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ENTERING THE FIELD: INITIATING LITURGICAL RESEARCH IN AN AFRICAN INDEPENDENT CHURCH (AIC)

ABSTRACT

African Independent Churches (AICs) have been studied by scholars from various disciplines, especially Missiology and Anthropology, making use of various methods including participatory observation. In Ritual and Liturgical Studies, AICs and their abundance of rituals is still a rather under-explored field of research with several reasons making it a difficult area to access. In this article, one aspect of participatory observation in researching ritual action in AICs will be explored, namely the initial phase of entering the field. Real examples from a current South African National Research Foundation (NRF)-funded research project as conducted by a team of scholars including some from the field of Ritual and Liturgical Studies will first be described and thereafter discussed. Diachronically, the initial phase stretching from a pre-proposal workshop until the first attendance of a worship service in a local congregation is sketched and commented upon.

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1. BACKGROUND

Prof. Johan Janse van Rensburg published several academic articles in the field of Liturgical Studies in recent years (cf. Janse van Rensburg, 2004; 2005a; 2005b; 2006a; 2006b), and he visited the Netherlands to orientate himself in Liturgical Studies. In the light of his interest and work in this field in Practical Theology, the authors of this article will make a contribution regarding liturgical research. Liturgical Studies is still a relatively small, but emerging field, and much research is to be conducted. There are numerous approaches in the larger field of Ritual and Liturgical Studies. Barnard (1998: 94) for example distinguishes between practical theological, systematic theological, historical, and Biblical-theological approaches. In a country such as South Africa, relatively little research has been conducted in any of these domains; therefore, there is a demand for liturgical research in all of them. This article is such a contribution based on a practical theological approach in general and an anthropological approach in particular towards the subject. It is hoped that this article will be of value to potential researchers/field workers who wish to study the phenomenon of religious rituals (worship) as enacted phenomena.

In 2008, a research project commenced in South Africa¹ entitled "Exploring the role of religious ritual in social capital formation for poverty alleviation". This NRF-funded project focuses on Christian congregations in the two South African provinces of the Western Cape and KwaZulu-Natal, and the research aims at a better understanding of the role of religious ritual in social capital formation, as well as a better understanding of social capital formation through the lens of religious ritual². As an integral part of the research process, ritual data were collected in five local churches in the two provinces. In KwaZulu-Natal, an African Independent Church (AIC)³ and an Anglican Church participated, and in the Western Cape, an Afrikaans-speaking Dutch Reformed Church, an Afrikaans-speaking Uniting Reformed Church and a Xhosa-speaking Uniting Reformed Church participated.

Students and field workers in these congregations were involved in the research and collected the ritual data by means of participatory observation.

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2 For an overview of the epistemological and conceptual framework of the project, cf. Wepener et al. (2010: 61-82).

3 The "I" in the acronym AIC can stand for "Independent", "Indigenous" and more recently also "Instituted" or "Initiated". Sometimes the acronym AIC is used in contrast to MIC, which stands for "mission-initiated churches" (Odoro et al 2008:6) and refers to many traditional mainline churches in Africa.

Participatory observation as used in Ritual and Liturgical Studies involves a number of techniques and considerations (cf. Hammersley & Atkinson 2007; Grimes 1995; Swinkels & Post 2003; Johnson 2005; Wepener 2005). The broader research project also adheres to the values of participatory action research (PAR)⁴, which has implications for the set-up of the entire research process. In this article, we shall consider only one small aspect regarding the research methodology of participatory observation, namely considerations when entering the field of research in the local communities. Thus, we shall limit ourselves in this regard to observations regarding the initial phase of entering the field for doing participatory observation of liturgy/worship/rituals within a PAR paradigm and with reference to one specific AIC congregation.

