomfortable environment for Catholic institutional growth. This episode raises a foundational question that runs through the entire history of Catholic missions in Indonesia. To what extent was missionary expansion genuinely autonomous, and to what extent was it contingent upon the protection and patronage of European colonial powers? The nineteenth-century Jesuit mission across the Lesser Sunda Islands, which ultimately withdrew around 1900 due to manpower shortages, offers another illustration of this structural dependency.[15] Its limitations were not caused by indigenous resistance, but by institutional and logistical constraints originating in Europe itself.

The establishment of the Apostolic Prefecture in Batavia in 1808 under Dutch colonial administration further cemented the structural relationship between the Catholic Church and colonial governance. While this created a formal hierarchical framework for the mission, it also meant that the jurisdictional expansion of the Church continued, in part, along the administrative lines drawn by colonial rule. The entrusting of the Lesser Sunda Islands to the SVD in 1912, and the formal transfer of mission control from the Jesuits in Timor in 1913, were acts mediated by both ecclesiastical and colonial authorities.[16] The SVD therefore entered a landscape already shaped by centuries of European presence, indigenous adaptation, and the power asymmetries that inevitably accompanied colonial encounters.

The SVD missionaries who arrived in the early twentieth century brought with them not only a theological vision but also a constellation of assumptions about modernity, progress, and what constituted development. This is not a minor consideration. Across the history of Christian missions in colonized territories, scholars have documented what came to be called the "civilization project." This refers to the idea that evangelization and the inculcation of European cultural, agricultural, and social norms were mutually reinforcing endeavors. The SVD mission in Flores was not exempt from this logic. The construction of schools, roads, and irrigation systems, together with the promotion of new agricultural and livestock practices, were presented simultaneously as pastoral care and as modernization. While these contributed undeniably improved material conditions for many communities, they also introduced new forms of social organization, new hierarchies of knowledge, and new dependencies. These dependencies were economic, institutional, and cultural in character, and they reshaped indigenous social structures in ways not always chosen by local communities themselves.

The arrival of the Sisters of the Order of the Servants of the Holy Spirit (SSpS) in 1917 extended this logic into the domain of gender and domesticity. The establishment of schools

[14] Hugues Didier, "Francis Xavier: Figure of Exile and Holiness." *International journal for the Study of the Christian Church* 7.2 (2007): 134-156. https://doi.org/10.1080/14742250701256187; Aritonang, Jan Sihar, and Karel Adriaan Steenbrink, eds., *Ibid*, chapter 3

[15] Karel Steenbrink, "Dutch colonial containment of Islam in Manggarai, West-Flores, in favour of Catholicism, 1907-1942." *Bijdragen tot de taal-, land-en volkenkunde/Journal of the Humanities and Social Sciences of Southeast Asia* 169.1 (2013): 104-128. https://doi.org/10.1163/22134379-12340024

[16] Jan Sihar Aritonang and Karel Adriaan Steenbrink, eds., *Ibid*, chapter 3; Widyawati, Fransiska, *Ibid*.

and dormitories for girls, hospitals, health clinics, and vocational training programs carried genuine emancipatory potential for women in a context of significant structural inequality. At the same time, these programs were embedded in a particular vision of femininity and household management.[17] That vision reflected both Catholic social teaching and European bourgeois norms of the period. A critical reading does not dismiss the real improvements in health and educational access that followed. It does, however, ask whose vision of women's flourishing was being enacted, and whether local women participated in shaping that vision or primarily received it.

The SVD's strategic choice to establish its mission center at Ende reflected a sophisticated territorial logic, prioritizing geographical centrality and access to the western regions of Flores, including Ngada and Manggarai. The founding of a minor seminary in Sikka in 1926, its relocation to Mataloko in 1929, the establishment of the first novitiate in 1933, and the founding of Indonesia's first local scholasticate at Ledalero in 1937 represented a deliberate effort to indigenize the mission. The aim was to cultivate local vocations rather than remain permanently dependent on European personnel. The ordination of the first SVD priests and indigenous clergy in 1941 and 1942 to 1943 was thus a significant structural milestone. It marked a transition from a purely imported clergy to the emergence of a locally rooted religious institution.

