

## **Contemporary Ethical Issues in Church Information Management in The Contemporary Society**

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### **Abstract**

The church is public institution where probity and accountability in all aspects of her records, documentation and archives are to be held in high esteem. An institution that serves as resource Centre to the members and the entire populace thereby contributing to the development of the society. However, experience has shown that there are lots of ethical issues around this, there are cases records not well kept, records such as financial documents, historical information, activities of the church and so on. This problem has been the crux in scholarship that this paper is to fix. The paper has adopted the historical research approach to put forward the need for probity and accountability in the information management of the church in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The concern posited by the paper is ensuring that high standard of ethical behaviour is maintained in the pursuit of information management in the church. It also subscribes to the fact that churches should accord great importance to integrity, honesty and fair-play. In the light of this fact, the paper examined three points, the concept of probity and accountability; the importance of ethics in church information management and implications of integrity in church information management.

*Keyword:* Church, Information Management, Probity, Accountability, Ethics.

### **INTRODUCTION**

A man died in 1972 and was buried in an Anglican church. His children were very young at the time of his death, but when the children were matured to arranged a befitting funeral service in memory of their late father in 2016, they had to consult the church for some vital information they do not have about their father and impressively, they were able to get more than the information they demanded for. The church provided to them their father's date of birth, place of birth, date of death and the date he was buried. This was possible due to proper keeping of church records. In

another scenario, a pastor recently resumed the pastorate of a church but couldn't get some vital information needed so he could be more familiar with the past administration and happenings of the church because proper records were not kept. The two scenarios cited above underscore the importance of church records which is an aspect of information management. The church is public institution where there should be probity and accountability in all aspects of her records, documentation and archives.

The demand for probity and accountability in every area of life has become more pronounced now more than ever before because of the decay, corruption and unfaithfulness been noticed in many quarters in this era of modernism. The church and mission agencies are not left out in the corrupt practices, they have become prevalent in many circles now. Hence, there is the need to think of probity and accountability in the information management of the work of the church with special attention to the church records. The work of the church is multidimensional, it covers many aspects, and therefore there is need imperativeness in probity and accountability in the information management of the church.

Accountability is required in all spheres of life. The Church cannot do less because she is expected to be the salt of the world, better ideas for management are to be seen in the church. It is painful that there are some cases of lack of accountability and transparency on the part of the church. Financial accountability in missions is a very crucial point in world evangelisation because of the funds from all mission lovers to both foreign and national missionaries. Missionaries or mission agencies need to give account of whatever comes to them because God is God of accountability. As missionaries are bound to give account before man, it is also scriptural that man shall give account of himself before God.

The concern of this paper is in ensuring that the high standard of ethical behaviour is maintained in the pursuit of information management in the church. It also subscribes to the fact churches should accord great importance to integrity, honesty and fair-play. In the light of this fact, the paper examined three points, the concept of probity and accountability; the importance of ethics in church information management and implications of integrity in church information management.

## **THE CONCEPT OF PROBITY AND ACCOUNTABILITY**

Accountability is a relevant concept in all ramifications of life because it is a central to human affairs, in public management or governance. The concept means to hold somebody accountable to the society or the organization to which one belongs, or to oneself. There are many segments of the society that need social cohesiveness and mutual dependence. Church organisation is an important aspect of the society. <sup>1</sup>

The basic definition of accountability is to give a reckoning, to furnish a report. Imbedded in the word is the practice of being answerable to another person or group who has the responsibility to evaluate what has been accomplished with the resources invested (money, time, or some other element of value.). Accountability was the focus of at least two of Jesus parables (Matthew 25:14-30, Luke 16:1-13)

It is obvious that accountability is the hallmark of a responsible society, however, the focus of this paper is accountability in the management of church records. In addressing the issue, these three words, sensitiveness, responsiveness and transparency will be explored. A minister of the gospel or mission administrator is required to be sensitive in the discharge of his or her duty. Sensitivity is something of a psychological attribute, a person is sensitive if in his dealing with the information management of the church (church records) by this, we mean records such as financial records of tithes and offerings, donations and gifts, birth register, death records, programme of events, and calendar of activities, attendance register, and minutes of meetings as well as historical information of the church. This is a sense of fairness and appreciation and if it becomes a habit, it will become a sense of social/moral obligation.<sup>2</sup>