With regard to research by liturgists in AICs, Robert and Daneel write,

Despite the centrality of worship as an identity marker, the fascination with AICs by anthropologists, scholars of religion, and missiologists has not extended to liturgical scholars or practical theologians. This is probably because of the complexity of gaining access to materials on AIC worship – especially among the group of AICs known as “Spirit-type” (Robert & Daneel 2007:46).⁵

In the light of this situation regarding the complexity of gaining access to ritual data in certain AICs, we are convinced that an exploration of some examples of what field workers in this project encounter when entering the field could be of value to future researchers in ritual and liturgical studies when collecting ritual data in local congregations, specifically AICs. Moreover, the process of entering the research field by negotiating and discussing the research project with the minister of the congregation, as we have done, already generates “important knowledge about the field” (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007: 41). Hopefully, in future, more practical theologians in general and liturgical scholars in particular will have access to the domain of AICs, which traditionally and almost exclusively has been that of missiologists in theology. John Witvliet (2007a: xv-xvi) also argues for much more inductive

4 Cf. Babbie and Mouton (2001: 58-68 & 313-332); Hendriks (2004: 215-221); Strydom (2002); Wepener (2006: 49-66). In this regard, also see the above-mentioned article in which the broad contours of this research project are explained (Wepener et al. 2010: 61-82).

5 One reason for this state of affairs in South Africa is the fact that there are traditionally many more full-time academic missiologists than liturgists in South Africa. Usually, liturgists in Protestant faculties are primarily homiletics and also liturgists only on a secondary level. However, this situation is not unique to South Africa. According to Witvliet (2007a: xvii) there no full-time liturgists were teaching at a seminary in North America until the 1960s.

descriptions of worship because worship is a central practice in all traditions and countries and there is a hiatus with regard to such descriptions.

This article will first describe experiences that were encountered upon entering the field when researching rituals in the village of Phepheni in general and the Corinthian Church of Zion (an AIC) in that village in particular. General methodological and ritual-liturgical reflections regarding these descriptions will follow. However, a short description of the village and congregation will be presented first, followed by the descriptions and discussions.

2. THE CORINTHIAN CHURCH OF SOUTH AFRICA IN ZION AND THE VILLAGE OF PHEPHENI

Phepheni is a small rural village in a mountainous area in the northern region of the Eastern Cape Province. Statistical data sketches the following picture regarding the general population and socio-economic status of the inhabitants of the village⁶:

- The total population is 232, all of whom are black Africans.⁷
- The language spoken is mostly isiXhosa⁸ with a few isiZulu speakers.
- Regarding employment, the data are unfortunately not complete. However, the situation regarding employment appeared to be bleak, with 46 persons who indicated that they could not find work, a further 12 who were unemployed or chose not to work, and quite a number who were in school or who were home-makers/housewives. The census data concerning the occupations held by the inhabitants of Phepheni confirm this picture regarding employment in the village, showing that a total of 118 people indicated “occupation” on the census forms as not applicable to them as they were not economically active.

One of the churches in the village of Phepheni is the Corinthian Church of South Africa in Zion. This church has its headquarters in Pietermaritzburg in KwaZulu-Natal and falls under the leadership of Bishop Walter Zamindlela

6 All the statistics are based on statistics acquired from Statistics South Africa and figures from the 2001 census. Specific reports used here include Geography by “population group”, “language”, “employment status” and “income”.

7 The nearby town of Kokstad has a total population of 11 568, of which 4 651 are black Africans, 4 756 coloured people, 1 780 white and 381 Indian or Asian. Thus, the composition of inhabitants of Kokstad differs radically from that of Phepheni.

8 According to one of the team members and a field worker in the project, the language spoken in Phepheni is indeed isiXhosa, but isiXhosa is mixed with isiXesibe.

Njangule.⁹ Broadly speaking, this church is part of the so-called African Independent Churches in South Africa that, according to the 2001 census statistics, amounts to 32.6% of the total of 79.8% Christians in South Africa.¹⁰ In the local church in the village of Phepheni, approximately 20 kilometres from Kokstad but situated in the Eastern Cape,¹¹ there are three priests whose leader is Rev. Pungula Wellington Dingani.

