

## CHAPTER 17

### THE PROSPECT OF INDIGENOUS CHURCHES

#### 1. Introduction

In the earlier chapters, you were acquainted with the history and development of the AICs. You also acquired some knowledge of the basic beliefs and practices of some of these movements. Our objectives in this chapter are to provide a cursory overview of the impact of the Indigenous Churches on the mainline churches and the society as a whole. We also want to discuss the prospects of the indigenous churches as they begin to spread beyond Africa.

The Indigenous Churches have become a movement that defies simple academic treatment. The movement continues to be a phenomenon attracting the attentions of anthropologists and missiologists, as well as sociologists that see them as sources for understanding aspects of Christian aberrations from indigenous perspectives.

#### 2. Content

We must be able to enumerate, by now, several reasons why indigenous African Christianity has become a vital phenomenon to be reckoned with and also why the movement continues to exert much influence on the society. Some of the reasons why Africans continue to flock into AICs include the following: (See Chapter 3 above).

##### (a) *Attempt to contextualise Christianity*

The Indigenous Church movements teach a kind of Christianity that has the trademark of African culture. The AICs, like the traditional religion, emphasise the good things of life that the African appreciates. These include good health, long life, children, wealth, titles, honours and so on. Any brand of religion that fails to take cognizance of these as the applied forms of religion among the Africans is bound to lose its hold on its members.

##### (b) *Consideration of African Worldview*

An extension of the first point raised above is the fact that the AICs cater to the Africans belief in witchcraft, sorcery and other malevolent spirits that the Mission Churches do not believe as reality. These churches speak to the fears and trials of Africans, by providing protection from such evil forces. They are more interested in the practical realisation of the terminology and ideology of the Christian faith.<sup>144</sup> Victor Hayward admonished "that even though the African worldviews present intellectual difficulties, Mission Churches need to take them seriously in Christian practice."<sup>145</sup>

##### (c) *Lovelier Forms of Worship*

Many Africans prefer the lovelier forms of worship of these sects. The frequent repetition of songs and choruses accompanied with hand clapping, tapping of feet and swaying of body are part of the average African's emotional response to the Ultimate Being. This of course has to do with the fact that the literacy level of most of the patrons is low to afford them the opportunity to be able to read effectively from Hymnals used by the historic churches. This is coupled with the use of indigenous lyrics and

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<sup>144</sup> See David A. Shenk, "African Christian religious itinerary: toward an understanding of the religious itinerary from the faith of the African traditional religion(s) to that of the New Testament," in Walls & Shank, (eds.) *Exploring New Religious Movements*, pp, 143-162, and Walter J, Hollenweger. "The theological challenges of indigenous churches," in *Ibid.*, pp. 163-168.

<sup>145</sup> Victor Hayward, ed. *African Independent Church Movements* (Edinburgh: WCC, 1963), p.73.

instruments that make people enjoy their worship. The patrons do not feel at home in the type that has been described as "uninterestingly European and dull" which is characteristic of the historic churches.

(d) *Healing*

It is obvious that the "ministry of faith-healing" forms a central part of the life of many AICs. They discern the causes of illnesses or diseases through prophecies, visions and dreams. Studies have been shown that some ailments, which have defied Western medical care, have been cured by AICs. Besides, Western medicine is not available on a large scale in much of Africa, while quack doctors with impunity are selling fake and outdated drugs! Therefore, the AICs will continue to attract numerous people who cannot afford or have access to Western medicine.

(e) *Evangelism*

Further, it is noticeable fact that these churches are committed to evangelism.<sup>146</sup> They are always ringing bells and proclaiming the message of salvation. Moreover they have travelling evangelists and prophets who engage in local crusades, revivals and house-to-house evangelism. Questions may be raised as to what they mean by evangelism and by what means; yet, the fact remains that some results follow their efforts as they keep gaining new followers. The growth of the Kimbanguist Church in Central Africa, even in the absence of their leader, is an evidence of AICs' commitment to spreading their faith in Christ Jesus. The same can be said of many of the groups discussed.

