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THE ETHICS OF LEADERSHIP WITHIN ACCOUNTABILITY: STRUCTURING INTEGRITY IN ADVENTIST TRADITION

Peter Onyebuchim Nwogu [1] & **Confidence Chioma Peter** [2]

School of General Studies, Federal University of Environment & Technology, Koroma/Saakpenwa, Ogoni [1]

Department of Public Relations & Advertising, Faculty of Communication and Media Studies, University of Port Harcourt [2]

Abstract

Leadership is central to the life, mission, and administration of religious organizations. Within the Seventh-day Adventist tradition, leadership is understood as a sacred responsibility to serve God, the Church, and humanity rather than merely the exercise of authority or management of resources. Consequently, Adventist leadership is expected to reflect biblical values of integrity, stewardship, humility, accountability, justice, and selfless service. Ethical leadership is therefore essential to maintaining the Church's spiritual credibility, institutional effectiveness, membership confidence, and mission. Biblical leadership emphasizes character, stewardship, and accountability. Leaders are entrusted with authority and are ultimately accountable to God for their decisions and conduct. Jesus Christ provides the supreme model of servant leadership, demonstrating humility, sacrifice, compassion, truthfulness, justice, and service. This Christ-centered model requires leaders to combine administrative competence with spiritual maturity, prayerful discernment, moral consistency, and commitment to the wider mission of the Church. Accountability is a critical component of ethical leadership. It operates at both spiritual and institutional levels: leaders are accountable to God and also to governing bodies, colleagues, members, policies, procedures, and established oversight mechanisms. Effective accountability promotes transparency, responsible stewardship, ethical decision-making, and proper use of authority and resources. It also serves as a safeguard against abuse of power, conflicts of interest, favoritism, financial impropriety, and other unethical practices. Beyond preventing misconduct, accountability functions as a formative discipline that develops humility,

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responsibility, transparency, and moral awareness. Integrity involves consistency between a leader's beliefs, values, words, and actions and must therefore be reinforced by institutional systems that encourage openness, checks and balances, and responsible governance. Nevertheless, power imbalances, weak governance structures, inadequate reporting mechanisms, and moral disengagement may undermine accountability. The study therefore advocates strengthened governance, institutional reform, transparent administrative practices, and renewed spiritual vigilance. It concludes that integrating accountability with ethical, Christ-centered leadership can build trust, enhance institutional credibility, strengthen governance, and advance the Church's mission by producing competent administrators and faithful stewards who reflect the character of Christ.

Key Words: Leadership, Accountability, Integrity, Adventist Church, Ethics of Responsibility.

Introduction

Leadership is fundamentally a moral undertaking, defined not only by the ability to influence others but also by the obligation to act in ways that reflect ethical standards and societal expectations. Accordingly, the ethics of leadership centers on the principles of right and wrong that inform leaders' decisions, conduct, and interactions within organizations and the wider society (Northouse, 2019). In an era marked by heightened demands for transparency and good governance, ethical leadership has become a decisive factor in determining institutional legitimacy and performance. At its essence, ethical leadership is expressed through integrity, fairness, and accountability in both personal behavior and professional responsibilities (Brown & Treviño, 2006). Leaders are expected to exemplify ethical conduct not merely as a reflection of personal virtue but as a strategic necessity that shapes organizational culture and guides followers' behavior (Treviño, Brown, & Hartman, 2003). This understanding resonates with virtue ethics, which prioritizes character, alongside deontological and consequentialist perspectives that assess morality in terms of duties and outcomes (Velasquez et al., 2015). Moreover, the ethics of leadership is intrinsically linked to accountability, which obliges leaders to explain and take responsibility for their actions and their outcomes (Bovens, 2007). Mechanisms such as oversight systems, performance appraisals, and ethical guidelines help institutionalize accountability, thereby reinforcing integrity and ensuring that authority is exercised within accepted moral and legal limits (Mulgan, 2000). Thus, ethical leadership is shaped not only by individual character but also by organizational contexts that either encourage or inhibit ethical behavior.