This initial description of the village derived from census data makes for a rather bleak picture with respect to the village of Phepheni where the members of this church also live and is indeed not the complete picture. According to Mbaya (2009), the members of the congregation are materially poor but seemingly spiritually rich. The authors of this article can confirm Mbaya's observation, namely that a lack of material resources is indeed but one part of the bigger picture regarding the life of the members of this church in the village of Phepheni.¹² A more detailed description of their worship will be provided in another article.¹³ This article explicitly focuses on a description of the process of locating and entering the village and church in Phepheni with the aim of researching religious rituals in that particular church.

3. ENTERING THE FIELD – THE FIRST TEN STEPS TAKEN

In this section, a diachronic overview will be provided regarding the broader process of entering the field in the village of Phepheni and the Corinthian Church there. This descriptive overview will start with important observations regarding a pre-proposal workshop that was held in 2006, and then move on to further steps taken to gain access to the research field, ending with a description of one of the authors' first attendances of a worship service and experiences with regard to that visit. Throughout the diachronic overview, experiences and descriptions will be discussed in the light of academic literature related to the topic.

9 Information regarding this church was obtained from an interview with Rev. Dingani during visits to Phepheni in 2008 and 2009, as well as from Mbaya (2009).

10 Data obtained from Statistics South Africa 2004. "Population Census 2001, Religion Report". Pretoria: SSA.

11 The larger town of Kokstad is situated in KwaZulu-Natal, and the village of Phepheni is just across the border in the Eastern Cape Province.

12 Cf. in this regard Mbaya (2009) as well as Mbaya (2008), which is a paper based on observations made in this congregation.

13 Cf. Wepener, Mbaya & Barnard (2010: forthcoming).

3.1 A pre-proposal workshop within a PAR paradigm

Field research is an expensive enterprise for which funding is needed. To apply for funding, a team was compiled to develop a research-funding proposal that could be submitted to a research funding organisation. Right from the outset, a choice was made in favour of an overarching participatory action research (PAR) paradigm for the research process as a whole, which meant that the composition of the pre-proposal workshop team was of utmost importance to adhere fully to the values and principles of PAR. With the assistance and advice of several experts in liturgical studies and development studies, a team was established. The team consisted of South African researchers from various disciplines, two Dutch researchers¹⁴ and potential students from various disciplines,¹⁵ and potential field workers from local communities and congregations were invited to the pre-proposal workshop. A rough criterion for deciding who would be invited was that the people had to have knowledge and/or experience regarding either theology (particularly liturgical studies), religious studies, development studies, church work or development work. Together, this team formulated the research question and the broad outlines of the proposal at a two-day pre-proposal workshop.

This workshop was an important phase for entering the field of research, seeing that people who worked at the lowest level in local communities and who had first-hand information and experience worked together in identifying the main needs and assets in the communities that the research could explore together with the scholars. An important need that was identified was poverty, and an important asset was everything that the local religious communities had to offer, in particular their non-material 'assets', including their liturgical rituals.

The inclusion of people from the local communities, the compilation of a team from various disciplinary backgrounds (theology, liturgical studies, development studies, economics) as well as people from various institutions (academia, church, development) meant that participation was seen as a core value in the project right from the outset. Along with this value of participation, the team endeavoured to identify a real South African challenge/issue and a real South African religious asset. The challenge or issue identified by the team was poverty and the asset was religious ritual. This identification of a challenge that should be addressed as well as an asset that could potentially play a positive role in addressing the particular challenge, put the value

14 One is a professor of Religion and Development and the other (also author of this article) a professor of Ritual and Liturgical Studies.

