

Problem or Resource? The Role of the Media in the Apostolic Faith Mission Zimbabwe Crisis

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Abstract

Adopting the conceptual and logical analysis method, this study focuses on the political and legal battles within the Apostolic Faith Mission of Zimbabwe (AFMZ) and how the media in Zimbabwe has reported the stories. While genuine and legitimate reasons for the conflict exist, the study seeks to establish whether the media has wittingly or unwittingly fuelled the division or was it the belligerents thrusting their stories into the laps of the media and casting them in a certain light. The general hypothesis of the study is that the media plays a role in the generation and escalation of religious-related conflicts. Whist conflict is common in every society; it is the violence that often accompany it that is cause for concern. In the case of religious conflict, it becomes artificial if it is fanned by the media or other external factors. Ultimately this discussion seeks to establish the ideal role of the media in mediating ethics, religion and politics in society and whether this is in line with their mandate. To achieve its objective, the paper selects some stories about the split of the AFMZ Church as reported in the print media, specifically Newsday and Bulawayo 24 and analyses them for whether or not the reporting follows the sound ethics of journalism and responsible reporting. It concludes with calls for rejuvenated efforts to reinforce media ethics and the reporting of Church related issues in Zimbabwe and the surrounding countries.

Introduction

The crisis in the Apostolic Faith Mission in Zimbabwe and how the stories have been reported in the print media is the subject of this paper. It is common knowledge that conflicts are common in large organizations. Chivasa (2017) has raised the need to develop conflict management mechanisms in the AFMZ (N. Chivasa 2017). Chivasa and Machingura (2018) too have written about the need to manage conflicts within the AFMZ. For them, there is need to accept that conflicts are part of Christian life both at an individual and corporate life (Chivasa 2018, 73). The duo also contends that conflict need not be cast in bad light but as opportunities for growth (ibid, 76). This study focuses on the recent leadership conflict between the two pastors A. Madziyire and C. Chiyangwa and their respective followers. These conflicts were

cast in a certain light in the media. It the manner of reporting of these issues in the print media which is cause for concern here. The media appears to be playing a part in the schismatic developments in the once united AFMZ.

The study is divided into several sections. The first deals with the place of the media in society. The second examines how the AFMZ crisis was reported in selected print media. The last is an assessment of the two items of reporting and makes some observations.

The Role of the Media in Society

The media is a very important functionary in society because it has pedagogic, recreational as well as transmission purposes. As noted by Udomisor and Udoh:

The mass media or the press occupies a central position in the society. It is basically involved in the information, education, and entertainment as well as cultural transmission. The enormity of the functions of the press makes it imperative for a guiding principles or code of ethics which includes objectivity. However, current practices in the media especially as pertains to conflict management negate this ethical standard or code, hence the imperative of this study which seeks to investigate how the media can engage in conflict management without breaching this cherished and longstanding principle (Udor 2015, 1).

The primary function of the media in any society is to provide accurate stories of the goings-on to the public and ensures that citizens make educated judgements. It is one of the ideals of responsible journalism to allow the media public access to well written stories, factually correct, challenging and balanced. The media is particularly helpful in providing stories which provide amusement, rare and at times bizarre (Happer 2013, 321). If asked about their trade, most journalists would say that their role is to report stories accurately in whatever sphere of life, be it politics, business, soccer, religion or any other areas (PloS Medicine 2005, 0576). In addition, journalists have the responsibility to mirror society's needs (ibid). However, one should not be oblivious of the fact that every media has ownership structures and operational policies (Maheshwari 2015). Some media channels are public, others private (Moehler and Singh: 2011). Citizens sometimes end up preferring one form of media over the other. Government media is controlled mostly by the ruling party (Moehler 2011, 276). The other private media is often termed alternative media in that it is critical of governments.

Chan-Meetoo contends that we live in a mediated society where information is produced, distributed and consumed at a very fast rate and dramatically impacts the lives of both individuals and communities (Chan-Meetoo 2013). The nature of the impact varies and sometimes too elusive to fathom. Although questions may be raised as to the efficacy of the media, it cannot be denied that the media impacts people's lives. In some instances, the media has played a role in fuelling conflicts, like in Kenya during the 2007-8 disturbances where the media played a big role in fanning violence (Chebii 2015, 39). In that respect, the media has come to be regarded as a 'double-edged' sword in the sense that it can act as an agent of conflict escalation or de-escalation (Ibid). In other cases, the media can mobilize people online to change their government (Singh 2017). Whereas the media may lead to positive developments, such as alerting the public about the rise of deadly diseases; in other cases, it can trigger the impeachment of presidents. From this, one can infer that the media brings mixed fortunes in the various communities.

