



**M L Daneel**

# **AFRICAN Earthkeepers**

**Volume 2**

**Environmental mission and  
liberation in Christian perspective**

## African Initiatives in Christian Mission 3



**UNISA**



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# AFRICAN Earthkeepers

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Volume 2

Environmental mission and  
liberation in Christian perspective

**M L Daneel**

University of South Africa, Pretoria



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In Africa names are indicators of relationship. I thank AZTREC for calling me Muchakata and the AAEC for insisting generously on 'Bishop Moses'.

Bishop Moses Daneel  
Shiri Chena  
Masvingo 1998

# SERIES PREFACE

Literature on Christian mission in Africa has been biased toward the activity of Western-oriented mission. White missionaries, Western mission policies and the relationship of mission to European imperialism have dominated the discussion of African missions. Little or no attention has been paid by scholars to African initiatives in Christian mission, nor have missiological studies been made from the perspective of the so-called 'recipients'. Yet the phenomenal growth of Christianity in Africa has occurred in the twentieth century, much of it after the independence of the continent from outside control. The series 'African Initiatives in Christian Mission' represents an attempt to address the reality that the spread of Christianity in Africa, its shape and character, has been the product of African Christians, both in the 'mission churches' and the 'African Initiated/Independent Churches (AICs).<sup>1</sup>

Mission churches and AICs are the two primary ecclesial contexts in which African initiative has occurred. Mission churches are those that have evolved directly from the outreach of Western denominations, and still represent the collegial traditions concerned. African Initiated Churches are churches begun by Africans in Africa primarily for Africans. AICs have consistently asserted their own leadership autonomy and religio-cultural contextuality free from the immediate control of influence of Western-oriented church leaders. These classificatory terms are somewhat misleading in that AICs are missionary churches par excellence, and the mission churches, by virtue of the missionary contributions of their members from the beginnings of their history, could be characterised as African Initiated Churches. Nevertheless, the distinction between the two families of churches remains important for historical and sociological reasons.

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1 Nomenclature varies on the two groups of African churches. 'Mission churches' have also been called 'Historical or Established Churches'. The acronym 'AICs' originally stood for 'African Independent Churches', a term which is still preferred by many scholars. In recent years, the World Council of Churches has tended to use the term 'African Initiated Churches'. In this series, different authors are free to use any of the three they choose. But in the introduction to the series the editors generally refer to 'African Initiated Churches' because the term resonates with the title 'African Initiatives in Christian Mission'.

This series seeks to overcome some of the limitations in previous studies of missions in Africa. Mission churches have been analysed primarily as denominational institutions, with a focus on educational work, or else as participants in political processes such as nation building. Less attention has been paid to mission churches as social movements, as products of indigenous culture and leadership, or as creators of African theologies. In short, the indigenous mission dimension has been weak in many of these studies. Works on mission churches today tend to be generalised rather than based on reliable, representative information gleaned from empirical enquiries. Thus the uniqueness and witness of these churches remains obscure. A predominantly male image of church history, moreover, has resulted in a paucity of literature on the contribution of women to church life and church expansion. The roles of black women pioneers in African churches are of particular interest to the editors of the series.

As regards the African Initiated Churches, the tendency in most of the earlier studies has been to assess AICs in terms of reaction to Western missions, separatism or protest against oppressive colonialism. As a result the missionary genius, missionary methods and missiological significance of AICs have not been studied in depth. However, the contribution of the AICs to the growth and religio-cultural rootedness of Christianity in Africa is of vital importance for the development of a relevant mission theology in Africa. It is increasingly evident that in terms of growth rates, indigenised evangelisation, missionary campaigns, and ecclesiastic contextualisation, the AICs are not peripheral but belong to the mainstream of African Christianity. Their contribution therefore should be evaluated as such, alongside that of the mission churches. Critical, yet open and fair-minded field studies should overcome the bias that has frequently distorted AIC studies in the past.

The ideas behind 'African Initiatives in Christian Mission' originated in an interdisciplinary research project conceived by Professor Marthinus L Daneel. With thirty years of empirical research on AICs in Zimbabwe, Daneel gathered a team of researchers from South Africa, Zimbabwe, and Malawi and received a grant in 1994 from The Pew Charitable Trusts. Assisted by field workers, researchers set out to gather data on different facets of African initiative within various churches in southern Africa. Meeting periodically at the Department of Missiology at the University of South Africa, the researchers reported on the work in progress and received feedback from other team members. The cooperative

nature of the project was essential to its success, for the original team included members of mission churches and AICS, academics and practitioners, blacks and whites. The Research Institute for Theology and Religion at Unisa provided administrative support; and Professor Dana Robert participated as the representative of Boston University, the official host institution for the project.

Out of the project meetings emerged a decision to hold an international conference in 1997 on 'African Initiatives in Christian Mission in Southern Africa'. As well as the conference, the group decided to launch a publication series that would make the results of the project available to scholars and church people in Africa. Given the lack of research and its limitations as outlined above, the project participants decided to broaden the focus of the series beyond southern Africa and, by implication, beyond the core group of scholars. The widest possible definition of 'mission' underlies the series. The participant scholars agreed to deal essentially with Christian mission: the outreach of Christian faith and life in the extension of Christ's good news beyond the boundaries of ignorance, cultures, poverty, suffering or whatever obstacles obscure a clear Christian witness in the world. Nevertheless, not all contributors are missiologists and their research methodologies include phenomenological, socio-anthropological, historical and distinctly non-theological approaches, or a combination of these. Yet the team feels that even if the joint venture, against the background of diverse disciplines, runs the risk of controversy and overdiversity within the series, the overall outcome will be both challenging and enriching. The qualification 'African initiative', too, is not subject to narrow definition. Black and white African theologians, for instance, are contributors in this series. And despite the predominant concern with black African initiatives, a number of studies on white missionary endeavour will be included, particularly the attempts of black African scholars to interpret the legacy of white-controlled missions, their impact on African society and the attitudes and response of African communities to such endeavour. In many respects white and black participation in mission in Africa are two sides of the same coin, the implication being that study of one enhances understanding of the other.

