5 *Distinguished church leader essay*

Theology in African Initiated Churches – reflections from an East African perspective

John Njeru Gichimu

Worship

Unique styles of worship are characteristic for many African Initiated Churches.¹ Generally, worship is lively, vigorous (enthusiastic), contextual and lengthy. Some worship will begin at 9 a.m. and end late in the evening. Quite a number of Spiritual Churches, e.g. from Western Kenya, hold their worship service on Saturday, but still meet on Sunday for various church activities not limited to a brief worship service, while Nationalist and African Pentecostals hold their worship service on Sunday.² Worship in some AICs begins with repentance and cleansing of the place of worship by casting out demons from the venue for Roho Churches (*Roho* is the Swahili word for spirit). Nationalist Churches on the other hand use a customised liturgical order of worship adopted from the churches they seceded from. In Spiritual Churches singing precedes every action in a worship service. Songs act as liturgical pause cords and order of service. While the singing is going on, the leaders consult on the next item in the worship service. Consequently, worship songs are sung to prepare the congregation for self-prayers, speaking in tongues (*glossolalia*), inspiration of the Holy Spirit for prophecy, visions and dreams sharing. In some churches, visions are pronounced to have happened during enthusiastic singing. Dreams and visions interpretations usually form the theme of the sermon. AICs do not pay much attention to sacraments. They do not have a common position on the number of sacraments. The commonest AIC sacraments are baptism, marriage and the Lord's Supper. The Lord's Supper is rarely celebrated in most AICs and if it is, only the founder or successor is qualified to administer it. This expresses a replication of African culture where only the elder holds the powers to bless. The Roho/Spiritual Churches celebrate agape meal in place of Holy Communion. Some Akurinu/Aroti (dreamers) celebrate the communion for seven days though, following the children of Israel commemoration of Passover as stated in Exodus 13:6 'For seven days eat bread made without yeast and on the seventh day hold a festival to the lord' (New International Version). The Nationalist Churches have sacraments similar to the Mission Churches they seceded from. This confirms how the seceding churches carried on with practices experienced from Mission Churches, albeit with local additions to authenticate their belonging to the African context.

Many AICs have high regards for dress codes. In Nigeria, the Spiritual Churches are called 'white garment churches' because of their emphasis on wearing white gowns. Often the dress codes are established on the basis of biblical scripture. In some Roho Churches turbans are worn in line with Zachariah 3:3–6. Some of the most common symbols African Independent Churches use are white garments, prayer gowns, water, gowns/cassocks and certain colours, e.g. white as symbol of righteousness. Also flags, turbans, sashes, crucifixes, iron rods, wooden rods, incense, candles, rings and many others are common. Taboos among AICs differ from one context to another, but AICs cherish observing marital taboos, menstrual taboos, holiness codes, dietary taboos and other taboos stated in Leviticus. They do not see anything wrong in observing the taboos, as long as the taboos are stated in the Bible.

Spirit and leadership

The constant advice and presence of the Holy Spirit through dreams, visions and prophecies guides church members in AICs communally while assuring them of God's personal interest in their lives. Evil in the church and in individual lives is confronted, repented of and the evil spirits that lead people to sin are cast out. Jesus is encountered at the point of repentance. Laws of purity establish boundaries between believers and non-believers – those 'of the spirit' and those 'without' the spirit. Frequent repentance ensures a heart cleansed of sin, the dwelling place of the Holy Spirit.

Key to the teaching of these churches is the passage from the prophet Joel 2:28–29, 'And afterwards, 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' (New International Version). The Spirit of the Lord will be poured out on all groups of people, women and men, old and young, alike. Hence one of the key themes of Roho Churches has been every member ministry, or in other words, 'what the prophet can do, you can do also'. Exercising the gifts of the Spirit is not restricted to those who are approved by the church hierarchy (cf. the concept of the priesthood of all believers outlined in 1 Peter 2:5). This has created churches that are genuinely popular and owned by the grassroots.

The churches being grassroots movements does not mean though that no leadership is developed in the AICs. Instead, over time the traditional leadership forms of collective leadership as a movement that had roles assigned to everyone changed and formed a new model of leadership that focuses more on individual leaders and removed collective responsibility. The new and the traditional models of leadership need to be mitigated especially when events of succession arise or when the role of women in traditionally patriarchal church structures is challenged by modern forms of leadership. In this leadership situation, the Organization of African Instituted Churches (OAIC) developed a theological training for the leadership of AICs.