Responsiveness indicates giving attention to a person and events, it is a modicum of courtesy, it is attending to the problem or welfare of a person or an event as one is obliged to do as a servant of God, it is not succumbing to pressure, but a way of remaining courteous even when provoked. Transparency or openness is another factor in accountability that is essential to church work. A servant of God is required to be transparent in the handling of church affairs, it is necessary for

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<sup>1</sup> John Ayo Oladapo. "The Imperativeness of Probity and accountability in global evangelization" in Global evangelization and the challenges for contemporary church. Ogbomoso, The Nigerian Baptist Theological Seminary, 2018.

<sup>2</sup> T.N. Chaturvedi, "The quest for accountability" In Ethics, integrity and values in public service. New Delhi: New age international Ltd. 2014, 355.

people to be opened and transparent, there should not be cover up of one's laxity or want of probity.

Transparency is positively looked at as a stimulus to good management, and negatively viewed as an antidote to administrative and political corruption which has created waves of public protests and adversely affected development and commitment to mission works<sup>3</sup>.

The Nigerian Baptist Convention churches have the following procedure as a way of achieving accountability; every income, donation or gift is officially receipted. Every donation or gift to the missionary is expected to be reported to Global Mission Board Office. Quarterly financial report is expected to be given to the Global Mission Board Office by supervising missionaries; Monthly financial report is expected to be given to the church council. Report of any financial transaction by church and her staff must be sent to the internal auditor of the church and report circulated to every member in the church in conference every quarter. Annual financial report will be published for scrutiny by Nigerian Baptist Convention family members in the financial book of report during the annual

A good example of accountability in mission effort is in Acts 15. The Jerusalem council which convened to examine the work among Gentiles. Paul and Peter came back to give account of the session and submitted to the will of the church in line with biblical injunctions of "iron sharpens iron". This is accountability, it is submitting to someone else for actions and decisions.<sup>4</sup>

Accountability and responsibility are two words that are related and are used interchangeably. Responsibility is something that springs from within. It is associated with one's perception of right or wrong on its own without any outside pressure or stipulation. The word responsibility probably adds a moral and ethical dimension to the concept of accountability. Accountability from any angle of life could be examined from three points of view; accountability to oneself, accountability to society and accountability to the organisation in which one is functioning: self-accountability is the most important of all the three views of accountability because accountability to oneself will of necessity translate to accountability to the society. Anytime there is conflict between interest for self and the community/society, accountability will definitely make the interest for the society

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<sup>3</sup>. U.C. Agarwal, "Administrative corruption: causes and cure" in Noor Jahan. Bava, ed., public policy and Administration: Normative concerns. New Delhi: 2010. 161

<sup>4</sup>. "Missionary Accountability" <http://www.everlastingarms.com>. Accessed on 28/5/2022.

to prevail, at this point, the integrity and character of a person are tested. When the interest of the society prevails, accountability sets in but when self-interest is allowed to set in, corruption becomes imminent. Efficient mission work or public service that will remain a blessing to the kingdom of God cannot but be with probity and accountability.

### **THE IMPORTANCE OF ETHICS IN CHURCH INFORMATION MANAGEMENT**

There are two major things to consider here, information management and ethics. Information management concerns a cycle of organizational activity: the acquisition of information from one or more sources, the custodianship and the distribution of that information to those who need it, and its ultimate disposal through archiving or deletion.<sup>5</sup> It is also the collection, storage, curation, dissemination, archiving and destruction of documents, images, drawings and others sources of information. Information management embraces all the generic concepts of management, including the planning, organizing, structuring, processing, controlling, evaluation and reporting of information activities, all of which is needed in order to meet the needs of those with organisational roles or functions that depend on. In terms of technology, information management encompasses systems such as: Document management (DM), records management (RM), web content management (CM), digital asset management (DAM), learning management systems (LM).