15 Disciplines included Theology (especially Practical Theology and Liturgical Studies, but also Church History), Religious Studies, Development Studies and Economics.

of action or change on the table, namely that religious ritual could play a potentially positive role in the alleviation of poverty in South Africa.¹⁶ Both participation and action are central to the epistemological values of PAR, to which this project also wishes to conform (cf. Babbie & Mouton, 2001: 63-67). This is in line with the emancipatory qualities of PAR, which is also a core quality of the whole research process.

As it happened, most of the South Africans who participated in this workshop were either from the north-easternmost part of the Eastern Cape Province and the area just across its border, which also includes the southernmost part of KwaZulu-Natal, or from the Western Cape. This fact also had practical implications for the choice of churches and researchers to be involved in the project.

3.2 Practicality, statistical data and an informant

After the NRF had accepted the final research proposal for funding, specific communities and congregations where the ritual and other data could be collected had to be identified. The two communities that were selected as appropriate for this research project were Worcester¹⁷ in the Western Cape and Kokstad in KwaZulu-Natal. Three distinct factors led to this conclusion and choice:

- As mentioned in the previous section, some participants in the pre-proposal workshop came from these greater geographical areas. Thus, these two larger areas had the practical advantage that students who were able to participate in the research and who could conduct field work were already living in those areas.
- During the workshop, it was decided that both mainline churches and AICs would be involved in the field work, seeing that they represented the two single largest Christian groups in South Africa. Of the 79.8% Christians in South Africa, 31.8% belong to the so-called mainline churches and 32.6% to the so-called African Independent Churches (AIC), which constitute the largest Christian groups in South Africa (Hendriks 2005: 28). Statistical data obtained from the Unit for Religion and Development Research (URDR) confirm that this was also the case in these areas, which made these areas appropriate for the project.

16 For a preliminary exploration of the link between religious ritual and poverty alleviation, cf. Cilliers & Wepener (2007).

17 A PhD student who was assigned responsibility for the research in Worcester contacted the local ecumenical bodies and other religious leaders to gather information regarding a choice of local churches to select.

However, the areas still had to be narrowed down to specific towns and villages, which required a different kind of knowledge.

- To arrive at the final choice of the towns of Worcester and Kokstad and the village of Phepheni, a local expert in the field of AICs and teacher of AIC leaders in Biblical Studies was contacted for advice, who suggested two local churches and their leaders in the greater Kokstad area. This information by this person, who Babbie and Mouton (2001: 298) call an 'informant', proved to be invaluable to the research in the Kokstad area. The person knew several bishops, priests and ministers in both areas and recommended specific persons whom we could contact, because they served in these kinds of churches in relatively poor contexts and would possibly show openness to appreciate the potentially positive contribution that this kind of research could make to the role of the church in alleviating poverty.

The next step was to contact and eventually gain informed consent from these leaders and their congregations.

3.3 Set-up of the first meeting with local leaders

Those involved in the research project from the Kokstad area contacted both churches and their leaders to set up a first meeting with them. The fact that the people from Kokstad involved in the project and the pre-proposal workshop were also local church leaders with ample local knowledge was very helpful. It proved to be easier for them to explain the outlines of the planned research in brief telephone calls and other discussions, a task that would most probably have been much more difficult for university scholars who are to a certain extent removed from the life of the local communities and congregations. This became more and more apparent in the subsequent steps that were taken. At this stage, the outlines of the research aims and methods were explained in telephonic conversations and shorter informal face-to-face conversations, and the leaders were invited to a more formal meeting where the project leader would also be present.

What should be mentioned here is the capacity of the two persons who were responsible for most of these organisational matters. Both of them are ordained Anglican priests, one of whom is also a rector and fairly well known in the greater Kokstad area. There are indeed many options for the ways in which a researcher or a team of researchers can establish contact with the people they plan to study. However, as Babbie and Mouton (2001: 299) state, "You should realize that your choice can influence your subsequent observations." In this case, contacts were established by these ordained and practising Anglican priests. As a consequence, the research project was

framed in a more specific theological and ecclesial rather than in a general, academic way.

