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ETERNAL MEMORY OR HOLY AMNESIA? PRESERVATION OF, AND ACCESS TO RECORDS AND ARCHIVES OF AFRICAN INDEPENDENT CHURCHES IN SOUTH AFRICA

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"The Lord Almighty, the God of Israel, says that take these documents, both the sealed and unsealed copies of the deed of purchase, and put them in a clay jar so they will last a long time."
Jeremiah 32:14.

Abstract

Records and archives are important to any institution regardless of its size or whether it is a public or a private entity. However, many non-governmental organisations in South Africa such as churches, particularly African Independent Churches (AICs) think of records and archives management as a complex activity pursued by multinational corporations or government's departments. The problem of lack of record-keeping and archives management in AICs can be partly attributed to various spiritual leadership succession battles that took place in these churches, for example Zion Christian Church (ZCC) in 1948, Nazareth Baptist Church (NBC) in 1976, St John Apostolic Church in 1970/1971, as well as a further split in 1997 resulting in a splinter of a splinter of a splinter and International Pentecostal Church (IPC) in 2000. These AICs did not keep records and had to suffer when required to present records as evidence in court. Furthermore, the memories of these churches can be lost forever due to lack of preservation of records resulting in "holy amnesia". Utilising a qualitative research approach and various data collection tools such as interview, observation and questionnaire, this study sought to investigate the strategies and practices for preserving and accessing records in major AICs in South Africa with a view to stimulate the creation of archives repository for preserving the memories of AICs for eternity. Key findings of this study include AICs' overreliance on oral communication and oral traditions, lack of awareness on the importance of archives management, and unavailability of archives repositories in the AICs to preserve records. The study suggests possible ways in which the AICs may preserve their records in such a way as to be useful to researchers in future and to protect the memories of the AICs for eternity. A further study in converting oral tradition in the AICs into written form is recommended.

Keywords

Archives, records, African Independent Churches, South Africa, preservation, access

Introduction

The quote above from the book of the prophet Jeremiah in the Old Testament of the holy *Bible* underscores the importance of preserving records so that they can be accessible when people need them. The scripture is supposed to stimulate religious organisations, especially churches to preserve records in order to access them now and in future. However, as historical scholars could attest churches, especially African Independent Churches (AICs) in South Africa, these

churches hardly preserve records that they generate. For example, in their historical expositions of African Independent Churches (AICs), scholars such as Anderson (1992; 1995), Becken (1991), Körner (2002) and Lukhaimane (1982; 1991) lament lack of recorded information to support their studies. Lukhaimane (1982; 1991), who did significant work on the largest AIC in South Africa, namely the Zion Christian Church (ZCC) bemoans that his studies relied much on oral history which was not corroborated by any recorded information when collecting primary data. This was because the period (1924-1948) covered under this ZCC study lacked primary records. Körner (2002:135) echoes similar sentiments in his attempts to study the history of St John Apostolic Church. In such cases, chances are that the results can be biased if the researcher is investigating sensitive issues such as succession battles or splits of the churches.

Relying on human memory is dangerous due to its elusiveness, frailty or the tendency of human beings to be subjective (Jimerson 2003:90; Ngoepe 2008; 2011:22:). As the current researchers would attest, the challenge is compounded by a struggle to solicit information from the subjects in the studies that are not sanctioned by the church due to the secretive nature of AICs. For example, Becken (1991:153) indicates that he was denied access to the records of one AIC that he was studying as he was not a member of the church and was considered to be an outsider. A further challenge can be the destruction of records in the course of the turbulences arising in AICs to silence opposite factions. This has been the case with ZCC (Lukhaimane 1982); Nazareth Baptist Church (Becken 1991:153); St John Apostolic Church and International Pentecostal Church (IPC) (Körner 2002) to mention just a few cases.

However, in situations where records are kept and managed properly, they (records) can be used as a source of evidence should a quarrel or succession debate arises. In many AICs in South Africa, as alluded above, leadership quarrels arose after the death of the founders. In these squabbles, records were not presented in court as evidence to support arguments by either party in support of their claims. This was because records were never created in the first place or in the cases where they were created, records were destroyed during the squabbles as alluded by Lukhaimane (1991). As in line with the scripture from the prophet Jeremiah, Dladla as quoted by Becken (1991:151) urges members of Shembe (Nazareth Baptist Church) to record everything that they do in the church:

> You children of the great Lord Shembe, our Lord said: 'Write down everything that is done! When we were still children, we heard the words of the Lord of Ekuphakameni. However, nothing was written down. It was just oral tradition and it ended there. Today we have this problem that we cannot say how things grew, how we followed Shembe, what we heard and saw.