Historical methods of theological training in AICs

In the African Initiated Churches, the act of worship and faith required of most to be seen and perceived within the local context. Leaders therefore needed to be trained, through learning how to use traditional stories, proverbs and rituals. The first method through which training was done in AICs and even in some up to the present is apprenticeship/mentorship. The variance in the contemporary is the usage of terminologies, e.g. training for ordination, in-service training or in-house training. In this method, the leader of the church automatically becomes the tutor or trainer of the personnel. Although there was no understanding how such a leader got trained, it is obvious that it was through the oral tradition method, which at its best required listening and doing. In this method, knowledge is handed down by word and not by documents or reference books. It also implies that, if one got a chance to serve a church leader in any capacity, that was an opportunity to learn. The other method of training was by occasional meetings-cum-seminars. These were arranged for any person who demonstrated mastery in mass communication and acceptance by the congregation. In this understanding charisma was preferred as a qualification for training. For example, someone who was well versed in the mastery of traditional stories and proverbs was qualified for leadership and preaching. Such a person could use the many stories and proverbs to illustrate the biblical text.

Historically, AICs did not have institutions of theological training to train their personnel and even those that were able and willing to train in conventional theological institutions found themselves in contexts they did not feel they belonged to. Moreover, in many cases candidates were refused by institutions sponsored by the Mission Churches the AIC had seceded from, because of suspicion against these younger churches.³ Since the 1970s a number of AICs have trained and continue to train a few candidates in theological institutions sponsored by the established churches. The candidates, however, experience difficulties in connecting the training from conventional institutions with their experience and practice in AICs, as churches of belonging. Also, the clergy of these churches are involved in other employment as a way of support for the ministry work, which denied them training formally even if an opportunity for such training arose. AICs personnel supported managing the ministry by engaging in extra occupation because there was no systematic remuneration. In this regard, they objected to the notion of being referred to as part-time clergy as the work they did outside of the churches also always contributed to their ministries.

The Organization of African Instituted Churches

In 1978 the OAIC was founded in Cairo as an association of African Initiated Churches. The international headquarters of the OAIC are located in Nairobi, Kenya, where OAIC is registered under the Societies Act. The vision of OAIC is to facilitate those who are building on their African cultures and values and

who are transformed by the Good News of Jesus Christ and are blessed by the Spirit of God to create an abundant life in community for their children and the world. OAIC's mission is to bring African Initiated Churches together in fellowship and to equip and enable them to preach the Good News of Jesus Christ in word and deed. The organisation works in seven regions: East Africa, Southern Africa, Madagascar, the Democratic Republic of Congo, West Africa Francophone, West Africa Anglophone and Nigeria. These regions are represented on the governing body, the General Assembly and on the Executive Committee. At country level, the OAIC works through chapters. OAIC has programmes in theology and ministerial formation, livelihoods and food security, just communities and health. The latter developed from HIV/AIDS work conducted by the organisation since the mid-1990s. The programmes are conducted with an emphasis towards women empowerment and youth issues. OAIC is an associate member of the All Africa Conference of Churches, participates in programmes of the World Council of Churches and in its central committee (in adviser role). Moreover, OAIC participates in the Global Christian Forum leadership and activities. The organisation also works in partnership with the Programme for Christian Muslim Relations in Africa (PROCMURA) on interfaith issues. More information can be found on OAIC's website (www.oaic.org).

Theological education in OAIC

At the formation of OAIC, the founding leaders identified theological education as one of the most important issues the African Initiated Churches (AICs) had to address. As outlined above, theological education among AICs had been largely based on apprenticeship and mentorship within the churches. OAIC consulted the World Council of Churches with an aim of starting a seminary for training AICs. The advice from the World Council of Churches was that using the Theological Education by Extension (TEE) methodology would be most beneficial to the AICs at that time. Hence, OAIC started a TEE programme in 1982. It was at a time when AICs were still very suspicious of theological education, as it was offered by seminaries established by Mission Churches. The 1980s became the founding phase of the programme. Students were brought to Nairobi and were taken through a training process that the OAIC was doing. This earlier TEE programme succeeded in engaging AICs and enabled them to acquire skills in facilitating TEE classes. It had a profound impact on churches in nearly all of sub-Saharan Africa.