3.4 The first meeting

For the first formal meeting between the local church leaders, the project leader, the local field workers and students, a meeting was set up in the rectory of one of the field workers in Kokstad, which is located on the church property. The setting of a rectory created a more ecclesial atmosphere as opposed to a strictly academic one, which was also an important choice to accommodate everyone. The rectory specifically provided a space in which the research was framed as being more “religious” or even “theological” and “liturgical” than “secular” or “sociological” or “anthropological”. During this meeting, the proposed research was explained in great detail and at length, with an explicit effort to explain in non-academic language what the practical implications would be for the congregations involved, as well as the potential benefits that could emanate from the research.¹⁸ The central theoretical concepts employed in the research project were also explained, notably “social development”, “social capital”, “ritual” as well as “the dynamics of ritual and culture” (cf. Wepener et al. 2010), but in essence it was important to make clear that the qualitative research we were planning to conduct has as its two most basic objectives the description and understanding (cf. Babbie & Mouton 2001: 53) of the worship performed in the two local congregations. Everyone who attended the meeting was then given the opportunity for further input and questions relating to both the content of the research and its practical implications on the congregations. In general, a choice was made at this meeting for overt research, entailing that the names of the congregations and respondents could be used in research outputs such as publications: therefore, in general, there would be no need for anonymity. During this meeting, the researchers also explained their own positions and starting points as theologians who want to do research by making use of a method such as participatory observation.¹⁹ At the end of the meeting, everyone involved was satisfied with the answers

18 The practical implications discussed involved an explanation of who would visit the congregations and the worship services and other events. It also involved how often this would be and how the data would be collected, namely by field notes, photographs, video recordings, interviews and focus groups activities. It was also explained that the research findings would be communicated to the congregations at the end of the project, e.g. by means of workshops, and that they could possibly benefit from that.

19 Cf. in this regard the article by John Witvliet (2007b: 17-40). Although there is much to learn from the social sciences, he warns liturgical researchers to be aware of the commitments that come with borrowing methodologies from the social

provided, except for the leader of the AIC congregation, Rev. Dingani, who still had two important questions before he would give his final approval.

3.5 The importance of rituals when researching rituals

Rev Dingani had two questions or rather prerequisites by the end of the meeting:

- Firstly, he wanted to know whether the project leader with whom he was having the meeting was an ordained minister in a church; that is, ordained by means of the ritual laying on of hands in a worship service. The project leader could respond that indeed he was not only academically qualified as a minister of religion, but also ordained with the laying on of hands several years before and currently actively serving in a congregation as a minister of religion.
- Secondly, Rev Dingani requested at the end of the meeting that he wanted to hear the project leader pray. In the light of the previous question concerning his ordination, the visiting project leader realised that this request was more important than he might suspect. He accepted the request and concluded the meeting with a prayer.

These two examples emphasize the importance of attending to religious rituals when researching religious rituals. Non-religious and/or non-ordained researchers would probably have had a harder time to gain access to this particular congregation. At a recent South African conference, a European scholar in religious studies presented a paper and accompanying DVD on the “Umemelo” initiation ritual for Zulu women/girls. In the DVD, it was shown how the researcher interviews the particular young woman during her period of seclusion, which is a standard part of such a ritual. When time was allowed for questions after the paper and DVD, the African women present had two very important comments, namely that the researcher who had not undergone this particular ritual herself could in no way have real access to the period of seclusion, since only those who have undergone this ritual themselves are allowed in this space. Secondly, they were also of the opinion that this researcher’s presence as a non-initiated person in that particular space (seclusion period) rendered the whole ritual invalid. This is just a further example of the importance of attending to rituals in the process of researching rituals.²⁰

sciences. Therefore, he argues that liturgists should be free to borrow ‘for our own purposes’.

20 In December 2009, one of the authors of this article visited the church and during this visit was joined by Dr Henry Mbaya. Dr Mbaya wore his Anglican priest’s collar to the service and advised the author to wear the liturgical attire of his own tradition.

