



HOLISTIC AFRICAN THEOLOGY – ENACTED IN RURAL ZIMBABWE

by Professor M. L. Daneel

The theology of African Initiated Churches (AICs) — i.e. the prophetic Zionists and Apostles and the non-prophetic African Ethiopian, Congregational, Reformed and Methodist churches (modeled on but distinct from the mainline Mission Churches)—can hardly be described as systematized, written theology based on abstract reflection as is common in the West. Instead, it is an enacted theology, written in song and dance, in the rhythm of dancing feet, in serving hands of healing and exorcism, where worship and proclamation give expression to the presence of God, to His kingdom already manifest in black ‘Jerusalems’ and ‘Zion Cities’ under the blazing skies of Africa.

AIC theology in rural Zimbabwe is holistic. It encompasses all of peasant life. The need for theological education of church leaders who, on the whole, have had only primary school education, is therefore integral to the woes of their subsistence economy: frequent droughts, dwindling crop yields, soil erosion, environmental degradation; let alone the current political and economic crisis which leaves them with little food, non-existent health facilities in the face of the HIV-AIDS pandemic and little hope of a meaningful future.



Nyamafufu graduates – with Albert Nhakano, coordinator of the center, in the middle – drumming out the rhythm for dance and song.

September—October 2007

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How, then, does a white African, still privileged with a salary, 'teach theology' to the AICs and a large number of lay people from the mainline Mission Churches living under such dire circumstances, shackled by poverty?



Ms Memory Makoko, administrator and tutor of EFZIM, addressing Nyamafufu students during graduation ceremony.

There is no clear-cut answer to this question. But one thing is certain. You cannot create an ideal classroom situation separate from the grim struggle for survival which permeates the lives of the students. You can only do theology by identifying with their needs, helping where possible to bolster their local support systems, slip in a few correspondence courses for them to study and eventually cater for graduation celebrations which, for many, represent the kind of social high-light in village life which they can no longer afford.

The inevitability of the teacher's practical engagement in the lives of students, of enacting a liberative, life-support theology, if teaching is to make any sense at the Zimbabwean grassroots today, was poignantly underscored by the comment of a student elder. During one of our graduation ceremonies south of Masvingo, this year, he proudly held out his certificate thanking the EFZIM (Ecumenical Foundation of Zimbabwe) team for it, then added, "Fr. Daneel, we absolutely need the maize seed you provided us with in the past. We cannot open the Bible for study if we have no sadza [maize porridge] to eat. The eyes refuse to read when the stomach remains empty." This cry of despair was as good as saying: 'without food the theological program is dead!'

It reminded me of the time in the early seventies when AIC leaders engaged in a seemingly successful theological education program unexpectedly confronted me with radical demands I could not meet. We were serving some ninety AICs, had developed forty extension centers spread over hundreds of miles, with an intake of up to six hundred AIC students per year in our TEE (Theological Education by Extension) programs and more than a thousand people participating in our correspondence courses. And the results were there for everybody to see. For the first time in Zimbabwe the AICs had joined hands in their own ecumenical movement, called Fambidzano (Cooperation of African Churches). Studies in Church history enabled them to interpret their own movements in relation to the world church and to evaluate and eliminate the divisive schisms which had previously caused endless fragmentation in their congregations. Old and New Testament studies enhanced Bible knowledge, stimulated spiritual formation

and strengthened an indigenous Christology in the face of a messianic-type leadership in a number of churches which in some respects obscured an understanding of Christ's salvific work; and so forth. But spiritual gain was not enough if it did not coincide with economic progress in a poor society! So, the AIC bishops told me they could not proceed with Fambidzano unless they were given at least half of the funds of the annual budget for theological education, for them to buy diesel engines to pump water for their envisaged irrigation farming schemes.

Checkmate! It felt like betrayal... the end of the line for me; even as I fully understood the causes of the situation in which I found myself. Instead of yielding to the demands of the bishops and thereby jeopardizing future sponsorship for our



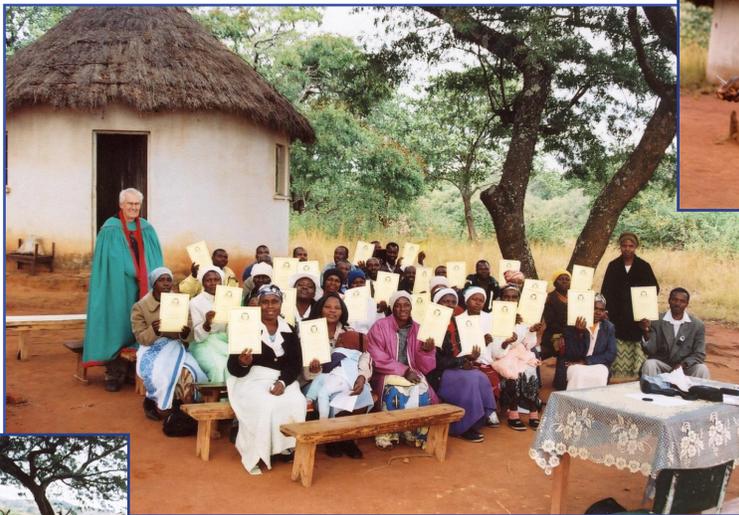
Ms Elsie Turo, student and nurse at Gunikuni, talks about the spiritual benefits of the course work.