(f) *Emphasis on the Holy Spirit*

Much emphasis is placed on the role of the Holy Spirit in the various ministries of these churches. While much depends on the ingenuity of the leaders, they still refer to the Holy Spirit as the source of their gifts of vision, prophetic utterances and healing. The Holy Spirit is not an academic subject to be debated, but to be experienced by the leaders and the followers. A re-enactment of the activities of the Holy Spirit in the Acts is the norm for most of these churches and their leaders. In some cases, there may be "heresies" on the subject of the Holy Spirit, yet, He is still recognised as the power behind their activities.

(g) *Women's place and role are prominent*

The AICs have elevated the uniqueness of women as many of their churches are led by women, or play prominent roles. They serve as "mothers," "prophetesses," "overseers" and such roles. In most of these churches, women are always in the majority, though they are also the most beneficiaries. In recent times, there are several of them who are now "Bishops" and even "Archbishops" with many men serving under them.

(h) *Membership Participation*

Most members of the AICs do not feel themselves on the peripheral strata of their churches. Regardless of how many leaders they have, members feel at home, and as part of the mainstream of events. Unlike the professional clergy showmanship in the mainline denominations, everyone is valued and can even "disrupt" services when moved by the Holy Spirit — to raise a song, deliver a prophecy without any leader raising eyebrow.

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<sup>146</sup> 116 See Wilbert Shenk. "The contribution of the study of new religious movements to missiology," in Walls & Shenk, op. cU., pp.179-206.

### 3. Weaknesses

In spite of the above promising strides made by the AICs, some people have "prophesied" that the days of the AICs are numbered because of a number of the following reasons:

#### (a) *Increasing secessions*

One of the serious problems the AICs are facing is the increasing secession within the movements. It appears new church groups emerge every month! The desire of individual prophets to have their own congregation has led to new churches being established in rapid succession. An obvious evil effect of this "mushrooming of AICs" is the uncomfortable partition it is generating among Christians.

#### (b) *Church Discipline*

It is also to their discredit that church discipline is all but absent in most of these churches. This may be part of the reasons for the increasing secessions. Their regulations consist merely in the prohibitions generally taught within the group and offences are determined as they arise. Because some of them fear to meet with a loss of some of their members they hardly carry out biblical injunctions to punish severely some offending members. Consequently, they allow members who are loosely related with the church, but who are just interested in their "efficacious prayers" for their life-crises.

#### (c) *Over dependence on Leaders*

It is general knowledge that some of these churches have gone to the extent of idolising their leaders. The case of Simon Kimbangu is somewhat unfortunate as he would not have endorsed anyone idolising him. However, some of the leaders have arrogated to themselves some powers, authorities and titles that have no biblical support. Some have, as a result of personal weaknesses, engaged in practices that their members have imbibed, even when such practices are known to be "unchristian." Also, as Hayward observed, "organisations built around an individual inevitably face a fundamental crisis on the death of such leaders."<sup>147</sup> Succession after the death of some leaders has often led to multiple secessions, hostilities and litigation. Personality cult is the bane of most of the AICs. Such powerful figures often enrich themselves at the expense of the faithfulness of their followers, who may lose almost everything at the exit or death of their idol-leaders.

#### (d) *Financial Support*

Most of these churches do not receive regular subscriptions. In practice therefore, they have to depend upon irregular voluntary gifts from members usually made as thank offerings for blessings received or expected. They also rely upon income derived from special occasions such as harvest, thanksgiving, silver collections and anniversary celebrations. This explains why many of them go to such extent to "extract" money from their members. The result of these is that no budgets can be prepared in advance and workers cannot be paid or promised any fixed salaries. With the exception of the leaders and founders who often refuse to be accountable to anybody, most of the junior ministers face uncertain financial support and no security in later life since every minister has to almost rely on his own device to get a living.

