

# Encounterological praxis of the Research Institute with African Initiated Churches: 1975–2025

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The African Initiated Churches (AICs) suffered a sour relationship with churches and institutions of Western origin from where most originated. Western religious and political institutions adopted a polemic approach towards them. Their critique was primarily on their lack of theological training. This led to tension between them, levelling blames against each other making trust difficult. The Research Institute for Theology and Religion (RITR) was viewed as a Western entity that served colonial interests. Like the University of South Africa where it belonged over the 50 years of its existence, the RITR likewise, was judged as part of the drivers of the colonial project, infested with epistemic violence. It was placed in the same space as the mainline churches and their leadership that were polemic against them (AICs). How did the RITR explore and manage this tension with the AICs? In order to project a sustainable relationship between them, employing Kritzinger's concept of 'encounterology' and drawing on existing literature through a qualitative review method, the author will critically examine the journey of their encounter to determine if it will be sustainable and become exemplary to others, more especially for ecumenism. The author will also propose sustainable strategic relationship goals between these two. The conclusion would be reached to determine if the RITR is doing or not doing enough to nurture and sustain this relationship.

**Intradisciplinary and/or interdisciplinary implications:** This study examines the relationship between the RITR and the AICs over the first 50 years of the institute's existence. Although it is in the field of missiology, it also has interdisciplinary implications for disciplines such as history, practical theology and sociology.

**Keywords:** AICs; RITR; churches; institutions; mainline churches; encounterology; Western aligned.

## Introduction

Most part of the life of the Research Institute for Theology and Religion (RITR) could be located in the difficult period of apartheid in South Africa when there was polarity politically between black and white people because of the racist policies of the time. This polarity also played itself within religious and academic establishments. The friction between the mainline churches that were Western aligned, and the African-Initiated Churches (AICs) is well documented in academia and elsewhere. As the mainline churches and academic institutions were polemic against the AICs, the latter also reciprocated critically towards the attacks they suffered. Tension and suspicion grew within the AICs' spaces against the Western religious formations.

Despite the aforementioned scenario, the RITR succeeded in strategising means of communication and construction of a relationship with this category of African churches. This study seeks to explore and examine the strategies adopted by the RITR in their encounter with the AICs as well as their academic contributions towards them. In the process, strategies for a sustainable relationship between the AICs and Western-aligned religious establishments would be explored. In order to do this, drawing on existing literature through a qualitative review method, the author will survey the AICs in South Africa by looking at their origin, theological praxis and the level of the tension between these two camps as well as the methods and strategies employed by the RITR to construct a solid relationship in their encounter.

**Note:** The manuscript is a contribution to the themed collection titled 'Fifty years of theological and religion research: The history of the Research Institute for Theology and Religion at the University of South Africa (1975–2025)', under the expert guidance of guest editor Professor Emeritus Christina Landman.

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Kritzinger's (2008:764) concept of 'encounterology' will thus be employed to shape the RITR's praxis towards the AICs. Although this concept is applied in this research between the RITR and the AICs, it is about a relationship that goes beyond these two. It is about a missiological encounter based on the *missio Dei* that sees others as equal, regardless of race, gender, economic class, religion, culture, among others. This is the RITR's encounter with the Christian others (AICs) based on mutual respect, equality, and an insertion into their space with openness to learn and be influenced by them and their context. This is a call for a faith-to-faith encounter. This concept is like or has been influenced by Koyama's (1974:91; Kritzinger 2008:770) similar concept, which he coined as 'neighbourology'. In addition to doing exegesis on the Word of God, this is a call to do an exegesis of the life and culture of the people among whom we live and work. This is a transformative encounter of equals driven by *missio Dei*. It calls for Christians towards a transformative encounter with others as a missional and missiological project. In this case, the focus is on the encounter that is driven by the RITR towards the AICs. At the end, the author would determine a way forward and reach a conclusion towards a model of a positive and sustainable relationship between these two.

## The African-Initiated Churches in South Africa

South Africa is a fertile ground for the AICs. This has been confirmed by Molobi (2013) as he echoed:

South Africa, for instance, has been viewed initially as the 'hub' of the development of the AIC movement. It was like this, because earlier through the South African Council of Churches (SACC), Christianity was regarded as the foremost religion. (p. 155)

The understanding of the AICs, therefore, is paramount for the informed analysis of the nature of their relationship with the Western established academic institutions and churches.

