

TOWARDS A SACRAMENTAL THEOLOGY OF THE ENVIRONMENT IN AFRICAN INDEPENDENT CHURCHES

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Liberation theologians tend to set great store by the liberation of human beings from oppressive political structures and economic exploitation. Salvation to them is tantamount to liberation from sociopolitical degradation, poverty and powerlessness. It requires humanization, political empowerment, improved living conditions and the like – in other words, a concrete manifestation of Christian justice in the socio-economic and political dimensions of this existence. I have no objection to such theological commitments. What I do oppose is the attitude which elevates human liberation in the sociopolitical sense to an overriding priority, sometimes also on a time scale. The argument is that no proper attention can be paid to ecological matters, the liberation of nature, until people have been freed and economically empowered and the poor have been fed.

On both theological and ecological grounds such a sequence of priorities is untenable. Humankind is part of and belongs to nature. Much of our bondage and dehumanization is attributable to the fact that we have misinterpreted and abused our God-given stewardship over nature, that we have felt entitled to “reign” over nature and in the process have engaged in unprecedented destruction of the environment on which our very existence depends. As a result we are confronted with a global situation in which social injustice, political oppression and ecological degradation are equally urgent issues which have to be addressed concurrently if the objective is liberation. What I am saying is that genuine humanization depends on much more than sociopolitical reform. The basic human right to life and freedom never excludes ecological responsibility. There is no point at which a responsible theology of liberation can or should ignore the liberation of nature from destruction.

Apart from biblical injunctions concerning ecological stewardship, the ecological realities of our globe and particularly of our African continent in themselves present serious challenges. These are directly related to the survival of the human race. They are challenges which none of us – whether we are city-dwellers or rural inhabitants – dare evade if we are concerned about quality of life for ourselves, for our fellow Africans and for the coming generations.

A sound theology of the environment, like any contextual theology, should be based on searching, comprehensive analysis of that environment. For the limited purposes of this paper, however, I merely comment briefly on one of the burning ecological issues which we face on the African continent, namely deforestation and the accompanying phenomenon of desertification. This choice is deliberate, because rural deforestation is a reality which many of the AICs in Southern Africa are already confronted with and which they are perhaps better equipped than other churches and institutions to address effectively.

The forests of Africa are vanishing at an alarming rate. The reasons are numerous: the timber trade, overpopulation, an ever increasing need for firewood, the clearing of forests to make way for cash crops, and so on. With regard to the last factor, a Senegalese officer of the United Nations summed it up neatly: "There is an advertisement on television in New York which says 'Our peanuts are fresh from the jungle.' The joke is that peanuts don't come from the jungle; you have to cut down trees to plant peanuts. Then you get peanuts - and desertification" (Timberlake 1985: 103).

Large areas of savanna woodland and dry tropical forest are being cleared in order to plant cash crops every year. So-called agro-economic progress is in fact killing the earth. Guinea Bissau loses 20 000 to 35 000 hectares of forest annually; Burkino Faso loses 85 000 hectares and Senegal 50 000 hectares, mainly to peanuts and other commercial crops. In Tanzania 6000 villages rely on tobacco crops which are cultivated on a biannual rotating basis. Thus, both for planting and for curing tobacco, huge forests are literally consumed without check. Kenya already suffers severe firewood deficits and only 3 percent of the country is still under natural forest (Timberlake 1985: 109, 110). According to the latest surveys in Zimbabwe some 3 to 4 percent of that country's total land surface is being deforested annually. In South Africa the so-called homelands and other rural areas with a high population density could well turn into moonscapes in the foreseeable future.

According to Timberlake the universal diminution of woodland throughout tropical Africa represents a bleak picture of an estimated overall loss of 2,3 million hectares of open forest annually. If one considers, moreover, that continent-wide only one tree is currently being planted for every eighteen chopped down, and that of those planted only a small percentage mature, then ecological bankruptcy appears inevitable (Timberlake 1985: 111). To complete a chilling scenario there are the shocking findings of the UN-appointed World Commission on Environment and Development (1987: 2), namely that each year some six million hectares of productive dryland on our planet turns into worthless desert and more than 11 million hectares of forest are destroyed (an area which within three decades will equal the size of India). In view of the vital function of vegetation in the production of oxygen, one can say that humankind, in its greed and quest for so-called progress, is, so to speak, ripping the lungs out of creation.

Deforestation obviously relates to a complexity of local and international factors. Colonialism led to discriminatory land distribution, resulting in disproportionate population pressure on parts of the land. Another factor is the economic stranglehold which the First World still has on the Third World, as a result of which the latter has to over-exploit its natural resources to service its massive loans from the World Bank. These factors, no doubt, have to be dealt with at various political and government levels.

In Southern Africa the redistribution of land is currently of crucial interest. Yet we have long passed the stage where a single solution, such as new land legislation and distribution (overdue as these measures are), will remedy the entire ecological malady. We are reaching a point where tree-planting must

become the concern of *all* people of *all* nations in this world. In Africa billions of trees need to be planted annually if desertification is to be checked and controlled. Much stricter measures on forest conservation are required, as well as universal conscientization through ecological educational programmes. The production of firewood should be made a condition for the use of this commodity in all rural areas. The chopping of indigenous trees without permission from local government authorities should be made a legally punishable offence.

In all of this, religion can and should play a significant role. The Christian churches in particular have a grave responsibility to develop an appropriate theology of nature or the environment. Such a theology should first of all aim at a *radical transformation of attitudes* from opportunistic exploitation to altruistic guardianship of nature. In the second place, in so far as Christ's church on earth is actively involved in the realization of God's kingdom and the salvation of all creation in the present dispensation, a ministry of nature should lead to the *mobilization of all believers* in the implementation of massive and imaginative nature reform programmes. In Africa all the serious ecological problems (control of population growth; the nuclear threat; air, water and soil pollution; wild life and forest conservation; etc.) need to be addressed. In this paper, however, the focus is on tree planting, as a crucial measure against desertification.

What is the significance of the AICs in the field of ecology?

First of all, the AICs represent a *mass movement* which in South Africa alone comprises more than 4000 churches, representing an overall membership of some 30 to 40 percent of the total black population. As grassroots organizations in African society the AICs have proved that they have a powerful *mobilization potential*. They have developed numerous self-help programmes with limited resources amongst the relatively lower income groups of society. Thus they are well equipped to provide the motivation and empowerment for the implementation of ecological projects.

Secondly, the AICs are *liberation movements* in their own right. Many of their leaders have liberated themselves religiously from the control of mission churches. Some prominent figures are known for their resistance to colonial rule and for establishing independent, agriculturally self-reliant colonies or holy cities in which they act as Moses figures or "messianic" leaders. During the Zimbabwean liberation struggle numerous Zionist and Apostolic prophets supported the guerrillas and helped determine battle strategy on the war front. And even in those cases where AIC leaders kept or still keep more or less aloof from the revolutionary forces aimed at radical sociopolitical change, they generally identify with and verbalize, through their religious ceremonies, black African aspirations to sociopolitical change and empowerment. Against this background the AICs are religiously in a strong position to extend their unwritten, yet existentially enacted or still dormant theologies of human liberation into the field of ecological conversion and conservation.

Thirdly, with the exception of some notable urban concentrations (e.g. in the Rand area), AICs are still a *predominantly rural phenomenon*. In Zimbabwe

urban AIC congregations are on the whole extensions of rural churches and retain their religious roots deep in the rural environment. Virtually all of the 80 to 90 member churches of Fambidzano – Zimbabwe's largest AIC ecumenical movement – have their headquarters on farms or in the communal lands, where both rural folk and urbanites gather regularly for their major meetings, ritual ceremonies and festivities. As a result the AICs largely consist of and serve a peasant society of subsistence farmers. Hence their theology is attuned to the rhythm of nature. God as creator, rain-giver, the source and protector of human and crop fertility and the one who holds the seasons and agricultural produce in his hands, is focal in their proclamation. Their world view is largely holistic and as a result human beings, animals and plants or trees are closely associated in their spirituality, and are seen as being either in direct relationship to or in God. In a sense, therefore, they already possess an unwritten ecological theology – one which includes intuitive awareness of God's presence in and redemption of nature and which consequently holds great significance for the development of a relevant environmental – more specifically, a shade-tree – theology.

In the fourth place, the significance of the AICs for our subject does not merely lie in their mobilizing power or rural roots, but also and more importantly in their central position in African Christianity. For too long they have been regarded as separatist, sectarian movements which are peripheral and therefore relatively insignificant to the so-called mainline, established or historic churches. Despite obvious limitations, particularly the lack of a written theology, I consider *the AICs to be integral to the mainstream of African Christianity*. As a result their enacted theology, which on the whole consists in a sensitive and innovative response to Africa's existential needs, must be seen as a central feature, if not the most important and authentic part, of African theology.