#### (e) *Provision of Bible Training*

Researchers have shown that several of the leaders of the AICs have no Bible or "theological training whatsoever. One of the serious effects of this is that their teaching or preaching is usually of a rather low order and sermons show little or absolutely no sign of careful preparation. The result of this is that some of these churches engage in some practices, which are not biblical. Some border on renewal of ancestral cults and rituals, traditional divination through objects, pronouncing curses and laying of

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<sup>147</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 73.

spells, consultation of spirits and other practices which are condemned in the Bible. Some have already started some formal training of their leaders, but it is so simplistic. The training sometimes last some few weeks under teachers who themselves have no formal theological training anywhere.

There is hope for growth in the area of theological training. In Southern Africa for instance, an African Independent Churches Conference was formed. The meeting was held between July 28 and 30 1972, and was initiated by Dr. M. L. Daneel with financial support from the Free University of -"Amsterdam. The objectives of the conference are three-fold:

- (1) the theological education of members of the AICs through the establishment of a theological training school, Bible Correspondence courses, and refresher courses;
- (2) the establishment of a scholarship fund for theological education; and
- (3) the promotion of inter-church relations through conferences and assistance in the problems and needs of the member churches of the conferences.<sup>148</sup>

(f) *Extra-Biblical Practices*

As stated above, attempts by AICs' leaders to satisfy or minister to the Africans, have led some of them to the extreme of adding extra-biblical modes to their worship and ministry. Fernandez is of the opinion that some of these churches make frequent use of images.<sup>149</sup> The syncretism is more obvious in some of the offshoots of the original groups that came out of the mission-related churches. There are information or testimonies by defected members of CCC, C&S among others, to the effect that some leaders of some of these churches within the AICs have alliances with witches and wizards. They engage in spiritism and occultism in order to achieve their desired goals. The ritual baptism at the crossroads, seashores, and in the middle of the night, the prescriptions of herbal items, such as "holy water," candles, animal sacrifices among others are indicative of their syncretism.<sup>150</sup>

(g) *Absence of Elaborate Administrative Structure*

In most of the AICs, hardly can anyone find cumbersome administrative set-up. The so-called headquarters of any of the AICs may be the same house where the leader or the overseer lives. Decisions affecting the congregations scattered all over a country is taken by the leaders, and carried out by the followers. Pastors are placed and removed by the same leader without any questions to be raised elsewhere. In most cases, red-tapism or committee systems in Mainline denominations are not a problem, thus decisions are easily carried out. However, the simple administrative structure paves way for greater confusion and easy disintegration after the demise of the leader.

(h) *Marital Problems*

One of the recurrent problems with the leaders of the AICs is the issue of polygamy. Most of the leaders seem to "enjoy" keeping a harem of women as wives, plus others who simply served as mistresses. It can be argued that since most average African men marry more than one woman, that they are not immune, yet, there are more African men who marry only one. In other words, they can be said to be lenient towards African traditional marriage, or that they simply engage in such form of

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<sup>148</sup> For details, see Peter M. Makamba, "African Independent Churches and TEE," *INTERNATIONAL REVIEW OF MISSION* Vol. LXXI:282 (April 1982): pp. 2-4-212.

<sup>149</sup> J.W. Fernandex, "African religious movements," *Annual Review of Anthropology* Vol. 7 (1978): 195-234.

<sup>150</sup> Cf. Harold W. Turner, "Pagan Features in West African Independent Churches," in *Readings in Missionary Anthropology II* (enlarged 1978 edition) ed. William A. Smalley (Pasadena, CA: Wm. Carey Library, 1978), pp. 442-48.

marriage as a reaction to the Mission churches' policies towards polygamy. Prophet Harris had his four wives accompany him in his evangelistic trips.<sup>151</sup> Isaiah Shembe of South Africa had four wives, but divorced all of them before he resumed his prophetic ministry. Oshitelu of the Aladura married seven, while Johane Maranke "left sixteen wives on his death in 1963."<sup>152</sup> There are others such as Simon Kimbangu who married only one, though he could have fallen prey to the same problem but for the early interruption in his ministry. The Kimbanguist Church however in 1958 prohibited polygamy in their *Constitution*.