The AICs originated from breaking away or were expelled from the Western-aligned churches. Kgatle (2019) agrees with this idea when he concluded that they:

[A]re independent from Western influence and relevant to indigenous people in Africa. This type of church has grown in quantity and quality in the past and continues to make impact in African Christianity. (p. 11)

Another helpful view is by Masuku (2019:1996) who argues that they are basically those churches that were separated from the mainline churches because of administrative or doctrinal differences. The differences with the mainline churches or Western institutions could be located from conflicting administrative or doctrinal matters. Pobee and Ositelu (1998:1) concurred with this fact when they argued that AICs are discontent with Western church structures, patterns of ministry, liturgical forms, hymnody and architectural buildings brought by missionaries.

The origin of the first AIC in South Africa is identified by Ngada and Mofokeng (2001:4) when they reasoned that the first AIC was born in 1884. It came into existence because of a breakaway from the Methodist Church. This first AIC that was formed by this action came to be named the Thembu National Church. The AICs crafted a version of Africanised Christianity that ran parallel to the system of the mainline churches. Mijoga (2000) already acknowledged this trend, which led him to entitle his book as *Separate but same Gospel*. Hollenweger's (in Pobee & Ositelu 1998:ix) argument is relevant in this case when he says that the AICs adopted the Anglo-Saxon parliamentary system in their operation. This is a system marked by a democratically chosen leadership in a church gathering like synod.

It could therefore be concluded that the birth of the AICs was a reaction against the colonisation of Christianity in Africa. They were churches that were born in a battlefield with the Western-aligned institutions. Molobi (2019) further demonstrates this as could be deduced from his assertion:

African Independent Churches are groups of churches emerging out of Western mainline church experiences. They have increased into many small groups with variant names of their interest. The process of constant breakaways gave them the urge to multiply and gain autonomy. (p. 319)

## Friction between African-Initiated Churches and Western religious establishments

The line of difference that runs between AICs and the Western-aligned institutions is clearly known and well documented (Daneel 1987:9; Mala 1991:22,34; Sundkler 1948:297). There is a considerable amount of scholarship that has been devoted to this subject. The AIC leaders, Bishop Ngada and Rev Mofokeng, already, as recent as 2001, revealed the element of this friction as they gave reasons for authoring a new book in defence of the AICs against attacks by Western-aligned forces. They indicated that they authored the book:

[B]y the need to defend ourselves against all the forces which have been aligned against our churches; the attitude towards us of the missionaries, the apartheid regime and the mainline churches still today. (Ngada & Mofokeng 2001:xi)

On the other hand, Beyers Naudé located the friction from the mainline churches' position who regarded the AICs as (Ngada & Mofokeng 2001):

[S]ectarian and even inferior because of a lack of proper theological training which their churches had not provided them with. I also discovered that in their worship practices, some of them were so far removed from the liturgies and norms of the worship of the mainline churches that this added to the serious gulf between these two groups. (p. viii)

Beyers Naudé assumed that the further the AICs distanced themselves from the liturgies of the mainline churches, the more they became alienated, and the gap between these two groups grew. This is because the mainline churches felt that their superior liturgies and worship methods were being rejected.

Masuku (1996:446) already gives a warning with regard to the result of this friction between these two camps: 'The oppression of these churches by government not only encouraged their proliferation but also increased their anger, mistrust and suspicion towards established institutions like mission churches, universities, research institutions, etc'. Most people who participate in research activities of these churches face the problem of having to overcome all these barriers.

Another picture of AICs regarding their divide with mainline churches is portrayed by Chakanza (1991:126) who argues that when comparing the Christian divisions in Europe and America to those in Africa, attention is no longer drawn to the divide between Rome and Reformation, but could today be located in the AICs and Western-aligned churches or institutions. Accusations levelled against the AICs are along the lines of the distortions of the Christian faith, which is blamed on the lack of theological education (Dlamini 1991:129; Mala 1991:30–31). Chakanza (1991:126) categorises the mainline churches with Western-oriented institutions. In line with this view, the RITR offers theological education because of the masters and doctoral students who are supervised as well as the theological courses offered by the CB Powell Bible Centre. The centre was named after and in honour of Mr Charles B. Powell whose bequest made it possible for it to be established in 1984. The RITR is part of what Chakanza (1991:127) refers to as Western-oriented institutions. The book titled *African Christian Witness: African Indigenous Churches* by prominent AIC leaders Ngada and Mofokeng (2001) was a defence of the AICs against the attacks of Western-aligned forces. These forces included related institutions such as universities, which were seen as drivers of epistemic violence and where research institutes such as the RITR are based.