In probing for the ecological tenets in AIC theology I am engaged as a fellow Independent. Over many years of identification with and participation in the life of the Shona Independent Churches of Zimbabwe I have become part of that movement. Consequently my analysis of church practice is based mainly on the AICs of Zimbabwe. My personal specialization, however, in no way detracts from the ecological challenge facing all AICs on the continent. Moreover, the centrality of the AICs in African Christianity implies that any realistic considerations or challenges proposed in this paper apply equally to all other Christian churches in Africa.

Attention will be given, firstly, to some practical aspects, as a result of which the already ecology-related sacramental life of the Independents can be further developed into a comprehensive ecological theology which may be translated into meaningful action. After that we consider some of the implications of a dynamic sacramentalism with a view to laying new emphases in our conception of and faith in the triune God.

1. An environment-related sacrament

The AICs have an intuitive awareness of God's presence and his manifestations in nature. Much of religious life is experienced in nature. Outstanding

church leaders receive their call to the ministry out in the wooded wilderness or on mountains which are subsequently declared holy by their followers. People in search of spiritual renewal or preparing for church ceremonies spend days or weeks fasting on mountain tops. Night vigils of prayer are spent out in the open and on such occasions shooting stars are frequently interpreted as direct revelations from God.

In all the Shona AICs the *sacraments of baptism and holy communion* feature prominently. But it is particularly in the prophetic movements that they are celebrated in nature. One need only spend one day next to a “Jordan” river with a ZCC prophet while he or she is preparing some neophytes for baptism, through Spirit-led instruction and confession of sins, to appreciate the close interaction between human spirituality and nature symbols. The latter express God’s nearness and his requirement of conversion. The baptismal water of Jordan not only symbolizes the new or eternal life of the initiate who is entering the body of believers in Christ. It also represents the life-giving and healing powers of the Holy Spirit which bring well-being, prosperity and peace in this existence. In their preparation for the eucharist, the *vaPostori* of Johane Maranke (Daneel 1971: 315f) – the largest of all the AIC movements in Zimbabwe – spend seventeen days in huge open-air camps, conducting services, praying and fasting. Here a process of spiritual renewal and sanctification of the entire body of believers through fasting, foot-washing and public confession takes the form of a return to nature. God is met among or on mountains, under trees. Expression is given to the sacramental union of the body of Christ, away from man-made roads, houses and cities.

In this respect the AICs resemble Eastern Orthodox Christianity which, more than Western Christendom, has preserved the age-old intuition that the cosmos is sacred, that nature is a manifestation of divinity. Carmody (1983: 76–77) contrasts the “powerful sacramentalism” of the Eastern Orthodox Church and its tendency to view all creatures as signs of the holy with the Protestant genius for proclamation. The Protestant emphasis on pure worship has at times led to iconoclasm – a rejection of symbols of fertility and worldly success, which were considered detrimental to pure monotheism. The two emphases, the scriptural and the sacramental, are of course complementary and essential to Christian theology. Both are found in the AICs. But it is in their dynamic sacramentalism that we find the seeds of a new theology of the environment. For, as Carmody (1983: 78) asserts about Christianity in general – and thus also about us Independents – “a principal utility of Christian sacramentalism for a contemporary theology of nature is its reminder that Christian tradition has been as sensitive to manifesting signs as it has been to proclaiming words”.

It is in the sacraments that the Independents anticipate a salvation which encompasses all of creation, despite the one-sided emphasis on personalized, human redemption – a trend which still permeates virtually all of Christianity. In the sacramental context expression is given to such biblical motifs as God’s pleasure in and protection of his creation, the Word become flesh amongst us, and the Pauline assertion that in Christ all things hold together. Hence the

foundation is laid for a converted theology of the environment, in which the equality and liberation of all of creation, "the rights of all creatures, both living and inanimate, to respect and reverential treatment" (Carmody 1983: 78), can become manifest.

1.1 Ritual reinterpretation of conversion

In the AICs conversion is very much a group experience and is integral to the sacraments. It is in preparation for baptism that the prophetic leader emphasizes the radicality of the convert's turning towards Jesus and, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, urges new believers to confess all their sins, publicly repudiating them and leaving them behind as they start a new life. Thus the ministers of the church take responsibility for and facilitate the process of religious change, which they believe originates in God.

Again, in the preparation for the eucharist, conversion is ritually reaffirmed in the cleansing of individual participants through public confession of sins under the guidance of Spirit-filled prophets. The vaPostori, for instance, spend an entire night in public confession. First of all, in a massive demonstration of rejecting sin, thousands of participants run around huge fires shouting out loudly the offences they had committed against fellow believers and God. Then they pass the symbolic gates of heaven, which consist of twelve prophets standing in pairs. All sins have to be confessed at the gates, as it is believed that the Holy Spirit enables the prophets to detect whatever sins remain undisclosed. It is at this point that unrepentant wizards, the ritually unclean and adulterers – all those who pose a threat to social equilibrium, who resist the authority of the Spirit and refuse to confess – are disqualified from participating in the sacrament. The next morning the feet of those who have been allowed into the holy area are washed before they celebrate the eucharist.

The central role of the prophetic leaders in this sacramental rejection of sin clearly indicates that they are key figures who could be instrumental in reinterpreting conversion. Such reinterpretation should basically involve an extension of the concept of sin to include not only moral sins of an interpersonal nature, but all destructive acts against nature. Some of the requirements for this to happen are the following:

1.1.1 Ecological conscientization of the prophets

In Zimbabwe, Fambidzano with its 90 odd member churches has already introduced a theological course on development and ecology in its TEE training programme, run by a team of twenty Shona tutors. Some 500 to 800 AIC students participate in these courses annually, the majority of them from the prophetic movements. Here one has a unique opportunity to introduce a theology of the environment which could sway the prophets towards a more comprehensive concept of conversion – one which widens the perception of God's grace to encompass the entire creation as a gift from God. Such conversion includes the intuition that we as believers have proved unworthy of this gift, the ready recognition that "the ruin of nature and the denial of God

go hand in hand, because both overexalt human beings" (Carmody 1983: 79). Thus ecological and moral sins are taken equally seriously. It includes the confession that pollution of the ecosphere and the destruction of Africa's forests testify to our sinfulness. We have made a mockery of the stewardship over creation entrusted to us by God (Gn 1:28). Whereas the world has stood before us, ready to cooperate and serve, we have turned it into garbage (Carmody 1983: 72); in Africa we have turned it into a desert.

1.1.2 *Confession of ecological sins*

Once conscientized and convinced, AIC prophets could be instrumental in broadening their converts' concept of sin. The sacramental context with its emphasis on confession of sins lends itself to public articulation of the ecological intuition of God's presence in creation, already felt in the Independent Churches. Confessions about having chopped down trees without planting any in return and about overgrazing and neglecting to make contour ridges, thus contributing to soil erosion – in other words, admitting to the human greed of taking from God's nature without reinvesting in or nurturing it – can have a dramatic impact in a peasant subsistence economy. It is next to the river Jordan that it should make sense to the newly converted to confess such guilt, where the barren treeless plains, the ever deepening dongas, the denuded river banks and the clouds of dust testifying to wind erosion are clearly in evidence. The baptismal context itself points to human sinfulness and vitalizes the prophet's exposition of the ecological implications of a new life in Christ.

This is the place to discuss the plight of rural women, who have to walk increasingly long distances each day in search of firewood, and the necessity of curbing population growth to lessen the pressure on the land. Here the prophet has a unique opportunity to instruct converts that crossing the river Jordan into a new life offers not only incorporation into the body of Christ, the community of believers, and the prospect of salvation in heaven. Baptism also entails the cleansing of nature, the healing of God's creation here and now. It requires the new convert's commitment to help restore nature and to engage in ecological stewardship – in recognition of God's grace and in selfless service to the generations to come.

Traditionally, the concept of sin in African society was associated with the importance attached to social harmony and well-being. Evil was personified in the human being who posed a threat to social equilibrium, mainly by causing illness or death; or who, through envy, hatred, selfish ambition or antisocial behaviour, gave rise to social conflict. Such a person was and still is referred to as a *muroyi*, a wizard (witch or sorcerer). In customary practice society dealt with the *muroyi* through ostracism or the death penalty. The AICs have already broadened this traditional concept of sin on Christian lines. Many prophets, however, still focus their ministry on the detection of wizardry, *uroyi*. Exposed or self-confessed wizards are rarely ostracized from church communities. In the church context they are disciplined by being demoted from leadership positions or by exclusion from the eucharist.

Against this background, it makes sense that ecologically conscientized prophets should increasingly include the combatting of ecological sins in their ministry. To the extent that the destruction of nature threatens human existence and causes suffering in society (shortage of firewood, poor crops, etc.), such abuses could be qualified as a form of *uroyi*. The wizard will not only be the traditionally conceived antisocial person who disrespects human life, but also the wanton destroyer of nature who, albeit indirectly, disrupts society. Once spiritual progress is measured not only according to interhuman moral criteria but also in terms of ecological responsibility, the prophets will be in a position to insist on the confession of ecological sins as an added condition for participation in the eucharist.

