

The ecumenical vision of the Organization of African Independent Churches from an educational perspective

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Abstract

This article will concentrate on the African Independent Churches (AICs) unity and the articulation of their theologies in the global context beyond Africa wherever AICs are found, such as in Europe and North America. This implicitly should be seen as a process of covering fresh ground through constant self-renewal focusing on ministerial training in the rural and urban areas. This will also apply to those who are living on the margins of our society. How can the AICs living on the margins be trained theologically without making them become over-dependent on the centres of training or sponsorship? The task of the Organization of African Independent Churches (OAIC) is to bring AICs together in fellowship and enable them to preach the gospel in word and deed. However, the environment in which people are ministering the gospel has changed over the years. When the OAIC/Theological Education by Extension (TEE) programme was started in the early 1980s, HIV and AIDS may have been there but were not known of. Since then, through the influence of NGOs working in HIV and AIDS and development, secular development discourses have overtaken even the churches. Terms such as “faith-based organisations” were not used in the 1980s. Such terms did not emanate from the church but from secular sources, very often for the purpose of using the church for a development project. How do we facilitate theological education in a grassroots environment that is continuously being shaped by this development discourse? Everywhere in Africa pastors are coming under pressure to conform to the demands of NGO partners.

Introduction

Aim

The aim of this article is to discuss theological educational development and ecumenical significance of the AICs in Africa historically and currently. The AICs have been trying to find their footing in the national and international arena for the promotion of their theological initiative from at least the early 1960s up to the present. The challenges of the AICs were to be tackled from congregational educational levels. There were also other challenges resulting from lack of resources, and ability to attract and engage the AIC youth, as a result of lack of sound historical educational structure. We even saw the sectors on religious politics which the AICs were sometimes criticising for producing the apologetics and the interested scholars who merely described the patterns and developments of the movement's history.

Ecumenism and ecumenical

In this article the words ecumenism and ecumenical have the same sense, to imply a wide representation of the AICs as the body of churches of Christ throughout the African continent and beyond. Both terms relate to the promotion of worldwide African Independent Churches (AICs) and Christian unity. In this article they are focused on organisational structural harmonisation and historical educational initiative, through the help of the OAIC for the entire body of the AICs continentally and in diaspora.

It should be kept in mind that the African Independent Churches (AICs) are the fastest-growing churches in Africa today. Because these churches are growing fast and have great influence upon the people of Africa, it is necessary to investigate their beliefs. It will then be necessary to discuss what

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these churches are, why they grow, and what part of their theological beliefs makes them acceptable to the people. This article also discusses whether their theological emancipation could be founded on education” and with what form of curriculum.

Identified literature for support

Sundkler’s (1961) book entitled *Bantu prophets in South Africa* is viewed by many AIC researchers as the first well-researched and written history of the AICs in South Africa. The other book which impressed many AIC researchers was *Missions at the crossroads* by Stanley Soltau (1963). In chapter 20 of this book, the Pauline principle of planting an indigenous church is discussed in the light of AIC interests. Perhaps for a better understanding we should use the synonym “indigenous” and refer to the “home-grown” church for clarity. The use of “home-grown” raises another question demanding understanding of the mandate of the “home-brewed” AIC theology.

The most closely contested discussion of the AICs came from Barrett’s (1968) *Schism and renewal in Africa: an analysis of six thousand contemporary religious movements*. Indeed the book’s focus was on historical schism and renewal of the AICs churches. Interestingly, the renewal referred to was more descriptive than robust in analysis of how the AICs were growing historically. The other book was edited by Barrett (1971) and entitled *African initiatives in religion*. The book comprised 21 articles in chapter form on different topics relating to the AICs in South Africa and Africa by different individual scholars. Martin West (1975) wrote his *Bishops and prophets in a black city*, a self-explanatory title, focusing on the AICs of the Zionist and Pentecostal Apostolic type in Soweto. The book discussed the different perspectives and developments of how AICs operated over centuries.

Although different authors have tried hard to capture the core characteristics of many AICs over a period of time, they were clearly unable to stimulate debate on the critical functions of these churches or to express their historical character.

Insisting on hearing their own voice

The AICs have been concerned that no one should speak for them without their consent. They have a valid concern that interpreters, translators and their representatives write honestly about them. That is why the issue of theology around the AICs seems to lag behind these days. It is due to the misunderstandings relating to their theology and spirituality.