In the opinion of the authors, in this particular instance in Kokstad, the request for a prayer and the question regarding the laying on of hands at the end of the meeting pointed to more than just the importance of rituals when researching rituals. In this situation, rituals could also function as important means by which prospective participants can make their own “deeper” inquiry into the motives and intentions of the researchers. In other words, the reaction of a researcher to a request involving a particular ritual, for example accepting or refusing to pray, potentially tells the participant something about the researcher’s own (faith) convictions. In a defence of anthropological fieldwork in AICs, Mohr refers to Rev. Makhubu’s concern, namely

fear that outside scholars, such as anthropologists, are not motivated by a genuine sympathy (‘sincere love’) for and interest in the Independent Churches (Mohr, 1996: 217).

Rev Dingani’s question and request during the meeting in Kokstad appear to be a quest for the presence of a faith dimension or faith commitment within the larger research project and process, but also perhaps an affirmation that the motivation for the research also rests in “genuine sympathy” or “sincere love”. Viewed in a certain light, it could perhaps be seen as a hopeful attempt to find a process of *fides quarens intellectum* as apposed to a research process in which a congregation and its rituals are objectified to phenomena of academic study without the acknowledgement of the role of a reality such as God. In this regard, the importance of the integration of a theological and anthropological perspective in liturgical research is emphasized.

3.6 The value of teamwork

After this important meeting, during which the leaders of the churches gave their consent to participation in the project, students and field workers gathering data started to visit the congregations frequently. In the course of time, the project leader also visited the church in Phepheni, and in 2010, a conference was held in Kokstad. The choice to host the conference in Kokstad rather than at a university was partly because it would provide the opportunity to all participants in the project to meet the church leaders and/or visit worship services in their congregations. Important in this description is that the research project was a real team effort, which entails that people from various backgrounds and a range of expertise and skills had the opportunity to enter the field where the actual worship under investigation was being performed in their own way.

According to Mbaya, it is a symbol of the researcher’s respect for the church that they are visiting and for complying with Rev. Dingani’s preference.

In this team of researchers, some speak the language of the worshippers, but some do not and have to use interpreters. The inability to speak the language of the church members is probably one of the most serious criticisms by researchers of people who do not speak the language and who attempt to study AICs and their worship. Of course, this can indeed be a real problem, and knowledge of the local language is an invaluable asset, but it is also sometimes used as a kind of shibboleth to help guard against unwanted intruders in this research field. The following three comments regarding this situation seem appropriate:

- Antjie Krog quotes Salman Rushdie in her book *A Change of Tongue*, stating that

It is normally supposed that something always gets lost in translation; I cling obstinately to the notion that something can also be gained (Krog 2003: 267).

The possibility that something may also be gained in translation specifically refers to the different observations and questions that a process of translation adds to the research process. This brings us to the second remark.

- An important aspect when doing qualitative research, especially also participatory observation in worship services and other ritual actions, is that of distance and proximity. A researcher needs close proximity to the subject matter studied to have access to finer nuances. However, a certain amount of distance, which is inevitably there when a researcher does not speak or understand a local language, can also help a researcher to gain a certain amount of perspective of the activities under observation.
- Taking the above remarks into account, namely the advantages of distance, proximity and concomitant language ability, brings us to the third comment, namely the value of team research. With the above-mentioned aspects in mind, the research team consists of roughly three types of researchers: firstly, those stemming from the local community with close proximity to the people and their way of life (and worship); secondly, other South African researchers who experience greater distance (not speaking the local language and belonging to other church denominations, etc.); and thirdly, European scholars who have arguably the greatest distance in spite of their academic knowledge regarding religion and worship in Africa. Taken together, the team as a whole had the ability to provide a more comprehensive perspective on the worship observed than one or one type of researcher alone would be able to provide.