In all the features of information management, this work deals with document management and record management. Document management helps to ensure accountability for the process of document creation; while records management helps to ensure accountability for managing records that are needed to conduct the business of the organization.<sup>6</sup> A document is a piece of writing that contains information whereas a record is a document that can be used as evidence. Both documents and records provide information, but records also serve as evidence. This is the main difference between document and record.

Church records are rich resources for the genealogical and historical researcher. In many parts of the country, church records predate civil records. They therefore document vital events, giving birth, marriage, and death information that might otherwise be lost. Besides providing names and

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<sup>5</sup>. <https://en.m.wikipedia.org>.

<sup>6</sup>. <http://info.aiim.org> >aii-blog > d. accessed 22/6/2022.

dates, church records may reveal relationships between people and depict a family's status in the community. In addition, entries of a personal nature are not uncommon, and these can offer a glimpse into an ancestor's character or habits.

It's quite unfortunate that so many church leaders in this postmodern era, though zealous, anointed, intelligent, smart and relevant but they are nonchalant about keeping church records. It is quite painful that even with the advance level of technology in this era, so many pastors cannot boast of a proper church record keeping of a year. It is observed that if this should continue, it's most likely the church would fail in her responsibility to broaden the heart of the upcoming generation of past happenings, thus, a problem to solve before it gets out of hand.

It would be an unclear reality for the believers in Jesus Christ who came up after the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ if a proper record of happenings before (and shortly after Jesus Christ ascended to heaven) had not been kept as presented in the HOLY BIBLE of the sovereignty, mightiness, graciousness, kindness, love, wrath and instructions of the triune God. Many of us may find it too difficult to believe the existence of God and the creation of the earth if records have not been kept in the Bible. Genesis 1:1 – “In the beginning God...” and John 1:1 – “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God,” amongst other undeniable page-to-page events in the Bible gave a picture of what it is to have a wonderful record keeping. As Nils Forsander said in the above quoted words, the Bible gave us a greater confidence of the church history. This however set a pace for the church on proper record keeping. Records needed to be kept for administrative and legal requirements. It is possible in the nearest future to have reasons to demand for a clear picture of all decisions which are made, what led to such decisions and details regarding financial commitments and legal obligations etc., records well-kept will be the solution to such needs. Instances arise in the future when such details are needed to save people from embarrassment and unnecessary legal battle.

Types of records to be kept.

The following are vital documents to be kept by the church: Minutes of organizational and congregational meetings, Minutes and reports of the Committee of Management, Session etc., Selected correspondence of all committees and groups, Annual reports (congregation, committees, groups), Registers of baptisms and marriages, Membership lists, Newsletters (regular, monthly, quarterly etc.), Publications (histories, anniversaries, special occasions, brochures, service orders

for special occasions), Legal documents (constitutions, property titles, employment contracts), Sunday School records (attendance rolls), Photographs and audiovisual material (buildings, Ministers, members, special occasions), Building plans, Financial records, Newsletters (regular, monthly, quarterly etc.). Financial records are legally required to be kept for at least 7 years, annual financial reports should be retained permanently. Records relating to significant purchases should also be retained. This could be furniture, organ, memorial windows, etc. It is not necessary to keep bank statements, cheque book butts, invoices, receipts, collection books, cash books, etc.

### **STORAGE OF RECORDS**

Records need to be stored securely. They need to be protected from fire, damp, heat, light, silverfish and theft. They also need to be well-organised and a list needs to be prepared of what records exist and where they are stored.

#### Means to Keep Records

##### 1) Library

Church records in hard copy form could be kept in the church library, pastor's office or secretary's office.

##### 2) Cloud Storage

Soft copies of church records can be kept securely in Google Drive, email address, social media platforms; Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, Instagram, etc. (albums can be created on the church's Facebook account for pictures and video keeping).

### **PRATICAL OPERATIONS OF KEEPING CHURCH RECORDS**

1) The pastor as the chief administrator of the church is the chief custodian of all church records, therefore, he must painstakingly arrange how church records should be kept. He should develop interest in keeping records. Also, he should keep his own personal records apart from the official one.