On behalf of all participants in this joint research and publishing venture, we express our appreciation to our sponsors, the staff of Unisa's Research Institute for Theology and Religion, and Unisa Press; their support remains crucial in the realisation of the envisaged goals.

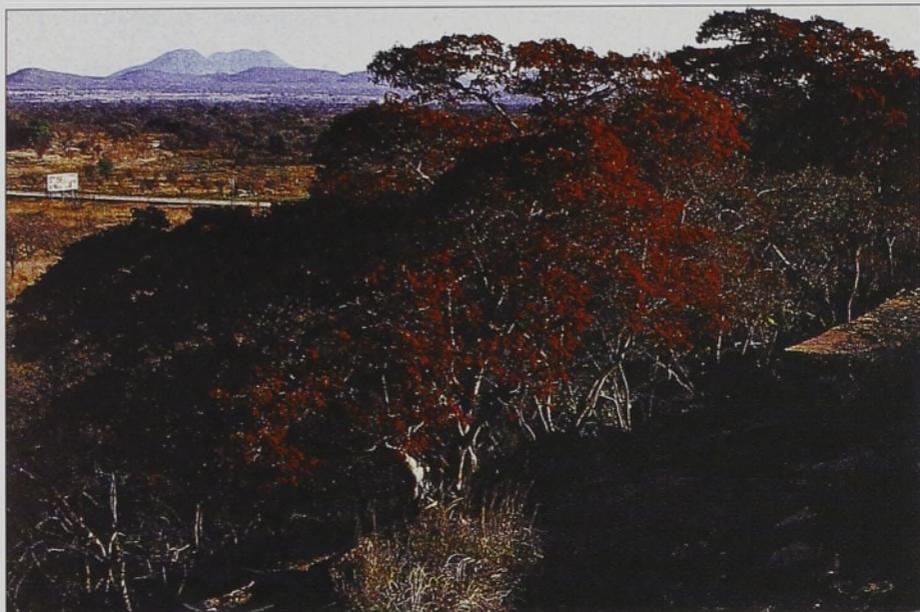
## About this publication

Volume 2 of *African Earthkeepers* describes the Christian wing of ZIRRCO, the largest grassroots environmental and tree-planting movement in southern Africa. Working in tandem with traditional chiefs and spirit mediums (whose work is described in volume 1), millions of AIC members led by their bishops belong to the Association of African Earthkeeping Churches, based in Masvingo Province, Zimbabwe. As founder and participant-observer in ZIRRCO, author Inus Daneel traces the contours of an emerging Trinitarian African environmental theology. Citing sermons and ecological rituals, he argues that the earthkeeping mission of the indigenous churches represents a contextualised form of religio-cultural liberation.

Readers of this book will be drawn to the detailed descriptions of 'earth healing' (*maporesanyika*) ceremonies held by the earthkeeping churches. The ceremonies combine the classic AIC emphasis on healing with tree-planting eucharists in which communicants confess their sins against the earth. The reception of the sacrament accompanies distribution of seedlings that are planted to heal the denuded and damaged earth, often understood as the body of Christ. Since many AICs use the eucharist as the launching point for missionary campaigns, the incorporation of environmentalism into the heart of Christian sacramental life demonstrates a holistic mission model that potentially could be applied in other parts of southern Africa.

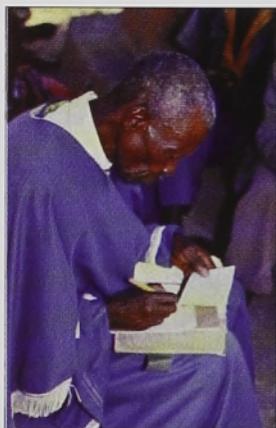
In the final section of the book, the author places the enacted theologies of the African earthkeepers into the international framework of ecotheology. Unlike many Western theories that never touch the lives of ordinary people, the work of ZIRRCO represents effective local initiative – a tangible study of environmentalism at work. This book vividly demonstrates that the creative missional vision of the African earthkeepers brings hope not only to Africa, but to the entire world.

Dana L Robert  
Series editor



'On each side of the river in the New Jerusalem was the tree of life, which bears fruit twelve times a year, once each month; and its leaves are for the healing of the nations' (Rev 22:2). The young leaves of *mivuzhe*, mountain acacia trees, signal the promise of healing through life-renewing rain, while the rest of the landscape still appears dry and forlorn

Bishop prophet Musarari Dhliwayo, first patron of the earthkeeping AICs

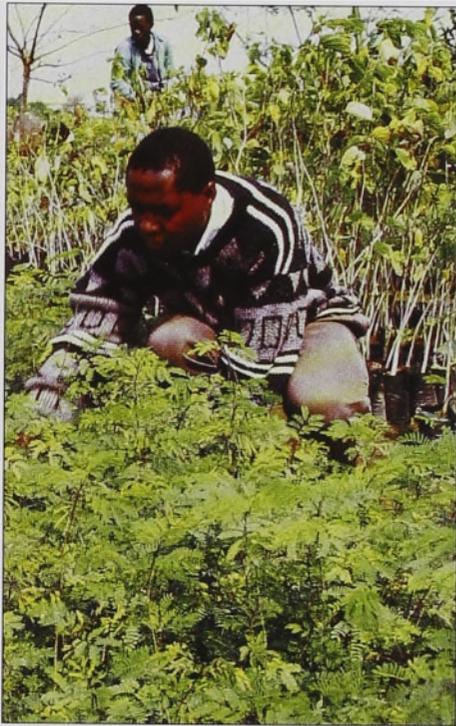


And the Spirit of God urged the prophet: 'Cry the empty gullies,  
the dying plains – clothe naked land of forebears!'



