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The Legal effects of unregistered Christian churches on believers in Tanzania mainland: Evidence from Rungwe District, Mbeya Region

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Abstract

This study examines the legal effects of unregistered Christian churches on believers in Tanzania Mainland, drawing on qualitative evidence from Rungwe District, Mbeya Region. It explores the implications of church registration for believers' legal protection, financial accountability, continuity of worship, and relationships with surrounding communities. The study employed a qualitative research design, purposive sampling, interviews, focus-group interviews, and documentary review. Participants included pastors, church leaders, believers, Roman Catholic priests, church trustees and secretaries, and officials associated with the Registrar of Societies.

The findings reveal four major concerns: limited awareness of churches' registration status and uncertainty about available legal protection; vulnerability to financial mismanagement due to weak accountability; disruption of congregational life when churches depend heavily on individual leaders; and conflicts with neighboring residents arising from excessive noise during worship. Evidence from Rungwe District illustrates how these challenges may undermine believers' confidence in religious leadership and affect peaceful coexistence within communities. The study argues that church registration alone cannot guarantee suitable protection; effective safeguards also require transparent financial management, sound internal governance, leadership succession arrangements, and accessible complaint mechanisms.

The study recommends simplifying and clarifying registration procedures, raising public awareness, strengthening church accountability, and establishing fair, religion-neutral mechanisms for resolving community disputes. It emphasizes that regulation should protect believers and the public while respecting constitutional freedom of religion. Given its qualitative design and geographical focus, the findings are context-specific and cannot be generalized to all Christian churches in Tanzania Mainland.

Keywords: Unregistered churches, believers, religious freedom, accountability, church registration, Tanzania, Rungwe District.

1. Introduction

Christian churches provide spaces for worship, fellowship, teaching, pastoral support and collective action. In many communities, they also contribute to social assistance and moral guidance. The growth and diversity of Christian churches in Tanzania Mainland cannot be treated as a social problem. The central question is how religious freedom can be enjoyed alongside legal compliance, accountability and protection of the people who participate in religious life[1].

[1] WILKEN, R.L (2021), *Liberty in the things of God. The Christian origins of religious freedom*. Yale University Press. Also, read MUNA Ndulo, (2019), Freedom of religion. An International perspective Journal.

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The Constitution of the United Republic of Tanzania, 1977 protects freedom of thought, conscience and religion as it provides under Article 19(1)[2], as discussed in the underlying research, provides the constitutional foundation for freedom of religion. That protection is important for individuals and communities who wish to worship, teach, practice and manifest their beliefs. At the same time, the findings explains that religious activity takes place within a legal order and refers to Article 30(2)[3], as a basis for lawful limitations intended to protect public interests such as safety, order, peace, morality and the rights of others. The relationship between these provisions requires a careful balance. Regulation should not become a cause for suppressing belief, but religious freedom should not be interpreted as removing all responsibility for conduct that affects other people[4].

The findings on which this study is based examines the effectiveness of laws and practices governing the registration of religious institutions in Tanzania Mainland, with a case study of Christian churches in Mbeya Region and particular attention to Rungwe District. Its third specific objective is to identify the effects of unregistered Christian churches on believers in Tanzania Mainland. This study isolates that objective and develops it into a focused manuscript. It considers what the reported field evidence indicates about worshippers' legal protection, financial contributions, continuity of congregational life and relationships between churches and neighboring residents.

The problem is not simply that an institution may lack a registration certificate. Registration is relevant because it can help establish an identifiable organization, clarify its governance and create a basis for accountability as it provides in section 3 of the Societies Act[5]. Where a church operates outside formal registration and has weak internal governance, members may have difficulty determining who is responsible for funds, what happens if a founder leaves, or where to take a complaint. The interviews report that some church leaders and pastors were unfamiliar with registration requirements, while some churches continued to operate without registration. Those conditions are relevant to the risks experienced by believers, although registration alone cannot guarantee ethical leadership or prevent every form of abuse.