This trajectory toward institutional self-sufficiency accelerated considerably in the postwar decades. By the 1980s, European SVD personnel stopped sending missionaries to Indonesia. This occurred not because the mission had failed, but because Indonesia had developed the internal capacity to sustain and expand it independently. This reversal of missionary directionality is analytically significant. By 2012, 385 SVD missionaries from the East Nusa Tenggara region had been deployed across 52 countries, including the Netherlands itself.[18] The 2025 SVD catalog identifies the Indonesian contingent as the largest national group within the global Society. What began as a European missionary project in a colonized territory had, over the course of a century, inverted its own logic. The former mission field had become a primary sender of missionaries to the former sending country.

The aggregate outcomes of the SVD mission in Flores are, by any measure, striking. Within twenty-five years of sustained presence, more than half of the island's population had adopted Catholicism. After approximately fifty years, Catholics constituted 89% of Flores' population. Today, one third of all Indonesian Catholics are of Flores origin. The province of East Nusa Tenggara remains the only Catholic-majority province in a nation that is home to the world's largest Muslim population. These figures are not merely religious statistics. They mark a profound and lasting cultural transformation in which Catholicism has become constitutive of Florenese identity in ways that exceed institutional affiliation.

Yet the scale of this transformation also invites sober reflection. Mass conversion processes, wherever they occur, are rarely reducible to individual spiritual conviction alone. They unfold within fields of social pressure, institutional incentives, and structural power that complicate a simple narrative of free religious choice. Missiological scholarship has increasingly attended to the conditions under which conversion operates. Scholars examine the role of schools and hospitals as both genuine services and vectors of cultural influence, the relationship between missionary presence and colonial legitimacy, and the long-term consequences for indigenous cosmologies and social practices that are displaced or absorbed.

[17] Karel Steenbrink, *Catholics in Indonesia, 1808-1903: A Documented History, Volume 1*. Vol. 196. Brill, 2021.

[18] Alexander Jebadu, Donatus Sermada, Kristianus Sambu, Pieter Dile & Eko Yuliantoro, *Cross-Cultural Mission of Indonesian SVD-Missionaries in Foreign Countries*, (2012): 37-99

A historically honest account of the SVD mission must hold these tensions together. It must acknowledge the genuine contributions to education, healthcare, and social development while remaining attentive to the asymmetries of power within which those contributions were made.

The SVD mission in Indonesia represents one of the most consequential episodes of Catholic missionary history in the twentieth century, measured both by its demographic reach and its institutional legacy. It is a history that cannot be told as a simple story of faith overcoming obstacles, nor as a story of colonial imposition alone. It is, more accurately, a complex negotiation between missionary initiatives, colonial structures, indigenous agencies, and the transformative possibilities and limitations of institutions built across profound differences of culture and power. Understanding this complexity is the necessary foundation for any serious engagement with what the SVD mission means for the ongoing work of Catholic social witnesses in Indonesia and beyond.

Indonesian SVD Missionaries in the Netherlands: Field Research Findings

The Structural Context of Reverse Mission

The deployment of Indonesian missionaries to the Netherlands cannot be understood in isolation from the broader institutional crisis affecting Catholic religious life in Western Europe. Since the last decades of the twentieth century, European Catholic provinces have experienced a marked and accelerating decline in religious vocations, compounded by the progressive secularization of public life, the erosion of institutional religious authority, and a series of internal crises that have weakened public trust in the Church. These structural conditions have affected the SVD no less than other religious orders.

In October 1990, SVD provinces across Europe convened in Roscommon, Ireland, specifically to address the trajectory of decline. The resulting Roscommon Consensus constituted a formal institutional acknowledgment that Europe could no longer be regarded solely as a sending region. One of its key agreements stated that:

> "The fields of activities on the Society of the Divine Word in Europe are to be considered in the same way as those of the other regions of the world in the light of our constitutions and the priorities drawn up by the 13th General Chapter."[19]

Following contested internal debate, SVD Europe formally designated the continent as a new missionary field, open to missionaries from outside Europe and to the development of what the document termed "new frontiers in mission within Europe." This decision created the structural opening through which Indonesian missionaries would eventually enter the Netherlands.