The importance of ethical leadership has become increasingly evident in light of governance breakdowns, corporate misconduct, and inefficiencies in public institutions, often driven by compromised integrity and inadequate accountability structures (Kaptein, 2011). These realities highlight the need for leaders who combine competence with strong ethical grounding and who can balance organizational goals with broader societal responsibilities. As Ciulla (2004) observes, the true legitimacy of leadership derives from moral authority rather than mere positional power. Within this context, this study positions the ethics of leadership within the broader framework of accountability, underscoring the imperative of structuring integrity through intentional systems and practices. By exploring both theoretical perspectives and practical implications, it contributes to ongoing discussions on how leadership can effectively align authority with responsibility in ways that foster trust, sustainability, and organizational excellence. Furthermore, leadership within the Seventh-day Adventist Church is fundamentally a spiritual and moral calling, grounded in biblical principles and guided by a commitment to service, integrity, and accountability.

Unlike secular conceptions of leadership that often emphasize authority and control, Adventist leadership is rooted in the model of servant leadership exemplified by Jesus Christ, who taught that true leadership is expressed through humility and service: *"whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant"* (Matthew 20:26–28, Bible). At its core, the ethics of leadership in the Adventist tradition emphasizes character, faithfulness, and adherence to divine principles. Leaders are expected to reflect Christ-like attributes such as honesty, compassion, and justice, recognizing that leadership is ultimately stewardship under God. Scripture underscores this responsibility, noting that *"it is required in stewards that one be found faithful"* (1 Corinthians 4:2, Bible). This perspective positions leadership not as a privilege, but as a sacred trust that demands accountability both to God and to the faith community.

Integrity stands at the heart of ethical leadership within the Church. The biblical injunction in Proverbs 11:3 *"The integrity of the upright guides them"* (Bible) highlights the centrality of moral consistency in leadership. Adventist leaders are therefore called to align their actions with biblical teachings, ensuring that their decisions and conduct uphold the values of righteousness and truth. This alignment is further reinforced in Micah 6:8, which calls leaders to *"act justly, love mercy, and walk humbly with your God"* (Bible), encapsulating the ethical framework within which leadership is to be exercised. Accountability is equally integral to leadership ethics in the Adventist Church. Leaders are not only answerable to organizational structures but are ultimately accountable to God, who evaluates both actions and intentions. Hebrews 13:17 affirms this responsibility: *"they keep watch over you as those who must give an account"* (Bible). This dual accountability spiritual and institutional ensures that leadership authority is exercised with reverence, transparency, and a deep sense of responsibility. Furthermore, the Adventist understanding of leadership ethics is closely tied to the Church's mission, which emphasises service to humanity, evangelism, and the promotion of holistic well-being. Leaders are expected to embody these values, fostering unity, trust, and spiritual growth within the Church community. The apostle Paul the Apostle admonishes leaders in Titus 1:7–8 to be *"blameless, not self-willed, not quick-tempered… but hospitable, a lover of what is good, self-controlled, just, holy, and disciplined"* (Bible), providing a clear ethical standard for leadership conduct. In this context, the ethics of leadership within the Adventist Church transcends administrative competence, focusing instead on moral character, spiritual accountability, and faithful service. By grounding leadership practices in biblical teachings and Christ's example, the Church seeks to cultivate leaders who not only guide effectively but also inspire through integrity, humility, and unwavering commitment to God's principles.

Conceptual Foundations of Ethical Leadership

Ethical leadership refers to the demonstration of normatively appropriate conduct through personal actions and interpersonal relationships, as defined by Brown and Treviño (2006). This conception emphasizes that leadership is not merely about achieving organizational goals but about how those goals are pursued and the moral quality of the means employed (Brown & Treviño, 2006; Treviño, Brown, & Hartman, 2003). Ethical leaders are expected to model integrity, honesty, and respect in both private conduct and public decision-making, thereby serving as visible standards for others within the organization (Kalshoven, Den Hartog, & De Hoogh, 2011). At its core, ethical leadership involves fairness, transparency, and a steadfast commitment to doing what is right, even when such actions may be inconvenient or personally costly (Ciulla, 2004; Northouse, 2019). Fairness requires that leaders treat followers impartially and make decisions based on objective criteria rather than

personal bias or favoritism (Colquitt et al., 2001). Transparency entails openness in communication and clarity in intentions, which helps to reduce uncertainty and build confidence among stakeholders (Rawlins, 2008). Moreover, ethical leaders engage in principled decision-making, guided by moral reasoning and a sense of responsibility toward both individuals and the broader community (Rest, 1986; Freeman, 1984).