The empirical material also points to effects on the wider community. The findings records complaints about high-volume speakers and microphones used during worship extending towards midnight in Kawetele Ward. A Ward Executive Officer reportedly acknowledged that residents complained about the noise but described difficulty resolving such complaints in the context of freedom of worship. This example illustrates a practical challenge for local administration, the task is not to decide which beliefs are legitimate, but to address conduct that may interfere with residents' rest and peaceful enjoyment of their homes through fair, consistently applied rules.

This study is organized as follows. Party 2 explains the legal and conceptual setting. Party 3 outlines the study's methodology as reported in the findings. Party 4 presents the findings by theme. Party 5 discusses the implications for believers, church governance and community relations. Party 6 proposes practical and legal responses, and Party 7 concludes with limitations and areas for further research.

2. Legal and Conceptual Framework

2.1 Religious freedom and the position of believers

Religious freedom protects a person's ability to hold, adopt, change or manifest a religion or belief. In the context of churches, manifestation may take place individually or collectively through worship, teaching, observance and organized religious life. The findings rely on Article 19(1)[6], and discusses international human-rights principles, including Article 18[7]. These protections matter because believers should not be prevented from gathering for worship merely because their faith is unpopular or their congregation is small.

The distinction between belief and the conduct of an organization is important. A person's inner conviction is different from the administration of a church, the handling of money, the use of loudspeakers in residential areas or the response to complaints of harm. Requirements that apply to organizations should be assessed for legality, clarity, fairness and proportionality. Regulation that is unclear, inaccessible or selectively enforced may undermine freedom. Regulation that is transparent and directed at legitimate public interests can help protect the rights of believers and others[8].

For the purposes of this study, believers are not treated simply as subjects to be controlled. They are rights-holders and participants in the life of religious organizations. Their interests include freedom to worship, access to truthful information about the organization they support, reasonable assurance that contributions are handled responsibly, continuity of pastoral and congregational arrangements, and a fair route for raising concerns. Protection of

[2] The Constitution of the United Republic of Tanzania, 1977 as amended from time to time

[3] The Constitution of the United Republic of Tanzania, 1977 as amended from time to time

[4] ODIEMO BA (2016). The Debate for and Against State Regulation of Churches in Kenya (Master's Dissertation). University of Nairobi.pg. 60

[5] [Cap 337, R.E 2023], that an association shall not operate as a society unless it is registered with the Registrar in accordance with the law.

[6] The Constitution of the United Republic of Tanzania, 1977 as amended from time to time, which provides freedom of religion including freedom to change his religion of faith

[7] International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), which provides freedom of religion or to adopt a religion or belief of his choice, and freedom, either individually or in community with others and in public or private to manifest his religion or belief in worship, observance, practice and teaching.

[8] HACKETT R (2011). "Regulating Religious Freedom in Africa." Emory International Law Review.862

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believers should be understood as both a legal and a governance issue[9].

2.2 Registration as a form of organizational recognition

The findings identify the Societies Act[10], and related rules as central parts of the domestic framework for registration of societies, including religious organizations. It refers to statutory requirements for registration before a society operates and to the Registrar of Societies under the Ministry of Home Affairs. It also discusses the Trustees' Incorporation Act[11], in relation to trustees and property held for religious or other purposes.

Registration may serve several practical functions. First, it can make the identity of an organization easier to verify. Second, it can support clarity about its constitution, leadership and authorized representatives. Third, it can help believers and public officials distinguish an organization from an individual who claims to act on its behalf. Fourth, it may facilitate administrative communication and the handling of complaints. These potential functions depend on implementation. An organization can be registered yet poorly governed, and a registration system can fail if its requirements are unclear or the process is prohibitively difficult[12].

The findings identify the length and perceived difficulty of the registration process as reasons some churches remain unregistered. It also notes that requirements applicants encounter, such as constitutions, minutes authorizing establishment, personal particulars and supporting letters, were viewed by the researcher as insufficiently clear in the legal framework. These findings suggest that enforcement cannot be effective if people who are expected to comply do not understand the requirements or experience the process as opaque.

2.3 Accountability, transparency and protection

Accountability refers to the obligation of leaders to explain decisions, account for resources and respond to legitimate questions. Transparency means that relevant information is made available in an understandable way, including information about organizational identity, leadership, governance arrangements and financial practices. In a church context, these concepts should be applied with respect for religious doctrine and autonomy. The aim is not for the State to determine theology, it is to reduce preventable risks involving financial management, misrepresentation, safety and the rights of others[13].