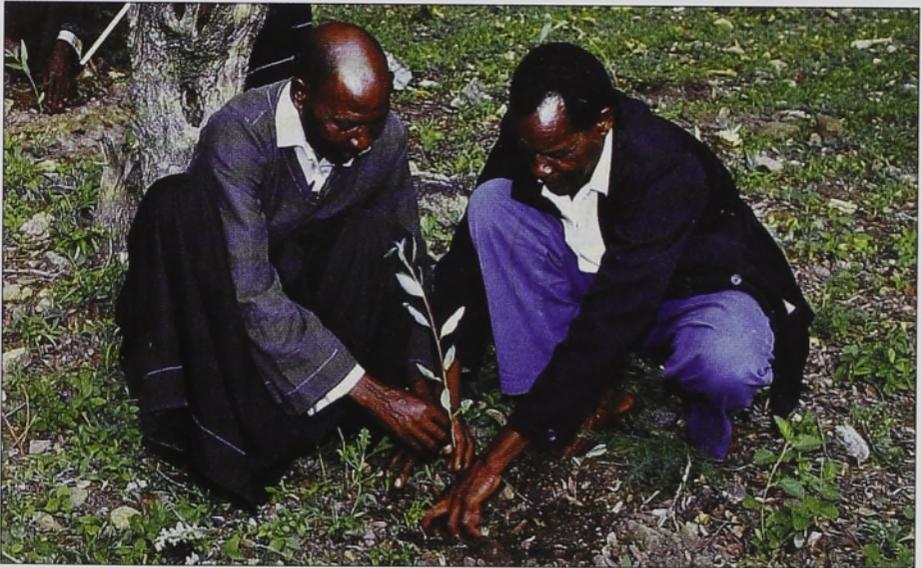
Heeding prophet's call they came  
Churches of the poor  
billowed swirl of garments  
holy staves and cardboard crowns





Tend seedlings!  
the arsenal ...  
for war of trees

Bonded hands, new earth-community  
Touch childless womb, hapless soil –  
with seedlings of love



# INTRODUCTION

## 1 Earthkeeper's call

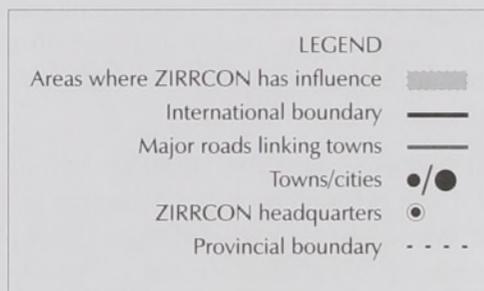
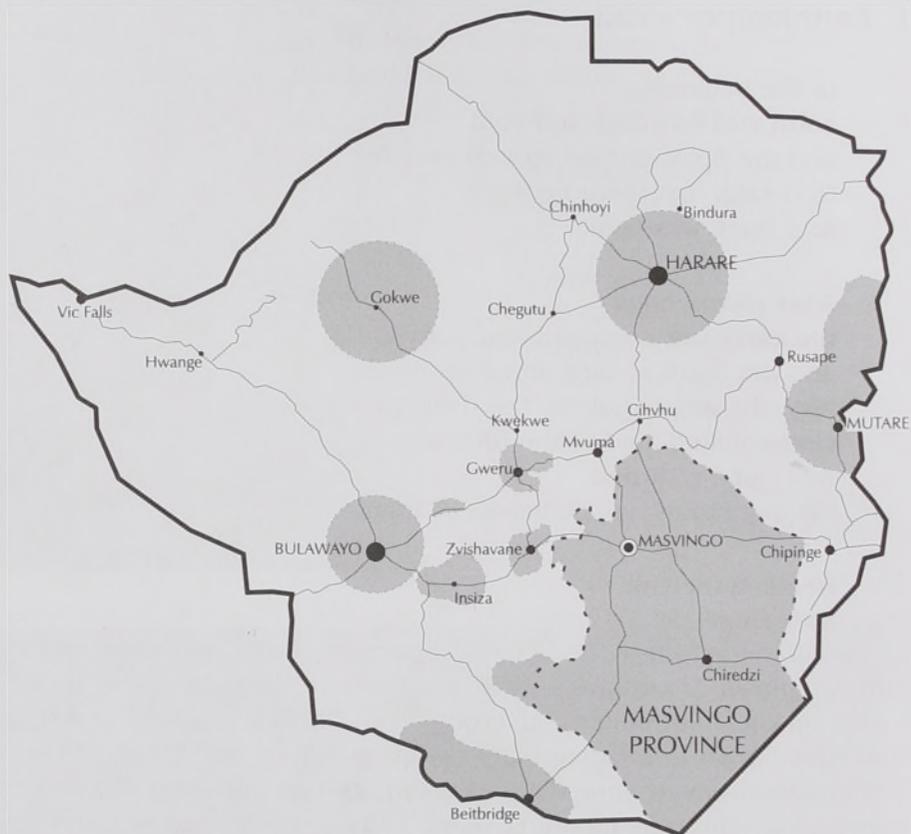
In the beginning  
earth was formless and void  
and the Spirit of God moved over the waters.  
God said: 'Let there be light!'  
And there was light.

After *chimurenga*  
the earth was scorched and barren  
and the Spirit of God urged prophets:  
'Cry, the empty gullies, the dying plains –  
clothe naked land of the forebears!'  
And hope returned  
Healing hands, young leaves of trees

Heeding the call  
they came:  
black multitudes  
churches of the poor:  
billowing garments ...  
red, white, blue, resplendent green  
bearing holy staves, cardboard crowns.  
Cursed descendants of Ham  
rejects of white mission  
lift the fallen banner of Spirit  
kingdom's cornerstone  
where souls of people, tree souls meet.