The main concerns have emanated from the question whether or not theology was ever problematic to the AICs’ adventures with faith. Also, the reasons for doing theology among them needed to be investigated further. In the next sections we will venture to find solutions to the concerns raised. The answers arrived at will guide the AICs in a new direction to deal with their contemporary challenges and development. The prescriptive analytical method will be employed to discuss the discourses among the AICs. The method will highlight and describe the possible way forward among the AICs on the ecumenical and theological ventures respectively, mainly through the influence of the OAIC who place the AICs on ecumenical heights. Starting from South Africa and then internationally will help to understand the historical educational context of the AIC initiative in centripetal and centrifugal forms.

We have tried to reflect on how the AICs have developed historically and how a new change was emerging from the reawakening of the Organization of the African Independent Churches through its headquarters in Nairobi, Kenya. We saw the founding of the OAIC encouraging participation in the theological global context for self-renewal. This is focused on ministerial training, and doing theology without becoming over-dependent on sponsors and other funders. Indeed it was the AICs' appeal to reclaim their own space. We also previewed their theological peculiarities. Perhaps we should start by giving an overview of developments in South Africa.

The development of the AIC theologies in South Africa

A number of concerns have forced the AICs to revisit the question of theological articulation and they were dealt with in South Africa from different perspectives. One challenge however was that the AICs were structurally diverse and could not be channelled into one typology and expected to project the same message through the same approach to its wider audiences. Indeed this was not new since many theologians who studied these churches have discovered that they can be categorised under more than one type, for example the Ethiopian² or conventional type, Zionist and Pentecostal types.³ Recently, the idea that the AICs were indigenous to Africa has had to be surrendered, as AICs could also be found in Europe (e.g. Germany, Britain) and the USA. In such cases, the term "African" suggests also the continent of origin, rather than location.

It is from this perspective that one wishes to venture into the subject of ecumenicity and theology of the AICs concurrently. In addition, we should mention the developmental initiatives by the AICs themselves. The development was not expected to be what the missionaries have hoped for in the past. Indeed the AICs combined were and still are viewed as syncretistic.⁴ A fair judgement is that more still needs to be heard from the AIC stakeholders speaking for themselves.

The foundation for hearing AIC voices dates back to the early 1970s and carried some of the fundamental AIC voices from the South African saints, including the late Rev Makhubu, Archbishops Ntongana, Ngada and Kenosi Mofokeng, among others. Through the help of the Institute for Contextual Theology (ICT) and other AIC leaders they managed to draft a booklet entitled *African Independent Churches speaking for themselves* published in 1985. Chapter 4 of this book explains and outlines how they perceived theology. They used interviews to arrive at their respective conclusions. In that book, their theology (ICT 1985:25-31) carried the following significant points:

- (a) Theology of the heart was to be made explicit from the implicit; (b) The expression of faith by the AICs was not to be conceptually the same as Western e.g. Congregational, Presbyterian or Episcopal than following what the Spirit is saying to them; (c) The question of Trinity was also to be merely viewed from the Bible, celebrating the Lord's supper at night and the washing of feet, Jordan baptism by immersion were all said to be learned from the Bible; (d) Challenges by the spirits, the role of the Holy Spirit who guides every activity of the AICs is very significant, healing, church communities, Easter time gatherings at headquarters celebrating the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ were all significant; (e) Concern about poverty denied them to express themselves politically and soundly other than participating with rest of the community involvement in matters of politics; (f) AICs still recall the Bambata rebellion of 1906, and the notorious massacre at Bulhoek. All of these need a theological interpretation from within their context.

² The Ethiopian Movement is a religious movement that began towards the end of the 19th century, when two groups broke away from the Anglican and Methodist churches. One of the main reasons for breaking away was that the parent denominations were perceived to be too much under white control, with not enough scope being given to African leadership (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/African_Initiated_Churches).

³ A variety of overlapping terms exist for these forms of Christianity: African Initiated Churches, African Independent Churches, African Indigenous Churches and African Instituted Churches. The abbreviation AIC covers them all and the differences in names correspond to the aspect that a researcher wishes to emphasise. Those who wish to point out that AICs exhibit African cultural forms, describe them as "indigenous", and so on. In other words, these terms have largely been imposed upon such groups, and may not be the way they would describe themselves (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/African_Initiated_Churches).