Molobi (2019:323) located the area of limitation for *etic* researchers as he argues, 'The stories of the white researchers on the AICs are mainly from the western missionary doctrinal perspectives.' One of the formidable critics of the AICs was Sundkler (1948). He adopted an *etic* approach in many aspects with regard to the AICs. He also came out strongly against their ecclesiology in the light of the notion of *notae ecclesiae*. On this point, he questioned their ecclesiological character (in Daneel 1987:9; Sundkler 1948:297). In his argument, there is no manifestation of *notae ecclesiae* in these churches. Anderson (1995:289) enters this argument by a question: '... are these churches genuine and living churches of Jesus Christ, or has the Christian witness been obscured beyond recognition?' It may seem that the indigenous culture and social structure within the AICs left the mark on their ecclesiology. That is why as they applied an *etic* approach, Martin and Oosthuizen (in Daneel 1987:270) judged the AICs' new tribal communities with attachments of new codes of conduct. They misunderstood the efforts of the AICs in the adaptation of their moral standards to tribal law and traditional codes of conduct. Masuku (1996) tries to clarify this situation:

The AICs are strongly and consciously African in orientation. Their religious activities are closely related to the traditional African culture and worldview. There appears to be friction in their encounter with the Western worldview and theological interpretation. Their character of being friendly to African traditional culture wins them thousands of adherents. (p. 443)

The above situation as explained, resulted into negative responses from the AICs. This anger is summed up from the AICs themselves as could be heard from the leaders such as Ngada and Mofokeng (2001:xi): 'we have been harshly treated, so harsh that it caused some of our members their lives'. The nature of their response took various shapes. Among them was intransigence to divulge information about themselves to researchers. Masuku (1996:446) indicates that the approach applied by Western aligned scholarship among the AICs, contributed in their sour response. There was thus a growing atmosphere of distrust, tension and suspicion in their encounter with the Western-aligned institutions that were engaged in research projects among them. Consequently, the AICs became virtually inaccessible. It is along these lines that in his quest for attempting to explore possibilities for peace between these two streams, Masuku (1996) authored an article titled 'AICs: Christian partners or antagonists?' Masuku (1996) further warned:

'There was also a growing atmosphere of tension and suspicion in their encounter with the "mainline" churches and institutions that are engaged in research activities on them. As a result of this situation these fellow Christians became virtually inaccessible.' (p. 441)

The AICs' negative reaction to Western religious institutions could be understood from their perceptions towards them. Ngada (1999:1) points out that the AICs were abused and called derogatory names by the Western churches. Pobee and Ositelo (1998:18) indicate that the AICs were often considered morally lax because some of them practised polygamy. Nongogo (1999:54) came forward with an exclusivist approach calling the historic churches 'foreign churches'.

The AICs therefore had undisputed credentials in the fight against the colonial powers. As products of the colonial Christian ethos, they played a prominent role in the awakening of black nationalist movements. They confronted head-on the political grievances of Africans under colonial regimes. They played a leading role to act against dissatisfaction with Western domination in churches and other related institutions. The close relationship between them and black nationalist movements was common. The relationship between the nationalists and the AICs was fuelled by their black membership on both sides who were Christians. Moremi (1991:57) also highlights the close relationship between the AICs and the liberation leadership when he indicates that the president of African National Congress (ANC) in 1924 was a church leader, Rev. Z. Malebane. Further involvement of the AICs in national issues could be located at the first congress of the Africanist Pan African Congress (PAC), which opened in 1959 with a prayer by an AIC leader, Bishop Dimpa, the then head of the Federation of Bantu Churches in South.



Having mapped out the nature of the conflict between the AICs and the Western establishments such as the RITR, one could be in a better position to appreciate the challenges the latter had to go through in their encounter with the Christian others. In the following section, it is important to explore the categories and nature of transformative encounters between the RITR and the AICs.

## The Research Institute for Theology and Religion's encounterology with the African-Initiated Churches

### Preliminary reflections and transformative encounters with the African-Initiated Churches

Since the birth of the RITR in 1975, it seems that there were no serious reflection and action with regard to the AICs in the institute until 1994. The cause for this delay could be known from the fact that during the earlier part since its birth in 1975, the RITR staff was made up of those who share the following experience about the church and AICs as Beyers Naude did (in Ngada & Mofokeng 2001):

As the son of a religiously conservative white Dutch Reformed 'dominee', who himself also became a 'dominee' of this church, I had no knowledge of the African Independent Churches in South Africa ... I was barely aware of their existence. In so far as I noticed their presence, they were to me black sectarian groups wearing all kinds of interesting robes and dresses. I noticed that they were meeting regularly under the trees and alongside rivers. This conveyed no specific religious message to me. All together I regarded them as 'funny' African religious groups. (p. v)