I can imagine *vaPostori* running around their confession fires, shouting: "I have chopped down ten trees this year", "I have not taken part in tree-planting ceremonies", "I sold my neighbour's firewood", etc. Then, at the gate-test, the unrepentant ecological *varoyi* will be cast out by the Spirit-filled prophets. Like the other *varoyi*, they will be banned from the eucharist until they are prepared to mend their ways. The prophets will know who such *varoyi* are: the ones in the resettlement schemes who prejudice the long-term interests of their neighbours by chopping down as many trees as they can for a quick profit from selling firewood; those who refuse to accept the principle that firewood can only be used by those who are prepared to plant the trees that supply it; the resisters of government conservationist measures and of the customary prohibition of chiefs on chopping down trees in the holy groves of the ancestors on mountain ranges; and the destroyers of river banks.

Once the AIC prophets integrate such ritual expression of conversion into the sacraments it will be a sure affirmation of the already existing yet in some respects dormant theology of the environment in their churches. Such cleansing action will liberate many rural people from their fatalism about the dwindling forests and degradation of nature generally. A deliberate, church-backed choice *against* the old life of exploiting and abusing nature in rebellion against God, and *for* environmental stewardship in obedience to God, will generate new hope of a less threatened this-worldly future. Spirit-inspired hope will crystallize in the committed action required for the daunting challenge of restoring creation.

1.1.3 Tree-symbolism

A converted theology of the environment will require a new idiom, a new set of symbols. Depending on the nature of their ecological programmes, the AICs may well want to refer to such activity as shade-tree or firewood theology. God's protection and presence are symbolized even now by the large trees in whose shade the AICs conduct their ceremonies, dance out their praise to God and celebrate life itself. Fambidzano's TEE instruction, which hopefully will concentrate increasingly on environmental conscientization and the launching of ecological action programmes, likewise takes place under shade-trees.

The AICs may well re-evaluate their religious roots and fill some of the old traditional symbols with new meaning, as they have done with numerous

ancestral rituals (Daneel 1974: 101–170). In Shona traditional religion the shade-tree symbolizes ancestral protection of both humans and animals. Traditional conservationists such as the chiefs and spirit mediums (*masvikiro*) have always prohibited the chopping down of *muchakata* (cork) trees because they belong to the guardian ancestors. Their dense evergreen foliage provide shade for peasants resting from their toil in the fields, for beer parties and rain-making rituals (*mikwerere*), and their fruit is eaten by both people and small game such as duiker and steenbok. To this day most Shona traditionalists and Christians refrain from chopping down the *muchakata*. Traditionally, too, clusters of wild fruit trees, particularly the *mushuku* (wild loquat), were protected on behalf of the senior ancestors. These holy groves were called *marambatemwa* (lit. “refusal to have [the trees] felled”). As such they symbolized the authority of the ancestors in the field of nature conservation.

Much of the traditional conservationist symbolism is currently being revived by the Association of Zimbabwean Traditionalist Ecologists (AZTREC), founded in 1988 in Masvingo Province. This body consists of spirit mediums, chiefs and ex-guerrilla combatants. Its aim is to extend *chimurenga*, the liberation struggle, from the sociopolitical arena to ecological conservation (tree-planting, wild life conservation and protection of water resources). As was the case during the struggle for political independence, inspiration for the implementation of projects to liberate nature from destruction derives from the guardian ancestors of the land (*varidzi venyika*) and from the traditional oracular deity, Mwari. At present the prime objective is afforestation in the communal lands where the threat of desertification is greatest. Part of AZTREC's long-term strategy is to mobilize rural people to develop nurseries and plant woodlots at major water points. This will involve most communities in the production of firewood as well as timber for carpentry and building purposes. In the long run such action should help curb deforestation.

To date the association has developed the largest nursery of indigenous seedlings ever in Zimbabwe and, in the course of January 1990, planted over 120 000 trees at a large number of woodlots in Masvingo Province. The symbolism of protective trees is reflected in the nicknames of the key figures in the movement. As architect and co-founder of AZTREC, I am known to traditionalists in our association as *Muchakata*, the tree not to be chopped down. VaZorira, one of the most influential spirit mediums of the Duma people is called *Marambatemwa* (refusal to have [the trees] felled) because of her insistence that the customary practice of conserving holy groves should be reinstated. Lydia Chabata, another female medium who played an important role on the *chimurenga* war front in the Gutu and Bikita districts and who promotes nurseries for indigenous trees, is named *Muchecheni* (wait-a-bit thorn tree) because she hooks people into planting trees. One of the staunch chiefs in our association is called *Murwiti* (black ebony) because of an ecological commitment as strong as ebony and thus unbreakable.

Once the AICs undertake similar ventures on a large scale I imagine that some of the churches and/or their ecological figures will popularly be referred to by the names of the trees they specialize in, for example “Zion of the Holy

Grove", "ZCC of the fruit trees", "Peter the prophetic guardian of the *mushuku* trees", "John *Mukurumbira*, dreamer of the future" (because these prized kiaat trees take decades to mature), and so on. In the churches such symbolic names will have a different content from those used in traditionalist circles, but they will connote comprehensive conversion, recognition of grace, dedication to God's creation and divinely inspired environmental responsibility springing from beyond human selfishness.

1.2 *A tree-planting eucharist*

In his book *A worldly spirituality: the call to redeem life on earth*, Granberg-Michaelson (1984: 131–136) relates God's grace to the eucharist in a telling manner. Grace, he says, begins with the Creator. It radiates from God to creation, imparting life itself. Our response to grace is gratitude, which finds expression in worship and praise. The heart of that worship is communion, the eucharist, which, as a gift from God, both commemorates the redemptive work of Christ and provides the means for God's grace to continually touch our lives. Granberg-Michaelson argues that in the Protestant tradition the eucharist tends to be seen as a commemorative event, in which the individual's preparation for celebration and commemoration of his or her own salvation through Christ is sometimes overemphasized. By way of contrast he maintains that this sacrament has corporate dimensions which, in the celebration of grace, extends to all of creation (Granberg-Michaelson 1984: 133).

Seen thus, the eucharist introduces us to a new vision of creation. The gift of grace we receive through the bread and wine cannot be treasured and held within our own selves. Instead, we are liberated to pour out our lives for the sake of Christ's reign over all creation. "Just as the bread and the wine are brought forth from the creation to become the offering of the eucharistic celebration, so we depart the eucharist as vessels ready to restore the creation as God's own, offering it up back to God" (Granberg-Michaelson 1984: 135). Our lives in Christ cause us to become the mediators of creation, called to a ministry of global sanctification. On account of God's redemption of the world we act to restore creation and to fulfil God's shalom, whereby the world can be touched ever more deeply by God's grace.

The AICs' celebration of the eucharist already reflects something of Granberg-Michaelson's interpretation. Although it is not verbalized in the same manner, an AIC eucharist invariably expresses the corporate dimensions of God's grace which, through Christ's reign, extends to all creation. For this reason many prophetic movements incorporate part of their agricultural preparations into the paschal celebrations which form the climax of the eucharist. In this manner Christ's reign is ritually proclaimed as holistic and all-inclusive; a reign which extends well beyond individual human salvation and requires a comprehensive realization of God's shalom in this existence. This is one of the reasons why the paschal celebrations are often characterized by an intensification of developmental activities at the Zionist holy cities, such as the building of schools, dormitories and offices, the initiation of new

agricultural projects and the implementation of agricultural mutual aid schemes whereby participant peasants who had reaped good crops assist those who struggle in drought-stricken areas. Preparation for the sacrament therefore includes a comprehensive, practical agro-economic statement, linked to the paschal sermons, more intense and more frequent pastoral faith-healing sessions, conversions and baptisms. These activities also include the planning of new missionary campaigns, for which the sacrament itself forms a launching pad – an empowerment, through reaffirmation of Christ's reign in heaven and on earth and his call to mission (Mt 28:19). In a sense, therefore, the entire Zionist paschal festival erects in microcosm a sign of God's shalom, one which bears a message for the macrocosm – all creation.

Ecologically, however, the current AIC attitude to the sacrament does not altogether reflect a shift from agricultural exploitation of nature to an altruistic emphasis on restoration. To many Independents the focus in preparation for the eucharist is still more on individual and communal human sanctification than on global sanctification. Hence the above-mentioned call for the confession of ecological sins. Such confession will have little meaning if it is not followed up by positive action which clearly illustrates commitment to an all-inclusive ministry of grace.