The media operates under key principles as defined by Tamenukova et.al (2017). According to these authors, the principles are: credibility and safeguarding public interest, accuracy and truthfulness, accountability, integrity and editorial independence, transparency, minimizing harm and insult, fairness privacy and the protection of children (Temenukova 2017). All these ethical guidelines are meant to fortify Journalism from within.

Media ethics enjoins practitioners to think about the impact of their activities on others. John Merrill reminds us that, "Media ethics concerns right and wrong, good and bad, better and worse actions taken by people working in the field of journalism and mass communication. Media themselves, of course, cannot be ethical or unethical—only workers in the media can. When we deal with media ethics, we are really concerned with standards media people have and the kinds of actions they take" (3).

Ethics demands agents to pause and reflect on what ought to be done. Some, following Kant point us to duties. Utilitarians devote their energies to the maximization of utility by placing emphasis on the greatest happiness for the greatest number of persons affected or likely to be affected by the action envisioned or actual. Ethics demands that we have duties to ourselves and to others. Media practitioners often think that they have nothing to do with ethics. Nothing can be further from the truth. Ethics is important as it permeates all spheres and activities of our lives, including the professional life. Journalists are operating right in the thicket of ethics.

How they collect news, from whom and how they transmit it are all areas that fall under ethical considerations which should not be regarded as abstract because they are related to everyday life (Wyatt 2014, xv). It is also crucial how institutions – the family, Industry, Church and community exert pressure on us to act one way or another. Thus, individuals are not islands because other people and their demands may impact on the individual and his freedom.

However, over the years and for a reason, the media has also embarked on negative reporting. This is one of the dark sides of the media and has become common in politics. Negative publicity helps candidates to win in elections in some cases. In other cases, stories are run without verification. This dark side deprives citizens of the chance to receive well-filtered information. In Zimbabwe, it is common cause that the AFMZ has received very bad and negative publicity as a result of the leadership wrangle between Reverends A. Madziyire and C. Chiyangwa. Ethical considerations were supposed to be taken to arrest the possible repercussions resulting from this implosion.

The media is very powerful and influences all our lives. In the history of modern politics, actors have tried in various ways to control and regulate the media. However, in relation to the media, journalistic ethics make certain demands on the practitioners and sets certain values and guiding principles on the practitioners. Some think that ethics is relative and subjective, hence it is futile to demand moral behaviour as there is one objective standard. While it may be conceded that objective moral values are difficult to realize, we still converge at our subjective preferences to forge a form of inter-subjective objectivity. Let us focus on how this plays out in the reporting on the Apostolic Faith Mission in Zimbabwe (AFMZ). This is arguably the largest Pentecostal church in Zimbabwe. Although schisms were happening in the past the current one is threatening to decimate the organization like never before. Journalists have gotten interested in it as the stories were coming out which were news worthy. However, the question is whether these were reported following journalistic ethics.

The Reporting of the AFMZ Conflict by selected Media

Some of those who reported on the crisis in the AFMZ Church, presented the then Church President, Rev. A. Madziyire as clinging on to power and refusing to give way to elections and usher in a new crop of leaders (*Daily News Live*, 21 December, 2017). Others suggested that the church leaders got involved in politics (*The Herald*, 08 January 2019) and that Church leaders were bent on victimizing and character assassinating their perceived rivals (ibid). Another report in the papers suggested that the AFMZ was burning with no end in sight. There

is mention of the Madziyire administration busy suspending leaders from the Chiyangwa faction. The bickering had continued, while the followers were suffering (*The Herald*, 08 March 2019). Thus, the stories about the crisis in the AFMZ are numerous and form a variety of perspectives. However, this study will zero in on two reports: one by Richard Chidza, entitled *AFM Power Wrangles Rage* (*Newsday*, 16 March 2018) and another by a Staff reporter for *Bulawayo 24 News* (14 October 2018). The reports are paraphrased below.