However, there were some positive gestures regarding the AICs within the World Council of Churches (WCC) circles. Communication with the Christian others, in this case, the AICs, has been the focus of the WCC. Already, in the year of the establishment of the RITR in 1975, the WCC had some positive pointers towards dialogue and embracing the AICs. Molobi (2012:101) indicates that dialogue with other Christian and religious organisations has been the focus of the WCC. He locates this move in 1975 at the WCC Nairobi Assembly. During this assembly, the report entitled 'Breaking barriers' was a positive gesture in relation to the AICs. This approach and ecumenical vision were understood to be of missiological significance as part of what God intended to be (Molobi 2012). A negative scenario was seen within the South African context. Masuku (2014:160) indicates that the AICs failed to attract intellectuals because they were viewed as 'uneducated' and 'primitive'. They were viewed as 'red people' with the understanding that they were fresh from tribal areas with no education. One could therefore know the reason for the delay in the dialogue with the AICs by RITR from the aforementioned challenges.

The call for the need for Africans in Christian mission has been in existence as early as the 1800s. Maluleke (2000:43), indicated this need from his writing titled, *The quest for muted black voices in history: Some pertinent issues in (South) African*

*mission historiography*. In this, he highlighted the name of Pambani Mzimba and described him as, 'the founder of only the second Ethiopian Church in South Africa – The Presbyterian Church of Africa – which he established around 1893.' Maluleke (2000) further indicated that Mzimba argued for the black presence in mission history. What he emphasised ecclesiastically was as he stated:

[B]lack presence and self-determination – is similar to what we now seek in mission history, namely a black presence which, though impossible to detach completely from the dominant historiography of white Christendom, can nevertheless walk its own walk without a debilitating dependence on the theoretical crutches of established mission historiography. (p. 43)

The thought of the research on AICs in RITR could be noted in 1994. The initial approach adopted then could not work until a new successful one was adopted the following year (Masuku 1996:447). The roots of serious talks towards successful projects on AICs in the RITR could be located within their reflections on the need for a broader bibliographical database of churches worldwide early in 1995. Thomas (1995:18) argues that the AICs 'contribute to the world church a renewed emphasis on apostolic images of the church and mission, with distinctive contextualisation for the needs of Africa'. It was noted that the current construction of the database focused on the period from 1990 to 1994. It was also noted that the bibliographical database for worldwide periodical articles was limited within the period 1975 to 1994. The services of Prof. H.L. Pretorius were suggested as he was understood to be engaged on AICs' bibliographical database (RITR Annual Report 1995:10).

The approval of a grant by Pew Charitable fund for an AIC-related project in Africa called the African initiative of Christian mission in 1994 laid a foundation for engagement with the AICs. This fund was named after the Pew family name who played a prominent role financially, in its establishment in 1948. In the RITR, this project was given a timeline to be concluded in 1997. Participants in this project embarked on AIC-related topics in their research praxis. For instance, Prof. M.L. Daneel worked on 'The missionary nature of AICs' and Dr T. Shoko on 'Healing techniques in AICs in Zimbabwe' (RITR Annual Report 1995:19). Daneel (2000) who researched and wrote extensively on the AICs, had to deal with the same question related to this project as could be seen from the title of one of his books titled, *The AICs in Southern Africa: Protest movements or mission Churches?*

It could be concluded that interest in AICs scholarship within the RITR, was not part of their initial projects. The WCC however, started to demonstrate interest, earlier than the RITR. There were notable enablers for AICs in the RITR such as the grant from Pew Charitable fund and the broader Church History project. The following section explores projects related to AICs that emanated from this situation.

### Projects related to African-Initiated Churches

One of the projects that related to AICs was called the African initiatives in Christian mission. It was sponsored by Pew

Charitable Trusts, Philadelphia, USA and was activated in 1995 in the RITR after the grant was approved the previous year (RITR Report 1994). It appears that Africans had interest in Christian missions dating some years back. For instance, Masuku (2021:5) and Vellem (2014) described the AICs as protagonists who maintained African spirituality against what he termed 'the terror of Western spirituality'. Robert (2003:1) hints that already in 1958, African voices were already echoed with regard to the need for African initiatives in Christian missions as emanated from a series of consultations conducted. The voices in question leveled criticism against Western Christian missions. The AICs also featured in these consultations although delegates chose to remain in the mainline churches because, in the words of Niles (in Robert 2003:1), they have 'seen a vision of the Church which is truly supra-racial'.