The phenomenon that has followed is analytically described in missiological literature as "reverse mission," referring to the movement of missionaries from formerly colonized, non-Western regions toward the historical Christian societies of the global North. This reversal carries significant theoretical weight. It challenges linear models of missionary diffusion that posit a unidirectional flow from Western sending churches to non-Western receiving ones. In the Indonesian-Dutch case, this reversal is particularly resonant, given that the SVD itself originated in the Netherlands and that Dutch missionaries were among the primary agents of Catholic expansion in Indonesia during the early twentieth century. The current deployment of Indonesian SVD missionaries to the Netherlands thus enacts a structural inversion with deep historical significance.

[19] Roscommon Consensus, from the SVD Archive, 1990 (manuscript)

The Composition and Organizational Framework of Indonesian Missionaries in the Netherlands

Field research conducted in 2025 identified 83 Indonesian missionaries active across the Netherlands, serving in major cities, small towns, and rural communities. This cohort is notably diverse in terms of gender, congregational affiliation, and regional origin. It consists of 43 women drawn from 11 different women's religious orders, including the Congregatio Missionalis Servarum Spiritus Sancti (SSpS), the Sisters of Charity of Our Lady of Mercy in Tilburg (SCMM), the Dochters van Maria en Josseph (DMJ), the Franciscanes of St. Georgius Martir (FSGM), and several others. The male contingent numbers 39 individuals representing 15 religious orders, among them the SVD, the Ordo Fratrum Minorum (OFM), the Salesians of Don Bosco (SDB), and the Congregatie Immaculati Cordis Mariae (CICM), among others.

Within the male cohort, the SVD is the most numerically prominent congregation, with 10 active members recorded at the time of research. A total of 12 Indonesian SVD missionaries have been deployed to the Netherlands since the 1980s, including those who have since returned to Indonesia. This relative numerical strength reflects both the organizational capacity of SVD Indonesia and the sustained institutional relationship between the Indonesian and Dutch provinces of the Society. As Moorman[20] and Wijsen[21] have noted, the reasons for missionary deployment in this context are varied, encompassing appointments as order leaders, responses to local membership shortages, academic study, and specific pastoral invitations. The Indonesian missionaries thus occupy a range of institutional roles rather than a uniform function.

For purposes of coordination and mutual support, Indonesian missionaries in the Netherlands operate under two organizational umbrellas. The Indonesian Missionaries Brotherhood functions as an inter-congregational network facilitating information sharing, communal spiritual practice, and mutual care. It convenes annually for retreats and maintains ongoing communication through digital platforms. A second structure, the Indonesian Catholic Family (Indonesian Catholic Family, KKI), serves as the primary vehicle for pastoral outreach to the Indonesian Catholic diaspora and involves active SVD participation.

Deployment Mechanisms: Institutional Processes and Individual Trajectories

The process by which Indonesian SVD missionaries were selected and deployed to the Netherlands is both formally structured and, in practice, shaped by individual pastoral history. Based on interviews conducted with six SVD priests currently serving in the Netherlands, the standard deployment process involves four sequential stages. First, seminarians register their interest in international mission prior to making their perpetual vows. Second, formal applications are submitted to the SVD General Leadership in Rome. Third, the General Council evaluates candidates and makes deployment decisions. Fourth, ordination is followed by assignment to a specific mission territory. This process was described by Fr KN,[22] a member of the SVD General Council in Rome, as grounded in personal discernment, communal evaluation, and final hierarchical approval.

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[20] Gerard Moorman, "Learning What it Means to Be Part of Multicultural Body of Christ: Experiences within Catholic Religious Orders in the Netherlands", Exchange 41 (2012): 68-86. https://doi.org/10.1163/157254312X618780

[21] Frans J.S. Wijsen, "Foreign Priests in the Netherlands. Reversed Mission, Mutual Assistance and Internal Outsourcing", *Exchange* 45 (2016): 66-85. https://doi.org/10.1163/1572543X-12341385

[22] As a note, all respondent names referenced in this research will be written only in initials, in order to protect their real identities. The term "Fr." means "Father," which is the title used to address an ordained priest.

An alternative pathway also exists. Missionaries with substantial pastoral or field experience in other Indonesian regions may be appointed directly, based on demonstrated competency and the specific needs of the receiving province. In practice, deployments to the Netherlands occur through both channels: some missionaries are sent following initial field experience, while others arrive directly after ordination.