⁴ Syncretism is the attempt to reconcile contrary beliefs, often while melding practices of various schools of thought. Combining syncretism may involve attempts to merge and analogise several originally discrete elements, especially in theology and mythology of religion. Pato (1990) indicated that unless the AICs are seen primarily in terms of the historical, cultural and sociopolitical conflicts between the missionaries and their successors, on the one hand, and blacks and whites on the other, their character and worth cannot be adequately appreciated and understood.

Chapter 5 of *African Independent Churches speaking for ourselves* (1985) outlined some future plans relating to development of the AICs. The Wilgespruit Conference in 1984 was attended by many of the AIC and their representatives, who presented several papers about training and theology. Rev Augustine Battle (1986), Director of the Theological Education by Extension (TEE)⁵ programme of the AICs in Nairobi, Kenya, spoke about TEE in Kenya. Dr August, Rev Makhubu and Ntsuntsha spoke about training of the AICs in South Africa. Archbishop Ngada presented the preliminary results of both the pilot research on theology of the AICs and the leadership training programme which was developed in Tsakane Township in the East Rand, South Africa.

The conference has set up a research commission and the temporary steering committee to look into the theological development. Another project focused on theological training courses. The research commission met with the Theological Education by Extension College (TEEC) and the ICT to come up with suggestions relating to the AICs' own writers and tutors. Rev Kakhubu, Archbishop Ngada and Rev Mofokeng were recommended to study the TEE programme for one and three months respectively in Nairobi.

Khanya for African Independent Churches was formed way back in about 1981 and has since progressed and utilised a number of the TEE programmes. However due to the lack of funds and proper administration, especially after the death of Rev Makhubu, the college was eventually declared insolvent and closed down. Since then AIC training in South Africa dwindled and there was alternative participation in open programmes or short learning courses provided by the then CB Powell Bible Centre at Unisa. The centre operated under the Institute for Theology and Religion (RITR) at Unisa for many years. But this did not suit many AIC students because the tutorial content needed adjustment to meet their theological needs⁶ more precisely, and drew mainly on resources of the global and Western Christian world. However their South African context became the watershed as the AICs from many African countries experienced similar drawbacks. Small though the AICs' theological impetus was, they have engaged with the global world and devoted themselves to strengthening their spiritual and theological profile. This has evoked their interest in participating in global activities, although mostly through foreign funding and representatives. Eventually the formation of the Organization of African Indigenous Churches (OAIC) became the core of present and future developments of the AICs across the continent, and ecumenically as well.

The founding of the OAIC

The OAIC was founded in 1975 in Cairo, Egypt. It is the representative international body that brought together the African Independent and Instituted Churches, and offered them a forum for sharing their concerns and hopes, and it works to enable them to minister effectively to the needs of their members and their communities. It was founded when a number of AIC leaders from across the continent were invited by Pope Shenouda III of the Coptic Church to a meeting in Cairo. The OAICs' original objective was to provide a forum for AIC leaders for fellowship and to share their concerns. The organisation also sought to provide better theological and biblical education for its members including the promotion of Sunday schools. The OAIC was thus an institutional expression of the movement, vision and aspiration of the AICs (Padwick & Lubaale 2009:9).

The first AICs emerged during the colonial period as grassroots Christian movements. AIC leaders and prophets spread the gospel of Jesus Christ over wide areas of Africa, confronting spiritual, social and political evils in the community, and founding churches as they went. They affirmed the positive values of African culture in protest against the individualism, secularism and Northern models of development that were propagated by colonial governments and missionary churches. The majority of these leaders had little formal education since they came from the ranks of the poorest of the poor.

⁵ Battle describes the Organization of African Initiated Churches (OAIC) Theological Education by Extension (TEE) programme as a means of enabling a people-theology to develop. The OAIC/TEE programme gives an opportunity to all: young people, women who have always been marginalised, and men who are not leaders, lay preachers and pastors, bishops, etc. From the bottom to the top everyone may have the training opportunities to study the Bible. This is a corporate enterprise which involves all the people of God and not just a few that represent the group. This corporate learning enterprise is also in accordance with African tradition that puts emphasis on corporate life. This theological community is also the one that decides on the theological priorities which need to be studied (or discussed).