3.7 Many forms of hospitality

Some months after the first visit to Kokstad and the meeting with the church leaders, a second visit of the research leader was arranged to attend a worship service in Phepheni for the first time and to conduct a focus group exercise. On the Sunday morning, the researcher drove with an interpreter from Kokstad to Phepheni. On arrival in the village, they stopped to ask for directions to the church. The woman who was approached knew that they were coming and said that there were some boys in a nearby hut who at that stage were getting ready for the service. They wanted a lift in the car and would be able to give further directions to the church. The neatly dressed-up boys directed them to a rondavel, apparently the church, and went into the building, but said that they thought the visitors should wait in the vehicle.

Singing and clapping from the rondavel was audible in the car, and after a few minutes, the whole congregation came out of the church building, dancing in a long line. They danced rhythmically towards the car to welcome the researcher and interpreter, who joined the line that moved back to the church. Inside, Rev. Dingani was waiting and gave a very warm welcome to the researcher and interpreter. The researcher and interpreter received special seating positions as well as a special mat to sit on, and although they said that they would just like to be part of the group, the priest assured them that it would be out of the question for honoured first-time visitors not to be seated in a special place in front and on a special mat.

This warm-hearted hospitality was continued after the almost four hours of worship service, when the researcher received a gift from the congregation – from experience, he suspected this to happen and he also brought Rev Dingani a gift in return. The congregation also gave the two visitors an amount of R40-00 to buy themselves cold drinks on their way back to Kokstad (a short drive that would not take much more than 20 minutes) and they were invited for a meal at Rev. Dingani's house. Once again, the following three comments regarding this experience of hospitality seem appropriate here:

- Firstly, hospitality seems in a way related to the African spirit of ubuntu²¹ “I am because we are” or “a person is a person through other persons”. Within a spirit of *ubuntu*, caring for visitors and strangers is a core value, and a researcher had the privilege to experience this at first hand.
- Secondly, hospitality by means of which the visitors received special seating and were not expected to participate in the rather physical worship also shows a measure of reactivity regarding these first-time visitors. For example, Mbaya comments that his own recurring visits to this particular congregation to do participatory observation have led to

21 For the concept of “ubuntu” see Nabudere (2004).

invitations to preach during worship, which, according to him, is a sign of acceptance and diminishing reactivity.

- In research, as in translation, there is always something lost and gained. Much can be gained through this research process in terms of a better understanding of the role of religious rituals in forming social capital. This kind of research, in which participatory observation is conducted in a community such as this congregation, inevitably changes the community by the process. Members start to think in new and sometimes different ways about what they are doing and why they are doing what they are doing. The mere presence of researchers can also influence a community in a very direct way.

Indeed, the very act of asking questions, of systematically observing, will change the congregation's life – even when there are no skeletons to be exposed (Ammerman et al. 1998: 9).

For example, one member pointed out to the researcher after the worship service that it had been the first time ever that a white man had entered that church building. Because of that, some people had remarked that they would never set foot there again. Hospitality towards strangers, such as researchers, often comes at a price.

3.8 That first AIC worship experience

It is not easy to describe in words what an AIC worship service looks and sounds like. Helpful adjectives include rhythmic, physical, loud and long. As Xulu (1996: 173) puts it, "Of all activities in the Zionist Christian worship, music is the most dominant." To a liturgist trained in the classical and "mainline-church" traditions, observing an AIC worship service for the first time does not fit in with any neat, well-known liturgical format, so that it could be labelled with liturgical adjectives such as "high church", "charismatic" or "orthodox". AIC worship is certainly something different and perhaps even unique, and to many liturgical scholars it may even be a challenging, enriching and relativising experience. As Witvliet (2007c: 276-277) puts it,

It challenges us to think of ourselves not as a center of Christian experience, but rather as one strand of a rich tapestry of practice.