The findings' discussion suggests that some independent churches depend heavily on a founder or a small group of leaders. Where there is no stable administrative structure, congregants may lack an effective way to question the use of funds or seek a remedy when leadership changes. Registration can contribute to organizational identification, but meaningful accountability also requires internal procedures, records, shared governance and accessible complaint mechanisms. These safeguards should be designed so that they protect members without creating unjustified barriers to peaceful religious association.

2.4 Effects as used in this study

The term 'effects' is used here to describe consequences identified or reasonably indicated by the findings' field material. Four related themes guide the analysis, (i) limited awareness and uncertainty about the legal status of a church, (ii) vulnerability to financial exploitation and weak accountability, (iii) disruption of worship and congregational continuity when leadership becomes unavailable or changes and (iv) conflict between churches and surrounding communities, particularly worship activities like over noise in music and praying. These themes are grounded in the source research. The study does not claim that every unregistered church produces these outcomes, or that registration automatically prevents them[14].

3. Methodology

The study adopted a qualitative research design to examine the legal and social effects of unregistered Christian churches on believers in Tanzania Mainland. This approach was appropriate because it enabled an in-depth understanding of participants' experiences, opinions, observations, and perceptions regarding church registration, leadership accountability, financial transparency, congregational continuity, and relations between churches and surrounding communities. The study was conducted in Mbeya Region, specifically Rungwe District, with fieldwork including Kawetele Ward. Purposive sampling was employed to select participants with relevant knowledge and experience in the establishment, management, operation, and regulation of Christian churches. The participants comprised thirty interview respondents, including five pastors, five church leaders, ten believers, five Roman Catholic priests, three church trustees and secretaries, and two officials from the Registrar of Societies under the Ministry of Home Affairs. In addition, two focus-group interviews were conducted, involving five and seven participants, respectively. These participants provided diverse perspectives on the challenges associated with unregistered churches and their implications for believers and community relations.

Data were collected through face-to-face and telephone interviews, focus-group interviews, and documentary review. Secondary information was obtained from relevant legislation, court

[9] United States Department of State (2022). Report on International Religious Freedom in Tanzania. The report discusses developments concerning registration of religious institutions and faith-based organizations.

[10] [Cap 337, R.E 2023]

[11] [Cap 314, R.E 2023]

[12] GREEN, M (2003), Priests, witches and power, popular Christianity, after mission in Southern Tanzania. Cambridge University Press

[13] THWALA TC, The Accountability of Spiritual Leaders in Mushrooming Independent Churches; A Pastoral Response, University of Pretoria. August 2020.

[14] ALEXANDER, P. I. (2019). *State regulating of religion in Uganda*: Fears and dilemmas of born-again churches. Journal of African Studies and Development, 11(6), 99–117.

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decisions, books, journal articles, research reports, and other legal materials relating to religious freedom and the registration of religious institutions. The collected information was analyzed thematically by organizing participants' accounts and documentary evidence according to recurring themes relevant to the study objectives. Ethical and interpretive considerations were observed by distinguishing participants' reported experiences from broader analytical interpretations. For instance, the experiences of five believers associated with Bread of Life Church International were treated as a specific qualitative illustration rather than as representative of all believers attending unregistered churches. The reported presence of approximately ten out of eleven unregistered churches in Kawetele Ward was presented as a local field observation, not as a verified census of the district. The findings were interpreted within the limits of the qualitative design and were not intended to provide statistically generalizable conclusions about all Christian churches in Tanzania Mainland.

4. Findings

4.1 Uncertainty about legal status and limited protection

One of the central findings is that believers may participate in a church without knowing whether it has been registered. This creates a gap between the confidence that congregants may place in an institution and their actual knowledge of its formal status and governance arrangements. The interviews report that five believers from Assemblies of God Gospel Church International in Rungwe District said they had not known that their church was unregistered. They had worshipped with the pastor for approximately two years and made regular contributions and offerings.