As a result of lack of proper record-keeping and archives management, the history of many AICs may be distorted. The intention of this paper is to investigate methods for preserving and accessing records in "church archives repository" in ten major AICs in South Africa, namely: St Engenas Zion Christian Church, Zion Christian Church, International Pentecostal Church, International Comforters Holiness Church, Nazareth Baptist Church (four factions), Apostolic Faith Mission Church and St John Apostolic Church. Therefore, its intention is not to discuss the split of churches in the AICs. It is hoped that the study will raise awareness on the importance of creating archives repositories in the AICs. The literature review indicates that very little research occurred in the area of preservation and access of church archives, especially in South Africa. A similar study was carried out in Botswana by Bayane (2011), but the focus was on mainstream churches. Therefore, this study attempts to fill the gap in the area of researching church archives in South Africa. For the purpose of this paper, church archive refers to a "collection of essential documents which reflect the activities of a particular church and which

have been carefully preserved to reinforce the interests of that institution" (Sumners 2012a). In this regard, the major functions of a church archives are to collect, arrange, describe, preserve and make the records and materials that document the congregation's heritage available for use.

Brief background of African Independent Churches

African Independent Churches, also known as African Indigenous Churches, or African Initiated Churches, or African Instituted Churches, or just AICs, represent over 10,000 independent Christian denominations in Africa (Oosthuizen 1989:73). Oosthuizen (1989:73) defines AICs as "any of a number of Christian churches independently started in Africa by Africans and not by missionaries from another continent, in which they sometimes hold to one or more African tribal belief systems syncretised with Christianity". Anderson (1992:7) defines AICs as churches which have exclusively Black leadership and are independent from Western influence. These are the churches that form the main focus of this paper. They are found in many parts of Africa, but they are more adequately documented in western and southern Africa (Mafuta 2010). Even though the denominational, ritual and linguistic diversity of these churches makes it difficult to analyse and classify, the common thread uniting all of the AICs is that they were all established by African initiatives rather than by foreign missionary agendas. Even though many of these churches have traditional denominational names and relationships, they are not defined by these traditions. In addition, all AICs place emphasis on the biblical warrant to include African cultural norms into their modes of worship, theology and practice, though in varying degrees.

Some scholars claim that AICs are syncretistic in that they combine indigenous African religion with Christian beliefs, but the degree to which this occurs is varies (Anderson 1992). Regardless, a process of acculturation between Christianity and African culture occurred. AICs are often classified by common characteristics including denominational names or traditions, including Ethiopian, Apostolic, Zionist or Messianic. AICs have also demonstrated a strong missionary tendency in that most of the spread of Christianity throughout Africa in the 20th century may be attributed to African Independent Churches (Oosthuizen 1989:73). It is not the purpose of this paper to discuss the theological positions of the AICs, but to discuss the strategies and methods employed by AICs in South Africa to preserve and make archives accessible.

Importance of church archives

Scholars such as Bergon (1999) and Sumners (2012a) significantly documented the importance of church archives. The archival records from church archives have always been important as they document the activity of nurturing spiritual growth and yield priceless vital statistics for the church (Duncan, Flesher and Stocks 1999:143). Church records play a great part in tracing one's ancestors. Therefore, one generation can leave another no greater gift than the preservation of church records. Bergon (1999:1) contends that a world-wide genealogical boom elevated the importance of religious and church archives. This placed greater demands on churches for information from church records. Sumners (2012a) argues that a church archives serves as a repository for the official records and historical materials that document the heritage of the church. In this regard, the holdings of church archives include among others: minutes of church meetings, deacon and church council minutes, membership records, financial records, Sunday school and church attendance records, committee files and reports, files and papers of church staff members, photographs, slides, newsletters, programmes, publications, recorded sermons of the clergymen, clipping files, videotapes and scrapbooks. However, this is not generic as the holdings differ from church to church. Nonetheless, an important aspect is that not all records created by the church may be historical or worthy of permanent retention. For example, housekeeping records such as telephone and utility bills, invoices and cheque stubs need to be

retained only for a limited time and then destroyed. The archival records are those materials that illustrate and document the actions, decisions, policies, programmes, church statements, for example sermons by spiritual leadership, baptismal registers and the constitution, among others.

According to Sumners (2012a) establishing a church archives serves several purposes and functions. For example, legal documents may be preserved in the church archives and provide needed information in the time of disputes or litigations. Persons needing proof of birth dates for retirement and pension purposes often refer to vital statistical records (i.e. membership, baptismal and marriage) for information. Archival files provide useful data to church leaders on past promotional activities and events and assist them in evaluating future programmes and methods. These records may help to avoid mistakes of earlier years. Specific information on church policies and statements can be located in the archival holdings (Bergon 1999:2).