For a participant observer, this experience raises several questions as to precisely how this ritual action should or could be documented and with what kind of tools. Which methods for collecting or recording the data will be most appropriate – videos, photographs, audio recordings or field notes

in the form of thick descriptions? Babbie and Mouton (2001: 294), however, correctly state that,

Even tape recorders and cameras cannot capture all the relevant aspects of social processes. The greatest advantage of observation is the presence of an observing, thinking researcher on the scene of the action.

This statement could be translated for this specific research project to the "advantage of the presence of an observing, thinking ritual and liturgical scholar in a worship service" (Babbie and Mouton, 2001: 294). Techniques and tools are extras to personal observations by a critical scholarly observer and well-observed and documented written field notes. In this regard, Ronald Grimes' categories (cf. Grimes 1995: 24-38; also Wepener 2009a: 26-27) regarding ritual space, time, objects, action, sound and language, as well as ritual identity come in handy with regard to getting a first grip on what is being observed. In the process of attempting to distinguish between these different aspects of the ritual action, many of the details that could otherwise have been missed become more apparent.

In short, when entering the field of participatory observation with regard to AIC worship, few tools can surpass the field worker's accurate observations when documented by appropriate field notes and lengthy descriptions based on the analysis of the notes, talks, interviews etc. However, a participant observer should be open and adaptable with regard to the kinds of tools he or she will use, depending on the ritual action and other variables. This also holds for tools or techniques with which the participants' appropriation of their own ritual action can be ascertained.

3.9 The first focus group

After the worship service, the researcher conducted a focus group discussion pertaining to the people's food and eating habits.²² The time allowed for questions went according to plan. However, when the researcher had finished, participants/respondents wanted to know whether they could have a turn and ask the visitor some questions of their own. The questions he was expected to answer ranged from solutions to the problem of the many young people leaving their church to raising the stipend of the priest. This seemingly mundane matter is raised here because a researcher should be

22 For some of the data, see Wepener (2009b: 240-244) as well as a book on the subject (Wepener 2010), which includes biblical-theological, liturgical-historical as well as anthropological perspectives and a shorter, more popularized article on the theme (Wepener 2009c: 6-10).

extremely careful in attempting to provide answers to these very intricate and contextually bound questions during a first visit, when the congregation and community are hardly understood at all. The researcher is easily regarded as a visitor from a university who should be able to provide answers and if he or she does indeed provide answers, those answers will carry substantial weight in this specific context. On the other hand, these questions can also be viewed as attempts on the part of the respondents to create an atmosphere of understanding with the researcher. For example, another researcher in this project, working in the Worcester area, reported how she had been invited to lead the worship and preach on an occasion when the minister had not arrived for a service.

3.10 A private conversation after the service

Just before the researcher and interpreter left Rev. Dingani's house after the worship, another important matter was raised to discuss with the researcher. The matter involved money that the congregation needed to be able to expand its worship facilities, and he wondered whether the visiting researcher perhaps had any contacts in this regard or could be of assistance himself. This is mentioned because coming across such a request is not exceptional when entering the field to conduct participatory observation. Moreover, such a request clearly has ethical implications. According to Babbie and Mouton (2001: 298), situations such as these "are part and parcel of participatory observation", and although there are no rules for coping with them, participant observers entering the field should be aware of these kinds of situations and the fact that they will have to deal with them.

4. CONCLUSIONS

The main contribution of this article lies in the process of the description of entering the field of research itself. We hope that, in future, these observations will assist liturgists in this process of entering the field of researching (AIC) worship. We are convinced that the unfamiliarity of many scholars educated in the western world urges them to cooperate in their research on AICs with people from the field and to negotiate entrance to the field in meticulous respect for the people in the research field. This respect is expressed in the strong belief that people in the field are no objects of investigation, but subjects and co-investigators who willingly inform academic scholars about their lives. One of the advantages of ethnographic research is that the field is also, and not only, understood in terms of the people (respondents, interviewees) in the field. However, that is another topic.

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