My proposal therefore is that, in the environmentally ravaged context of Africa, at least one eucharistic celebration each year should be attached to a tree-planting ceremony. This would be one of the most relevant and convincing ways of publicly witnessing to Christ's reign over all creation and ritually acknowledging human involvement in its realization. At the very point where unity in and identification with the body of Christ is sacramentally celebrated active responsibility for the restoration of his creation would be made manifest. A tree-planting eucharist could be one of the most powerful ways of saying that Christ's good news not only liberates and saves human beings but also heals and protects nature where it agonizedly awaits redemption. Thus the missionary task acquires a wider dimension and sacramental empowerment, for mission would be inspiring both evangelistic outreach and environmental restoration.

Once a new theology of the environment is translated into tree-planting as an integral, sacramentally inspired part of AIC life, a massive contribution towards ecological reform, sanity and hope can be made on this continent. Given the vision and dedication of the AICs and considering their vast influence at grassroots level, particularly in Southern Africa, a mighty advance can be made against the evil of deforestation. This need not detract from traditionally conceived spirituality but, because of obedience and response to divine grace, may become a major signpost of spiritual growth and maturity.

2. Trinitarian perspectives in AIC ecologically related sacraments

It is remarkable how some trinitarian insights or beliefs currently emphasized by Western theologians as being pertinent to a realistic theology of ecology – much as they may vary in their expression – implicitly or explicitly

underlie the sacramental life of the AICs. The intention in pointing out these similarities is not to contrast African and Western forms of Christianity in terms of the theological superiority or inferiority of either. We all have our distinctive contributions to make on a planet already so comprehensively threatened in the life-and-death struggle of creation that we cannot afford the indulgence of such theological controversies. What is needed now is to learn from the God-given wisdom of Africa as it becomes manifest in AIC sacraments and to consider the practical implications.

2.1 *God the creator and guardian of creation*

In his attempt to establish guidelines for a theology of ecology, Jürgen Moltmann (1985: 13) stresses God's immanence in the world. "An ecological doctrine of creation," he says, "implies a new kind of thinking about God. The centre of this thinking is no longer the distinction between God and the world. *The centre is the recognition of the presence of God in the world and the presence of the world in God.*" (My italics.)

Moltmann explains how the Old Testament teaches Yahweh as a deity different from the world, to contrast his nature with the pantheistic matriarchal and fertility cults of the Canaanites. In this world "God's context is transcendence, and the world, 'as the work of his hands', is turned into immanence. Nature is stripped of her divinity, politics become profane, history is divested of fate. The world is turned into passive matter" (Moltmann 1985: 13). This viewpoint obviously accorded with the modern processes of secularization and seemed to justify the ruthless conquest and exploitation of nature by modern Europeans. According to Moltmann, however, a modern ecological doctrine of creation must perceive and teach God's *immanence* in the world. "God is not merely the Creator of the world. He is also the Spirit of the universe. Through the powers and potentialities of the Spirit, the Creator indwells the creatures He has made, animates them, holds them in life, and leads them into the future of His kingdom" (Moltmann 1985: 14).

2.1.1 *The ZCC God of the crops*

For many years Bishop Samuel Mutendi, founder of the Zion Christian Church in Zimbabwe, expressed similar convictions at his Zion City, admittedly against a theological background very different from Moltmann's and in ritual activity rather than in written theology. He, too, attempted to preach the biblical Mwari (Shona for "God") as truly present and totally involved in all of creation – in a peasant society as the God of the farmers and their crops. Unlike some sophisticated African theologians, who apologetically attempt to postulate full continuity between the Creator God of Africa and the God of the Bible and to understate the reality of God's remoteness from individuals in traditional religion, Mutendi and other prophetic leaders recognized both discontinuity and continuity with the old religion. The immanence of the old *Mwari vaMatonjeni* (the God of the Matopo hills) was not the same as the overriding, pervasive presence of the biblical God. The remoteness of the traditional Mwari was evident in the fact that, as the oracular deity, he was

approachable only to a few select cultic officials. He was indeed the god of rain, fertility and national crises; but in everyday religious life it was the family and tribal ancestors who dominated the minds and ritual activities of commoners. Mwari had to be brought into daily life.

There are several ways in which the traditional High God was drawn close by the Zionists and in which his image changed in the Shona prophetic communities. I restrict myself to the ZCC practice of Bishop Mutendi, which transformed the old concept of a relatively remote creator (*musiki*) into an active personal power, present in and sustaining his creation. Although he opposed the old cult, the ZCC bishop provided substitutes for its cultic activities, notably in a sacramental context. Instead of relying on the traditional cultic messenger (*munyai*) who annually petitioned for rain at the oracular centre, each ZCC congregation was required to send a delegation to Zion City during the October conference to bring gifts and a special request for rain. There they could petition the Zionist "man of God" directly for rain and agricultural prosperity. Towards the end of the proceedings Bishop Mutendi, through laying on of hands, blessed the seed to be sown by his followers and the flails to be used after reaping the crops, thus transferring symbolically the grace and life-giving force of God to the agricultural tools to be used.

This was Mutendi's message of an immanent Christian God in creation. God, as father and creator, was preached and experienced as the God of ecology! The protective blessing of the divinity traditionally called *Wokudenga* (the one in heaven) was related directly to the seeds and the crops in the presence of thousands of ZCC subsistence farmers as a substitute for the generation of crop fertility by the oracular deity of Matonjeni. In a very real sense the Bishop reflected the incarnation of the biblical, ecologically active Mwari at Zion City. Himself a subsistence farmer, as dependent on the agricultural economy as his followers, the bishop identified with them totally in his petitioning of God. Unlike the white missionaries, whose livelihood at the mission station remained secure when the rains failed, the Zionist bishop faced the same dilemma and hardships as his followers in periods of drought. When they suffered, he suffered. When they rejoiced over a bumper harvest, he led their celebration, their thanksgiving and their testimony – sermons which propagated a caring God present in the midst of his people. Existentially, therefore, God as creator entered the lives of these Zionist peasants in the person of someone who shared their destiny, who felt what they felt, whose features they knew, who lived in their midst.

The October paschal celebration, which coincides with the onset of the rainy and planting season, is called *ungano yembeu* (the seed conference). The seed to be blessed, the sermons witnessing to God's provision of rain and the members' contribution of produce from their lands at Zion City all testify and form part of concrete thanksgiving to an involved, protective God. Here the God of germinating seed, the ecological God of the crops, features convincingly as the one whose body and blood redeem the entire creation. Creator and Redeemer are one! The creator who gives life to the seed and guards the crops

at the request of the humans he has entrusted with nature's stewardship is also the redeemer who receives the sacrifice of those very elements he has nurtured as the symbols of redemption. This integrates and sanctifies the interaction between him and all creation.

The question is whether the *ungano yemebu* should not be given a much wider ecological connotation in African theology. So far the ZCC interpretation has been limited mainly to God's providence and protection for the Zionist faithful in the coming agricultural season. The immanent creator securing life for his present flock is certainly no less concerned about the seeds and crops of the distant future, the sustenance and capacity of the land, the prevention of erosion and deforestation, as well as the availability of firewood for coming generations. If seen in this perspective, present ZCC leaders have ample opportunity – indeed, it is their unquestionable responsibility – to extend the *ungano yemebu* concept into a long-term ecological strategy. To be sure, recognize God as the one who blesses and germinates the seeds for the coming season. But let him also be the God of the *seedlings* nurtured in church-initiated nurseries and the God of long-term tree crops in plantations which will one day provide the banking investment, building materials and firewood for the young or as yet unborn members of humankind.

This may all sound very utilitarian, as if all church-inspired earthkeeping ultimately serves only the needs of humankind. But there is more to it than that. The image of God as the sustainer of seedlings and the gardener of as yet distant tree crops of coming generations is the true test of spiritually inspired ecological altruism. To the extent that the plantation crops not only supply the multifarious needs of a peasant society, but also clothe the earth for its own sake, to that extent may we be said to respect and restore the natural and indigenous habitat entrusted to us by God.

The immanent creator who emerges vividly as the initiator and protector of the tree crops in the eucharistic context could be a source of a new vision for creation among the AICs. Imagine how the *ungano yemebu* – without losing the central impact made by the flourishing plantations at Zion City – could be decentralized to benefit each and every ZCC congregation. Sacramental celebration would then culminate in, amongst other things, nurseries and plantations at all regional church centres. In the long run these tree crops will be available to the entire church, greening a barren countryside. God's redemption will be thrown into sharp relief – his very voice rustling in the leaves.