Prophets shouted:  
Repent! Confess!  
I bare earth with axe and fire  
rape forests without return  
sledge-rip gullied meadows

## ZIRRCON's main spheres of influence in Zimbabwe



turn earth's water to trickling mire.  
Confess and baptise ...  
the wizards, the land!  
Oust demons of neglect.  
From Jordan emerge  
with bonded hands, new earth community  
Touch childless womb, touch hapless soil  
– seedlings of love.

Proclaim new heaven,  
new earth in black Jerusalem  
'Come Mwari!  
Come Son! Come Spirit!'  
Bare feet touch sacred soil  
where rhythmic bodies sweat and sway.  
where weary traveller  
finds cool in shade  
rustle of leaves  
fountains spring  
clear water of life.

The African Independent Churches (AIC) in Zimbabwe indeed heeded the prophetic call to earthkeeping. They joined forces with practitioners of traditional religion – the chiefs, headmen, spirit mediums and ex-combatants of Zimbabwe's political liberation struggle – and formed their own Christian wing of the green army. This they called the AAEC – the Association of African Earthkeeping Churches. Over nearly a decade this body of churches has grown into an imposing ecumenical association, currently counting some 150 member churches and representing an estimated constituency of two million adherents. In the space of a few years they have engaged in nursery development and the planting of millions of trees. New earthkeeping rituals were introduced. There were also sermons and sacramentally related green activities, all pointing to the evolution of a grassroots eco-theology.

This book presents a profile of this emergent AIC theology within the green struggle. It is hoped that it will not merely be an exercise in self-assessment *with* and *for* the AIC communities engaged in earthkeeping, but will also challenge the church in Africa and abroad to reconsider and restructure its ministry to the environment.

The background to the formation and initial growth of the AAEC was sketched in the first volume of *African earthkeepers* (Daneel 1998, chapter 3). It included an outline of the organisation of ZIRRCO, the interaction between its two religiously based branches – AZTREC and the AAEC – and the roles of traditionalist and Christian key figures in the movement. The historical section on the birth of the entire movement in volume 1 was followed by a descriptive analysis of the traditional rituals and beliefs developed by AZTREC in the context of the war of the trees. In this volume I attempt to amplify and complement that story by exploring the Christian dimension and theology of the earth-keeping struggle as reflected in AAEC activity.

## 2 Community-based contextualisation

When theologising as an ecologically motivated insider but a cultural outsider who tries nonetheless to see through African eyes and feel through the throb of dancing black feet, one needs to consider the methodological implications and limitations.

AIC theology by definition is *spontaneously enacted theology*. It is not an academically systematised theology, the preserve of 'professional' theologians who retreat Western-style to reflect and then record their reflections in writing. No, AIC reflection and response to life-situations in a given context primarily take the form of community events and find expression in emotionally uninhibited dance, song, vivid proclamation and social action, all based on predominantly literal interpretations and applications of Scripture. Given this outstanding characteristic of AIC theology, it is appropriate that the first section of this book should focus mainly on *church praxis*: the patterns of activity emerging in what is felt to be the church's new ministry of healing and liberating all of creation. Here, too, the basic trend of theological innovation derives from spontaneous community response to comprehensive (anthropological and ecological) needs in peasant society, instead of being imposed by written dictates from above. Admittedly, key figures like myself and fellow founders of the AAEC have helped to give some organisational direction to new developments, as will be described below. But the starting point, significantly, was that the Independents of Zimbabwe experienced the movement of God's Spirit in direct relation to both the church's task and a devastated environment. This movement of the

Spirit, moreover, correlated with the sharing of scriptural insight against a common, if diversified, background of *chimurenga*, which eventually converted into concerted church activity – earth healing through tree planting.

Enacted, sung and danced in direct response to African needs, AIC theology – for all its lack of books written by the actual participants – is *contextualised theology* par excellence. In his discussion of the varieties of local theology, Schreiter (1985:7–16) distinguishes between three different models: the *translation, adaptation and contextual* models. To relate AIC theology, my involvement in its interpretation, and specifically current eco-theological developments in the AAEC to other local theologies, let us briefly examine these three models.

*Translation models* are the theological procedures generally adopted in traditional cross-cultural missionary situations. To be properly understood, church ceremonies, worship, catechetical instruction and gospel proclamation need to be translated into the recipient culture. This translation entails a twofold procedure: freeing the Christian message as much as possible from its previous cultural association, and then translating it into the new situation. ‘An underlying image directing this procedure,’ says Schreiter (1985:7), ‘is one of kernel and husk: the basic Christian revelation is the kernel; the previous cultural settings in which it has been incarnated constitute the husk. The kernel has to be hulled time and again, as it were, to allow it to be translated into new cultural contexts.’ Variations of this model can be found in attempts to rid Western Christianity of Hellenistic categories, in the post-Vatican II liturgical adaptation of Roman Catholic rites to local customs, and in countless Protestant attempts to translate the Bible using concepts which are considered to have linguistic equivalents in local cultures.

This model has two major weaknesses. First, it stems from a positivist understanding of culture. Since it is the foreign missionary or Bible translator who is analysing the culture, the focus is not so much on the culture investigated as on finding parallels with a previously contextualised Christianity. Second, the kernel-and-husk theory tends to assume a ‘supracultural’ setting in which the message is translated into a new cultural situation. Consequently the interwovenness of revelational kernel and cultural husk, also in the Bible, is not sufficiently recognised to deal with the theological complexities involved.

*Adaptation models* take local cultures more seriously and often emerge at a more advanced stage of local theological development. In this kind of model expatriates and local leaders cooperate in attempts to construct local philosophies or worldviews which correspond with Western philosophical or theological systems as a basis for a local theology. Schreiter (1985:9) writes:

Placide Tempels's *Bantu philosophy*, first published in 1944 from his experience in the Belgian Congo, is an early and good example of this approach. In this book Tempels takes the then prevalent Neo-Thomistic philosophical framework and redevelops it with equivalent categories from Bantu peoples. The understanding was that this could form the basis for a sub-Saharan Christian theology much as Neo-Thomism had formed the basis for a European theology.