Leaders who consistently embody ethical principles cultivate environments where trust and responsibility flourish. Trust emerges when followers perceive their leaders as reliable, just, and morally grounded, which in turn enhances cooperation, commitment, and organizational citizenship behaviors (Dirks & Ferrin, 2002; Mayer, Davis, & Schoorman, 1995). Such environments also encourage employees to act responsibly, as ethical leadership has been shown to promote moral awareness and reduce unethical conduct within organizations (Brown, Treviño, & Harrison, 2005; Kaptein, 2011). In this way, ethical leadership contributes not only to individual moral development but also to the establishment of an ethical organizational culture. Accountability, in this context, is the obligation of leaders to answer for their decisions and actions, as articulated by Bovens (2007). It represents a critical mechanism through which ethical standards are maintained, ensuring that those in positions of authority remain answerable to stakeholders and governing structures (Bovens, 2007; Mulgan, 2000). Accountability encompasses both answerability the duty to explain and justify actions and enforceability the possibility of sanctions or corrective measures where conduct falls short of expected norms (Schedler, 1999).

Importantly, accountability ensures that power is not exercised arbitrarily but is subject to scrutiny, evaluation, and, where necessary, correction. Through formal mechanisms such as audits, performance reviews, and reporting systems, as well as informal processes like peer evaluation and public oversight, accountability constrains misuse of authority and reinforces ethical behavior (Behn, 2001; Romzek & Dubnick, 1987). It also promotes transparency by requiring leaders to disclose relevant information and provide reasons for their decisions, thereby strengthening institutional trust and legitimacy (Fox, 2007). In practice, the integration of ethical leadership and accountability creates a mutually reinforcing relationship. While ethical leadership provides the moral foundation for responsible conduct, accountability offers the structural framework that ensures such conduct is consistently upheld and evaluated (Denhardt & Denhardt, 2000). Together, they foster a culture of integrity, where leaders are both guided by ethical principles and held responsible for their actions, ultimately contributing to sustainable organizational effectiveness and public confidence.

Accountability as a Mechanism for Integrity

Integrity is often described as the consistency or alignment between one's values, words, and actions. It reflects an inner moral coherence that enables leaders to act with honesty, transparency, and reliability across varying circumstances. As Stephen L. Carter observes, integrity requires not only discerning what is right but also acting on that understanding consistently, even when it is costly. In this sense, integrity is not merely a personal virtue but a lived practice that manifests in observable behavior and decision-making. However, integrity does not exist in abstraction; it is structured, sustained, and reinforced through accountability systems. Accountability provides the external frameworks formal and informal that ensure individuals remain answerable for their conduct and decisions. According to Mark Bovens, accountability is a relational mechanism in which an actor is obliged to explain and justify conduct to a forum that can question and evaluate it, and

potentially impose consequences. This relational dynamic creates a feedback loop that strengthens ethical consistency by aligning internal values with external expectations.

Scholars in ethical leadership, such as Linda K. Treviño and Michael E. Brown, argue that accountability systems such as transparent reporting structures, ethical codes, performance evaluations, and peer review mechanisms serve as critical enablers of integrity within organizations. These systems institutionalise ethical expectations, making integrity less dependent on individual disposition and more embedded in organisational culture and governance processes. Without such structures, even well-intentioned leaders may drift toward inconsistency due to pressure, bias, or lack of oversight. Furthermore, accountability enhances integrity by introducing consequences and corrective measures. When individuals know their actions will be scrutinized and must be justified, they are more likely to act in ways that are consistent with established moral and professional standards. This aligns with the view of Philip Pettit, who emphasizes that accountability fosters "contestability," ensuring that power is exercised in a manner that can be challenged and corrected when necessary. In sum, integrity and accountability are mutually reinforcing constructs. Integrity provides the moral foundation for ethical behavior, while accountability supplies the structural support that sustains and verifies it. Together, they form a dynamic system in which ethical leadership is not only professed but also practiced, monitored, and continuously strengthened. Leaders demonstrate integrity when they:

i. Accept responsibility for outcomes,
ii. Provide transparent explanations for decisions,
iii. Submit themselves to oversight mechanisms.