⁶ Mijoka has focused on detailed study of biblical interpretation among the AICs. He has investigated issues that were considered when preparing for exegesis; to find out problems faced by local exegetes when undertaking biblical exegesis; to examine the texts and themes popularly chosen and the reasons for their choice; and to assess the role of songs in biblical exegesis. He has approached his research from the theological perspective instead of the usual historical, sociological and anthropological perspectives. His intension was that the hermeneutics perspective adopted would (a) pave the way for further theological studies of AICs, (b) help mainstream Christian Churches learn something from how these churches interpret the Bible and (c) avail the AICs themselves the opportunity to gain something from the experience of their colleagues.

AICs are essentially egalitarian in recognising the ministry of all members, which can be seen in their frequent use of the words of Prophet Joel 2:28-29.⁷ AICs are primarily oral communities and have little written theology. Often they lack strong bureaucratic structures and borrow models of leadership from African culture. There are about 60 million AIC members spread over tens of thousands of AIC denominations across sub-Saharan Africa and the African diaspora. Most of these denominations are small, but some are large and significant with over a million members.

OAIC International is incorporated as a registered society under Kenyan law, and has its international secretariat in Nairobi, Kenya. The organisation is active in East Africa, South Africa, Central Africa and West Africa, and works through regions and national chapters. A group of chapters constitutes a region. The OAIC is a recognised regional ecumenical partner of the World Council of Churches, participates in the Global Christian Forum, and is an associated member of the All Africa Council of Churches. It is also an active member of the World Conference on Religion for Peace. In this way the OAIC seeks to share AIC insights and understandings with other Christian traditions and other faiths, and also to learn from them.

Constant AIC ministerial review and training is necessary to achieve what has been set out above. But this ministerial review will need to be phrased in terms of theological global events and initiatives. This will help the AICs with their catch-up strategy derived from their ecumenical connections. Perhaps it could be asked what is new for the AICs in this dispensation that is different from what is already known?

Expression of the new vision of the AIC theologies in the global context

The new vision for the AIC theologies and ecumenicity came through the revival of the OAIC and was a most welcome surprise to many who worked with the AICs. For instance the consultation for theology and ministerial formation organised by the AIC that was held in Karen, Nairobi, from the 1st to the 3rd December 2009, emphasised global interest among the AICs. This was a very important consultation since it became a benchmark for the OAIC's⁸ new vision outline. This vision has reflected the AICs as the people of God who build on their African cultures and values, transformed by the Good News of Jesus Christ and blessed by the Spirit of God to create an abundant life in community with their children and the world.

The vision highlights a positive valuation and critique of African culture as the inescapable, God-given, historical context for the reception in interpreting the Gospel, and creating the original AIC theologies (known in the OAIC as "the founding visions"). The vision also highlights the power of the gospel to continuously transform people, theologies and churches so that the challenge of the Gospel remains fresh and focused on contemporary realities. The vision also wants to bring the understanding of the church as a movement of the people of God called by him and empowered by his Spirit to undertake new initiatives in assignments, and especially to build *ubuntu* (shalom), for a human society without poverty, exploitation or disease, and even to articulate and communicate throughout the African continent and globally this AIC vision of the human community under God.

Padwick (2009:5) has singled out the current strategic framework of the OAIC vision for a better world (for the period 2009 to 2013), and identifies the following broad objectives for the OAIC Department of Theology:

- (a) to strengthen the OAIC department of theology to become an effective tool for policy development and implementation; (b) to facilitate the articulation, communication, and renewal of AIC founding visions and development of theologies; (c) to enhance AIC understanding and practicing of mission, especially in cross-cultural and urban settings and among young people; (d) and to promote positive teaching of AIC theologies and AIC issues in non-AIC theological institutions.

Among others the objective of the consultation was to develop guidelines and criteria for building a country's regional and international resource team to be responsible for overseeing the training programme at national levels. The other objective was to represent the OAIC theologically and in the

⁷ Reading from NIV ©2011: verse 28-29: "And afterward, I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your old men will dream dreams, your young men will see visions. Even on my servants, both men and women, I will pour out my Spirit in those days.

⁸ OAIC stands for Organization of African Instituted Churches working in seven regions throughout the continent, including East Africa, Southern Africa and Madagascar, Democratic Republic of Congo, West Africa Francophone, West Africa Anglophone and Nigeria; at country level the OAIC works through chapters.

ecumenical dialogue internationally (Padwick 2009:5-6). This level of interaction was necessary for AIC theological development and to promote unity among different Christian churches beyond AIC circles as well. There was an urgent need constantly to revisit the ministerial training among the AICs in a meaningful way in order to rediscover a suitable strategy for establishing AIC theology as it confronts other global theologies.