TEE work by churches abroad, I engaged in extensive fund-raising for rural development projects and fortunately ‘struck gold.’ Soon we were all up to our necks in building AIC community development centres: agricultural projects, gardening schemes, manufacturing of clothes, oil production from sunflower seeds, bakeries, soap manufacturing, etc. As a kind of development manager, I paid a heavy price in the loss of time for research and publications. But the AICs were happy with the restoration of balance in their world between spiritual and material progress. Dancing feet and jubilant song once more were paying tribute to a comprehensive salvation in the here and now. Celebrating the annual graduation ceremonies with certificates that symbolized the growth in spirituality and knowledge somehow made more sense when the peasant granaries were full and the celebrants could afford new clothes for their festivities, the sure signs of divinely guided economic progress.

After Fambidzano a new movement of African Earthkeepers was formed in which AICs (the Association of African Earthkeeping Churches representing 180 member bodies) joined forces with traditionalists (Association of Zimbabwean Traditional Ecologists) in an attempt to make a solid contribution towards environmental reform. In this instance a bold and imaginative theology of tree-planting combined with innovative forms of inter-religious ecumenism (between African Christianity and Traditional Religion) led, over a period of fifteen years, to the planting of an estimated 14,000,000 trees in thousands of woodlands in the central and south-eastern regions of Zimbabwe. In the process of earth-care—improvised traditional rituals emphasizing ancestral care for the environment, a Christian Eucharist of tree-planting, confessions of eco-

logical sin and endless sermons on the salvation of all creation—a new enacted theology of the environment emerged. This formed the basis for teaching challenging new courses on earth-stewardship in our TEE training programs, imbedded in the movement until it collapsed. Mismanagement of funds by an indigenous leadership which had nothing to fear from a dysfunctional local judiciary, incapable of dealing effectively with issues of corruption, led to the alienation and withdrawal of donors abroad.

Out of the demise of two essentially peoples’ movements, in which I had invested respectively eighteen



TOP: Bvukururu graduation in Zaka district. Mr. Joram Musana, coordinator of the center, addresses the graduates (his ZCC - Zion Christian Church badge on display). **MIDDLE:** Bvukururu graduates with certificates. **BOTTOM:** Mr. Ephraim Muganyi, the top student at Bvukururu Center, receives his certificate (and subsequently also a new Bible for sound performance) by ‘Bishop’ Moses, director of EFZIM.

years and fifteen years of my life, I ‘salvaged’ a basic team of theological tutors to enable me to continue with ministry among the AICs. This band of workers and the participant churches were named EFZIM (Ecumenical Foundation of Zimbabwe). Operating from my house in Masvingo town—eighteen miles from Great Zimbabwe—the team was geared for the past seven years to continue with field research and theological education.

How did this team manage to do theology alongside the AICs who were increasingly suffering deprivation in an imploding economy? First of all they kept up the



challenge of earth-care by providing seedlings to students who were determined to develop their own woodlots and nurseries. Together with the students, they also participated in gully-reclamation exercises in the students' home-areas as an addition to teaching ecological courses. The soil-eroded earth had to be healed. Second, they taught AIDS awareness, prevention and treatment courses and allowed the open-air classes to become the activist platforms of church women who needed to voice public protest against male patriarchy which exposed them to the risk of HIV-AIDS contamination. On special occasions the women students engaged in acting out plays of care for AIDS patients. Third, a full-time agricultural advisor was employed to distribute OPV (open-pollinated variety) maize seed at each training centre for experimentation and the growing of their own maize seed, so that they could proceed with planting their own crops despite their inability to purchase seed on the market.

It was a win-win situation for everybody concerned, in terms of students learning the 'paper-theology' of knowledge and at least coping somewhat with the dire conditions of rural life. . . Until, of course, the labour unions got wind of our venture and came in like vultures on the kill, to 'scrape the barrel clean.' End of story. The union officers claim exorbitant salaries for the workers they pretend to represent, walk off with a huge percentage of the loot and leave unemployed workers without a future in their wake. Who cares about the carnage? ZANU-PF certainly doesn't!