The problem involved here may be due to the AICs leaders' style of pastoral ministry where women with problems are asked to come under their "spiritual watch-care." It is probably during the "counseling sessions" and several days of "prayer vigils" that they are tempted to engage in extra-marital affairs. Women with emotional and psychological problems are mostly affected.

Some of the AICs women leaders are also affected by this problem, as some of them "change" their men from time to time. It is our considered opinion that if the AICs leaders interact with other Church leaders, and are open to accountability in relation to the biblical standard for Church leadership, this problem may be removed or checked.

#### **4. The Future of AICs**

What exactly will happen to these groups in Africa with increasing development, industrialisation and education? Will what happened to religious movements in Europe in the Middle Ages and in the 18th century when with the rise of scientific knowledge and financial security of individuals, religious fervor declined?

While there is no doubt about the many problems confronting the AICs yet, the movement has come to stay, in spite of the weaknesses. In the first place, the movement is a wake-up call for the Mission-related churches that all was, and is not well with their method of ministry to their members. We should remember that most of the members of the AICs are drawn from the mainline denominations. It is amazing that it took the Kimbanguist churches only a few years to reach a greater part of Central Africa with the Gospel than the many years of the mission-related churches endeavours.

It is important to consider the fact that AICs movement did not emerge in a historical and social vacuum. The contributions of Henry Venn through his "Mission Principle" helped to pave way for thoughts of independency. He had argued by 1846 that indigenous leadership was basic to the growth of the Church in Africa.<sup>153</sup> Henry Venn no doubt awakened the idea of indigenisation. The unfortunate consequence was the misunderstanding of Venn's colleagues to the idea, thus leading many of them to resent or malign any African that exhibited signs of leadership. The cases of Bishop Ajayi Crowther and Ladejo Stone (his group broke away in 1888 from FBC, Lagos), are good examples — both of Anglican and Baptist traditions.

The above mentioned churches, among others, would not have been established but for the arrogant attitude of some of the missionaries who resented the idea of African leadership. The ethnocentrism of the then-missionaries contributed immensely to the emergence of indigenous churches. The irony of this development is the fact that most of the African leaders continue to exhibit the same intolerance to new leaders within their organisations. Many of such prospective leaders are sidelined and frustrated

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<sup>151</sup> Debrunner, *Prophetism in Ghana*, p. 152.

<sup>152</sup> Barrett, *Schism and Renewal in Africa*, p. 118.

<sup>153</sup> Wilbert R Shenk, *Henry Venn — Missionary Statesman* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1983), p.31.

out, who then are forced to begin their own churches, thus the proliferation of indigenous churches. The fragmentation can be repeated in any organization that discourages prospective leaders, or muzzles the gifts of God in some individuals.

One key phenomenon of AICs is the mass movement led or started by charismatic figures. Many of these leaders were original members of some mainline denominations, thus many of them never had intentions to establish new churches or denominations. They were to some extent renewal movements. These prophetic figures organized evangelistic crusades in various localities, but due to a lack of support and tolerance by the historic churches, such leaders had no choice but to organize their followers into churches led by their disciples. Among these are Garrick Braid from Niger Delta in Nigeria; William Wade Harris, a Kru from Liberia; Walter Matiffa from Lesotho; Simon Kimbangu from Belgian Congo; and Samson Oppong from Ghana..

It is important to state here that recent events relating to Pentecostal or charismatic renewal or what may be termed as "Neo-Pentecostal" or "Gospel Churches" are a serious threat to the AICs. Some of these groups are splinters from some of the AICs. These new groups are being led or founded by well-trained charismatic leaders who do things very differently. They have rectified some of the weaknesses discussed above by modernizing their Gospel music, introducing electronic gadgets and giving much publicity to their ministries through mass media. These churches attract more of the youths and intellectuals. However, the scandals relating to money, women and wordly method of getting their members appear to be of greater proportion than the AICs.