The archival records from church archives have always been important as they document the activity of nurturing spiritual growth and yield priceless vital statistics (Bergon 1999:1). Furthermore, informing the church membership of their heritage through exhibits relies on having historical material to display. These items are of great value for anniversary celebrations or the development of a heritage room. The records of the church also assist in public relations efforts of the church. Information from the archives documents the influence and activities of the church in the community. Its stance on various issues, its commitment to the goals of the Kingdom of God, its willingness or lack of willingness to adopt new procedures and programmes are all rooted in the church's history (Sumners 2012a).

More traditional and external use of a church archives comes from individuals researching their family history and local history. Genealogists find church records choice material for finding valuable family data (Bergon 1999:1). In most communities, the history of the local area cannot be written without discussing the influence of the church (Sumners 2012a). Therefore, one generation can leave another no greater gift than the preservation of church records as the prophet Jeremiah instructed for the suitable housing of documents. In this regard, it is important for AICs to develop their own archival repositories as Bergon (1999:9) emphasises that "archives give us inspiration by yielding information about people who created our heritage and made us proud heirs." Therefore, AICs' use of church archives to reflect on their history will help them determine the future of their ministries better and also have reference in the case of squabbles.

Problem statement

There is a notable shortage of primary records in many AICs in South Africa and elsewhere. Bayane (2011) observes that records of churches, especially AICs are inaccessible in Botswana and there is a danger that some may be lost. As Bowrin (2004:121) and Sumners (2012b) would attest "the only time records are discussed in a church staff meeting is when some crisis has occurred". In this case records are either cannot be found, lost or have been destroyed, or all of the filing cabinets are full and no more storage space is available. Unfortunately, churches seldom initiate actions to manage their records in a more effective and efficient manner. The situation seems to be the same in South Africa. Historians such as Anderson (1995:283), Becken (1991:151) and Lukhaimane (1982; 1991) concur that when studying AICs, an emphasis on historical aspects is a matter of any sincere scholar. This is because the identity of most if not all AICs is predetermined and shaped by their experiences in the past. However, the challenge in studying AICs in South Africa is the unavailability of documents as very often the experiences of AICs are not chronicled. Many historians as alluded to above, especially those specialising in the history of AICs have sorry tales to tell about the shortage of information on most of these legendary churches. Only a few rudimentary records about AICs are available from the South

African state repositories and looked at these churches from the Western point of view (Becken 1991:152). Furthermore, those records in state archives repositories were not generated by the AICs themselves but by the state. The other category of accessible records about AICs is old newspaper cuttings. However, the press is more interested in feeding readers' minds with sensation than undertaking scholarly research. In this regard, the adage 'until lions write their stories, the hunter will always be the hero' holds true. The most authentic sources are oral traditions of AICs who preserved the historical events of the churches in the minds as accounts were not written down. However, the problem with this latter method is that people take along their knowledge of past events and their own interpretation into the grave. Also, there is an issue of subjectivity for relying on human memory as alluded to above. It is important that AICs establish archives repositories to preserve records and make them available to users. Using church archives to reflect on their history will help AICs to determine the future of their ministries better.

Purpose and objectives of the study

The purpose of this qualitative study was to investigate the strategies and methods that AICs utilised in South Africa. They utilised these to preserve and make records accessible with a view to stimulate the creation of archives repository for preservation of the memories of AICs. The specific objectives were to:

- investigate whether AICs in South Africa have established archives repositories to preserve their recorded memory
- identify the availability of strategies and policies to preserve and make records available
- identify the types and formats of records that are preserved by AICs in South Africa
- investigate the accessibility of records in the AICs in South Africa
- investigate whether AICs in South Africa have embraced new technologies in the creation, management, preservation and access of records

Scope and limitations of the study

This study was limited to 10 major AICs in South Africa which were selected through snowball sampling. The current study proved difficult for the researchers to collect primary data as we struggled to get contact details of the churches under study. The researchers resorted to search for contact details of identified AICs through means such as yellow pages, Google search and through asking members of these churches who were not always willing to cooperate. The problem was compounded by lack of websites for AICs understudy. Furthermore, some of the AICs targeted were reluctant to participate in this study by not returning telephone calls and questionnaires.