According to their account, the pastor became seriously ill and stopped attending worship and congregation also stopped attending. After the pastor recovered, the believers later heard that he had joined another church. Those who had contributed to the earlier congregation then dispersed and joined different churches. The important point in this account is not that illness or a pastor's decision to move necessarily constitutes wrongdoing. Rather, the incident exposed the congregation's dependence on one leader and the absence of arrangements that could maintain the institution when that leader was unavailable or left.

The account illustrates how uncertainty about legal status may coincide with uncertainty about organizational continuity. If members do not know who legally represents a church, whether it has a constitution, who holds its property or funds, or how leadership succession is determined, they may be poorly placed to ask for explanations when the organization stops functioning. The findings do not provide evidence of a formal legal claim by these believers or establish that they attempted to recover contributions. The defensible conclusion is narrower, the congregation's dissolution left members dispersed, and the reported experience raises questions about the practical protection available to people who support a church without clear organizational arrangements.

Limited legal protection can also mean that a believer does not know where to direct a complaint. The source research argues that unregistered churches may operate without effective oversight of their activities. Where the only recognized point of authority is the founder, members may have little practical leverage if they disagree with a decision. The problem is particularly acute when a congregation's identity and operations are closely tied to one individual rather than to documented rules and collective structures.

This finding should not be overstated. Formal registration does not itself guarantee that members will receive a remedy, and the findings does not establish that every unregistered church lacks all internal rules. The case demonstrates why transparent legal identity and governance arrangements matter. Believers should be able to find out the status of the church they attend, understand who is responsible for its administration, and know how to raise a concern without being forced to choose between silence and abandoning their religious community.

4.2 Financial vulnerability and contributions

The findings identify risks of financial exploitation, unreasonable fundraising and weak accountability as consequences associated with unregistered churches. The concern arises where believers make offerings and contributions but have limited information about the legal identity, leadership arrangements or financial controls of the organization receiving them. Contributions are a normal part of many religious traditions and should not be treated as suspicious merely because they are voluntary or faith-based. The risk arises when contributions are solicited without adequate transparency, when leaders cannot be questioned about the use of funds, or when members are misled about the status or purposes of the institution.

In the Pentecost Revival Church example, the believers described making regular contributions and offerings while attending worship. Their account does not quantify the money contributed and does not say that the pastor personally appropriated the funds. It cannot support a claim that this particular pastor committed fraud. What it does show is that the congregation's financial contributions were made in a setting where members reportedly did not know the church was unregistered, and the group later dispersed after the pastor's absence and departure. The episode raises a governance question what arrangements, if any, existed for accounting for contributions and deciding what should happen to the congregation's resources if the church ceased to function?

An interviewed pastor described internal conflict in some churches, where a leader allegedly sought to control church affairs and discouraged members from asking questions about income. According to the account, a person who questioned the conduct was isolated, in one example, that person later started a new church without registration because he did not meet the qualifications required to apply. This account links financial transparency, conflict and the multiplication of small unregistered congregations. It is an interview-based account and should not be generalized to all churches or leaders.

Financial vulnerability can have consequences beyond the loss of money. For households with limited resources, regular giving may

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represent a meaningful sacrifice. If a congregation disappears or leadership changes without explanation, members may experience disappointment, mistrust and a sense that their contribution has not produced the community or support they expected, these are possible implications of the reported findings. The available interviews do not quantify the economic burden or measure long-term household outcomes.

Practical financial safeguards need not intrude into religious doctrine. Churches can maintain basic records of income and expenditure, use more than one authorized person to oversee accounts, explain the purposes of special collections, and provide periodic summaries to members. Where a church is part of an umbrella body, that body can offer guidance and internal review. These measures protect both congregants and responsible leaders by reducing suspicion and clarifying how funds are used.

4.3 Disruption of worship and institutional continuity

The account from Bread of Life Church International also points to disruption of worship and congregational life. The believers' relationship with the congregation appears to have depended significantly on the presence of a particular pastor. When he became seriously ill, worship attendance stopped. When he later joined another church, the members dispersed to different congregations. This illustrates a potential vulnerability where a congregation relies heavily on one leader and lacks clear continuity arrangements.