The mid-1990s was a period of reflection and questioning the work of leaders in Bible studies and development of training materials based on the values of the various churches which participated in the training. In particular, questions arose whether the training done by the Theology Programme of OAIC was appropriate to AICs considering their identity, mission and context. OAIC recognised the fact that the church leaders were looking

for an enriched training that would contribute towards ministerial formation. An evaluation was carried out and a pastoral training curriculum was developed. This moved the OAIC training programme from group trainings in churches to training pastors. In the new millennium, reflections on what is the appropriate theological education for AICs based on their founding visions (identity, mission and context) occasioned the OAIC Theology Programme to embark on developing a master plan for training theological education in AICs. The master plan has four major components: 1. curriculum, 2. production of training material, 3. resourcing for theological education and 4. quality control. The working definition of theology within the AIC setting leading the work of their trainings today is: 'Theology is people making sense of God in the midst of their histories, cultures, worldviews and contemporary struggles for survival' (OAIC 2005).

Founding visions become theologies

The idea of the 'founding vision' as a way of explaining AIC faith and theologies was first introduced at an OAIC workshop in Johannesburg in 1996. As its name suggests, the founding vision is created during the struggles of the founders to hear God's calling, and to obey it in the particular circumstances and communities in which they live. In subsequent generations or in different cultures, the community of faith faces new challenges. The founders themselves pass on, a new generation of leaders emerges, society changes, people have new expectations of the church. Moreover, in the process of handing on the founding vision from one generation to the next, it is often subject to change. Such changes are not always easily observable, since at the same time the cultures of church and society are also changing. Sometimes there is a shift in the dominant language or cultures of the church. For example, the church may have crossed political borders from one country to another, or the majority of church members may now live in multicultural urban settings instead of in rural areas.

Changes like these in the external environment often lead to divisions or disagreements in the church. It is at this stage that the leaders will normally begin a second process of reflection that is intended to do two things: first, recover and record the original teachings and vision of the founders. Second, elaborate or explain these teachings in a way that communicates them within the new social or cultural settings. This dual process looks to the past, and then uses what it has learnt from the past to engage with the challenges of the present and future. In this process of recovery and reflection, theology – the result of reflection on faith and its history amidst the challenges of the present – gains a distinct existence from religion or faith. Part of this process is to objectify the founding vision – i.e. to distance ourselves from the vision so that we can make it the object of our description and analysis. The purpose of the process is to develop a coherent description and explanation of our faith in the new circumstances – in fact, a theology.

Practical methodology of recovering, documenting and updating AIC theology

OAIC has understood AICs' faith and traditions in terms of 'founding visions' – the values, teachings and understanding of the world passed down from the generation of the church founders through the life, worship and ministry of the church. Much AIC teaching or theology is embedded in its founding vision and is rarely fully articulated or even properly recorded. The task of recovering a theology from prayers, songs, sermons, church rites, services, customs and history (the ways in which the founding vision is transmitted) has often seemed challenging. From an academic perspective, it seems to require a variety of technical skills drawn from disciplines such as history, ethnology, sociolinguistics and cultural studies. Unfortunately, asking for such elaborate and esoteric methodologies in practice disempowers AIC members lacking such skills or the resources to obtain them.

A simpler approach was used in a workshop of documenting a theological handbook of the Holy Spirit Church of East Africa (HSCEA) in 2016 that is currently in its final stages. The purpose of the handbook is to recover, document and update founding visions and sieve theological experiences that would be useful in training various theological topics. Retaining the concept of the founding vision as the source of AIC theologies, and building on recent developments in the study of local theologies (Bevans 2002; Lonergan 1990) and of orality, we began by recognising the fundamental nature of AICs as oral communities. This meant valuing the primacy of the lived text (the oral text) over the printed text as the raw data for our theologising (Lubaale 2017). We accepted that the church had already been using an oral theology in its life and ministry for several generations, and that our task was not to create a theology, but first of all to write it down. Respecting the orality of AICs was liberating. We learned that the form and content of an AIC theology must be appropriate to the faith community that owns it, and that the process of theologising (in this case, the group dynamics of the workshop) should respect the way HSCEA members actually worship and practise their life and ministry.

AICs are of different types. The HSCEA is a Spiritual Church, and specifically a member of a group of such churches with their origins in Western Kenya known as Roho Churches. We thus agreed that the Roho Churches' vision and orientation should influence the form, content and process of the workshop. Working this out in practice was both challenging and exciting. As facilitators, we made mistakes, but the end result was a workshop experienced by all participants as a time of particular blessing from the Holy Spirit. The workshop also provided a good foundation for developing a handbook on theology for the HSCEA.

Notes

- 1 To keep the terminology coherent throughout the volume, the term Initiated is used here.

- 2 See the introduction to this volume for an outline of the different strands of African Initiated Christianity.
- 3 See Chapter 15 in this volume for the example of Good News Theological Seminary in Ghana, which managed to bridge the gap between Independent Churches and Mission Churches in theological education.

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