So, you sell off project vehicles to provide the unions with their bounty, discontinue the services of most of the team members who had served the cause of the kingdom well and continue with a skeleton team to do correspondence courses. No more TEE classes, no support systems or OPV seeds for desperate rural communities! Only paperwork, lessons you can no longer support with praxis theology, and sporadic contact with students remain.

Is it worth continuing with 'theological education' when you can't fully meet the needs of rural students? I pondered this question as

LEFT: Lead lady of celebrations at the Zimbizi graduation ceremony in Gutu district about to stir the participants into dancing. TOP: A woman's experience in course work recounted with great flair at Zimbizi graduation ceremony. BOTTOM: 'Bishop' Moses congratulates the best student at Zimbizi center, who receives a certificate and Bible for outstanding course work.

often before, when in June I attended the graduation ceremonies of five cen-

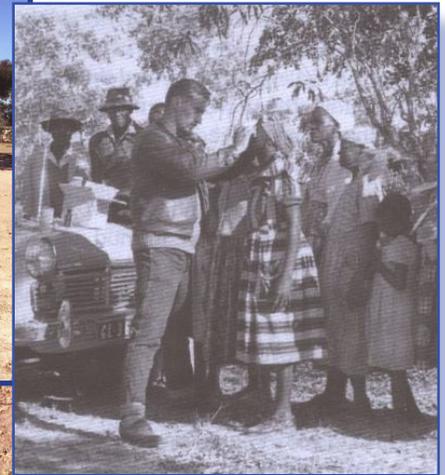
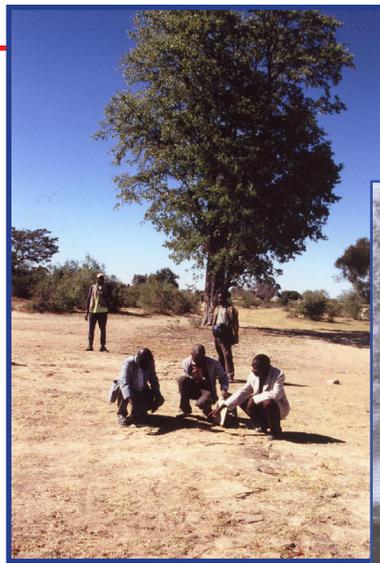
ters (Nyamafufu and Gunikuni in southern Masvingo district; Bvukururu in Zaka; Zimbizi and Chatikobo in Gutu; with Kiyai still to come early next year; a total of some 250 students). Then I saw the happy faces of celebrating students, together with their families and tribal elders. And I listened to the words of the chief at Nyamafufu:

"The thing that impresses me most at this ceremony," he said, "is the unity among you people of different churches. You take care of each other in overcoming the



Mud-and-pole research center built next to Zimbizi dam in 1965 with Zionist Ave.' and 'Prophet Square' in the foreground.

TOP: Friends and fellow Gumbo clansmen observe the foundation of the research center, with the mopani tree still standing in the background. **MIDDLE:** As ‘healer of the eyes’ I had to provide treatment for trachoma wherever I travelled in the Gutu district during the sixties. **BOTTOM:** An old ‘bush-palace’ only needed half-bricks and flat granite stones as a foundation.



conflicts often found in church relations. If the churches can do this the chiefs’ councils should follow suit.”

Yes, I thought, even though the organizational infrastructures for inter-church and inter-religious ecumenism have disappeared, the spirit of unity among many rural communities is still convincingly in evidence. The seeds sown are coming to fruition in unexpected ways.

Then the crowd broke out singing:

Who is the bridge?
 [It is] Lord Jesus who grabs the heart
 Enter and cross the bridge
 You of Nyamafufu
 Enter and cross the bridge
 You of Gunikuni
 Enter and cross the bridge
 You, Sekuru [grandfather] Daneel
 Look EFZIM has come
 Enter and cross the bridge
 It teaches me
 Enter and cross the bridge
 [It teaches] the Word of God
 It came to show us the bridge
 The bridge, Jesus Christ
 We have come, EFZIM is here
 Professor Daneel is here
 EFZIM has come to teach us
 About LIFE and WORK
 The work of Christ
 Enter and cross the bridge
 Enter the teachings of faith
 The entry is open
 Ah, the people here are full of joy

I join the singing and the dancing, knowing that I do not know all the answers to my questions. But I experience a deep sense of belonging and sharing with my friends as my green robe of yesterday’s tree-planting billows in the wind.