Mainline churches such as the Dutch Reformed, Lutheran (Garaba and Zaverdinosn 2013), Presbyterian, Methodist, Anglican (Chisa and Hoskins 2013) and Roman Catholic were excluded in this study as they have their own archives. These churches do donate records such as baptismal registers to archives repository, for example holding of the Dutch Reformed Church and St George's Cathedral in the Cape Archives Repository. The earliest records kept in South Africa are those of the Dutch Reformed Church that start in 1660, the Lutheran Church records from 1784, Anglican from 1806, Methodist from 1822 and Catholic from 1820.

Cory Library in Grahamstown is the official custodian of archives of the Methodist Church of Southern Africa. The archives include material relating to Methodism in southern Africa and

most of the material date back from as far as the early nineteenth century. They also include manuscripts (letters, diaries, minutes, memoranda, press clippings, scrap-books, registers, financial, ecclesiastical and personal documents and pictorial material). These archival records are supplemented by individual Methodist missionaries' diaries. They are consulted mainly for genealogical and historical research or when people would like to apply for naturalisation. Also, Presbyterian, Baptist, Catholic, Congregational and Jewish records can also be found at the Cory Library. The same cannot be said about AICs records. Researchers who try to consult records from AICs in the South African state repositories are often not served as the repositories do not have such information. Equally beyond the scope of this study were charismatic churches or the so-called "Bazalwana" churches such as Universal Kingdom of God, Faith Mission and others.

Research methodology

This qualitative study used multiple forms of data collection tools such as interviews, observation and questionnaire albeit small sample. Therefore, an overview given in this study has obvious limitations. One being the limited sample size and sample selection and therefore, the results cannot be generalised. Due to lack of a sampling frame, the AICs were chosen on a basis of snowball sampling. The researchers requested names of AICs that had a membership of 100 000 and more congregants. An assumption was that these AICs would generate many records at the local, district and headquarters level that will need to be managed properly. As a result, researchers identified 10 AICs. The AICs being studied were informed of the nature of the study and were willing participants. Those which were not willing did not return the questionnaire nor grant permission for interview or visit to the headquarters' premises.

Firstly, open-ended questionnaires directed to the secretaries of the AICs identified were mailed via post with a self stamped envelope enclosed during July/August 2013. After only three questionnaires were returned, only headquarters of two AICs were visited to observe how they kept and preserved their records. It was not possible for the researchers to visit the premises of all the churches as they were scattered all over South Africa. Permissions to visit the premises of these churches were assumed declined as they did not return calls or responded to requests. Furthermore, only a secretary of one AIC was interviewed telephonically. The researchers also navigated a dormant website of one AICs understudy. Other nine AICs identified did not have a website. Therefore, the results of this study will be presented on six AICs that participated. Since they preferred not to share any details that would make them identifiable, this study will not provide the names of the AICs' responses. Rather the AICs will be represented by letters A to F, if necessary.

Regarding the profile of AICs, all six indicated a membership of over 1 million. However, the exact number could not be provided due to a number of reasons:

- In some churches people were baptised or converted after a certain age, for example after attending the church for a period of years. As a result, children of the members may not be included in the church registers.
- In other instances, the total number of membership was based on attendance registers for the annual pilgrimage. In such cases, non-members are included as members. However, in some churches there were two registers for members and non-members.
- Members backsliding without notifying the church. As a result, they are still counted in the church register.
- Registers not kept well at branch levels.
- Some churches with no registers at all.

The dates for annual pilgrimage differed from one church to another, namely during Easter, September and January. Over and above annual pilgrimage, there were local, regional and ad-hoc gatherings in most of the churches. Furthermore, the AICs could not provide the total number of branches but all indicated availability of branches throughout South Africa, with two citing branches in southern Africa and even abroad. The branches abroad were mainly opened by local members who relocated to those areas (overseas).

Findings of the study

The findings of data obtained through questionnaire, interview and observation are presented and discussed according to research objectives raised in section 4.

Storage and management of church records

No AICs understudy had established an archives repository for storage of records. However, one church had a room dedicated for storage of records. Records for this church were kept in arch lever files. Furthermore, each member of the executive council had an office at headquarters where they kept their files. This particular AIC seemed to be well-organised compared to others as it even had all financial records in order. It was further noted that this AIC followed a three-tier structured system: head office, district and local. The other AICs without archives storage indicated that the records of the church were kept at the bishop's home. In some instances, church records such as photographs were scattered with some possessed by individual members where churches did not have any control over them. In one instant, it was revealed that some of the sermons of the bishop in audio-visual medium were lodged with SABC radios. It was indicated that these records are supplied when needed for reference purpose.