2) Every year, the church should appoint a record officer as an executive officer of the church council who will keep records of all the daily happenings in the church, e.g., birth, naming, wedding, death, burial, foundation laying, house warming, etc.

- 3) Buy record book materials from Baptist Bookstore or a higher education that could be kept for same purpose
- 4) The church should have a safe in the pastor's office where the documents are to be kept.
- 5) Churches with paid office secretary should assign such individual to equally help to keep records in the church safe.

Above all, the work of record keeping is primarily in the purview of the pastor.

In ensuring probity and accountability in church records management, ethics must take the centre stage because ethics is a system of acceptable beliefs, morals and values which control human behaviour<sup>7</sup>. Ethics is all about what is morally right, and what is not, it is the moral principles that governs a person's or group's behaviour therefore it is of greater importance in the administration of mission endeavour. There are some practices that are prevalent within church organisations today in Nigeria that are not in conformity with ethical standard, hence, it has been affecting mission work and reducing efficiency and productivity of the task of global evangelism.<sup>8</sup>

Ethical guidelines for any establishment or society are not hidden, yet people are defiant to it, Western philosophy postulated three eminent schools of ethics that are relevant in every society till date; in this school of ethics, Aristotle, opines that virtues are dispositions to act in ways that benefit the possessor and the society of which he is a part.<sup>9</sup> The virtues such as justice, charity and generosity are deposited in every moral being and therefore must be used to benefit the society as well as the possessor. In his submission, Kank, was of the opinion that the concept of duty is central to morality; that is, human beings are bound, from knowledge of their duty as rational beings, to obey the categorical imperative to respect other rational beings with whom they interact. The

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<sup>7</sup>. Ramesh Karora, "Ethical concerns in Public Administration" in Ethics, integrity and values in public service; Arora, K. Ramesh (New Delhi: Newage international limited) 2014.5.

<sup>8</sup>. U.C. Agarwal, "Administrative corruption: causes and cure" in Noor Jahan. Bava, ed., public policy and Administration: Normative concerns. New Delhi: 2010. 161

<sup>9</sup>. Ibid, 162



utilitarian school of thought as the third viewpoint holds that the guiding principle of code of conduct should be the greatest happiness or benefit of the greatest number.<sup>10</sup>

Probity within the administration system of church and responsibility in the governance system is to create and sustain an ethical environment that will nurture and protect basic moral values, the rules will not only be moral themselves but would also be the guardian of morality because being moral is a prerequisite to being a guardian of wider morality. Ethical decision making is a pivotal point of administration morality in order to deliver qualitative administrative services that are essential concern in regard to administrative ethics. The value of accountability, good report, justice, fairness and objectivity are essential in a mission effort, the absence of it certainly makes the work of evangelism burdensome.<sup>11</sup>

The concept of ethics in church information management is a wild range, because ethics covers many aspects of life. However, selected areas that can cover essentials aspect of this work will be highlighted. Everyone is expected to be true to one's profession and is to be faithful, fair and not to be influenced by favouritism and greed while making decision in mission work. Objectivity should not be misconstrued just as a mechanical and rigid adherence to laws and rules of decision-making<sup>12</sup>, rather it must be seen as a way of life in global evangelisation. A discussion of ethics in any organization, as well as its strategy, ethical awareness are something that can be cultivated. Kant's view that we should always treat other people as ends in themselves and never simply as mean is surely an important principle for decent human resource management<sup>13</sup>.

Work ethics is an important dimension of ethics in church missions. It represents a commitments to the fulfilments of one's official responsibilities with a spirit of dedication; involvement and sincerity. The implication of this is that a mission agent would love his work and do it as unto the Lord, therefore, it is sacrosanct that efficiency, productivity, punctuality, discipline and

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<sup>10</sup>. Ramesh Karora, "Ethical concerns in Public Administration" in Ethics, integrity and values in public service; Arora, K. Ramesh (New Delhi: Newage international limited) 2014, 11.