2.1.2 The creator as protective guardian

From the foregoing narrative it is apparent that significant changes have already taken place in the traditional conception of God's guardianship. Through the blessing hands and holy staff of the interceding bishop, God's presence, his life-giving potency and guardianship over the crops to be planted become tangibly real. This does not mean, however, that the church has managed to transform the old fertility concepts completely and that the Mwari it preaches resembles the biblical creator, Yahweh or Elohim, in all

respects. It is possible, for instance, against the background of colonialism, that black people's need for a liberating "man of God" is so overpowering that the AIC leader, in mediating God's guardianship, obscures rather than illuminates his saviourhood. Another problematic issue is the petitioning of God for good crops by presenting the Zionist bishop with gifts at Zion City, analogous to the traditional messengers' pleas to Mwari at the Matonjeni cultic centre: does this actually represent a complete conceptual and cosmological breakthrough? In the minds of many Zionists some notion appears to survive of a causal connection between right-minded giving and subsequent blessings received from God, between drought and the failure of church members to provide the bishop with Mwari's gifts. It is easily assumed that failure to observe Mwari's laws incurs divine retaliation in the form of droughts, and thus to lose sight of God's free grace bestowed independently of human merit.

Although the process of conceptual interaction and change in the ZCC cannot be expected to be consistent, it continues. In many respects the Shona prophets, attempts at reinterpretation and substitution resemble the penetration of the Old Testament Yahweh into the Semitic world. Bosch (1974: 51f) gives a striking description of the *continuity* and *discontinuity* between Yahweh and El. In the Semitic world, "El was king, creator and judge, the holy one, the One to whom the heavens belonged and the God of the heavenly council (Psalm 82)". Yahweh absorbed all these characteristics and still emerged a uniquely different deity. Without being equated with El, he penetrated the Semitic world via El. Likewise, in the Shona prophetic movement Yahweh enters a world occupied by pre-Christian concepts of Mwari and, like El, he gives fresh content to these concepts to gain access to and change the Shona world view.

Recent Zimbabwean history, however, has brought a resurgence, a veritable renaissance of Shona traditional religion. *Chimurenga* caused many Shona, both traditional and Christian, to reach back to their ancient roots. In part this represents a legitimate quest for a new African identity, in opposition to the alien, acculturated one imported by Westerners. During the struggle Mwari, the oracular deity of Matonjeni, rose to prominence once more, now more particularly as the warlord, the *muridzi venyika* (guardian of the land). He was conceived of as the final authority of the war council (*dare rechimurenga*), much as the Semitic El was seen as lord of the heavenly council. Mwari was now in command of the senior tribal spirits, the *mhondoro* or *varudzi* (the founder ancestors of the various tribes), each of whom in turn acted as *muridzi venyika* in his own area of jurisdiction. In other words, a hierarchical network of religious guardianship covered the entire country. In this spiritual constellation the national hero ancestors, Chaminuka, Nehanda and Kaguwi, featured prominently and became the cardinal symbols of black resistance to white rule.

The spirit war council moreover co-determined *chimurenga* war strategy. Senior guerrilla commanders and cultic messengers consulted Mwari at the cultic caves to convey his revelations and commands to the fighting cadres,

while spirit mediums (*masvikiro*) in each district conveyed the militant messages of the local guardian spirit to the guerrilla fighters operating in their area. Thus, both in terms of offensive strategy and protective guardianship, religion was interwoven with the entire history of the liberation struggle. An immanent creator was believed to be actively involved on all fronts, interacting with a host of his creatures (both living and dead) to liberate his creation from oppression and to establish new and just structures.

It is not possible to decipher the complex religious picture emerging from the Zimbabwean war years in this paper. Some of the Western-oriented churches and prophetic AIC movements, although involved in the struggle, certainly did not subscribe to the resurgence of traditional religion. On the other hand, in a period of crisis many Christians searched for their own roots and clung to the protection and guidance of the “traditionally” conceived Mwari and their ancestors, and obeyed their militant directives. What is pertinent to this discussion is that in the post-Independence period the guardianship of Mwari and the senior ancestors of the land has remained a significant reality – be it construed in traditional, syncretistic or Christian terms.

Thus AZTREC, as a traditionalist organization, draws heavily on this background for its ecological work. To the chiefs, *masvikiro* and ex-combatants, Mwari of old is the principal guardian (*muridzi*) of creation. His subordinate guardians – the *mhondoro* spirits of each district – are directly responsible for the restoration of nature in their divinely appointed areas of jurisdiction. To a large extent the *chimurenga* struggle is simply transferred to the ecological field. The *masvikiro* mobilize the tree planters in their districts; the tree planting itself is a ceremonial war (*hondo*); and at the end of the tree-planting season the AZTREC delegation of fighters – chiefs and *masvikiro* – journey to the distant shrines of Mwari in the Matopo hills to report on the progress of their ecological liberation struggle and to receive God’s oracular directives for the ongoing campaign. What is in fact taking place here in a traditional context is a *mutation in the concept of Mwari*. Although he remains the rain-giver, the God of war, peace and justice, as *musiki muridzi* (creator guardian) he is increasingly emerging as the “tree planter”, the guardian of tree crops, the one who, together with the ancestral guardians, is present in the land, taking care of its traditions. Whether because of historical processes, Christian influence or whatever, *the ancient remoteness is wearing off as the immanent insider claims his place*.

In the ZCC and other AICs, who with their “seed conference” (*ungano yemeu*) have already brought the creator much closer to church life, the question also arises how to give new content to this latest traditional religious development in the creator’s guardianship. If the idea of a sacrament of seedlings and tree planting is acceptable, then sermons on God the father of long-term tree crops, on Mwari the true *muridzi venyika* can acquire greater prominence. If *muridzi* is not interpreted rigidly as God’s overriding sovereignty, then human-divine interaction in the restoration of creation becomes possible. As Moltmann (1985: 14) says:

"If the Creator is himself present in his creation by virtue of the Spirit, then his relationship to creation must rather be viewed as an intricate web of unilateral, reciprocal and many-sided relationships. In this network of relationships, 'making', 'preserving', 'maintaining' and 'perfecting' are certainly the great *one-sided* relationships; but 'indwelling', 'sympathizing', 'participating', 'enduring', 'delighting' and 'glorifying' are the relationships of *mutuality* which describe a cosmic community of living between God the Spirit and all his created beings."

Religious guardianship in the Zimbabwean liberation struggle was based on mutuality between Mwari and the senior ancestors. In the church context ecological guardianship can be translated into mutuality between the creator and the churches guarding his creation: the gardener *muridzi* Mwari, who causes the seed to germinate and the life-giving rain to fall, interacting with and delighting in his tree-planting congregations who act as *varidzi*, stewards of nature, in the areas under their jurisdiction.

In this situation the Zionist "seed conference" as a preamble to the celebration of the eucharist could conceivably include commemoration ceremonies in which outstanding Christian restorers of creation, church tree planters, the "saints of the woods" – in other words, the African counterparts of Francis of Assisi – are venerated as symbols of a newly restored creation. Alongside the Chaminukas, the Nehandas and the Kaguwis – the liberator heroes of the Shona nation – will stand the Christian saints: the ZCC Mutendis, the Apostolic Johane Marankes, the Ndaza Zionist Andreas Shokos, David Masukas, Moses Makambas, the "Ethiopian" Nemapares, Gavures, Zvobgos and Sengwayos. And with these there will be a host of others – the *varidzi* guardians of nature who bore Christ's message of the redemption of all creation and lived in faithful expectation of a new heaven and a new earth, to be realized here and now, and yet to come. Together these Christian *varidzi venyika* will form part of the cloud of witnesses (Heb 12), inspiring their descendants in Christ not only to celebrate their own individual salvation, but to guard and restore the magnificent creation entrusted to them.

Such a commemorative focus on the creator as *muridzi* would revive the memory of a hopeful beginning, of order and justice despite all the signs of chaos in the world. It is in the midst of human oppression and the destruction of nature that the message of an immanent creator, of Mwari the *muridzi venyika*, is most urgently needed and acquires the most profound significance. Thus it was during the Babylonian exile – when Israel was in chaos, their temple destroyed, their worship prohibited, their God-given land lost, their holy city ravished and their people in serfdom under alien kings (Duchrow/Liedke 1987: 54–55) – that Mwari spoke to them the words of second Isaiah:

I, I am he that comforts you.

Who are you that you are afraid of man who dies, of the son of man who is made like grass

and have forgotten the Lord, your Maker,

who stretched out the heavens

and laid the foundations of the earth (Isa 51:12–13).

Similarly, when the black Zimbabwean people were suffering under severe oppression, alienation and despair before independence, Mwari the creator guardian sent oracular messages of encouragement through his traditional messengers and also revealed a return of peace and dignity through the AIC and other church prophets. This message will continue through the ages. Because of human frailty and corruption, *chimurenga*, the struggle for the liberation of all creation, will never cease. Here the Zimbabwean AICs, like all churches in independent Africa, have a responsibility to fight complacency. On the ravished landscape where they celebrate their sacraments the guardian creator looms large. He may well promise, as he did in Isaiah 41:17–20, never to abandon his people:

“I will make rivers flow among barren hills and springs of water run in the valleys.

I will turn the desert into pools of water and the dryland into flowing springs.

I will make cedars grow in the desert, and acacias and myrtles and olive trees.