A church's spiritual life may understandably be shaped by its pastor or founder. A congregation that has no clear succession plan, leadership team or documented governance arrangements may struggle to continue when a central leader becomes ill, leaves, dies or is unable to serve. The effect is experienced by believers as interruption of worship, loss of a familiar community and uncertainty about the future. It can also affect shared activities, pastoral relationships and the administration of resources accumulated by the congregation.

This issue is not exclusive to unregistered churches. Registered organizations can also experience leadership disputes or collapse. The relevant analytical point is that formal recognition and internal governance can make responsibilities easier to identify and can encourage a church to plan for continuity. The findings suggest that some churches are highly dependent on founders and that the absence of oversight can make it difficult for members to question decisions. A basic governance structure can reduce this dependence without requiring a church to abandon its religious identity or distinctive leadership tradition.

Continuity arrangements may include written rules for appointing interim leaders, a record of the congregation's membership and decisions, a transparent process for choosing a successor, and an agreed procedure for handling property and funds if a church closes or splits. The content of such arrangements should be developed by religious communities in a manner consistent with their doctrine, while meeting applicable legal requirements. The State's role should be to establish fair minimum standards and provide accessible guidance, not to choose pastors or determine theology.

4.4 Community conflict and disturbance

Conflict between church leaders and surrounding residents was another reported concern. In Kawetele Ward in Rungwe District, interview evidence described approximately ten out of eleven churches operating within residential areas without registration. Some reportedly conducted worship activities until around midnight, using speakers and microphones at high volume. A pastor affiliated with the Free Pentecostal Church of Tanzania described late-night preaching and singing as activities intended to cast out demons. These reports reflect local accounts and should not be interpreted as a national estimate.

An interview with the Ward Executive Officer of Kawetele on 26 July 2026 indicated that residents had complained about loudspeakers and microphones at night, which disturbed people while they were resting. The officer reportedly found the complaints difficult to resolve in the context of freedom of worship. This evidence illustrates a tension between a congregation's ability to practice its faith and residents' interest in rest and peaceful use of their homes.

The problem should be framed in terms of conduct and its effects rather than the content of belief. Loud sound late at night can affect neighbors regardless of whether it comes from a church, a commercial venue or another gathering. Fair rules on noise, public safety and land use can be applied in a religion-neutral manner. At the same time, officials should not use noise complaints selectively to target a particular denomination or suppress religious activity that complies with the law.

Where churches operate informally and local officials do not have clear records or guidance, residents may be unsure whom to contact, and officials may be uncertain about the steps available to them. This can allow small disputes to become recurring sources of resentment. Church members may feel that their religious freedom is under threat, while neighbors may feel that their daily needs are being ignored. The absence of clear procedures can thus weaken trust on both sides.

The reported case also highlights the importance of local-level guidance. Ward and district officials need practical instructions for receiving complaints, engaging church representatives, recording agreements, and applying applicable noise or public-order rules consistently. Church leaders should be encouraged to communicate with neighbors, agree on reasonable sound levels and times, and take complaints seriously. These measures can protect worship and community peace at the same time.

4.5 Fear, mistrust and the wider meaning of accountability

The findings taken together suggest that uncertainty about registration may contribute to a wider deficit of trust. Believers may not know the legal status of the institution, may have limited information about the management of their contributions, and may be unsure whether a congregation can survive a leadership change. Residents who experience disturbance may feel that there is no

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effective channel to resolve a problem. These are related but distinct dimensions of accountability.

For believers, trust is not only a matter of faith in religious teaching. It also depends on whether leaders behave responsibly, whether promises are clear, whether decisions can be explained and whether members can raise concerns without retaliation. Where governance is overly personalized, questions about money or leadership may be interpreted as disloyalty. Interview accounts concerning the isolation of a person who questioned church income point to this risk. A culture of accountability should make respectful questions a normal part of organizational life.

For public officials, accountability means that the legal framework should be understandable and capable of consistent implementation. If requirements are not clearly communicated, enforcement may fall disproportionately on people who are less informed or less connected. If complaints are left unresolved, community frustration may grow. Authorities should combine enforcement with education, clear processes and fair opportunities for organizations to regularize their status.

The analysis does not suggest that all unregistered churches are abusive or that all registered churches are safe. Instead, it identifies conditions that can heighten vulnerability, lack of awareness, unclear organizational identity, dependence on a single leader, weak financial records, limited complaint channels and insufficient local guidance. These conditions should be addressed through proportionate systems that protect rights and avoid treating religious diversity as a threat in itself.