Accept Responsibility for Outcomes

Accepting responsibility for outcomes is a core expression of integrity and a defining mark of accountable leadership. It requires individuals especially those in positions of authority to acknowledge ownership not only of decisions they directly make but also of the consequences that flow from those decisions, whether intended or unintended. This principle moves beyond mere task completion; it emphasizes answerability for results, including successes, failures, and the ethical implications of both. In accountability theory, Mark Bovens explains that true accountability involves an obligation to explain and justify one's conduct before a relevant forum. Accepting responsibility, therefore, entails a willingness to provide transparent explanations for outcomes, to admit errors without deflection, and to take corrective action where necessary. It rejects the tendency to shift blame to subordinates, circumstances, or external pressures, and instead fosters a culture of ownership and trust. From an ethical leadership perspective, Michael E. Brown and Linda K. Treviño argue that leaders who model responsibility for outcomes set a powerful moral tone within organizations. When leaders openly acknowledge both achievements and shortcomings, they legitimize honesty and learning, encouraging others to do the same. This, in turn, reduces fear-based cultures where mistakes are hidden and instead promotes environments where continuous improvement is possible. Accepting responsibility also includes a proactive dimension: anticipating the potential impact of decisions and taking steps to mitigate negative consequences. It reflects foresight, ethical sensitivity, and a commitment to stewardship. As Peter F. Drucker noted, effective leaders are those who take responsibility for the performance and direction of their organizations, recognizing that leadership is ultimately about accountability for results. In practical terms, this principle can be demonstrated through mechanisms such as transparent reporting, performance evaluations tied to outcomes, willingness to issue apologies when warranted, and

implementation of corrective measures after failures. It also involves learning from outcomes—using both success and failure as feedback to refine future decisions and actions. Ultimately, accepting responsibility for outcomes reinforces the link between integrity and accountability. It ensures that leadership is not merely about authority or intention, but about measurable impact and ethical answerability, thereby strengthening trust, credibility, and organizational effectiveness.

Provide Transparent Explanations for Decisions

Providing transparent explanations for decisions is a central pillar of accountable and ethical leadership. It involves clearly communicating not only *what* decisions have been made, but also *why* they were made, *how* they were reached, and *what* implications they carry for stakeholders. Transparency in this sense is not mere disclosure; it is the deliberate effort to make reasoning processes visible, understandable, and open to scrutiny. In the framework of accountability articulated by Mark Bovens, actors are expected to explain and justify their conduct before a forum capable of evaluating it. Transparent explanation fulfills this obligation by enabling stakeholders whether employees, governing bodies, or the public to assess the legitimacy, fairness, and rationality of decisions. Without such openness, accountability becomes hollow, as stakeholders lack the information needed to evaluate leadership actions. Ethical leadership scholars such as Linda K. Treviño and Michael E. Brown emphasize that transparency strengthens trust and credibility within organizations. When leaders openly share their decision-making processes, they signal respect for others and reinforce perceptions of fairness. This is particularly important in complex or controversial situations, where decisions may not satisfy all parties. Clear explanations help stakeholders understand the constraints, values, and trade-offs involved, even when they disagree with the outcome. Providing transparent explanations also serves an educative function. It helps to clarify organizational priorities, ethical standards, and strategic direction, thereby aligning individual and collective behavior. Over time, this practice cultivates a culture in which reasoning, rather than authority alone, becomes the basis for decision acceptance. As Jürgen Habermas suggests in his theory of communicative action, legitimacy is strengthened when decisions can be justified through rational discourse that others can evaluate and engage with. Practically, transparency in decision-making can be demonstrated through timely communication, documentation of decision criteria, openness about uncertainties and risks, and willingness to answer questions or receive feedback. It also requires avoiding selective disclosure or manipulation of information, as partial transparency can undermine trust as much as secrecy. Ultimately, providing transparent explanations for decisions reinforces the integration of integrity and accountability. It ensures that leadership actions are not only ethically grounded but also visibly justified, fostering an environment of trust, mutual respect, and informed engagement. Without accountability, integrity risks becoming rhetorical rather than practical. Thus, accountability acts as both a constraint and a reinforcement, ensuring that ethical standards are upheld consistently.