Constant self-renewal focusing on ministerial training

The rediscovery of AIC interest in the International Christian Community and their development has encouraged a meaningful partnership internationally. But what do the AICs have in store to promote their historical theological interests globally? Significantly the AICs have discovered their shortcomings and lack of international exposure because of failure to adapt to the technological advances of a fast-growing global world.⁹ Indeed AIC involvement has been sporadic, although fast growing in the diaspora into the Western world. There is a question about the value of the diaspora churches and what they are advocating overseas. This concern will cherish a need to investigate the value of AIC ministerial significance centrifugally beyond geographic frontiers.

The question of ministerial training for the grassroots remained a challenge to the World Council of Churches (WCC) who pledged some funds for projects on poverty alleviation and educational self-empowerment among the AICs and other African rural communities. This was mentioned in the 2009 programme on the Theological Education Desk of the World Council of Churches manual.¹⁰ The information in the manual was written by the staff of the Ecumenical Theological Education Programme, to which the OAIC is well connected. It is from this perspective that the AICs, through the OAIC, decided to draft a handbook on developing the manual *African Independent Church theologies for today*. The manual extrapolated information from the AICs' grassroots, and from their understanding and worldview on which a founding vision of contemporary mission was based.

Interesting was the realisation that the AICs should be mobilised for the whole world. This came through the help of the Millennium Development Goals (MDG)¹¹ which led to "The OAIC Just Communities" conference held in Nairobi, Kenya, at the Methodist Guest House, 12-15th September, 2010. The conference focused on responding to the following questions: How can ordinary citizens question the government at local or national levels over the quality of services they receive? How can AICs ask institutions like the family, economic structures, political systems, and government, about how well they enable people to live their lives in dignity? As a new key to the OAIC programme the aim is to promote economic justice, accountability and emancipated citizenship, and to cherish the dreams, visions and hopes of the AIC founders for a just society.

The founding of Just Communities came out of the new enthusiasm in AIC circles, through the OAIC, for the 21st century. The latter organisation has drafted a manual entitled *OAIC vision for a better world: abundant life for all in AIC community and beyond*, edited by Padwick and Lubaale (2009:1-40). The manual contains the strategic plan for the AICs not only in education but also in social life. The question of the vision for a better world was well articulated by the Chair, the OAIC Rev Daniel Okoh:

AICs are essentially popular Christian movements motivated by the Spirit of God and by a shared sense of mission. This strategy is a tool to facilitate the OAIC, its member churches and the communities they serve to sharpen that mission, and to use the social and spiritual resources in our midst to be more effective in working and living our calling (Padwick & Lubaalein OAIC 2009:4).

Having suggested a "vision for a better world" one should also indicate that the vision is not merely theoretical as it runs concurrently with AIC community interactions through various AIC associations, regions and local assemblies. The aim is to improve the capabilities and opportunities to earn a

⁹ See point 2, "the development of the AIC theologies in South Africa".

¹⁰ See Theological Education in World Christianity, 2009: World Report on future of theological education in the 21st century. World Conference of Associations of Theological Institutions. ETE/WCC Programme on Theological Education of the World Council of Churches.

¹¹ A high-level Plenary Meeting of the General Assembly on the Millennium Development Goals Summit was held in the United Nations Headquarters in New York on 20-21 September 2010 and the following objectives were tabled: the six round-table meetings would have the overarching objective of "Making it happens by 2015", and each one will focus on one theme, as follows – addressing the challenge of poverty, hunger and gender equality, meeting the goals of health and education, promoting sustainable development, addressing emerging issues and evolving approaches, addressing the special needs of the most vulnerable, and widening and strengthening partnerships.

livelihood of the rural and urban poor. There is also a need to assure food security among Africa's rural and urban poor as well as to strengthen the ability of church members and affiliated community organisations to respond more effectively to health inequalities and other challenges to health and wellbeing, especially HIV and AIDS. The OAIC wished to promote economic justice, good governance and emancipated citizenship through Just Communities. The aim of the strategic plan is to build the capacity of AIC and OAIC chapters to develop and implement appropriate theological education for their members. They wanted to improve their capacity for strategic communication with a view to better communicating the vision and mission of the OAIC and AICs. They also wanted to ensure quality, value-driven and effective, accountable practices at all levels of the organisation. Lastly they wanted to secure sustainability and a prosperous future for the OAIC. All of these form the strategic focus for the AICs between 2009 and 2013.