In its refined, more advanced form the adaptation model involves training local leaders to study their own religio-cultural heritage in Western categories and on that basis to create existentially relevant theologies. African theologians such as John Mbiti and Charles Nyamiti are examples.

A major advantage of this model is that when local theologians use Western categories and methodological frameworks in their writings it facilitates understanding and dialogue between Western and other, mainly 'Third' World, churches. The limitations, however, are obvious. This kind of theology is mostly addressed to academics who do not necessarily represent the same constituency as does the local church. Consequently the role of local communities in the theological process is neglected or remains somewhat obscure.

*Contextual models* differ from the first two in that reflection focuses less on the faith received but starts with the local socio-cultural context. In this category Schreiter distinguishes between an *ethnographic* and a *liberationist* approach. The former is particularly concerned with cultural identity. Here a local theology starts with the needs of the local people and not with questions asked by other Christian churches or those raised in systematic presentations of the faith. Small Christian community movements have been vehicles for this kind of theologising, resulting in enhanced identities. This theological method, however, has a number of limitations. Concern for identity and stability often

causes conflicting notions in the environment to be ignored for the sake of harmony and continuity. The ethnographic approach easily falls prey to cultural romanticism and, as a result, fail to come to grips with, 'by Christian standards', sinful aspects of cultural histories. Sophisticated cultural analysis, moreover, tends to exclude the most crucial component of the theological process – the communities themselves. Yet Schreiter (1985:14) maintains that these limitations can be overcome if a lively dialectic between gospel traditions and local cultural traditions is maintained.

Whereas the ethnographic approach is concerned with cultural identity and continuity, the liberationist approach focuses on social change and discontinuity:

Put theologically, liberation models are keenly concerned with salvation. Liberation models analyze the lived experience of a people to uncover the forces of oppression, struggle, violence, and power. They concentrate on the conflictual elements oppressing a community or tearing it apart. In the midst of grinding poverty, political violence, deprivation of rights, discrimination and hunger, Christians move from social analysis to finding echoes in the biblical witness in order to understand the struggle in which they are engaged or to find direction for the future. Liberation models concentrate on the need for change (Schreiter 1985:15).

One of the most positive features of this approach is that it unleashes Christian witness and action in communities by linking their existential needs with the saving word of God. Limitations are the inclination to concentrate on the needs of people to the exclusion of biblical witness and the experiences of other churches. In addition there is a risk that reflection sometimes takes place only after action instead of forming the basis for it.

The translation and adaptation models raise the question whether my own theological reflection – couched as it is in Western categories, and aimed partly at interpreting AIC theological development to both Western and African academics – can do justice to AIC theology. Is this vibrantly celebrated theology not distorted in the process of writing, and does my attempt to verbalise and systematise realities, to which I remain in part an outsider, not overshadow community enactment of that theology? In other words, is my theologising among the Shona

Independents not susceptible to the pitfalls of the adaptation model? Schreier (1985:18–20) warns against the dominance of professional theologians in the development of a local theology, insofar as their role imposes a new hegemony on already oppressed communities. Nevertheless, he points out that if the professional theologians participate in the community's experience they could create bonds of accountability between local and world church.

I hope that my role among the AICs fulfils a meaningful bridging function between Independents and the wider body of Christian believers. Nonetheless, the following aspects of this function should be noted when assessing the environmental theological developments presented in this study.

First, much of my work in Zimbabwe corresponds with Tempels' immersion in and interpretation of African culture and worldviews. A significant difference, however, is that among AICs I operate as a theological freelancer, seeking to interpret and participate in their theological development as a kind of adopted insider rather than working as a missionary of a Western church. It is in that capacity that I try to construct an indigenised philosophical framework as a basis for a Christian African theology. In addition, it should be noted that as a participant observer and fellow Independent I have welcomed the role of 'theological innovator' in the AIC context. Here my pietistic evangelical roots in the Protestant Calvinistic tradition are discernible. At the same time the Independents, with their zest for religious celebration, have taught me to be dogmatically 'footloose' – to dance at the point where precise systematic reflection gets blurred by the urgency of life and action. Consequently I have been much more involved in initiating and participating in new AIC movements – focusing on ecumenical theological training, socioeconomic development and ecological endeavour – than in producing Tempels' kind of comprehensive, culturally adapted and systematised theological reflections.

Second, the prominence of my position as founder and co-architect of the AAEC inevitably reflects in the theology developed by the movement. Central features of eco-liturgical innovation (eg the trend towards environmentally related conversion, 'ecological' baptism, public confession of ecological sins and the introduction of a tree-planting eucharist) stem directly from my proposals and insight based on

research and participatory experience. These proposals, made at executive meetings and conferences or in tree-planting sermons, are 'experimented' with in church praxis, assessed in terms of grassroots response and then adopted or rejected through community consensus reached during tree-planting ceremonies rather than in the more theoretical executive context.

Third, at this stage I cannot assess accurately the actual impact of my influence on theological developments in the AAEC context. Other observers may be able to judge this at some future date with greater objectivity than I am capable of. I am confident, however, that sufficient safeguards are built into AAEC theologising to prevent it from becoming a one-man show.

Fourth, these safeguards consist of the following: The AICs by their very nature will not permit an adopted outsider to do their theology for them. My proposals are accepted only to the extent that they fit and help extend the existing theology of the AICs. The reward for me as a fellow AIC innovator is to see some of our new ideas being absorbed and contextualised in AIC ceremonies, there to emerge in surprising variations and shapes based entirely on the intuitive creativity and improvisation of AIC communities themselves. In other words, authentic innovation is and remains the responsibility and prerogative of AIC communities. Schreiter (1985:16-17) aptly describes 'the community as theologian': 'the Holy Spirit, working in and through the believing community, gives shape and expression to Christian experience ... (therefore) theology is certainly intended for a community and is not intended to remain the property of a theologian class.'