Forests will grow in barren land

forests of pine and juniper and cypress.

People will see this and know that I, the Lord, have done it. They will come to know that Israel’s holy God has made it happen.”

This will indeed happen if Mwari’s people throughout this continent, throughout the entire *oikos* of the inhabited world, respond to his call to be *varidzi*, guardians, stewards of his creation. The eucharist could still be an occasion for human sanctification, for communion with Christ and fellow believers, for inner resolve, contemplation and growth. But it would also become a forum for discussing ecological destruction, pollution, uncontrolled population growth, AIDS, etc. And it could become a launching pad for new modes of ecumenical mission in which conversion, conservation and the restoration of all creation are integral.

2.2 Christ’s kingship and an extended missionary commission

2.2.1 Zionist interpretation of Christ’s great commission

As mentioned above, most paschal celebrations in the Spirit-type churches culminate in the celebration of the eucharist. Closely associated with this is a prophetic preoccupation with Christ’s classic missionary commandment recorded in Matthew 28:18–19. Bishop Samuel Mutendi in particular annually, while thousands of his followers were preparing for the climax of their festivities, confronted them with Christ’s command to his disciples: “I have been given all authority in heaven and on earth. Go, then, to all peoples everywhere and make them my disciples” (Daneel 1980: 107f). The programme of the daily church council sessions at Zion City included the actual planning of the missionary campaign that followed each *Paseka*. The regular prayer meetings invariably centred on the church’s outreach to the world. And Mutendi’s mission-oriented sermons would culminate, immediately after

the eucharist, in a send-off sermon aimed at inspiring a united and courageous response by all Zionists to the Lord's command.

In the ensuing missionary campaign teams of Zionists went on two-week on one-month preaching tours. These included pastoral and faith-healing services, mass conversion ceremonies, the establishment of new congregations and, at the end, a report back to the parent congregation at Zion City. At Zion City the people meanwhile kept up a vigil of intensive intercession for Zion's outreach to the world. There are numerous variations on these campaigns, but one can say that the massive Zionist response to Christ's commission derives from recognition of his kingship which is basic to his call.

In his treatment of Matthew 28:18-19, the late Bishop Samuel Mutendi seldom dwelt on the actual meaning of the words "all the nations" and he rarely specified the objective of missionary endeavour. There can be little doubt, however, that he assigned conversion and baptism paramount importance. He gave the text a specifically Zionist connotation by relating it to such texts as Isaiah 62:1 ("for Zion's sake I will not hold my peace, and for Jerusalem's sake I will not rest"). He would also protest against the half-hearted response of some of his followers to the church's mission, referring to Romans 11:25 which deals with the hardening of the Israelites' hearts.

In 1965 Mutendi sent his followers on their missionary campaign with the following rousing message:

"Jesus sent out his disciples and they had only one task to perform. This task is like a battle described in Deuteronomy 20:1: 'When thou goest forth to battle against thine enemies . . . thou shalt not be afraid of them, for the Lord thy God is with thee, which brought thee out of the land of Egypt.' In battle, when the leader says 'Fire!', the soldiers advance. Now that we say 'Fire!' after Paseka, you must go out like one man to preach God's word. Do not be diverted by women or the temptations of this world. Do not think of your troubles back home - God will overcome them! - but walk straight as you advance. You are going to fight Satan because you are the soldiers of God. Be courageous and not daunted by long distances. You may even have to go and die in the Zambesi valley or Zambia.

Let the cowards who cringe when they see a white man sit down, because they will not make good soldiers anyway. In the old times when I met with opposition [from the government] all the elders backslided and left me out of fear. Only John Shoko remained at my side and the two of us kept going. As Jacob freed Israel, so a deliverer comes from Zion and the preachers are sent forth into the world. The followers brought in [to Zion City] will be like the sand of the sea."

Mutendi's reference to his own perseverance in the face of opposition was intended to inspire his followers in the face of hardship. His reference to a "deliverer from Zion" reflected a close identification of his own work with that of Jesus, Christ. Although Mutendi himself never presumed, as a black Messiah, to usurp Christ's position, some of his followers undoubtedly saw him as a deliverer, a "man of God" - as he was popularly called. He was seen not only as someone who had come to assist them spiritually, but as the

creator of a new order free from oppression and white control. In this sense he was an *iconic leader* (Sundkler 1976), *the illumination of the Christ figure in this existence*. One implication of this view was that response to Christ's missionary command meant the expansion of Zion, the true manifestation of God's kingdom on earth, and the building of Zion City. Although one observes here a limited interpretation of the Great Commission, it ties in with the characteristic African Zionist approach to Christianity, which in theology is termed a "realized eschatology". The new heaven and the new earth has to be experienced *here and now*, and the human contribution, in partnership with Christ, plays a central role.

This theology does not necessarily override individual salvation in Christ and the apocalyptic theme. I have in fact recorded and analysed numerous ZCC mission sermons in which the appeal for conversion is based on such texts as Hebrews 13:14 which views the sufferings of this life almost exclusively in terms of a search for the "city yet to come". Emphasis on the future nature of God's kingdom thus maintains the eschatological "not yet" as a necessary balance to the widespread preoccupation with the "enactment" of the salvation here and now (Daneel 1980: 112–113).

2.2.2 A broader perception of the good news to be proclaimed

There can be little doubt that the *good news* of Christ's reign in heaven and on earth is clearly reflected in the spiritual peace, pastoral service, healing sessions, material and agricultural improvement, mystical protection against evil forces such as wizardry, and other manifestations of African well-being which characterize holistic progress in the Zion Cities, Jerusalems and Moriahs of the prophetic movements. In Mutendi's Zion City the climactic sermons by senior ZCC preachers prior to the eucharist – in other words, the sermons which outline the forthcoming missionary campaign message – include such themes as Bishop Mutendi's role as iconic illumination of Christ, as rain maker, preserver of crops, liberator of blacks from oppression, performer of healing and childbearing miracles, preserver of human rights, and so on.

The good news to be preached also has very definite historic connotations.

In the 1960s God allowed educational enlightenment at Zion City, in the form of a school which Mutendi had struggled to have sanctioned for several decades. In the 1970s there was the hardship of Mutendi's exodus from his Bikita headquarters to the Gokwe district in the north after he had clashed with government officials in a boundary dispute. In this exodus he featured as a Moses figure, with accelerated church growth as a result (Daneel 1983: 63). During this decade of real tribulation and guerrilla warfare the good news was that the "man of God" was Christ's representative of justice and peace – an essential missionary message in a critical period. After Independence, in the 1980s, the good news assumed the form of modernization and massive educational and agricultural progress with substantial support from foreign sponsors. At the Mbungu ZCC headquarters Bishop Nehemiah Mutendi, the

late bishop's successor, established a multimillion dollar Zionist school and college.

In the member churches of Fambidzano, when Independence came after many years of socio-economic deprivation, the good news assumed the concrete form of community development centres, vocational training centres, carpentry shops, small-scale industries, women's family planning clinics, etc. Salvation had come in concrete, tangible forms. Paschal celebrations included success stories and the eucharist witnessed to new dimensions of liberation from political serfdom and to material progress. These things are all associated with Christ's presence and his communion with his followers, thus making his salvation and kingship over this creation a living reality to the people.

Although these concrete features of the good news in the AICs are legitimate and healthy, it is to be hoped that during the 1990s the combination of eucharist and mission will see further shifts of emphasis. *Progress and agro-economic development projects in the AICs will be meaningless unless accompanied by a message of global sanctification, of nature's restoration, of an ecological economy which, under the reign of Christ, consciously strikes a balance between exploitive progress and altruistic restoration.* This is the true purport of an expanded missionary message. Moltmann (1985: 227f) describes the messianic calling of human beings:

"In the messianic light of the gospel, the appointment [of humans] to rule over animals and the earth also appears as the 'ruling with Christ' of believers. For it is to Christ, the true and visible image of the invisible God on earth, that 'all authority is given in heaven and on earth' (Matt. 28:18). His liberating and healing rule also embraces the fulfilment of the *dominium terrae* – the promise given to human beings at creation. Under the conditions of history and in the circumstances of sin and death, the sovereignty of the crucified and risen Messiah Jesus is the only true *dominium terrae*. It is to 'the Lamb' that rule over the world belongs. It would be wrong to seek for the *dominium terrae*, not in the lordship of Christ, but in other principalities and powers – in the power of the state or the power of science and technology."

We might even add, "or in the power of a church or a self-declared Messiah". Only in humble recognition of the sovereignty of the Lamb will the good news reflect a proper balance between acceptance of the reconciliation and sanctification of all creation already achieved in Christ, and humankind's active role in spreading the good news.