Trained theologically without becoming over-dependent

Many AICs have concerns about dependency, which their leaders have taken seriously. The AICs have inculturated Christianity in Africa in such a way that they are of considerable significance for African theology itself. Daneel (1989:54-57) considers their significance to be twofold: it lies firstly in their spontaneous indigenisation of Christianity uninhabited by direct Western control, and secondly in their erection of a "bridgehead" between Christian gospel and traditional thought forms.

According to Fashole Luke (1976:144) the African Independent Churches constitutes part of the raw material for the building of African theologies. He points out that a careful and critical study should be made of these churches to assess their value for the development of African Theology. To Anderson (1993:97) the theology of the AICs is obscure. He arrived at this conclusion by posing the question: To what extent are traditional concepts of God carried over into Pentecostal-type Christianity? Saint John of Manku belongs to the Pentecostal church in South Africa, but it is specifically regarded as an African Indigenous Church and part of the family of AICs. Some theological opinions and observations are that AICs of the Pentecostal type overemphasise the spiritual, mixing it with concepts from the African spirit world, e.g. the ancestor cult, which has found new expression (Oosthuizen 1968:129). It is also said that this overemphasis on pneumatology means that God is neglected and Jesus Christ is overshadowed. I do not agree with this criticism because the term "Our God", "the Son Jesus" and "Holy Spirit" are prominently used by the AICs in their prayers.

Perhaps information in the previous paragraph needs to be highlighted to draw the limitations for the kind of theology expected in theory from those who would venture into the theology of the AICs. Dependency in terms of the subheading above may denote two things. Firstly it may imply that the AICs need to be aware of the purpose of their study of theology. Secondly, they may need to guard against the temptations of satisfying their sponsors, particularly from the Western world, who may want to affect their objectives in their study of theology. Of course no one is suggesting that the AICs must isolate themselves from ecumenicity. According to Boseto (1982:172-173), ecumenical relations are always foreign and on the lips of Geneva and the Vatican. It means ecumenism denoting unity in the church is not an AIC idea, but an idea which the global Christian church has experienced before, as well as the robust debate around this idea. From the AIC perspective it may only mean integration, accommodation and unified strength with other Christian churches cross-culturally. The AICs are merely to share their existing experiences, although it seems unclear who may have to carry the responsibility of compiling the AIC curriculum. The educational adventure differs from country to country.

In South Africa today it is very difficult to register and start a college since education is centralised. Colleges are invited to register with the South African Qualification Authority (SAQA), whose criteria for qualification are difficult to satisfy. From another perspective it means that education may need to be shared with strangers. No one knows who will lead education; in the future it may be from the minority groups including the AICs. The only way is for such groups as the AICs to be able to register their colleges independently, which so far has proven difficult. The other alternative is partnerships with the already registered and advanced educational institutions. However the question remains about the right objective that will serve AIC needs. Do the AICs have the capacity to sustain themselves or are there other avenues? This remains to be seen.

Reclaiming of space by the AICs through OAIC

The OAIC has therefore embarked on a long-term programme to enable AIC leaders and members to articulate their belief systems and theologies and to develop an alternative value system based on a Christian form of *ubuntu*. This will provide a basis for engagement in contemporary political processes.

We describe this process as “reclaiming our space”¹² – the space in African society that historically was denied the AICs by colonial and postcolonial governments and which their leaders must claim back for themselves, by means of proclaiming AIC values and visions as valuable contributions towards building a humane African society. The process began in 1996 at an OAIC continental workshop in Johannesburg on “The founders vision: a theology of development for African Independent Churches”.

More recently, in September 2004 a conference in Pretoria, “Critical Solidarity in the Face of HIV/AIDS: Initiatives from the African Independent Churches”, challenged AIC leaders from 11 countries to apply their unique social and spiritual capital to the HIV/AIDS pandemic, and in October 2004 a workshop in Accra enabled AIC leaders in Ghana to address the issue of globalisation.