1. **Newsday – AFM Power Wrangles Rage (16 March 2018)**

Author: Richard Chidza – Reports that there are internal power struggles in the AFMZ and that these struggles have started to simmer. These struggles, according to Chidza, are between pastor A. Madziyire and his deputy Cossam Chiyangwa. The two are at each other’s throats over control of the Church. Chidza further reports that a group of church leaders led by Rev. C. Chiyangwa had allegedly passed a vote of no confidence in Madziyire. The report goes further to state that Rev. Chiyangwa felt the burden to stop the church from derailment hence, he moved in to correct the situation. However, he ended up being attacked from all sides especially from the then Secretary General, Rev A.D. Madawo. Is the AFMZ conflict primarily over leadership? The impression created by the author here is that Rev. A. Madziyire is clinging on to power, even after his term of office had expired or that he has lost the elections but is refusing to vacate the office of President. Is this the case?

The reporter should have taken care to go into the facts around the transfer of power. One useful perspective was to visit the constitutional review process (CRP) and examine how it was initiated and to explore what the Church constitution said about such processes. A glimpse at the common constitution (the old for one and the original, for the other group) would reveal that there is provision for amendments to the existing Constitution. There is also a laid down process prescribing the manner in which such amendments could be done. Perhaps the reporter in the quest for truth could have visited the said document to determine what was done or not done and what was done correctly or wrongly. The nature of the crisis in AFMZ is so delicate that it needed to be handled with care for the sake of the Christians led by these two pastors. This is in line with views of Mehradj et.al. that the media has effects which go beyond our imagination (p. 56).

The AFMZ fraternity only woke up to read the newspaper declaring the split. In this regard, the news item could have contributed to the worsening of an already volatile situation. To this end, the story is devoid of the principle of fairness. To be fair, a story ought to factor in all aspects contributing to the total picture (Altmeyden 2012). Journalists are expected to be fair to the sources and to the people or organizations they write about. Some would question the efficacy of the demand for fairness in the context of a crisis. However, ethics demands it. Fairness is a requirement in a just society (Rawls 1971, 3). Justice is a social virtue and Zimbabwe as a democratic society has room for it.

Related to fairness is the idea of objectivity. Facts need interpretation leading to a well-supported conclusion. It is easy in the case of the AFMZ to label Rev. Madziyire as one refusing to vacate office. However, this only carries weight according to how this is interpreted. Failure to do so may lead to sensationalism. According to Daniel E. Brandenstein:

Sensational events are events that break from the norm, are different, extraordinary, strange, odd, unusual, unexpected, astonishing, amazing, bizarre, weird and generally uncommon. Further, sensationalism is the practice of writing to entice, attract, stimulate, arouse, exaggerate and generally provoke an emotional response in readers. (Brandenstein 2011, 4)

It is often held that the reading public is the primary consumers of sensational news. These news items sometimes provoke surprise, anger, and dislike and other emotional responses. Stirring up these emotions must not be done at the expense of ethical principles such as fairness, the minimization of harm and balance among others.

Sensational reporting occurs when claims are exaggerated (Ransohoff 2001, 185). Sensationalism leads to distortion of facts leading either to false hopes or unwarranted fears. In the case of the report that Rev. Madziyire was refusing to leave office, many people felt as if he was a greedy and selfish man. Was this the case? Did he not voluntarily hand over power smoothly to his successor after the elections? Was it not imperative for him to leave office after the reforms which were initiated towards the end of his term? Reporters vilified him for superintending over these crucial changes. The sensationalized stories even damage the reputation of the organization and put potential members to take to flight in fright. Sensationalism is usually embarked upon by those who are shy of deep engagement. They

simply pick on a few sensational aspects and run with them. The reporter needed to focus on and engage with the deep issue surrounding the AFMZ crisis, especially to try and establish whether the old constitution made provision for a vote of no confidence on the leadership.

