

# Integrity and Accountability in Reporting Missions Statistics

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## Case Study

Pastor Kusa was a great church planter. I'm not sure how many churches he planted, but there were many. Well known in the villages of our district, many called upon him for special occasions. Whether he conducted a Muslim or a Christian funeral, the man preached fearlessly that Jesus was the Son of God. One day, I stopped at Pastor Kusa's house, greeted him, and told him that the main office wanted him to fill out his annual church report. I left him a copy of a form and told him I would soon collect it.

Within a week, I returned for the report and found that he had filled it out completely. I greeted his family and climbed back into my truck. Before taking off, I decided to have a look at it.

I must have had an odd look on my face because Pastor Kusa, waiting for me to drive away, came up to my window. In his language, he asked, "What has you?" I replied, "Oh, it's nothing. You have done a good job with this. Did someone help you complete it?" He smiled broadly and told me that his friend Ibrahim, a Muslim, had helped him. Again, I told him he had done a good job.

However, "what had me" was Pastor Kusa's response to one of the questions: "How many R.A.s<sup>1</sup> are in your church?" His answer was 33.

I looked at the question; then, I looked back at Pastor Kusa. He was still smiling. I asked, "Pastor Kusa, can you tell me what an R.A. is?" He thought a bit and shrugged his shoulders. I continued, "But you have the number 33 here on the form where it asks that question." Again, he smiled.

After a moment, he volunteered an answer: “I answered everything. Now, the people at the home office will be happy.” With that rationale, he assured himself that his annual report was adequate. I added a note to his report, and turned it over to the home office with my stack of similar reports.

Is there evidence of integrity and accountability here? Was Pastor Kusa telling the truth? No, he didn’t have 33 R.A.s in his church. Yes, he wanted his superiors to be happy with him. Even with my comments added, I dutifully moved the reports up-line. Others, receiving the reports from the four corners of the country, compiled and reported the results to others. It goes without saying that improvements to the process were needed. Let’s look closer at what we are after—integrity and accountability in reporting mission statistics.

### **Integrity**

*Webster’s Third New International Dictionary, Unabridged*, defines *integrity* as an “uncompromising adherence to a code of . . . values: utter sincerity, honesty, and candor.” Concerning ethical management and organizational integrity, Robert D. Herman and Associates write that “integrity has to do with continuity between appearance and reality, between intention and action, between promise and performance, in every aspect of a person’s or an organization’s existence.”<sup>2</sup>

### **Accountability**

*Webster’s New World College Dictionary, Fourth Edition*, defines *accountability* as a furnishing or reckoning to “account for one’s acts.” That is, accountability implies that if challenged, one can provide some evidence of statements made to others, such as provided in a journal, book, or other set of materials. This evidence may support assumptions completely, or it may provide caveats that call for further analysis and interpretation.

When integrity and accountability are brought together and applied to mission statistics, we expect that what comes to us is what it says it is, within the definitions and scope provided, and that it is useful for strategic intervention in our world. Further, we expect that we can test what comes to us using our own understanding of reality so that together a more precise understanding of reality will emerge.

This clinical approach to accountability invites all who use mission statistics to test what is offered so that what we learn and verify improves our understanding of reality, makes more certain our actions, and more fully measures our performance.

As we compare the case study that introduced this article to the ideals of integrity and accountability, we must admit that there is a gap between the two. This gap is a matter of concern for those who gather and report statistics and for those who use statistics for their strategy. How can the gap be closed?

**First, those who collect mission statistics can examine their collection and verification methodologies and make improvements where necessary.**

Since 1845, IMB (International Mission Board, Southern Baptist Convention, USA) has monitored the work of its missionaries around the world. We have learned a great deal about reporting with integrity and accountability. What we have learned has helped us to make advances in the reliability of what we report so that we can enhance our strategic impact in the world. We are accountable to those who view the statistics we share (see [www.peoplegroups.org](http://www.peoplegroups.org); <http://grd.imb.org>).

As such,

- We [invite feedback](#).
- When we receive feedback, we evaluate it.
- If feedback is incomplete, we return it to the sender for additional information. When feedback is complete and well sourced, we send it to field-based researchers for evaluation. The normal turnaround for feedback is two months.
- When field personnel judge the feedback to require a change to the statistical data for any people group, they make a change, and the change they make is reflected in the next monthly report published to our website.

Other information providers, such as the [World Christian Database](#) and [Joshua Project](#) have similar feedback mechanisms. Additionally, those providing statistics include definitions so that those who wish to interact with the information provided have a frame of reference for understanding the statistics offered.

Sometimes, mission statistics look too good to be true. When this is the case, missionary agencies cooperate to conduct field assessments. Assessments help to make statistics more accurate, provide new insights

into what God is doing in the world, and suggest new applications of fruitful practices that have contributed to amazing breakthroughs.

Finally, there are times when statistics need reflection in the context of field experts, but an assessment team is not possible. Advances in communications allow researchers to verify via Skype and other communication tools realities with those living on the field. This methodology allows people with a good understanding of their local environment to contribute to research without passports, travel budgets, and logistical complications.

**Second, those who report mission statistics can be transparent in the strengths and weaknesses of the information they offer.**

Our colleagues at Operation World show integrity in reporting statistics in *Operation World, 7th Edition*. We can see it in the frame they put around their content when they say: “The availability, consistency and accuracy of secular, religious and Christian statistics vary enormously from country to country, denomination to denomination, mission agency to mission

agency.” Here, they admit that it is difficult to compile all they have.

Further, they invite us to join them in their effort to be accountable when they say: “We welcome input and dialogue; the entire premise of the ministry is collaborative, relying heavily upon literally thousands of contacts and correspondents scattered around the globe.” Further, I know that contacts in just about every country are given opportunities to review material, give feedback, and suggest changes multiple times before a new edition of *Operation World* is published.

The transparency reflected in the front matter offers a glimpse into the diligence applied by the staff and volunteers in the production of this trustworthy prayer guide. In fact, as a part of their accountability, they invite us to join them in making the data better.

**Third, those who use mission statistics can be involved in testing the statistics even as they use them.**

Our understanding of reality does not have to be perfect before we obey God. Mission statistics inform our participation in the missionary enterprise. The missionary enterprise is not an option—we are commissioned to the task of making disciples of all nations. Still, some are slow to use statistics. There are at least two key reasons for this.

- **They feel that statistics are an intrusion into the life of faith.** First Samuel 24 is often cited in support of avoiding statistics in Christian living, since in this passage David was judged for counting his troops. David’s sin, however, was his lack of confidence in God’s ability to win the battle—the real reason behind his count. There are many cases in the Bible where God instructed that a count occur. More often, statistics in the Bible were simply descriptive and used to help readers understand the magnitude of an event or miracle.
- **Life throws so many statistics at us.** Just watch television some evening, and you will be showered by statistical claims. My favorite

popular statistic, which goes back a few years, comes in the testimony of a suave physician donning a white coat as if he has just walked out of a high tech lab. He looks into the camera and with an air of cool confidence says, “Nine out of ten doctors prefer Camel cigarettes.”

The hope of those who provide statistics is simply this—that we seek to glorify God among the nations. We are not motivated by self interests or sales; we are accountable to God to continually sharpen our understanding of his world and the progress of the gospel among the nations.

## **Endnotes**

1. Royal Ambassadors is a mission program involving men and boys from Southern Baptists and other Baptist conventions around the world.
2. Herman, Robert and Associates. 2004. *The Jossey-Bass Handbook of Nonprofit Leadership and Management*. San Francisco, California, USA: Jossey-Bass, 192.