Peculiarity of AIC theologies

The African Instituted Churches form an integral part of world Christian communions. Consequently, the AICs share in the common theologies of Christianity. The AICs believe in the revelation of God, the Trinity, the Atonement, the humanity and deity of Jesus Christ, the vicarious death of Jesus Christ, the resurrection, ascension and second coming of Jesus Christ, and many other prominent tenets of Christianity.

The AICs, like other faith communities, have their own peculiar theologies. This is so because of their history, worldview, societies and religious experiences. Some of the theologies peculiar to them are common to all the AICs, despite their environments, regional characteristics, aims and goals. The following are examples of theologies that are common to all AICs: the reality and existence of the devil and demons, the efficacy of curses, the practical omnipotence of God, the efficacy of prayer and fasting, faith healing, exorcism and the emphasis on the activities of the Holy Spirit (pneumatology).

The peculiarity of theologies has various emphases according to categories that fit particular AIC types, depending on their ministerial emphasis and religious orientations – nationalistic, African/Ethiopian, Prophet-Healing/Spiritual, Pentecostal and or Charismatic. Oduro (2006:34-35) discusses some types of theological education and training which are helpful in attempting to discover the possible type which may suit AIC expertise. He defines education as a broad process of learning which enables the learner to understand, evaluate and challenge that which is learnt. It equips the learner for life in the community and develops the ability to integrate new knowledge and advocate for appropriate change. Training, on the other hand, focuses on development of particular skills for a particular context and purpose.

They¹³ are of the opinion that theological training is built on the general definition given above. It is however used in this paper as the process of equipping the clergy and laity to get a firm grasp and broad perception of the dynamics of Christian theology and ministry which leads to formulation and articulation of theologies that are distinctive and relevant to their respective context, yet in consonance with overall Christian theological beliefs and practices.

Theological education and training can take many forms and types. They¹⁴ identifies seven types as follows: (a) formal or Western institutional type, with well-written curriculum, duration of study, library and award certificate after completion (usually called bible or seminary studies); (b) the periodic type – seminar and workshops; (c) mentorship/apprenticeship/discipleship; (d) Theological Education by Extension; (e) distance learning; (f) self-taught method; (g) regular Christian education facilitated through the teachings of Adult Sunday School teaching manuals.

The above forms of theology relate to the following question: How do we facilitate theological education in a grassroots environment that can always engage with and appreciate a discourse to enhance meaningful development and discourse? It is known that the AICs have lacked the ability to be effective in all of the above forms of education because of the dire poverty affecting many of their members. It remains to look for other means from other sources, especially through the help of the government and its resources. Being in partnership with the MDGs and Just Communities opens an important window to developing a legitimate corridor leading to a better life to all, including themselves. We should also mention that the biblical training mentioned above should highlight which avenues interested AIC researchers and other partners could explore in order to prepare for new ways of stimulating interest in an effective curriculum for the AICs.

Conclusion

¹² Padwick & Lubaale (2009). See bibliography.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid.

I attempted to highlight the importance of initiatives taken over a period of time. The initiatives referred to included the written sources on the AICs. This was done in an attempt to highlight the significant parameters of the historical paradigm shift in a bid to foster growth within the AIC circles. I have mentioned the contributions by some of the AIC fathers since the early 1970s that culminated in the booklet entitled *AICs: speaking for ourselves*, published in 1985. Important as their initiative seems, it still needs a well-coordinated plan if it is to be effective.

I have also tried to clarify the national and international ways in which the AICs have tried to develop within this dispensation through their past influences and experience. This happened because of the awakening from within the OAIC with the attempt to establish and implement a new vision to resuscitate a meaningful theological awakening among the AICs in Africa and in the diaspora. This has happened in association with other international theological church organisations, including the World Council of Churches (WCC), Theological Education by Extension (TEE), All Africa Council of Churches (AACC) and World Conference on Religion for Peace (WCRP), among others. I explained that through the initiative of the new vision for the AICs emanating from participation in the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and the Just Community Program (JCP) of the OAIC there is hope that the AICs in Africa and the diaspora will develop a new face. This is mentioned because of the process of change that is taking place among the AICs through the OAIC.

It was a privilege to be part of the major development on theological education of the OAIC, representing the Southern Africa region as a coordinator. I was also appointed as part of the organising committee on curriculum research and dialogue. The possibilities in partnership with some major theological institutions need to be explored. A distance learning institution like the University of South Africa (Unisa) has taken advantage of these opportunities through the Research Institute for Theology and Religion (RITR).

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