In the ensuing attempts to step in and solve the crisis, Rev. Chiyangwa called for a meeting, an urgent General Workers Council for the 17 March 2018 at Rufaro at 0900 hrs. Overseers, pastors, elders and deacons were all invited. According to Chidza, Rev Madawo accused Rev. C. Chiyangwa of insubordination. The reporter could have explored what the AFMZ old constitution says regarding the calling of a Workers Council. As provided in the Constitution, only the President or the Secretary General was empowered to call for a General Meeting of the Workers' Council. A notice of not less than 21 days was supposed to go out inviting all workers to attend the meeting. Chidza in his reporting did not interrogate the activities of Rev. C. Chiyangwa, particularly what it was that made him stay a legitimate leader, while at the same time claiming that the terms of all the other members of the Apostolic Council to which he was a member had expired. This essential balance went yawning in the story.

Put differently, the story does not help readers fully understand the nature of the crisis faced by the AFM in Zimbabwe Church. The reporter could have gone to examine the genesis of the problem and create balance in the whole story. The task of responsible journalism is, as it were, to create a holistic, and more authentic picture of reality and how people relate with that reality (Allen 2004, iii). Another important aspect is respect for humanity. The reporter ought to have considered the impact of reporting the story that way on the general membership of the AFMZ Church as a whole. Was he not worsening the situation by reporting the two leaders Rev. C. Chiyangwa and Madziyire as goring at each other. The manner in which the leadership problem in the AFM after the expiry of the term of the President and the need for fresh elections. The story does not help readers get to the missing links. Let us move to the next story as reported in Bulawayo 24 news.

2. *Bulawayo 24 news* - AFM Divorce Sealed – 14 October 2018

According to a Staff reporter, the Apostolic Faith Mission in Zimbabwe (AFMZ) has divided into two. These have own leadership structures. One is led by Dr. A. Madziyire and his deputy, Rev. C. Chiyangwa. These two camps are already established. This is because, “moves are made to seal the divorce” as two camps have established separate leadership structures through elections.

The reporter goes on to say that Dr Madziyire and Rev Chiyangwa locked horns over reforms to amend the church constitution. Whereas Dr. Madziyire supports reforms, Rev. Chiyangwa wants to stick to the old constitution. Whereas one camp is known as the 'Reform AFM', the other is called the 'Original AFM'. According to the reporter, Rev Chiyangwa's team held provincial elections on the 6th and 13th of October 2018 to choose new leadership in preparation for national executive elections on Saturday while Dr Madziyire's camp will hold polls on December 31, 2018.

In a notice dated October 11, 2018, the interim general secretary in the 'Original AFM', Dr Nathan Nhira said an Extraordinary Workers' Council will be held at Rufaro Conference Centre in Chatsworth on October 20, 2018 to elect national leaders. Rev Chiyangwa's spokesman, Rev Togara Mapingure said the majority of assemblies are aligned to their group. He claimed 276 assemblies are behind them, against the 87 that are in Dr Madziyire's corner. He said a total of 762 ordained pastors, out of 855, are rallying behind Rev Chiyangwa. Rev Mapingure said judging from the provincial elections, their camp had more numbers with 4 072 councillors participating against 1 130 in Dr Madziyire's 'Reform AFM'.

The story so far told stayed at the surface and did not interrogate the constitution and what it provided for in terms of the transition from one leader to the next. The report could have benefited the Church by dwelling on the vote of no confidence and examined whether or not it was in line with the constitution. Consequently, it stayed on the plane of sensationalism. Dirty linen was washed in public much to the detriment of the organization and the congregants. The reporter chose to focus on spurious statistics indicating how one group had taken control of the Church in terms of the number of ordained pastors rallying behind one leader as opposed to the other. This too does not create the much-needed balance.

The reporter also went on to highlight the vote of no confidence debacle. "The September 22, 2018 Workers council passed a vote of no confidence against Madziyire and Madawo (General Secretary) because there was a two-thirds quorum of the Workers Council. Madawo says he fired Rev Chiyangwa. He can't do that because he was also fired by the 22 September meeting. The reporter did not pay attention to the constitutionality of the vote of no confidence. A two-thirds-quorum was reported. This was in fact not true as attendance was based on selective invitation. Only those amenable to the purpose of the meeting were invited. Other councillors were left out. Besides, at this meeting in Gweru, women and children were allowed. This runs contrary to the manner in which such meetings are conducted.