5. Discussion

5.1 From administrative status to lived consequences

A key contribution of the findings is to connect registration with the everyday experiences of believers. Registration is sometimes understood as a technical administrative matter between an organization and the State. The field accounts suggest that its significance may extend to whether members know whom they are supporting, how decisions are made, what happens when a pastor leaves and how complaints can be addressed. The practical value of registration depends on the quality of the surrounding governance system.

The Bread of Life Church International example is particularly instructive because the immediate disruption followed a pastor's illness and subsequent move to another church. The account does not prove that registration would have prevented the disruption. It reveals the absence or ineffectiveness of continuity arrangements as experienced by the members. If a congregation had clear governance rules, it might have been better positioned to appoint interim leadership, decide whether to continue meeting and account for its resources. Legal status and internal governance should be understood as related, but not identical, safeguards.

The same distinction applies to financial protection. Registration may help establish an organization's identity, but it cannot alone ensure honest financial management. Transparent accounting, member participation, internal controls and accessible remedies remain necessary. A policy that focuses exclusively on issuing certificates may overlook the lived risks that the study identifies. A policy that imposes broad, burdensome requirements without support may discourage compliance and inadvertently preserve informality.

5.2 Balancing freedom of religion with the rights of others

The findings on late-night worship raise a familiar constitutional and human-rights question, how can the right to manifest religion be reconciled with other legitimate interests? The Constitution protects religious freedom, in Article 19(1)[15] while Article 30(2)[16], provides for certain lawful limitations. Article 18(3)[17], likewise addresses conditions under which the manifestation of religion may be limited.

The appropriate response to community disturbance is not a blanket restriction on worship. It is a clear and proportionate response to the particular conduct causing harm. Rules should be accessible in advance, applied without discrimination and accompanied by an opportunity to resolve disputes informally where appropriate. For example, sound levels and the timing of amplified worship may be addressed through dialogue and existing lawful standards. Where a complaint concerns a genuine safety risk, the response should be based on evidence and the applicable law rather than assumptions about a religious group.

This approach protects both believers and neighbors. Believers retain space to worship, while surrounding residents are not expected to surrender all claims to quiet enjoyment of their homes. A fair complaint mechanism can reduce the impression that one right must always defeat another. It also supports public confidence in the neutrality of local administration.

5.3 Institutional vulnerability and the role of leaders

The interviews suggest that some pastors may lack awareness of registration requirements and that some church founders operate with limited oversight. These observations suggest that the issue cannot be addressed solely through penalties after non-compliance has occurred. Religious leaders need accurate information about the requirements that apply to their organizations, the registration process, and the practical reasons for maintaining governance records. Public education should explain both obligations and benefits.

[15] The Constitution of the United Republic of Tanzania, 1977 as amended from time to time, stated for freedom of religion and worship to all individual, and that people are free to change religion

[16] The Constitution of the United Republic of Tanzania, 1977 as amended from time, freedom of religion has limitation for peace, order, morality and for national security

[17] International Covenant on Civil and Political Right (ICCPR) 1966, provides for limitation of religion, that such limitation necessary to protect public safety, order, health or morals or the fundamental rights and freedom of others.

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Religious leaders and umbrella bodies also have an important role in establishing professional and ethical expectations. They can condemn harmful practices carried out under the guise of religious freedom and promote accountability and transparency. This recommendation can be developed into a collaborative approach in which established religious organizations help communicate standards, support emerging congregations and encourage peaceful resolution of disputes. Such involvement must be handled carefully so that umbrella bodies do not become gatekeepers able to exclude groups merely because they differ in doctrine[18].

The State should focus on lawful organizational standards, safety and protection of rights rather than theological approval. Any criteria concerning qualifications or leadership should be clear, relevant to a legitimate purpose, consistently applied and open to review. Unclear requirements can create uncertainty and increase the incentive to remain informal[19].