Without fear of contradiction, we may safely project that as long as the AICs speak the language which the ordinary person on the street — the masons, carpenters and illiterates understand, it will survive. And so long as they continue to fulfill the claims that they are able to help those who face special difficulties in life: heal sicknesses, serve as a haven of rest to those in distress, and give relief to those with psychosomatic troubles, they will continue to survive in the face of all odds which are likely to befall them.

The attitude to any new movement within established denominations or organizations should be that of caution, rather than sheer, brute enforcement of draconian laws to ban or dis-fellowship them, just because they are doing things differently from the norms or tradition. God may be saying something new through such movements. The whole world has come to know that God was involved in the Protestant movement, and the subsequent Radical Reformation; the movements that received bitter persecutions by the then Church-powers that be.

There were circumstantial factors that gave birth to the AIC movement in Western parts of Nigeria after the WWI. The influenza epidemic of 1918, and the economic depression that followed the global war. The helplessness of the leaders of the mainline denominations in the face of the epidemic led some members to organize prayer bands that culminated in the establishments of several groups, such as Diamond Society, the Faith Tabernacle, the Cherubim & Seraphim Society, among others. In Nigeria, many of the African led churches came to being due to faulty ministrations of the grace of God by the Mission related churches. The power of God through Christ was not allowed to bear on the felt needs of members of historic churches, and when some decided to tap into the power of God through prayers, leaders of mission-related churches kicked against it.

One would expect pastors or missionaries to appreciate their members for organising prayer bands. So, far as they are not consulting Ifa oracles or even *Babalawos* (diviners) to help with the life-crisis that faced the people, but prayers patterned after biblical examples, they should be encouraged. A lack of

understanding on the part of the missionaries and the pastors they trained concerning the issue of felt-needs of their members naturally lead to the formation of new movement. There is thus some legitimacy in seeking to form another movement when one's former theological circle has failed to accommodate various models of ministrations.

David Barrett asserts that "independency reflects a rebellion against a Christianity that had become "over Europeanised."<sup>154</sup> The mode of worship and other areas of ministry of the mission-related churches were not psychologically and sociologically satisfying to the Africans. The introduction of Christianity into Africa that was enveloped by European culture put so many obstacles in the way of African converts. Many of the converts could express their newfound faith in their own way of life. With the emergence of AICs, liturgy was made more African, where African drums, dresses, singing and dancing reflected the African culture. In a sense, the Gospel was made relevant — contextualized to the thought patterns of the converts.

## 5. Summary

We have stressed in this chapter that many Africans flock into the AICs because of a number of reasons, which include the following:

- (i) Many Africans tend to derive religious satisfaction and or spiritual consolidation in the AICs.
- (ii) Their worship is lovelier besides, the individual is an active heart-and-soul-participant in the service. The songs that they sing are evocative and sometimes spontaneous composition.
- (iii) In the medical realm they have provided laudable assistance to the sick, the depressed and those with psychosomatic troubles. Some have even gone to the extent of opening healing homes, psychiatric cells and maternity homes.
- (iv) Their role in evangelism is still laudable.
- (v) The role of women as leaders in the AICs should be a challenge to the Mainline Churches.
- (vi) The absence of elaborate and time-consuming administrative institutions afford the leaders the opportunity to give daily to the spiritual needs to their people.

In spite of the above, they have observable weaknesses which include:

- (i) Rampant schisms.
- (ii) Financial constraints and abuses resulting from unaccountability of leaders to members.
- (iii) Fear of carrying out church discipline resulting in moral laxity.
- (iv) Overdependence on leaders and emulation of some of their practices which are unchristian.
- (v) The problem of illiteracy and the refusal of some of the leaders to learn.

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<sup>154</sup> Barrett, *Schism and Renewal*, pp. 161-62.

## **6. Post-Test**

Answer the following questions:

- (i) To what extent have the AICs influenced worship in the Mainline Churches?
- (ii) To what extent would you say that the characteristic doctrines of the AICs are biblical?
- (iii). What does the future hold for the AICs?
- (iv). Enumerate and discuss the contemporary checks on the progressive growth of the AICs in one community in Africa.
- (v). Account for the alleged exodus of people from the historic Churches into the AICs.