Submit Themselves to Oversight Mechanisms

Submitting themselves to oversight mechanisms is a decisive expression of accountability and a safeguard for integrity in leadership. It requires leaders to willingly place their actions, decisions, and use of authority under systems of review, evaluation, and, where necessary, correction. Rather than perceiving oversight as a constraint, ethical leaders recognize it as a structure that strengthens legitimacy, curbs excesses, and reinforces trust. Within accountability theory, Mark Bovens emphasizes that accountability involves not only the

obligation to explain conduct but also the acceptance of external scrutiny and the possibility of sanctions. Oversight mechanisms such as audits, supervisory boards, regulatory bodies, peer reviews, and performance appraisals serve as institutional forums where such scrutiny occurs. By submitting to these mechanisms, leaders affirm that their authority is not absolute but subject to evaluation against established standards and expectations. From an ethical leadership standpoint, Linda K. Treviño and Michael E. Brown argue that visible compliance with oversight processes sets a powerful example within organizations. When leaders willingly undergo review and accept feedback, they normalize accountability and reduce hierarchical barriers that often discourage openness. This behavior fosters a culture in which transparency and answerability are shared responsibilities rather than imposed obligations. Oversight mechanisms also play a preventive and corrective role. They help identify risks, detect misconduct, and ensure that decisions align with ethical, legal, and organizational standards. In this regard, Philip Pettit highlights the importance of "contestability," where power must always remain open to challenge and revision. Oversight provides the institutional means through which such contestation can occur, ensuring that leadership actions are not beyond question. Practically, submitting to oversight involves cooperating with audits and evaluations, adhering to reporting requirements, respecting the authority of governing bodies, and implementing recommendations arising from reviews. It also includes maintaining accurate records, disclosing relevant information, and refraining from actions that would undermine the independence or effectiveness of oversight institutions. Ultimately, this principle reinforces the interdependence of integrity and accountability. By subjecting themselves to oversight, leaders demonstrate humility, responsibility, and a commitment to ethical governance. It ensures that leadership is exercised not in isolation, but within a system of checks and balances that promotes fairness, transparency, and sustained organizational credibility.

Structuring Integrity in Leadership Practice

Structuring integrity involves embedding ethical principles into organizational systems and leadership behavior. This can be achieved through:

i. **Institutional Frameworks:** Clear policies, codes of conduct, and regulatory structures provide a foundation for ethical behavior (Kaptein, 2011). These frameworks define expectations and consequences, making accountability enforceable.
ii. **Ethical Decision-Making Models:** Leaders must apply principled reasoning when confronted with dilemmas. Models such as utilitarianism, deontology, and virtue ethics provide structured approaches to evaluating choices (Velasquez et al., 2015).
iii. **Transparency and Communication:** Open communication fosters trust and allows stakeholders to assess leadership actions. Transparency reduces the likelihood of misconduct and enhances legitimacy.
iv. **Role Modeling:** Leaders set the ethical tone of an organization. When leaders consistently act with integrity, they create a culture where accountability is normalized (Northouse, 2019).

Challenges to Ethical Leadership and Accountability

Despite its importance, maintaining accountability in leadership is often challenged by:

i. **Power Asymmetry**, which can shield leaders from scrutiny,
ii. **Institutional Weaknesses**, particularly in developing governance systems,
iii. **Moral Disengagement**, where individuals rationalize unethical behavior (Bandura, 1999).

These challenges highlight the need for robust systems and a strong ethical orientation among leaders.

Implications for Governance and Organizational Effectiveness

Ethical leadership anchored in accountability enhances:

i. **Public Trust**, especially in governance and public institutions,
ii. **Organizational Performance**, through improved morale and reduced corruption,
iii. **Sustainability**, by ensuring decisions consider long-term consequences.

Conversely, the absence of accountability often leads to corruption, inefficiency, and institutional decay.

Conclusion

The ethics of leadership cannot be divorced from accountability. Integrity, as the moral backbone of leadership, must be intentionally structured through systems, behaviors, and institutional frameworks that demand responsibility and transparency. Ethical leadership, therefore, is not simply about personal virtue but about creating and sustaining environments where accountability ensures that integrity is both practiced and preserved.

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