Prof. M.L. Daneel was granted this fund to conduct such a project from 1995 to 1997, researching on African initiatives in Christian mission. The RITR was to administer this project. Prof. Dana Robert from Boston University was the representative of this trust. It appears that this subject of African Initiatives in Christian Mission was at the heart of Robert because she produced an article entitled, 'Introduction to "African Initiative on Christian Mission"' (Robert 2003). Other researchers of this project, apart from selected UNISA researchers, were those from other universities and institutions such as Dr Tabona Shoko and Ms Lillian Dube (University of Zimbabwe), Dr Isabel Phiri (University of Malawi), Rev. Solomon Zvanaka and Bishop Ruben Marinda (ZIRRCON Zimbabwe) and Mina T. Tsoga (RITR Annual Report 1995:19). This project advanced so well in 1995, such that a workshop was organised on 12–16 August 1996 in the second year of its existence to assess the progress made as it was implemented the previous year (RITR Annual Report 1996:8, 10, 11).

Already in 1995, the Church History project, focusing on the church history-bibliography of Southern Africa, had sub-projects that directly spoke to the AICs. The sub-projects were as follows: computer database on AICs (dictionary project), a preliminary bibliography of the published materials on AICs and church history dictionary. The leadership of the broader Church History project was Profs. J.W. Hofmeyr and C. Landman, the latter as co-project leader. Their team members included Messrs. C.M. de Villiers and J.H. Rykheer as part-time junior researchers (RITR Annual Report 1995:9).

The actual serious mentioning of the AICs that became successful was echoed in Afrikaans as *Africa Onafhanklike Kerke* [African Independent Churches]. It was uttered early in 1995 under the sub-project of the bibliographical database of this type of churches. It was meant to cover the period 1990–1994. Obviously, the question that was in the mind of the researchers at RITR before they could embark on this research project among the AICs was well summarised by Masuku (1996:447) as follows: 'The first question that project members

had to face was how to go about gathering information from the AICs. We knew and understood that due to the experiences they had gone through, there were hurdles of suspicion, tension and resistance that we had to overcome.' Driven by the spirit of encounterology, which values equal partnership and respect for our encountering partners, Masuku (1996) further clarifies the approach adopted by the RITR:

Our thesis is that the AICs must participate in the writing of their own history. We had to work hand in hand with them in the writing of their history. From our side we decided to communicate to AICs our willingness to provide the necessary resources as an academic institution, but with the clear understanding that this had to be done from a position of equal partnership. (p. 448)

Researchers from the field of Church History were recommended to lead such a project. The database will be in a CD-ROM, because UNISA publishers cannot publish it due to financial constraints (RITR Annual Report 1995:10). The aim was to compile a list of published materials on AICs for the purpose of constructing a database, which was planned to be completed in 1995 and published the following year. It was argued that the existing bibliography on AICs is outdated (RITR Annual Report 1995:17). Masuku (1996) further and clearly describes the aim as follows:

Its principal aim is to compile a comprehensive set of 'entries' on significant people, institutions and events in South African church history. Initially a computer database on African-Initiated Churches is to be developed. (p. 447)

The sub-project, the computer database on AICs in 1995, was also led by Profs. C. Landman and J.W. Hofmeyr, and their team composed of Revv. Z. Banda and T. Masuku, as well as Mrs. J. Killian and Dr E. Mashao (an AIC leader and principal tutor at Timothy Training Institute). The aim was to document a report on AIC leaders, their contributions and events and institutions related to AICs (RITR Annual Report 1995:16). In the following year, that is 1996, this project was led by Prof. Christina Landman and Dr Lizo Jafta as project leaders. Rev. Tobias Masuku was the coordinator of this project. Other participants were Rev. Zuze Banda, Mrs Jansie Killian and Dr Elias Mashao. This also involved a preliminary bibliography of published materials on AICs (RITR Annual Report 1996:8). The 7-point strategy adopted by this team, which has been hailed as successful included the following: bottom-up approach, questionnaires, establishing contacts with bodies of mission churches, establishing contacts with associations that have related missions as ours, establishing contact with institutions within the AICs, attendance of conferences and workshops with AICs' agenda and contact with individual ministers or bishops (Masuku 1996:448–450).

At the end of 2001, when one assesses the engagement of RITR towards AICs retrospectively, it indicates that the level of activism on dialogue with them regarding formal projects has declined. The Church History project which also accommodated the AICs project came to an end (RITR Annual Report 2001). The bibliography on AICs was published in 1998 and 'it was received most favourably' (RITR Annual Report 1998:1). It also appeared that one of the

two main projects that were funded by Pew Charitable trust was completed in 1998. With the sudden departure of Mrs CM de Villiers who was identified as the contract holder and worked under the *Church History project*, which also contained the project on the bibliography of the AICs, it was thus impossible to further be productive in this regard. It should be noted, however, that although these projects were administered by the institute, they were made to be under the leadership of a faculty member or somebody from outside the university (RITR Annual Report 2000:6).