The story line pressed on showing that one group was reacting to the wrongs perpetuated by the other. The report was likely to heighten tensions and push the crisis to a tipping point. Again this is sensationalism and unfair to the processes of the Church as laid down in the constitution. The reporter appeared to legitimize the activities of a group that has acted contrary to the constitutional procedures thereby confusing the followers and causing tensions with the potential to split the entire Church into half.

The story went further to say that the group led by Rev. C. Chiyangwa held a vote of no confidence in the leadership of Rev. A. Madziyire, the former Secretary General (Rev. A.D. Madawo) fighting in the camp of the embattled leader, wrote to the church leadership under Dr Madziyire informing them that the new constitution would be adopted once contributions from the ordinary members of the church had been included. He said the Workers' Council will consider the input from the church members by December 15, 2018, after which the new constitution would be adopted. "At the Workers Council meeting, at which national elections shall be conducted, the apostolic council resolved to table its interpretation before the Workers Council and seek the condonation of the Workers Council and the ratification of all elections conducted in line with the apostolic council interpretation of the resolution of the Workers Council," wrote Rev Madawo.

Finally, the reporter wrote how the AFM International (AFMI), President Pastor Frank Chikane and the Secretary General Pastor George Mahlobo weighed in as they tried to give some counsel on how the AFMZ crisis could be resolved. According to the report, the AFMI was worried that the Zimbabwe crisis was destabilizing the AFMI, and there was therefore every need for the crisis to be resolved. Consequently, Pastor Chikane sent a circular to all AFM presidents on September 28, 2018, issuing instructions on how to resolve the AFM Zimbabwe problems. He said the AFM Zimbabwe apostolic council must adopt the constitution amendments by January 2019. "No one should be made to feel that the proposed amendments to the constitution are imposed on them without their consideration and views," said Pastor Chikane. Another call was made for the AFMZ to withdraw the matters from the courts.

Conclusion

From the two sampled stories on how the AFMZ crisis was reported in the Zimbabwe media, namely, the *Newsday* and *Bulawayo 24 News*, there are mixed fortunes regarding the importance of media ethics in the reporting of news items. It has surfaced that media ethics demands that journalists follow certain principles such as fairness, balance, credibility, and the prevention of harm among others.

Ethics matters as it is connected with justice and the social good. It regulates the conduct of individuals, organizations and the entire society. How individuals and institutions carry themselves can benefit or harm others. The two stories about the AFMZ have been sensationalized in one and unbalanced in the other. This had the potential of damaging the reputation of Rev. A. Madziyire as dictator and a leader who does not respect the constitution of the Church. Similarly, the report made Rev. C. Chiyangwa appear to be a very immature, selfish and power-hungry leader. There was need to provide the hidden links of the things happening in the respective camps. It would appear that that the hunger of power by one or the disregard of the church constitution by the other had taken the AFMZ into a dark alley.

The stories were potentially harmful to the ordinary Christian. Some never had the chance to understand what was going on hence they dug in and tenaciously stood by their pastors. The stories painted a bleak picture of war, divorce, fire etc. This sent ordinary followers into a panic mode. Had the reporters taken care to lay bare the facts as they contributed to the current predicament, chances are that the leaders from the two sides could have reached amicable positions. As things stand, one may argue that the media has contributed to polarization in the AFMZ through sensationalism and negative reporting. The media could have approached the conflict very carefully and with a view of arresting the tensions. The loss of membership by the AFMZ as a result of the manner in which stories of conflicts were reported media was phenomenal. New members and the youths fled the church in droves to other denominations because they were not willing to be associated with a church so badly portrayed in the media. The reports also sent anxiety to the AFM branches and partners in neighbouring countries who felt that what was happening to AFMZ could spill into the South Africa, Botswana or other countries. The anxiety emanated from sensationalized headlines and unbalanced reports.

What the media was supposed to do was as a matter of fact corrected by the High court judge⁴, who painstakingly tried to sew the facts together into a meaningful story before clarifying the position of the law. The courts even tried to reconcile the warring camps because the judges were aware of the importance of the Church in society and tried to promote unity not exacerbate tensions and conflicts.

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⁴ See the High Court Judgement on the case by Justice J. Mangota (*Apostolic Faith Mission in Zimbabwe: HC 9148/18 2019*)

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