<sup>11</sup>. Ibid, 12

<sup>12</sup>. Mullins J. Laurie, Management & organisational Behaviour, a Ninth Edition Edinburgh, England: Pearson Education Limited, 2010, 723.

<sup>13</sup>. Ramesh Karora, "Ethical concerns in Public Administration" in Ethics, integrity and values in public service; Arora, K. Ramesh (New Delhi: Newage international limited) 2014, 15.

transparency will be the hallmark of his behaviour<sup>14</sup> furthermore, other core value of mission work include loyalty, good public relation, humility and adherence to due process. Work ethics also has to do with the desire to do a good Job irrespective of financial regards, but not necessarily exclusive of social reward<sup>15</sup> work ethics propels workers to be efficient in the place of work in order to attain the higher goals of mission as well as devoting self to the expeditious achievements of those goals of the organisation.

A holistic view of probity in public life shows the need for elimination of corruption because elimination of corruption is not only a moral imperative but an economic necessity for a nation aspiring to catch up with the rest of the world. Integrity is much more than financial honesty: the work should be treated as a trust. To build trust and confidence, therefore, requires an environment where there is a premium on transparency, openness, boldness, firmness and justice. There are two facets of corruption, the first is the institution which is highly corrupt and the second is the individuals who are highly corrupt. Forthright and transparent people should endeavour to be bold and ensure that mission institutions work and is corrupt free. Probity is possible in mission work if transparent people can carry out their assignment with moral virtues in mind.

### **INTEGRITY IN CHURCH INFORMATION MANAGEMENT**

Integrity has several shades of meaning in the biblical story. It is both vertical and horizontal in nature. Generally, integrity has been defined as the state of wholeness and completeness which the process of life of faith is always striving to bring into being<sup>16</sup>. The vertical angle of integrity is the virtue of being in dialogue with God and unwavering commitment to the work of God despite the circumstances that may be on ground (Job 2:36) Horizontal dimension of integrity is interpersonal or social. It concerns our relationship with one another, which should be honest and transparent<sup>17</sup>.

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<sup>14</sup>. Sola Fajana, Human Resource management: An Introduction. Lagos, Labofin and company 2006,139.

<sup>15</sup>. Ramesh Karora, "Ethical concerns in Public Administration" in Ethics, integrity and values in public service; Arora, K. Ramesh (New Delhi: Newage international limited) 2014, 77.

<sup>16</sup>. R.J. Hunter. The Dictionary of pastoral care and counselling. Nashville: Abingdon press, Kanyoro 3musimbi 1990. 379.

<sup>17</sup>. P.N. Mwaura. Integrity of Mission in the Light of the Gospel: Bearing Witness of the Spirit among Africa's Gospel Bearers. In mission studies: Journal of the international association for mission studies. Vol. 24. 62 2007. 191 -192

The horizontal integrity is the main focus of this aspect of paper because it is important to note that duplicity; double mindedness and unreliability contaminate human relationships as well as our relationship with God. A serene integrity before God provides fortitude for maintaining integrity with one's fellow human being. In achieving global evangelization, it is clear that integrity is a requirement for individual Christian, lay or clergy, the sending church and the mission agencies. Maintaining integrity in church information management means the wholesomeness of a Christian's character, integrity between the way one lives and what one does or teaches<sup>18</sup>. Everyone involved in missions just as in all other areas of life should be forthright in every aspect of missions so that the gospel we preach will not be dental. Unfaithfulness, diversion of funds and materials should not be heard in mission endeavour. There have been cases of unfaithfulness and diversion of mission materials in certain quarters which had hindered the work of the gospel, this is a major challenge. Everyone involved in mission endeavour should make probity and accountability their watchword. It is expected of the steward that he be found faithful (1 Tim 4:2). The task of Global evangelisation must not be trivialised and allowed to be handled by unfaithful elements for mission to have integrity, there is need for courageous, empowered and effective workers committed to evangelization. The culture of making money or grabbing mentality because of economic instability should not be mentioned among believers and especially those who are into missions. They must be ready to give account of their stewardship all the time.