5.4 Limitations of the evidence

The findings should be read within the boundaries of the qualitative design. The research was conducted in one district of Mbeya Region and used purposive sampling. It provides useful contextual detail but does not estimate how common each effect is across Tanzania Mainland. The report of approximately ten out of eleven unregistered churches in Kawetele Ward is a local observation, not a national count. The account from five believers is a focused illustration, not a representative survey.

The available data provide limited detail on the financial value of contributions, the existence of church property, the specific legal remedies pursued by affected members, and the long-term consequences for households. Reports of other serious incidents were not accompanied by case-specific details sufficient for analysis here. Accordingly, this study does not present such incidents as independently established cases.

This study analyses the effects of unregistered Christian churches on believers using qualitative evidence from Rungwe District, Mbeya Region. Before submission, the author should verify interview dates, translations and legal references. In particular, statutory wording and the current status of the relevant legal framework should be checked against official legal sources, and the journal's preferred citation style should be applied.

6. Recommendations and Policy Implications

6.1 Make registration requirements clear and accessible

The first priority is to ensure that church founders and leaders can understand the steps required to register a religious organization. Uncertainty about required documents and the perceived length of the process may contribute to unregistered operation. The responsible authority should publish a plain-language guide identifying the applicable law, required documents, fees where applicable, responsible offices, expected stages and available review procedures. The guide should be available through district offices and appropriate online channels, with versions in accessible language.

Applicants should be able to obtain a checklist and a written explanation of any missing information. A transparent process would reduce repeated visits, uncertainty and the perception that registration depends on informal knowledge. If an application is refused or delayed, the applicant should receive reasons and information about any lawful review or appeal route. The legal framework should be checked to ensure that available remedies are clearly stated and that applicants can understand how to use them.

6.2 Improve public awareness among believers

Believers should have access to reliable information about the legal identity of the church they attend. This does not mean that congregants must be expected to become legal experts. Rather, basic information should be easy to obtain. Churches can display or make available their registration details and the identity of authorized leaders, subject to applicable privacy and safety considerations. Public authorities and umbrella bodies can explain how members may verify status and where they can seek guidance.

Awareness initiatives should avoid presenting every unregistered congregation as dangerous. The objective is to help leaders regularize their organizations and enable believers to make informed decisions. Outreach should be respectful, non-discriminatory and sensitive to the diversity of Christian traditions. Where a church has not registered, the first response may appropriately include information about the process and a reasonable opportunity to comply, unless there is an immediate and lawful reason for stronger intervention.

6.3 Strengthen internal governance and continuity planning

Churches should be encouraged to adopt written governance arrangements appropriate to their size and structure. These may identify leadership responsibilities, procedures for making decisions, arrangements for succession or interim leadership, methods for resolving internal disputes, and steps to take if a congregation ceases to operate. A written constitution or equivalent governing document can help members understand the organization's purposes and decision-making processes.

The continuity issue described by the believers from Pentecost Revival Church shows the importance of planning for illness, departure or death of a central leader. A church should not have to stop functioning simply because one individual is unavailable, unless its members make that decision through the applicable governance process. Where a church is affiliated with an umbrella body, the body may offer mediation and guidance, while respecting the congregation's autonomy and the limits of its own authority.

6.4 Promote financial transparency and responsible fundraising

[18] ALEXANDER. P.I (2019). State regulation of religion in Uganda. Fears and dilemmas of born-again churches. Journal of African Studies and Development, 11(6), 99-117

[19] MUNA Ndulo (2019), Freedom of religion. African Journal of International and Comparative Law, 27(1),115-130

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Churches should keep accurate records of offerings, donations, special fundraising campaigns and expenditure. Financial information should be reviewed by more than one authorized person, and members should receive understandable reports at reasonable intervals. Special fundraising should identify its purpose and, where appropriate, explain how the funds will be managed if the stated project does not proceed. These measures can be scaled to the size and resources of a congregation.

Where allegations of misappropriation arise, a fair process should permit the organization and the complainant to present relevant information. Serious allegations should be referred to the appropriate authority under the law. Public agencies should distinguish between voluntary religious giving and conduct involving deception, coercion or other unlawful activity. Such distinctions are necessary to protect donors without treating ordinary religious contributions as inherently improper.