Therefore, it could be concluded that the year 1994 was important for the revival of scholarship on AICs in the RITR. One could note the endorsement received for starting research projects on AICs during the same year, indicated by the approval of a grant from Pew Charitable Trusts for undertaking a project that focused on AICs, namely, African Initiatives in Christian Mission. This research endeavour prepared fertile ground for the initiation of numerous other projects on AICs as was seen with the AICs' database (also known as the AICs Dictionary) project. Another factor that facilitated the scholarship on AICs was the existence of the broader Church History project that focused on Church History-Bibliography of Southern Africa. These two factors gave new impetus for the revival of scholarship on AICs in RITR in 1994. It is also important to see how this resurgence of scholarship on AICs progressed and ultimately enabled the creation of many other research projects such as the individual research outputs by some RITR researchers, as could be seen in the following section.

### Individual research outputs on African-Initiated Churches

The aforementioned initiatives on AICs led to the creation of research outputs from individual researchers in the RITR. For instance, the AICs Dictionary project coordinator, Rev. Tobias Masuku, authored an article entitled, 'AICs: Christian partners or antagonists?' Molobi (2013; cf. RITR Annual Report 1999:18) indicates that in 1999, Prof. C.W. du Toit edited a special collection (from conference proceedings) entitled, *Hearing the AIC Voice. AICs and their place in the new SA*. Prof. M.V. Molobi in 2011 submitted a paper to the UKZN entitled, *Power struggle and poverty among the AICs in SA as a leading cause for the breakaways among them: A historical perspective* (RITR Annual Report 2011:24). He also authored an article entitled, *The AICs and Theological training: With special reference to the St. John Apostolic Faith Mission of Ma Nku*, in 2006 (RITR Annual Report 2006:15). He also published an article entitled, *The relationship between WCC and OAICs. An assessment of the mutual influence on ecumenical praxis*.

Individual research outputs continued. At some stage, in collaboration with the Organisation of African Independent Churches (OAIC), Prof. M.V. Molobi worked on a project that was seeking to establish an international journal for AIC (RITR Annual 2012:19). In 2013, he also authored another article entitled, *The historical voice of the AICs. Towards new developments* (RITR Annual Report 2013:23). Rev. M.T.

Masuku contributed by presenting on the topic, *Talking the Goodnews: Dialogue with AICs on education, science and religion*, on 25 June 1997 in Pretoria. He also participated by presenting on the topic, *A man of God: The story of Bishop MC Vilakazi, an AIC leader*, in Johannesburg on 27 June 1997 (RITR Annual Report 1997:23).

It is important to conclude that the existence of scholarship on AICs in the RITR motivated individual academic staff members to begin developing an interest in writing about them. That is why articles on AICs were published and read at academic conferences and related gatherings. One of the researchers in the RITR also had an active relationship with OAICs in Nairobi, Kenya where he contributed immensely. Having focused on the outputs by individual researchers of the RITR in this section, it is therefore necessary to look at the centrifugal element of the RITR's encounters with the AICs in the following section.

### Centrifugal encounterological praxis towards African-Initiated Churches

Researchers in the RITR have proven themselves to be organic intellectuals who did not conduct their research praxis from armchair positions but reached out to the AICs. In the same year, 1995, which the RITR seriously embarked on research on AICs, Maluleke (1995) advised as follows to emphasise the centrifugal and organic intellectual character that is required from the researchers:

Research that focuses on Africans and their Christianity (and any form of human research for that matter) cannot be remotely pursued in some academic ivory tower as some sort of curious hobby - it requires genuinely, personal participation, and commitment. (p. 283)

He further quotes Peter Reason who echoes the same sentiments when he states: 'we can only truly and do research with persons if we engage with them as persons, as co-subjects and thus as co-researchers'.

This centrifugal element was demonstrated by the RITR in several ways as they embarked on out-reach programmes to the AICs. For instance, Prof. Christina Landman, as a leader of the Oral History project, assisted by Ms Gabisile Mashigo, in 2006, was reported to have paid 10 visits to Ma Christina Nku, the founding leader of the St. Johns Apostolic Faith Mission Church. Prof. Landman acknowledges the difficulty of gaining access to information related to AICs but points out that despite this hindrance, they ultimately won their confidence (RITR Annual Report 2006).