Fifth, the emphasis on community enactment of AIC theology does not, of course, rule out authorship by a nuclear group within the community, which gives voice to (and writes reflections on) the theology of the community (Schreiter 1985:17). A lot of discussion and planning of possible earth-healing liturgies take place at AAEC executive meetings and conferences. Thus a substantial cross-section of AIC leaders take part in reflection and help to direct the new earthkeeping ministry, the war of the trees. Leadership participation at this level of theologising is vitally important because of an AIC ecclesiology – particularly in the prophetic movements, constituting the bulk of AAEC membership – which elevates the founder and succeeding leaders to a point where

they virtually, as iconic embodiments, become the church. Given this ecclesiological trend, AIC communities expect their bishops, both in the ecumenical context of the AAEC and in their own churches, to take a strong and convincing lead in the movement's environmental struggle. The bishops do so by preaching their growing ecological convictions to the AAEC's ecumenical conference audiences, calling on their flocks during ordinary church services and newly liturgised tree-planting ceremonies to help liberate the environment, and generally guiding whatever innovation their followers may spontaneously enact during such ceremonies.

Another integral part of AAEC theological innovation is the interaction between ZIRRCO and AAEC. As a result certain key figures have been authorised to produce publications on behalf of the entire movement for a variety of purposes. Thus Bishop Marinda has been commissioned to write two handbooks in the vernacular – one on AIC environmental theology and another on an AIC theology of development – to be used as prescribed material for AAEC conscientisation courses; and Revd Solomon Zvanaka is producing a traditional 'theology' of the environment for AZTREC's ecological training programmes. My own drafts for the two volumes on *African earthkeepers* were followed with keen interest by the AAEC. When sections of these drafts were read out to bishops their critical and stimulating feedback created a theological workshop situation. This in itself is a relatively new development in the AIC context, for a large number of barely literate AIC leaders are now not only aware of the value of ZIRRCO's monitoring and ongoing research service, but are themselves increasingly joining in reflection on the interaction between Scripture and ecological warfare and in the telling on paper of their own story.

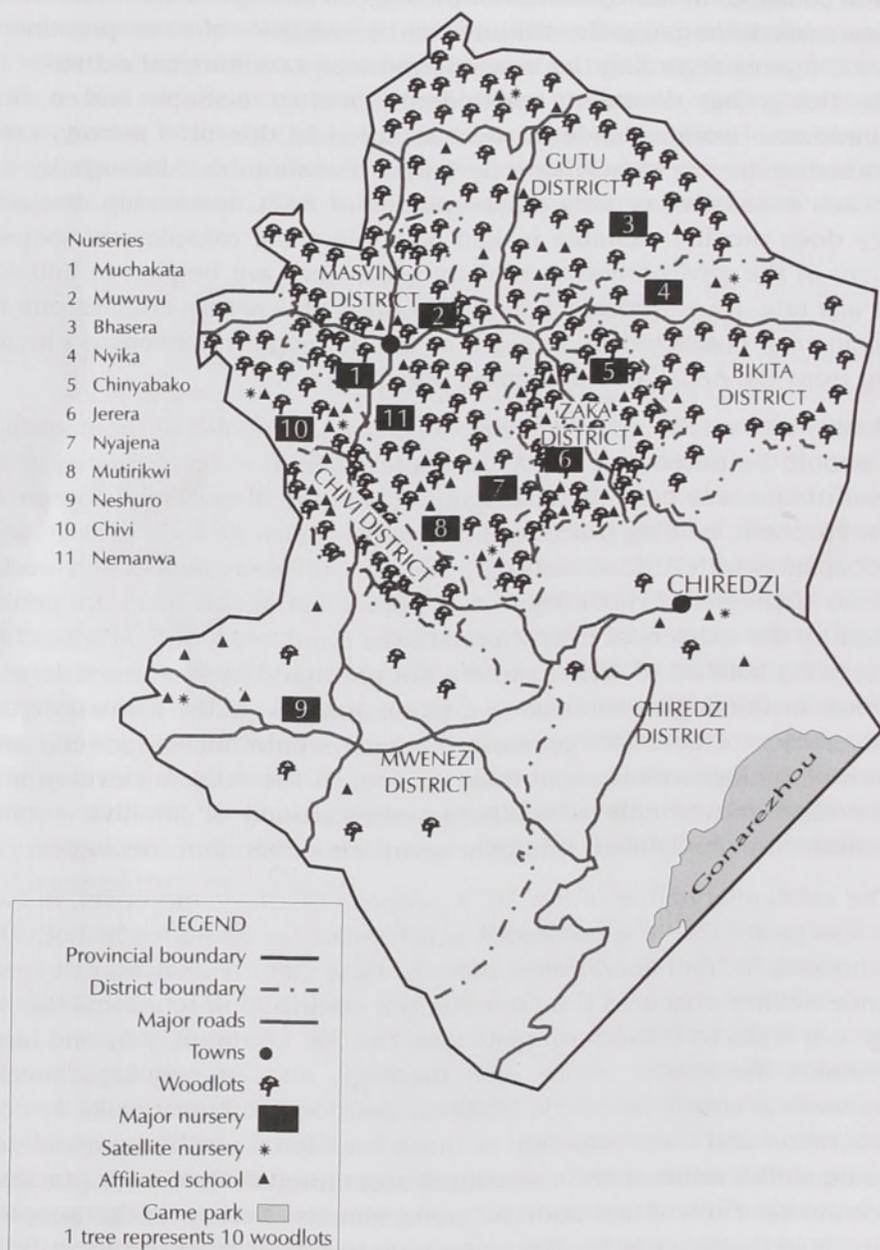
Having briefly described the AAEC's multifaceted process of theological development, I must emphasise that my account of AIC theology is purely introductory. It is quite impossible to do justice, within the limited scope of this study, to the entire tapestry of richly varied church ceremonies, the roles of all the leading figures and the theological themes in a mass movement of this nature. Nevertheless, my descriptive analysis of the emerging AAEC theology is an attempt to complement my own earthkeeping experience and observations with a probing scrutiny of the communal psyche of the movement. To this end I studied the tape-recorded tree-planting sermons of both Spirit-type and