The pioneering deployment to the Netherlands began with Fr. DG, dispatched in 1995, shortly after the Roscommon Consensus had been formally endorsed. Fr. DG, from the Ende Province on Flores Island, is recognized within SVD institutional memory as the first Indonesian missionary to the Netherlands. He was followed in 1996 by Fr. GK, also from the Ende region. Both had prior pastoral and seminary experience in Indonesia. However, both returned to Indonesia in 1997, following significant difficulties in adapting to the Dutch language and cultural environment. Their early departure was corroborated in interviews with current SVD missionaries in the Netherlands and with church actors on Flores Island. It illustrates a recurring pattern documented in reverse mission scholarship: the transition from a high-demand pastoral context to a secularized, institutionally weakened receiving environment generates acute disorientation that formal pre-deployment preparation alone cannot resolve.

The trajectory of Fr. MJ, who was deployed in 1997 following these initial setbacks, constitutes a particularly instructive case study in missionary resilience and adaptive capacity. Prior to his assignment to the Netherlands, Fr. MJ had served in the remote interior of Alor Island in East Nusa Tenggara, a context characterized by extreme climatic conditions, infrastructure deficiency, economic hardship, linguistic barriers, and the marginal position of Catholicism within the local social landscape. It was precisely his demonstrated capacity to persevere and ultimately succeed in that extraordinarily difficult environment that led SVD leadership to select him for the Netherlands. Interview data reveals that Fr. MJ received the assignment with initial reluctance. Drawing on his commitment to the SVD charism and on the founding narrative of Arnold Janssen, he accepted the mission. His subsequent 21 years of service in the Netherlands established him as the foundational figure of the Indonesian SVD presence in the country.

From 2001 onward, a gradual expansion of Indonesian SVD deployment followed, encompassing Fr. Kl (2001), Fr. YA (2007), Fr. RS (2011), Fr. EM (2016), Fr. SK (2019), Fr. I (2019), Fr. AM (2020), and Fr. Kr (2021). Among these, some proactively applied for their assignments while others were directly appointed. Interview testimonials from Fr. EM, Fr. AM, and Fr. RS consistently emphasized the role of Fr. MJ as a mentoring presence whose prior navigation of integration challenges significantly facilitated their own transitions. This finding points to the importance of institutional memory and mentorship networks in sustaining reverse mission deployments across generational waves.

The Works and Ministries of Indonesian SVD Missionaries

When Indonesian missionaries began arriving in the Netherlands in the mid-1990s, they encountered an SVD community already in advanced institutional decline. Seminaries, formation centers, and schools that had historically embodied the Society's educational mission had ceased operations. Several SVD properties have been sold. The remaining Dutch SVD members were predominantly elderly and retired, with limited capacity for active ministry. No specific institutional SVD work awaited the incoming missionaries. This absence of pre-existing roles constituted a significant structural challenge that from the missionaries themselves.

An additional structural constraint shaped the early years of deployment. Unlike the Indonesian pastoral context, where priests may readily assist in parish work through informal arrangements, pastoral service in the Netherlands requires explicit appointment by diocesan authorities. This regulatory distinction, combined with the language barrier that typically required up to three years to overcome, meant that newly arrived missionaries faced extended periods of functional marginalization. One missionary, speaking of his early experience, described feeling "*like a pig*," (Fr. MJ's words) a person possessing knowledge and pastoral capability but rendered unable to contribute meaningfully, overwhelmed by confusion, loneliness, and a sense of uselessness. This testimony captures the phenomenological dimension of early-phase reverse mission experience in a way that institutional accounts alone cannot.

In response to this structural vacuum, Indonesian missionaries developed alternative forms of engagement. Several, including Fr. Wijsen, sought volunteer work with charitable social organizations engaged in food distribution to the poor. These organizations frequently operate in close collaboration with the Catholic Church, which mobilizes parish networks and diocesan structures to address poverty and nutritional insecurity. Missionary participation in such work served multiple functions. It provided a practical outlet for pastoral identity during the pre-appointment period. It functioned, as several missionaries described it, as a form of vocational purification, deepening their sense of divine calling outside institutional structures. It also facilitated the acquisition of Dutch language skills and cultural competencies through sustained interaction with local communities. In this respect, the charitable work phase was not merely a transitional necessity but an integral dimension of the missionaries' formation as cross-cultural ministers.