On the other hand, Prof. Masilo Victor Molobi reached further to other parts of Africa. This was done through his project called AIC's continental and theological education both for short learning programme and higher learning education in collaboration with OAIC in Nairobi, Kenya. He also attended a meeting of the AICs in Nairobi, Kenya on millennium development goals (RITR Annual Report 2010:16). Prof. Molobi also paid visits to several AIC leaders



as he was preparing for a consultation with them to be held at UNISA on 11 March 2010 (RITR Annual Report 2010:17). He also participated at the Church History conference, UKZN in 2012 entitled, 'The Ecumenical vision of the OAIC' (RITR Annual Report 2012:18).

In addition, Rev. Tobias Masuku made contacts and paid visits to and contributed at conferences organised by the following AIC organisations and institutions: Khanye Institute, Association of South African Theological Institutions (ASANTI), Church of Christ Mission and Spiritual Churches. In addition he continued to contribute the same way to the following institutions: New Religious Movements and Independent Churches (NERMIC) workshop held at the University of the Witwatersrand on 29–30 June 1995, and the Independent Churches Forum held in Bloemfontein on 27–29 September 1995 (RITR Annual Report 1995:16,17). Several visits were undertaken by Rev. T. Masuku during 1997 to Khanye Theological Institute in Johannesburg to discuss the certificate courses with them (RITR Annual Report 1997:7). In 1997, he attended conferences and had meetings with the following: Community for Jesus annual conference in Soweto, Johannesburg, Catholic Christian Church in Zion (SA), in Sunbury, Stanger, among others (Masuku 1996:447–450; RITR Annual Report 1997:8, see 1998:9, see 1998:19–20). It could therefore be concluded that the solid nature of the relationship between RITR and AICs, could be measured by the way they invited each other to their spaces and positively responded to the invites. The attendance of AICs' conferences, seminars and workshops by the RITR is meaningful towards building a solid relationship, which will open more avenues for scholarship. The RITR has proven to be a pool for organic intellectuals who did not adopt an 'arm-chair' approach, but inserted themselves into the AIC spaces through their transformative encounters. Having explored the way in which the RITR reached out to the AICs, it is important to explore how RITR was a pulling force for the AICs towards them, which is discussed next.

### Centripetal encounterological praxis with regard to African-Initiated Churches

The RITR also became a pulling force for the AICs. This translates to mean that the AICs also made their way to UNISA as guests of the RITR. For instance, the Forum for Religious Dialogue (FRD) organised conferences at UNISA (Sunnyside) in 1998 where AIC leaders (e.g. Archbishop NH Ngada, Bishop Lekganyane, Bishop Ntongana, Revs. K. Mofokeng, Moleshiwa, etc.) were among guest speakers (RITR Annual Report 1997:27–28). A project consultation conference took place at UNISA on 11 March 2010 under the theme, 'Healing in the African Independent Churches'. Several AIC leaders attended this consultation (RITR Annual Report 2010:17). In 1998, RITR organised a conference at UNISA Pretoria with the theme, *Hearing the AIC Voice* in which AICs were invited (RITR Annual Report 1998:19). Reflecting on this conference, Molobi (2013:156) summed up the impact of the AICs as follows:

'Indeed, *Hearing the AIC's voice* is prophetic in that its foretelling stories became a reality inside and outside the movement, not only in South Africa but also on the African continent and elsewhere'.

Other activities that drew the AICs to UNISA campuses could be seen from Prof. V. Molobi who organised a consultation with them entitled, *AICs Theological education* held in UNISA in 2013 (RITR Annual Report 2010:17). An AIC leader, Rev. Sipho Tselane attended and presented a paper at RITR's annual seminar in 1999 entitled, *Violence truth and prophetic silence: Religion and the quest for a South African common good* (RITR Annual Report 1999:17).

Conclusion could therefore be reached that the RITR researchers having been centrifugally invited by and attended AICs' activities, in turn, the RITR also reciprocated by centripetally inviting them to RITR's activities at UNISA. It was observed how they cooperated so well with the RITR when they were invited to UNISA campuses for conferences, meetings, etc. This reciprocal relationship was a positive gesture for future engagements and scholarship. Having looked at the encounterological praxis of the RITR, it is important to look at measures that can be taken to make this relationship sustainable.