Ethiopian-type AIC leaders, a few of which are included in the appendix. This gave me some idea of how leading earthkeepers relate scriptural passages to the dynamics of their green struggle. I also used interview material to gauge the attitudes and convictions of some prominent AAEC figures regarding the newly introduced eco-liturgical activities in the field. Only fourteen respondents (mainly bishops and a few *Ruwadzano* women leaders) were included in this brief survey, conducted under my supervision by Tarisai Zvokuomba. Although by no means exhaustive or fully representative of AAEC leadership, the survey does provide valuable insight into influential role-players' assessment of the environmental ministry which they are helping to initiate. At any rate, an empirically based analysis of this nature enables one to distinguish characteristic features of the theological consensus emerging from the AAEC's earthkeeping praxis.

Finally, with reference to Schreiter's *contextual models* of theologising, it should be noted that the AICs' contextualisation incorporates in its own unique way both the ethnographic and the liberationist approaches. Prophetic healing practices in particular illustrate their intense preoccupation with African culture, traditional religious beliefs and world-views (Daneel 1971). Dialogue and interaction at this level are generated by the existential need to relate the good news of God's word to the living realities of Africa and are not prompted by Western-style academic or theological motives of cultural analysis. At the same time the experience of colonial oppression, religious paternalism, poverty and lack of socioeconomic opportunities caused the AICs to develop into liberation movements with strong undercurrents of intuitive – even vehemently proclaimed, if largely unwritten – liberation theologies.

The existential nature of the AIC's *people's theology*, moreover, makes it less prone to the weaknesses which Schreiter identifies in both the ethnographic and liberationist models. Here cultural analysis or experience neither obscures the community's contribution to a local theology, nor leads to cultural romanticism. The AIC community by and large remains the creator of its own theology, and an ongoing dialectic between a strong prophetic tradition and local culture results in confrontation and transformation of those traditional practices considered to be sinful, rather than in uncritical accommodation of such practices for the sake of cultural continuity and identity. Here, too, the people's needs in the struggle for liberation tend to colour or even distort Bible

ZIRRCON's woodlots, major & satellite nurseries and affiliated schools in Masvingo Province



interpretation and spontaneous action often precedes theological reflection. Despite these shortcomings, the Independents' committed search for scriptural guidance and the promptings of the Holy Spirit counteracts theological deviations or inconsistencies. Thus the contextual model of the AICs, comprising the integration of both religio-cultural identity and relevance with a tradition of struggle for sociopolitical liberation, provides an ideal vehicle for a ministry of environmental stewardship.

### 3 Outline of study

The first section of this study outlines the ecclesiological implications of an earthkeeping ministry. A brief historical survey in chapter 1 traces the emergence in AIC circles of a variety of images of the church as a healing and liberating institution in relation to the most crucial needs of peasant society in different historical phases. The original image of Zionist and Apostolic prophetic movements as 'faith-healing hospitals', for instance, evolved on sociopolitical lines to accommodate resistance against foreign colonial rule. This culminated during *chimurenga* in an understanding of Christian discipleship as active, divinely sanctioned involvement in the struggle against oppression until a new dispensation of peace and relative wellbeing could be achieved.

Thus an ecclesiological tradition of liberationist activism was already established by the time environmental commitment widened and enriched that involvement. An analysis of the outstanding attributes of an earthkeeping church shows an emphasis on ecumenism: united action, not only between Christian churches but also between Christians and African traditionalists. The outreach of tree-planting churches indicates a new understanding of the church's mission. Because of the good news of redemption in Christ, conversion, church planting and church growth remain focal in missionary proclamation. Earthkeeping, however, becomes integral to conversion and spiritual growth. The gospel is proclaimed as encompassing the entire earth community, through a ministry of earth healing which entails the salvation of all creation.

Chapter 2 describes the main ritual and liturgical innovations in AAEC churches. Public confession of ecological sins features prominently in the conversion of individual earthkeepers and their participation in the