According to Paul (Rm 8:23) Christians have the gift of the Spirit which not all creatures have. This truth has certain consequences and entails responsibilities. Duchrow and Liedke (1987: 64) write:

"Spirit-endowed human beings do not save creation, but creation looks to us. The way that we cope with its suffering shows how much hope there is for creation. When we increase the suffering of creation its hope sinks. When we sharpen the conflict between human beings and nature, and also the conflict between humans, then creation lapses into resignation. When, instead, in

solidarity with nature and our fellow human beings, we reduce suffering, then the hope of creation awakes to new life."

As religious leaders in their holy cities and often as qualified "master farmers" in a peasant community, the AIC prophets are ideally placed to demonstrate convincingly the required solidarity with nature. They spread the good news and awaken hope. In a sense they resemble the Old Testament prophets who related Israel's salvation and well-being largely to the history of their holy land. It was Amos who prophesied the fall of the kingdom of Judah because of Israel's declining faith manifested not only in neglect of the sabbath, but also in overexploitation of the land and unjust treatment of the poor. Hosea again used land and fertility images to warn against non-observance of the covenant. According to him the covenant had become null and void, with the result that the covenant gift – the land – was forfeited. Covenant history, which culminated in the occupation of the land, was now terminated, and the outcome was landlessness (Hosea 2:3; Carmody 1983: 87, with reference to Brueggemann). In a sense, therefore, salvation, peace and human well-being in Old Testament times correlate with land ownership and agricultural sufficiency. These together are components of Old Testament holistic salvation.

Carmody (1983: 88) rightly maintains:

"... the land was too central to the covenantal promise not to reflect Israel's overall fortunes in faith. Nonetheless, we note that neither the historians nor the prophets made much of the land or nature as a positive creation in its own right. By and large their biblical perspective was ethno-centric. The land was a wonderful gift from God, and so should have been used well, but the land had few rights over against its human stewards ... the biblical authors were not positioned to see that abuse of the land struck at the heart of a creative act larger in its purposes than Israel's prosperity."

It would not be surprising if, out of pragmatic agricultural motives, some present-day AIC prophets were to suffer from a similar blind spot as the Old Testament prophets where the abuse of nature is concerned. On the other hand, a sound Christology arising from the fusion of eucharistic celebration with mobilization of missionary endeavour could offer a unique opportunity to remedy such short-sightedness. The good news of God's redemption of *all creation* could gather momentum from both the paschal seed-and-crop and the tree-planting ceremonies. Then, as a comprehensive message of salvation (including individual human and apocalyptic features), it may spread across the country and the continent as a ripple effect of Christ's eucharist.

It is in this context that the prophetic "men of God", their holy cities testifying to a balanced ecological economy, can distil the full meaning of Colossians 1:15–20 for a Christology which will embody such an all-inclusive salvation:

"He [Christ] is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; for in him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or principalities or authorities – all things were

created through him and for him. He is before all things and in him all things hold together. He is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in everything he might be preeminent. For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of the cross."

Paul certainly was not an ecologist and this passage in his theology conveys a primarily soteriological message. In Africa, however, the cosmological inferences are bound to be drawn: "In Christ all things hold together." According to William Barclay (in Carmody 1983: 94), "this means that not only is the Son the agent of creation in the beginning and the goal of creation in the end, but between the beginning and the end, during time as we know it, it is he who holds the world together. That is to say, all the laws by which this world is order and not chaos are an expression of the mind of the Son."

Carmody (1983: 94) correctly asserts that this logos doctrine (the word of God as the principle of creation) has always occupied a prominent place, "but we have little applied it to scientific laws, and *not at all made it a basis for referencing nature*. Taken at face value, the text and Barclay's interpretation say that *everything* bears us a presence not only of God but specifically of the Son, the Logos, the person who became incarnate in Jesus and rose as the Christ." (My italics).

Perhaps the AIC prophets have understood this better than have Western theologians. Their acceptance of Christ's universal kingship as a basis for discipleship and missionary endeavour intuitively recognizes his presence in the entirety of their joyous yet spirit-threatened existence, in their liberating exorcist ceremonies, in their crucially important subsistence farming activities and in their celebration of life where he provides breath. *It follows that the genuine iconic leaders, who mirror Christ in their eucharistic ceremonies, will not only have human witness to Christ's reign resounding in their holy cities, but also the witness of the budding and treasured trees of a restored land, which in the quiet breeze whisper even more convincingly of Christ's cosmic salvation.*

2.3 The Holy Spirit as life-giver and healer of creation

According to Moltmann (1985: 9) the trinitarian interpretation of creation in theological tradition has tended to emphasize God the Father as creator over against his creation in a monotheistic way. Consequently attempts were made to develop a specifically christological doctrine of creation. Moltmann, however, deliberately chooses to focus on the third person: *creation in the Spirit*. He argues that all divine activity is *pneumatic* in its manifestation. It is always the Spirit who brings the activity of the Son to its goal. Everything that exists does so through the inflow of the energy and potentiality of the cosmic Spirit. "This means," says Moltmann, "that we have to understand every created reality in terms of energy, grasping it as the realized potentiality of the divine Spirit."

Moltmann (1985: 11-12) notes a similar interpretation in Calvin's work. The Holy Spirit, the "giver of life" of the Nicene Creed, is for Calvin the

fountain of life (*fons vitae*). Just as the Holy Spirit is poured out on all created beings, so Calvin's "fountain of life" is present in everything that exists and lives:

"If the Holy Spirit is 'poured out' on the whole creation, then he creates the community of all created things with God and with each other, making it that fellowship of creation in which all created things communicate with one another and with God, each in its own way. The existence, the life, the warp and the weft of interrelationships subsist in the Spirit. 'In Him we live and move and have our being' (Acts 17:28)."

The cosmic Spirit referred to by Moltmann and Calvin has no relation to Stoic pantheist notions. It remains God's Spirit acting in this world in the differentiated modes of *creating, preserving, renewing and consummating* life. In view of this I fully agree with Moltmann's (1985: 112) basic assertion:

"Creation in the Spirit is the theological concept which corresponds best to the ecological doctrine of creation which we are looking for and need today. With this concept we are cutting loose the theological doctrine of creation from the age of subjectivity and the mechanistic domination of the world, and are leading it in the direction in which we have to look for the future of an ecological world-community . . .

Faced with . . . [the progressive destruction of nature and the pile-up of nuclear armaments] we have only one realistic alternative to universal annihilation: the non-violent, peaceful, ecological world-wide community in solidarity." (My italics).

Moltmann introduces several distinctions to explain the position in creation that he assigns to the Spirit. We shall not dwell on these, but merely note that an integral part of his view is that of God's *immanence* in creation. He also refers to the *interpenetration* (perichoresis) of the trinity – the social doctrine of the mutual indwelling of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. In this interactive principle (God *in* the world and the world *in* God; heaven and earth *in* the kingdom of God; soul and body united *in* the life-giving Spirit to a human whole; etc.), *there is no such thing as a solitary life*. All living things, each in its own distinctive way, live in, with, from and for one another. This trinitarian interpenetration – which shows a distinct parallelism to African religious holism in which nothing is solitary or self-existing – is the key to Moltmann's envisaged ecological doctrine of creation. Inasmuch as the cosmic spirit is also the *organizing principle* of human consciousness, it is important to remember that "through the spirit we are bound together with other people socially and culturally (an interlocking association which can be described as the common spirit of humanity" and

"... through the Spirit we are bound together with the natural environment. This association is a system comprising human beings and nature. *We might describe it as a spiritual ecosystem*. Through the Spirit, human societies as part-systems are bound up with the ecosystem "earth" (Gaia) . . . So human beings are participants and subsystems of the cosmic life-system, and of the divine Spirit that lives in it" (Moltmann 1985: 18). (My italics)

Why this lengthy discourse on Moltmann's views? I included it because I subscribe to the main tenets of his ecological doctrine and because of its relevance to the AICs. Moltmann's idiom may be alien and the context of his appeal may be mainly the academic West and the threat of modern industrialization to our planet. As he observes, however, *our only realistic alternative to annihilation lies in the solidarity of a world-wide ecological community. This is where, for Africa, traditionalist ecological concerns and the enacted theology of the AICs enter into it. The latter's vision of creation in the Spirit can help to mobilize and inspire the desperately needed ecological mass movement.* Besides, Moltmann's views on the cosmic spirit in creation poignantly expresses a central concern of AICs of the prophetic type.

2.3.1 *The Holy Spirit as the "fountain of life"*

In some respects the AIC prophets of Africa probably understand and experience the life-giving power of the outpoured Spirit better than either Calvin or Moltmann did. Their intuition was shaped by their non-Christian forefathers who sensed as well as any Old Testament sage that the *mweya* (spirit) imparted by God the *musiki* (creator) was the source of all life. This intuition ultimately blossomed into an all-pervading testimony to the life-giving power of the *Mweya Mutsovene* (Holy Spirit) in the Spirit-type churches, especially in their healing colonies.