A second major domain of ministry involves pastoral care for the Indonesian Catholic diaspora. Since the early 1980s, the Indonesian Catholic Family (KKI-*Keluarga Katolik Indonesia*) has organized Indonesian-language liturgies and community gatherings across major Dutch cities, extending into Belgium. Indonesian SVD priests play a central role in these communities. Their work encompasses the celebration of the Eucharist and administration of sacraments in Indonesia, pastoral home visits, spiritual direction, support for migrants navigating integration challenges, faith formation in a foreign cultural context, and the organization of cultural and religious events that strengthen community cohesion. Several SVD clergy serve as KKI regional moderators, coordinating activities and maintaining liaison with diocesan authorities. This pastoral dimension reflects the broader dynamic of reverse mission: Indonesian missionaries serve not only the host society but also sustain the faith life of Indonesian Catholics in the diaspora, creating transnational spiritual and cultural bridges.

A third domain, accessible only after missionaries have achieved substantive Dutch language proficiency and familiarity with ecclesiastical procedures, involves appointment to leadership roles within Dutch parishes. Fr, MJ was appointed pastor of the Duivendrecht parish, and Fr. EM assumed pastoral leadership of Hoofddorp Parish. Others serve as associate pastors or members of pastoral teams across various dioceses. These appointments represent the fullest institutional integration of Indonesian missionaries into the Dutch Catholic structure and signify their recognition by local ecclesial authorities as competent ministers within the Dutch context.

Beyond parish ministry, Indonesian SVD missionaries are also involved in the administration of retreat centers and the Mission Museum in Steyl, the historic birthplace of the SVD. Fr. SK oversees the museum, whose collection encompasses artifacts from every region of SVD global activity, including ancestral statues, traditional garments, weapons, tapestries, ceramics, and natural history specimens. The museum functions as a public

educational space and as a site of institutional memory for the global society. The retreat houses in Steyl, also under Indonesian SVD administration, remain open to the public as centers for spiritual renewal. These roles place Indonesian missionaries in a position of custodianship over the very institutional heritage from which the SVD mission to Indonesia originally emerged.

Challenges and Adaptive Processes

Field research consistently identified language acquisition as the primary and most persistent challenge facing Indonesian missionaries in the Netherlands. Interview data from five SVD missionaries indicated that up to three years may be required before missionaries feel confident using Dutch in professional and social contexts. This protracted period of linguistic vulnerability is compounded by simultaneous adjustment demands across multiple dimensions: climatic adaptation, unfamiliar cultural norms, new institutional and civic structures, and a social environment in which the public role of religion is far more circumscribed than in Indonesia.

Beyond the pragmatics of language and adaptation, missionaries must also navigate more fundamental tensions arising from divergent value systems. In a society in which secular liberal values are institutionally embedded and widely normalized, Indonesian missionaries frequently encounter significant ethical and theological divergence from prevailing Dutch social attitudes on questions of family structure, marriage, sexual ethics, abortion, and euthanasia. These are not merely abstract theological differences. They emerge concretely in parish team dynamics, in conversations with parishioners, and in broader social interactions. Missionaries interviewed for this research reported maintaining their Catholic convictions while simultaneously cultivating genuine respect for what they observed as the disciplined, industrial, and humanistic qualities of Dutch civic life.

This capacity to hold theological commitment and cultural respect in productive tension, rather than experiencing them as mutually exclusive, represents a form of intercultural competency that the reverse mission experience itself appears to generate. The adaptive process, while demanding, ultimately contributes to the formation of missionaries who are both more resilient and more sophisticated cross-cultural interlocutors than those who were at the point of initial deployment.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study both confirm and complicate existing theoretical frameworks for understanding reverse mission. Scholars such as Ojo,[23] Burgess,[24] and Freston[25] have framed reverse mission primarily as a sociological response to migration and diaspora formation, often emphasizing the role of individual believers or loosely organized congregations as agents of re-evangelization in Western societies. The Indonesian SVD case suggests a more institutionally grounded model. The movement of Indonesian missionaries to the Netherlands is not driven primarily by diaspora dynamics but by deliberate congregational discernment, structured deployment mechanisms, and formal agreements between sending and receiving provinces. This finding supports Wijsen's[26] argument that the organized religious order constitutes a distinct and undertheorized institutional vehicle for reverse mission; one whose