The volume of unfinished task is enormous. Faithfulness and accountability are required among mission agencies in order to achieve success. Also, it is important for partnership to take place in this regard, if there is integrity and accountability, partnership cannot be difficult. We are in the age of partnership and strategic alliances; church mission agencies need strategic alliances in order to achieve best global practices in the field information management and greater evangelization in this present age<sup>19</sup>. Mission agencies should not be structurally and organisationally be self-sufficient and self-satisfied in the quest for global evangelization<sup>20</sup>. This interaction has to be

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<sup>18</sup>. Ibid

<sup>19</sup>. Andrew Abah. Strategic partnership in African mission in mission Africa: A Journal of mission practice in and from Africa Vol. II Number 2. May 2003. 154.

<sup>20</sup>. Frans J. Vertraelen. Patterns of missionary and ecumenical Relationships in Zimbabwe; In Exchange Journal of Missiological and Ecumenical Research. Vol 24. No 3. 1995. 213.

intensified, for instance, through systematic exchange of information – (reports, mission magazines and publications) by inviting representatives of other groups to important meetings and by holding programmes /prayer session together in order for inspiration and correction<sup>21</sup>. Every ecumenical mission conference since Edinburgh Conference of 1910 has dealt with various aspects of relationship and partnership, in order to achieve global evangelization<sup>22</sup>.

Proper accountability in information management of the church and mission work will give rise to qualitative and meaningful partnership that will enhance the course of the gospel. Mutual understanding, faithfulness, cooperation and openness will make partnership a model of the Christian faith. Accountability is scriptural and is built on trust, it is difficult to trust anyone who is unwilling to be accountable; however, it is also humiliating to be accountable to someone who does not trust you. Accountability of time, and money not only helps partners maintain trust but gives opportunity for rejoicing in God’s work and provision<sup>23</sup>. Partners must have strong and clear financial policies in order to ensure probity and accountability in mission work. Churches need accountability in all aspect of her work, in order to achieve a greater level of probity and accountability, the following ways can help the church increase her accountability and avoid some common related- shortcoming.

1. Hold church officers accountable – there are limited resources in the church, therefore, assigned officers should check on the records properly and be assured that no one is undermining the integrity of her work.
2. Be discerning – Church leaders should not be too gullible, or unwilling to ask about inconsistencies. Ignorance may be bliss but it is not good steward. It is extremely important for church leaders to be kind, wise and discerning for the spiritual health of the church and the workers and for the reputation of the gospel.

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<sup>21</sup>. Frans J. Vertraelen. Patterns of missionary and ecumenical Relationships in Zimbabwe; In Exchange Journal of Missiological and Ecumenical Research. Vol 24. No 3. 1995. 213.

<sup>22</sup>. John Brown. Some Issues Concerning Relationships in Mission in International Review of Mission Vol LXXXV No 337. 1996. 277.

<sup>23</sup>. Ibid. 56

3. Guard against deceit – churches or agencies should not underestimate the deceit of the human heart. Records officers just like any person may fall victim to temptation and worldly patterns of using funds therefore they should be guarded and not left alone.

4. Appoint mature people as church record officers – Notable and experienced church leaders or workers are the ones to be assigned responsibility of handling church records. Only mature people are to be appointed to handle affairs of the church. It is possible to see people who have been on the church for a long time without much spiritual formation. The church of God must be discerning, wise and hold missionaries accountable through regular contact and prayer.

## CONCLUSION

In moving the church to the next level, it is important for every officer of the church to be accountable. The church cannot shy away from the awesome value church record keeping has. At any given time, there may be a need to access anything about a particular church life, this calls for a proper record keeping in order to avoid any stress in case of emergency. Maintaining high ethical standard in church records assist the Church in the provision of social services to the faithful and the society, it assists in the administration of the church, keeping records assists in the preservation and maintenance of the sacramental documents or registers. This paper has examined all these under the following points, the concept of probity and accountability, the importance of ethics in information management as well as integrity of information management.

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