Observe, for instance, a Zionist "maternity clinic" in which the ritual and worship revolve entirely around new human lives. The expectant mothers wear holy cords around their bodies to ward off the attack of evil powers such as witches. Special prayer meetings and dances invoke the presence of a protective Holy Spirit. In the early morning the prophetesses prepare holy water and take all the newborn babies outside into the rays of the morning sun where they are stripped naked and sprinkled liberally with the life-preserving water of the Spirit.

Witness, too, the healing ceremonies of the sick, where the Holy Spirit's power is symbolized by smoke to repel harmful spirits; there are hours of sympathetic pastoral counselling between prophet and patient; laying on of hands, touch of the leader's holy staff, sprinkling of holy water and the use of a host of symbolic objects to cure or preserve life. In a sense, too, the blessing of the seed for the crops and the pegging of maize fields with prophetically blessed pegs symbolize the healing and protective power of the Holy spirit over inanimate things.

All these symbols testify to the outpouring of the Spirit, the *fons vitae* (fountain of life) of creation. It is a chorus of supplication. It takes place in the midst of suffering. But in the final analysis it is a massive celebration of faith to honour the only true source of life, the Holy Spirit.

There can be little doubt that this massive testimony to the Spirit's life-giving powers shows certain flaws. To some participants the holy cord or water which is believed to ward off evil forces is little more than, or equivalent to, a traditional amulet. The cord may be seen as a power in itself, without faith in the triune God playing a significant role. Here the magical belief

system still holds sway. In this respect Beyerhaus (1969: 75) and Oosthuizen (1968: 119–142) have indicated the misinterpretation of the work of the Holy Spirit in the AICs. In my experience amongst the Shona, however, such misinterpretations are the exceptions rather than the rule. They resemble our own Western Christian misconceptions when we seek merit rather than evidence of grace in the good works we have done, or when we try to manipulate God to favour us by producing yet another “truthful” theological statement born of a loveless heart.

Most AIC prophets experience the Holy Spirit as the indwelling Spirit of God, whom they do not control or manipulate. Interviews with prophetic church dignitaries show that the initiative for inspiration or revelation through the Holy Spirit is ascribed overwhelmingly to God and not to any human being. Prophets often declare that they only receive guidance from the Holy Spirit after fasting, Bible study, prayer and seclusion. They also readily acknowledge that these actions are not causal or manipulative, but that the Holy Spirit retains the initiative. Few prophets claim that they can “give” the fullness of the Spirit to a lay member of the church. It remains an *act of faith*. In addition the spiritual state of the recipient and the ultimate will of God determine whether there will be new life, preservation of life, healing or special gifts such as prophecy and speaking in tongues (Daneel 1987: 262).

In the Spirit-type churches the *fons vitae* flows freely, uninhibited by written dogma. Here no-one speaks about “trinitarian perichoresis”. It simply exists: God in the world, and the world in God. In the AIC prophetic community there is no such thing as a *solitary life*, unless of course the presence of a *murayi* (wizard) necessitates cleansing, sanctification and reconciliation. Through this holistic interpenetration of God, people and things, where the fountain of life is manifest in unquestioned action, the Spirit has prepared fertile soil for an ecological theology.

2.3.2 The Holy Spirit as *murapi venyika* (healer of the land)

On the whole the AIC prophets do not refer to the Holy Spirit as the *murapi venyika*, despite the fact that he is central in all their healing activities. This reflects the tendency in these churches to conceive of the life-giving Spirit first and foremost as the healer of humankind. In the build-up to both the sacraments (baptism and the eucharist) the Holy Spirit features pre-eminently as the healer of people. Prior to the baptism of novices the sermons of church members focus increasingly on their experiences of healing through the Spirit. The entire congregation is transformed into a body of witness to healing, and the group of believers receiving the baptisands on the other side of Jordan stand there as disciples of Christ healed of sin, brokenness, isolation, illness and a host of human problems.

Then, when the baptizer enters Jordan, he actually blesses the water by diving into it with a loud splash, or stirring it repeatedly with his holy staff and/or cord. In a sense he or she is transmitting the life-giving force of the Holy Spirit to the water, so that it literally cleanses the baptisands of sin and pollution, totally renewing and healing them. Baptism is therefore also a

healing ceremony par excellence. During the ceremony many members of the congregation will enter Jordan to drink the Spirit-filled water to obtain healing or add meaning to their lives.

At first I was inclined to interpret this feature as a remnant of the traditional magical philosophy – in other words, an attempt by people to lay hold of whatever life-force or power that could aid them. This may be true of some believers. The question that arises, however, is whether it does not present a golden opportunity to widen the interpretation of baptism. Can it not be said that the Spirit's presence in Jordan is a sign of God's creation being redemptively healed? Can we not say that the Holy Spirit manifests himself at Jordan as the "healer of the land"? This would obviously include the converts, who are healed and changed by moving into the body of Christ. But the Jordan river and its often barren environment are likewise changed and taken, symbolically, into the body of Christ the king, whereby his redemption is sacramentally proclaimed over the whole of creation.

In that case the drinking of Jordan water symbolizes not just the person's healing or salvation, but his or her participation in cosmic healing. The focus then changes from what may be gained privately and personally from the Holy Spirit's healing powers, to a statement of solidarity with all creation and an affirmation of new commitment, through individual conversion, to the healing and restoration of nature. What happens, then, in the sacramental context is that human beings, knowledge about creation through domination is replaced by knowledge gained through communication between them and nature. In a sense one could call it a *baptismal naturalization of the human being* (G. Altner, in Moltmann 1985: 50): "It assumes that, fundamentally speaking, the human being does not confront nature: he himself is nothing other than one of nature's products."

The image of the Holy Spirit as *murapi venyika* (healer of land) is thrown into even sharper relief in the paschal celebration, leading to the eucharist. I have mentioned, firstly, the "seed conference" as an integral part of Paseka. Here the concepts of an immanent creator as *muridzi* (guardian) can be fused with that of the Spirit as *murapi* (healer). For when droughts and pests threaten, the seasons and crops that are guarded are also healed to bear a life-producing harvest. In the second place, I mentioned the need for confessing structural ecological sins. Here, too, it is the Spirit who heals by laying bare those abuses and violence against nature which obstruct the redemption and life-sustaining fertility of nature. In the third place, it should be noted that just as the Jordan water is drunk by believers for its medicinal value, the elements of bread and wine have the same extended or post-symbolic significance to many participants. Mothers with sick babies, for instance, take extra pieces of sacramental bread home with them for their stricken little ones.

To the sacramental purist this may sound blasphemous. But is this not just another indication that the healing *charis* of Christ's sacrament extends in a mysterious manner far wider than do our theories and conceptions? And does this not mean that we could celebrate the eucharist in a manner which

emphasizes our corporate identity with nature in Christ, making us as dependent on the Holy Spirit's healing activity as all other natural beings? And if so, can we not, in the fourth place, have – in addition to other variations – a eucharist of tree planting? Can we not celebrate our unity in Christ in a manner which says that, because Christ the king is the *muridzi* (guardian) of creation, we as his disciples are fellow guardians; and because the Holy spirit is the *murapi* (healer) we are fellow healers? There where we have dug the holes for the seedlings and fenced the new woodlots for participant congregations, can we not bless the holes in the soil that receive the seedlings, the seedlings that go into them, the hands that do the work, and the workers who are responsible for the aftercare?

In such sacramental activity we need not pretend that we are the saviours of creation, for that we can never be. But we can erect not just symbolic but concrete signposts of life-giving hope in a creation suffering while it awaits redemption – a new heaven and a new earth.

If we have the courage to develop those trinitarian concepts in the AICs – both ecumenically and in contexts attended by people of differing faiths – this may be our best response to God's Spirit which heals through the inter-meshing and association of people of diverse societies and cultures. Moreover, the healing Spirit is best able to instruct us about our integral role in nature, our position not of dominion but of humble stewardship of the "spiritual ecosystem", the earth.

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Where do we go from here? We are running out of trees and air to breathe. Sitting on our hands in our armchairs is no longer good enough. Practically, we need:

- funds, and fund-raisers

- sober and visionary leadership

- a central interecclesial structure of AIC and Western-oriented theologians who will sit down and work out a thoroughly contextualized, yet simple and workable theology of the environment. What is needed is not a perfect publication on ecology, but experimentation with and implementation of ecological projects (e.g. tree-planting), long before the completion of any written theology of any kind. The attitude will have to be that the ecological work starts now! We do not need long arguments about black liberation first, then economic empowerment, then ecological reform. To some that may be the ideal; but the ideal is also a way of evading or procrastinating a massive responsibility. The money can be found, and the main *empowerment* must come from the Holy Spirit and from the people. The history of the AICs in Southern Africa proves this. In Zimbabwe the proudest ecological achievements were contributed by the poorest sectors of the black community.

- Finally, we need the Spirit-filled leaders of the AICs, who feel more sensitively than many of us what God – Father, Son and Spirit – says in NATURE.

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