### Model of a sustainable relationship and a way forward with the African-Initiated Churches

The principles of Kritzinger's (2008) concept of encounterology, which reflected in the transformative encounter of RITR with the AICs, marked some of the areas that could cement a sustainable relationship. This could be an engaged scholarship that also creates some benefits for ecumenicity. The bottom-up approach that was adopted by the RITR in 1995, which regards the Christian others as equal partners is recommended. This calls for organic rather than inorganic intellectuals as centred on the concept of encounterology or Koyama's (1974) neighbourology. In the same vein, we should approach the AICs with an open mind of learning from them. In light of this, it seems that the *emic* approach as a tool adopted by researchers such as Daneel and others is to be foregrounded more than the *etic* approach utilised by some researchers who sometimes miss the mark in their findings and conclusions. It calls for the warning that came from Beyers Naudé's experience with the AICs as he advised (Ngada & Mofokeng 2001):

I soon became aware that if I wanted to begin to understand the history, witness and religious activities of these churches, I also had to attend their worship services, normally starting on Saturday night and continuing till Sunday morning. This also gave me the opportunity to discuss with them their believe in the Bible, in Christ, in the church as the body of Christ and in the need for possible cooperation between themselves and the mainline churches. (p. viii)

This *etic* approach adopted by other researchers is largely responsible for the existing gap and tension between the

AICs and Western-originated religious establishments and academic institutions. Masuku (1996:448) noted these wrong approaches when he stated as follows from the experience of the RITR: 'We noted that many mistakes had been made in research on the activities of the AICs by academics who approached them from an inorganic position'. The AICs themselves lamented this approach as could be deduced from their assertions (Ngada & Mofokeng 2000):

Volumes have been written about the AICs by researchers who were themselves not members of our churches. As outsiders they often did not really understand what they were writing about. Sometimes they were prejudiced and sometimes they even distorted facts. (p. xi)

The voice of the AICs is no longer as vocal as it used to be. Molobi (2013) traces this trend to as early as the mid-1990s. He states:

However, their growth in terms of a united voice has declined tremendously. Since 1994 the 'AIC veterans' in South Africa have disappeared off the scene in vast numbers, largely due to their ageing and poor health. (p. 155)

However, the RITR decided to maintain their relationship with AICs by keeping contacts with them in any possible way. One could see some elements of hope from the words of Daneel (2000:3) who saw a different picture taking it from the early 1960s. He observed: 'In South Africa alone, statistics indicate a decline in the growth of major Western-oriented "mission churches," in contrast to escalating growth rates of the AICs'.

Therefore, the RITR will continuously maintain mutual engagement through the attendance of conferences, workshops, among others. Furthermore, identification and association with key AIC leaders and institutions are to be maintained as well. The promotion and development of AIC projects and newsletters are to be maintained (RITR Annual Report 1996, 1997:8, 1998:10). These positive strategic approaches to the AICs, require more of the like-minded thinkers such as Thomas (1991:1), who argues that 'African Initiated/Indigenous Churches (AICs) are integral to the mainstream of Christianity, rather than an aberration'. Despite the aforementioned declining AIC voice, there is hope as identified by Molobi (2013) when he states:

Nonetheless, the establishment of the OAIC headquarters in Kenya, Nairobi has become a vital bridge to overcome this challenge. It is yet to be seen whether its central initiative will manage to register most of the AIC's on the African continent, including South Africa. (p. 155)

## Conclusion

It seems that the RITR started late to embark on the encounter with the AICs as it was not part of their research agenda from 1975. The RITR having been born in 1975 and only starting to research on the AICs in mid-1990s was late. It was also indicated that the first component of the staff members in the RITR, both academic and administrative were all white. This, coupled with apartheid, which was rife at the time, rendered research among black people and Africans, in particular

difficult. It seems that this challenge was noted by the RITR staff, because before they could embark on AIC projects, they ensured that they employ Africans to drive AIC projects forward. They made huge strides within the AIC spaces by successfully undertaking projects and thereafter authored articles on AICs.

The relationship between the RITR and the AICs is commendable because of the aforementioned efforts to build a relationship with them. They are part of the life of the RITR. This relationship was demonstrated by the AICs' participation in both centrifugal and centripetal related activities organised by the RITR. These included workshops, conferences and seminars where the RITR and AICs invited each other and to which both actively participated. The highlight of this relationship was when they attended a conference organised by the RITR, entitled 'Hearing the AIC voice' where they actively participated. This relationship saw members of the RITR being invited to AICs' conferences where they also played an active role. This reciprocal relationship was cemented by the RITR's initiative towards the encounter with the AICs.

The relationship built by the RITR with the AICs will stand for many years to come when also taking into consideration the proposed model for a sustainable relationship. It has opened more doors for future engagements and scholarship. This is built on the success of the RITR in their transformative encounter with the AICs. This success is well outlined by Masuku (1996) as follows:

The AICs are now able to understand how we as a university are functioning in matters of research activities in relation to their business. They have in turn welcomed us as part of them, not as people operating with a hidden agenda. (p. 450)

They now invite us to participate in their conferences and gatherings. There is also a great degree of cooperation regarding the use of our questionnaires (Masuku 1996).

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## Data availability

The author confirms that the data supporting this study and its findings are available within the article.

## Disclaimer

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