At the Zimbizi graduation in Gutu district, it was as if my AIC ministry had come full circle. Forty-two years ago, in 1965, I built my mud-and-pole research center there in the rural ‘outback’ for three years of fieldwork among the Independents and practitioners of traditional religion. For the first time in several decades I revisited the old site at Zimbizi dam next to the large mopani tree where it all started. Standing at the site in June 2007 I could still hear the murmur of voices at ‘Prophet Square’ that woke me up every morning before dawn. Up to 70 patients turned up for treatment each day. Extraction of teeth, treatment of trachoma of the eyes, burns, wounds, and the provision of medication for all kinds of ailments formed part of the early morning routine before research interviews could start. During emergencies I even had to assist with child-birth deliveries. Without realizing it then, I was in training for a ministry of comprehensive enactment of theology in rural Zimbabwe which absorbed my life in later years . . . And now that that



During the Zimbizi graduation ceremony in June 2007 story-tellers — who now are tribal elders — narrated amusing incidents about ‘our’ healing, hunting, and research in the sixties.

ministry was drawing to a close the ceremony at Zimbizi bound the past and the present together for me. The forty-two years in between contain a rich world of adventure and blessing.

As I shuffle the supposedly dignified ‘old man’s dance’ among the flitting movements of the more agile Zimbizi students, several of them Zionists, burst out laughing at the memory of my sister’s visit there many years ago. She had driven for hours in Chingombe asking many villagers about the whereabouts of the researcher in the chiefdom. But nobody had ever heard of a white by the name of Daneel in their area until somebody perked up asking: ‘Is it Mdyira, the white Gumbo clansman, who dances with the maZioni (Zionists), you are looking for? If so, you’ll find him at Zimbizi dam.’ We had a good laugh when she arrived at my mud-and-pole home.

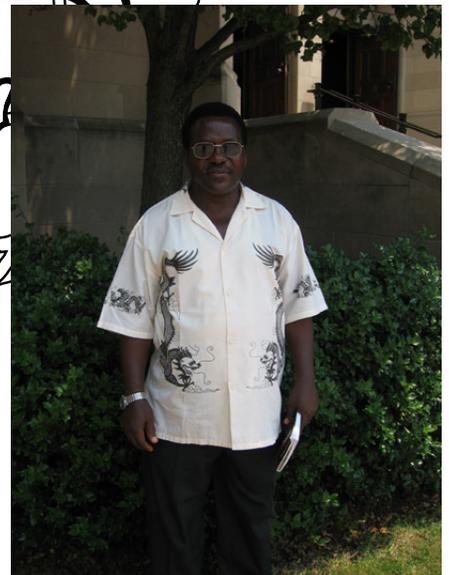
After all those years I am still dancing with the maZioni! Only the movements are a bit slower. And as I see those certificates held proudly by the dancers, I know that I have been taught much more about celebrating life and about sharing in communion by my AIC friends than I have ever managed to teach them theology.



cgcm pictures



Three Generations of Scholars — Dr. Charles Forman (age 90), emeritus professor of mission at Yale Divinity School, and doctoral advisor of Dana Robert; Doug Tzan, DRTS PhD student, Dana Robert, and Yeonseung Lee, ThD student — in attendance at the Yale-Edinburgh Mission History Conference, 28-30 June, in New Haven, CT at Yale Divinity School. Ms Lee gave a paper on her dissertation research, and Dana Robert gave a presentation on the History of Missiology website.



Rev. Dr. Emmanuel Anyambod, Dean of the Protestant Theological Faculty at Yaounde, Cameroun. He visited in June while attending a meeting of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches, and the picture is in front of Marsh Chapel, Boston University. He received his ThD in New Testament in 1993.

News in Brief:

Dr. Kevin Xiyi Yao

Dr. Yao has been promoted to Associate Professor of History of Christianity at the China Graduate School of Theology, Hong Kong.

***Christian Vision Project:
The Patrick Paradox***

Dr. Dana Robert & Ruth DeBorst

Featured articles on Christianity Today's website written by Dr. Dana Robert and Ms Ruth DeBorst.

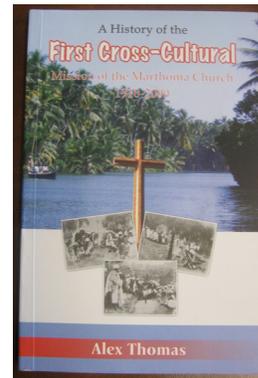
Visit: <http://christianitytodayblog.blogspot.com/2007/08/christian-vision-project-patrick.html>

Upcoming Events:

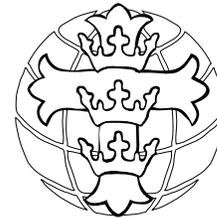
Eastern ASM Meeting
2-3 November

Shirley DeWolf to visit Boston University
6 November

New in Print!



Rev. Dr. Alex Thomas has published *A History of the First Cross-Cultural Mission of the Mar Thoma Church, 1910-2000.* (Delhi: ISPCK, 2007) **Dr. Thomas teaches Church History at the Mar Thoma Theological Seminary and FFRC, Kottayam, India.**



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