[23] Matthew Ojo, *Ibid*.
[24] Richard Burgess, *Ibid.*
[25] Paul Freston, *Ibid*.
[26] Frans Wijdsen J.S, *Ibid*

dynamics differ substantially from those of migrant Pentecostal communities or African-led independent churches.

A second significant finding concerns the role of historical missionary ties in shaping contemporary reverse mission flows. Much of the existing literature treats reverse mission as a rupture, a dramatic inversion of prior directional patterns. The Indonesian-Dutch case reveals a more continuous dynamic. The SVD's institutional presence in Indonesia, built over more than a century of engagement in education, healthcare, and social development, generated precisely the institutional depth and human capital that now sustains reverse mission. The Indonesian province's emergence as the largest national contingent within the global SVD is not separable from this history. In this light, reverse mission appears less as a reversal than as a completion of a longer reciprocal process. This finding resonates with Olofinjana's[27] concept of "mutual mission," in which the exchange of spiritual and pastoral resources between formerly colonizing and colonized churches constitutes a relational and theological deepening rather than merely a demographic correction.

The challenges documented in this study also carry theoretical significance. The protracted language acquisition period, the experience of institutional marginalization during the pre-appointment phase, and the navigation of deep value divergences between Indonesian Catholic formation and Dutch secular liberalism are not incidental obstacles. They constitute the formative conditions of the reverse mission experience itself. Moorman's[28] observation that multicultural religious communities in the Netherlands generate both intercultural competency and institutional tension is borne out in this study. The missionaries who successfully navigate these challenges demonstrate a form of pastoral resilience that is itself a missiological resource. Their capacity to hold doctrinal conviction and cultural respect in productive tension models a form of cross-cultural witness that the receiving Church urgently needs. Freston's[29] cautionary note that reverse mission is often more aspirational than operational finds a qualified counterpoint here. In the SVD case, organizational structure, institutional history, and theological motivation combine to produce a reverse mission that is both sustained and substantively transformative.

CONCLUSION

This article has argued that the presence of Indonesian SVD missionaries in the Netherlands represents a historically rooted, institutionally structured, and theologically motivated expression of reverse mission. The current deployment is not a sudden inversion of missionary directionality but the continuation of a century-long reciprocal relationship. The Dutch SVD founded the mission in Indonesia; Indonesia now returns missionaries to the Netherlands. This circular dynamic challenges linear models of missionary diffusion and invites a rethinking of the categories of sender and receiver, center and periphery, as applied to global Catholic mission.

The SVD case demonstrates that religious orders, with their transnational structures, shared charisms, and deep institutional histories, offer a distinctive and underexplored model of reverse mission. Unlike diaspora communities, which often initiate reverse mission organically through migration, the SVD deploys missionaries through deliberate congregational processes embedded in a global institutional framework. This structural dimension enables a form of reverse mission that is more sustainable, more theologically

[27] R.I.O. Olofinjana, *Ibid*.
[28] Gerard Moorman, *Ibid*.
[29] Paul Freston, *Ibid*.

articulate, and more responsive to the specific pastoral needs of the receiving Church than spontaneous or individually motivated forms of engagement.

At its theological core, this reverse mission is an ecclesiology of hope in action. Indonesian SVD missionaries bring to a secularized Netherlands not merely pastoral labor but a witness born of resilience, minority-church vitality, and a theologically robust commitment to mission as participation in God's purposes. Their presence testifies that hope is not disappointed. The seeds sown by Dutch missionaries in Indonesian soil more than a century ago have germinated, matured, and now bear fruit in the very soil from which they came. Future research should attend to the long-term ecclesial impacts of this reverse mission on Dutch parish life, to the experiences of the Indonesian missionaries themselves as subjects of cross-cultural formation, and to comparative cases across other European countries receiving missionaries from the global South.

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