6.5 Establish fair local complaint and mediation pathways

The Kawetele Ward Executive Officer[20] suggests that local officials need clear procedures for complaints involving worship activities and neighborhood disturbance. A practical system could record the nature, time and location of a complaint, contact the relevant church representative, explain applicable rules, and seek a documented agreement where appropriate. Repeated or serious breaches should be handled according to law. The process should be neutral and available regardless of the religious identity of the parties.

Ward Executive Officers and other local authorities should receive guidance on how to balance freedom of worship with lawful interests in rest, safety and public order. Guidance should make clear that officials are not responsible for deciding religious doctrine. Their role is to respond to concrete conduct under neutral standards and to avoid discriminatory treatment. Churches should also be encouraged to appoint a contact person who can respond promptly to residents' concerns.

6.6 Consider a specialized oversight framework with safeguards

Consideration could be given to a clearer statutory framework and a government institution with responsibility for religious societies. For instance, in Rwanda there is Rwanda Governance Board (RGB), this board may provide a comparative example of an institution involved in registration and oversight of faith-based organizations. Any reform for Tanzania should be assessed carefully against the constitutional protection of religion, the country's legal context and the risk that excessive state control could interfere with legitimate religious autonomy.

If a specialized framework is pursued, its mandate should be clearly defined and limited to legitimate regulatory purposes such as registration, organizational accountability, compliance with applicable safety rules and complaint handling. Procedures should be transparent, decisions should be reasoned, and affected organizations should have access to an independent review or appeal mechanism. Criteria should be objective and publicly available. Oversight should not depend on whether officials agree with a church's doctrine, style of worship or theological claims.

Religious leaders and umbrella bodies can contribute practical knowledge, but participation should be balanced and inclusive. No single denomination should be able to use the system to disadvantage competitors or minority groups. The framework should also avoid imposing financial or administrative burdens that small congregations cannot reasonably meet. The purpose should be to create a system that makes lawful operation easier, identifies genuine risks and protects believers and communities.

6.7 Monitor implementation and evaluate outcomes

Reform should be evaluated rather than assumed to work. Relevant indicators could include the time required to process applications, the number of applicants receiving clear written guidance, the proportion of decisions accompanied by reasons, the number and type of complaints received, and the resolution of disputes involving financial accountability or neighborhood disturbance. Any data collection should respect privacy and should not be used to profile congregations based on belief.

Further research should include a wider range of districts and denominations, and should seek the perspectives of registered and unregistered church members, leaders, local officials and civil-society actors. Comparative research could explore how different registration models protect members while preserving religious freedom. Longitudinal research could examine whether improved guidance and governance practices lead to greater continuity, better complaint resolution and increased trust.

7. Conclusion

This study has examined the legal effects of unregistered Christian churches on believers in Tanzania Mainland through qualitative evidence from Rungwe District, Mbeya Region. The evidence points to four interconnected concerns, uncertainty about a church's legal status and the protection available to members, risks associated with financial contributions where accountability is weak, disruption of congregational life when a church depends heavily on one leader and conflict with neighboring residents, particularly where amplified worship continues late at night.

The account from Bread of Life Church International illustrates how believers may contribute to a congregation without knowing that it is unregistered and may later find themselves dispersed when the pastor becomes unavailable and joins another church. The example does not establish fraud, nor does it prove that registration would have prevented the outcome. It does show why transparent organizational identity, continuity planning and clear financial procedures matter. The Kawetele Ward findings demonstrate the practical difficulty of responding to community complaints where local guidance is unclear and officials are concerned about interfering with freedom of worship.

The broader implication is that the protection of believers cannot be achieved through registration requirements alone. Registration

[20] During interview conducted in 27 July, 2026 in Rungwe District

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should be accompanied by public information, accessible application procedures, responsible financial management, internal governance, complaint mechanisms and neutral enforcement of rules protecting the wider community. At the same time, unregistered status should not be treated as proof that every church is harmful, and regulatory measures should not undermine the right to hold or manifest religious beliefs.

The appropriate policy response is proportionate and rights-respecting: make compliance understandable, help congregations regularize their status, establish clear lines of accountability, and address specific harms through fair procedures. Such an approach can strengthen protection for believers, support responsible religious leadership and preserve peaceful coexistence between churches and the communities in which they operate.

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