When members were asked about the oldest record in the church, estate papers of the founder of one AIC dating back to 1940s cited specific documents. These papers cited a church register dated 1928 and constitutions dating back to 1940s and 1960s. Of interest was a church receipt issued for a member indicating contribution for tithing that dated 1918. The other participants were not aware of what constituted the oldest record in their church. None of the AICs had an archivist or records manager. As a result, the responsibility in one of the AICs was assigned to volunteers who come to the church for a while and reside in the church premises for free. Others indicated that whoever created the record was responsible for its safeguarding.

Policies and strategies for preservation of and access to records

In all the AICs there were no documented policies or strategies for creation, management and preservation of records. Therefore, records generated are kept and disposed at the discretion of the bishops. Oral tradition was identified as the preferred method of passing information from one generation to another as compared to written words. Many AICs have practised this tradition since inception of many of them as Bayane (2011), Lukhaimane (1991) and Oosthuizen (1989) indicated in their studies. This can be attributed to the fact that in the past, the majority of members of AICs were illiterate. Lukhaimane (1982) even mentioned that in one AIC the constitution was available but members were not aware of it. However, participants admitted that information is sometimes distorted when it is not recorded.

Types and formats of records

AICs generate a number of records are generated in different formats, namely minutes, membership register, baptismal, sermons (in paper and CD), videos, photographs, newsletter,

letters. However, there were no records generated through computer technology and on microfilm in most AICs. In one AIC there were servers and surveillance cameras for security purposes. A number of activities were taking place in AICs even though not all were recorded. For example, AICs did not record most of the funerals on which they presided. However, in the cases where delegates from headquarters were represented at the funeral, reports were generated. In one AIC, the holy matrimonies for members were conducted at the headquarters of the church, as compared to others where they (weddings) were mostly conducted at the bride and groom's abode. The weddings conducted at the church premises were recorded and both the member and the church would have a copy. Regarding the ones happening at the home of the members, only members had a copy. The other set of records created were compact disks for music commissioned by the church through the choirs.

Upon scrutinising the church register of one AIC, it was clear to the researchers that it cannot be used in future for genealogical research. This is due to the fact that not much biographical information is captured; that is, only the names and identity numbers were captured. The registers were not comprehensive as compared to the ones for mainline churches that we perused at the national archives repository. With the ones for mainline churches, information such as name of parents and children are captured. In that way, it would be easy for a person in future to trace the ancestry.

One of the challenges experienced by the AICs was lack of information when they prepare for celebrations such as centenaries as there was always no record to refer to. For example, one AIC indicated that when the church council considered the commissioning of the writing of the history of the church, the problem was records were not available. Due to lack of records, in some cases there was conflicting information about when the AIC was established. The other noted challenge was a struggle to access videos captured in VHS as they become obsolete.

Accessibility of records

As records management principles were not practised in AICs, there were no methods of arranging records. Whoever was possessing records was keeping them the way they liked. Furthermore, no AICs had established a Promotion of Access to Information Act (PAIA) programme. As a result, there was no church will a PAIA manual. It was noted that even members of the church did not have access to records. The access was limited to a few elite, that is, church council members and auditors of the church. It would seem that church members were not even aware that records do exist.

Adoption of technology for management of records

While the AICs acknowledge that technology is vital for managing the church, none of the AICs was managing records generated electronic records. Records generated electronically were left at the discretion of the creator. Only one church had a website which was dormant. The only preservation option that seems to be followed by the AICs unconsciously was boxing – they put documents or records in boxes. However, this "boxing" happened without arranging records and labelling boxes.

Conclusion and recommendations
It is clear from the study that there is overreliance on oral tradition, lack of awareness on the importance of archives management, and unavailability of archives repositories in the AICs to preserve records. Furthermore, the adoption of technology is very slow. The AICs should consider creating repositories where they can store records. However, at the same time there is a

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need to digitise the records. These records could be useful to the descendants of the members of the churches, especially for genealogical purposes as membership is mainly African which is not represented in state archives. The AICs could also benefit if they are required to provide proof. The following are further recommendations:

- AICs should consider developing and implementing policies to prevent loss of the "holy memory".
- Members with archives and records management skills should volunteer in their churches to develop strategies and policies for managing records and archives.
- The AICs should also consider developing websites that will provide more information about them.

Failure to manage and preserve the records would result in erasing the holy memory of the AICs. As mentioned in section 7, an overview given in this study has limitations in terms of sample size and selection. Therefore, there is a need for further studies to assess the preservation and access of records in AICs, which should cover a bigger and representative sample, including mainline churches. It is also recommended that there should be a further study on converting oral tradition in the AICs into written form. This will go a long way in helping to bridge gaps that exist in the AICs on archives and records management.

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