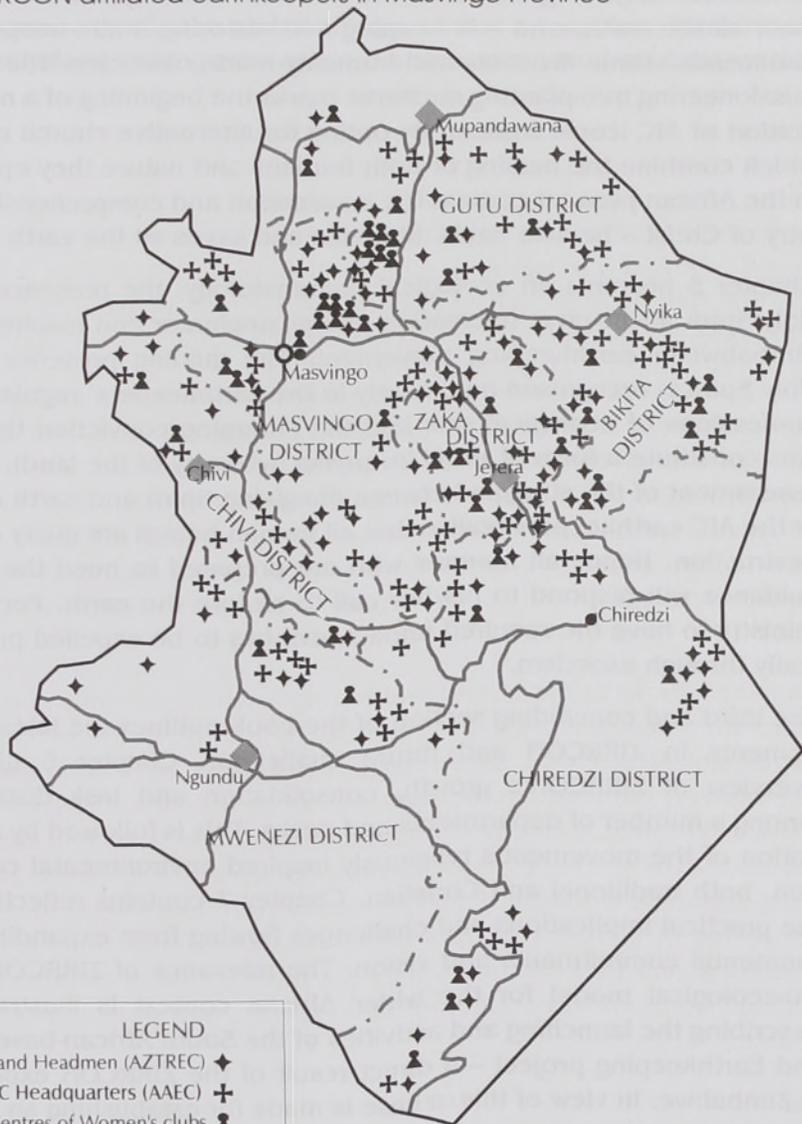
sacraments of baptism and holy communion. More than anything else, tree-planting eucharists, ecumenically celebrated by clusters of AICs during the rainy season, illustrate the symbolic inclusion of all creation in the sacrament of Christ's death and resurrection. This sacrament, the heartbeat of Christianity, potently demonstrates the unity between Christ as the head of the church and his disciples as its body, and the union between the cosmic Christ, in whom all things hold together (Col 1:17), and his creation. In this sacrament, popularly referred to as the *maporesanyika* (earth-healing), the healing of human beings and of the cosmos fuse in symbolic realisation of the new heaven and the new earth and in powerful witness to faith in the coming kingdom.

Part 2 examines the trinitarian characteristics of an emerging African theology of the environment. Related theological issues – the development of a Spirit-inspired green ethic, the understanding of God's kingdom in relation to a cosmically commissioned church, and the eschatological implications of earth-bound salvation, etc – are mentioned in passing, are implicit in the descriptive data, or are not discussed at all. Nonetheless the insight derived from a vibrant earthkeeping ministry could help mould future African eco-theologies.

Chapter 3 looks at the awareness among earthkeepers of the presence of an immanent creator in a ravaged environment. In the perception of participant AICs, Mwari, the ecological deity who, as *Wokumusoro* (the one above), remained somewhat remote in traditional religion, is the insider, the biblical God of the crops and the power behind the war of the trees. The presence of an anthropomorphic, near pantheistic and compassionate God who is jealous of his dwindling forests and hurt by the felling of a tree, contrasts with – and adds new dimensions to – Protestant and Catholic missionary attempts in Africa to draw the distant and transcendent creator into the daily life and worship of common people.

A green Christology, presented in chapter 4, portrays Christ the earthkeeper. His traditional healing ministry encompasses all the earth and his lordship over creation is understood to give new impetus to the creator's call for earth stewardship in the Genesis story, and a more comprehensive mission to his church than the mere salvation of human souls. When Christ emerges as kinsman of the African earthkeeper, he fulfils and transforms the traditional role of the clan's founder ancestor

# ZIRRCO affiliated earthkeepers in Masvingo Province



## LEGEND

- Chiefs and Headmen (AZTREC) ◆
- AIC Headquarters (AAEC) +
- Centres of Women's clubs ♀
- ZIRRCO Headquarters ○
- Main roads ———
- Provincial boundary ———
- District boundary - - -
- Towns ●
- Growth points ◆

as *muridzi venyika* (guardian of the land). He is the guardian of all the land, all the earth, who – in keeping and restoring it all – respects yet transcends ethnic divisions and humanly made obstacles. The AAEC's missionering tree-planting eucharist marks the beginning of a new generation of AIC iconic leaders. By opting for alternative church colonies which combine the healing of both humans and nature they epitomise in the African peasant context the incarnation and comprehensive ministry of Christ – he who heals, liberates and saves all the earth.

Chapter 5 presents an ecological pneumatology: the presence of the Holy Spirit as life-giver in creation and as originator and inspirer of the Zimbabwean earthkeeping movement. The guiding presence of the Holy Spirit is recognised particularly in the earthkeepers' regular public confessions of ecological sins and the emerging conviction that such sins constitute a form of *uroyi hwenyika* (wizardry of the land). In their assessment of the struggle between life-giving Spirit and earth destroyer the AIC earthkeepers realise that all human beings are guilty of earth destruction. Hence all humans who are prepared to heed the Spirit's guidance will respond to his/her call to restore the earth. For such a ministry to have the required impact, evil has to be expelled pneumatically through exorcism.

The third and concluding section of the book outlines the latest developments in ZIRRCON and future challenges. Chapter 6 gives an overview of ZIRRCON's growth, consolidation and task distribution among a number of departments and desks. This is followed by an evaluation of the movement's religiously inspired environmental contribution, both traditional and Christian. Chapter 7 contains reflections on the practical implications and challenges flowing from expanding environmental commitments and vision. The relevance of ZIRRCON's religio-ecological model for the wider African context is illustrated by describing the launching and activities of the South African-based Faith and Earthkeeping project – a direct result of the ZIRRCON experience in Zimbabwe. In view of this, a case is made for establishing an African Earthkeeping Union to promote a people's green movement along similar lines of religiously informed empowerment. I also point out the need for African Christian theologians to develop an environmental liberation theology, in which a concept like 'eco-justice' in the African situation will signify human and environmental values and upliftment as integral and equal components of the same struggle. Finally, the story

of ZIRRCON, modest and relatively unknown as it is, is fitted into the flow of green news in the global village, so that it may draw fresh inspiration and also challenge the as yet inactive earthkeepers of the world.

## PART 1

# Environmental ministry and changing images of the church