

## Christ the earthkeeper

In the 1970s Fashole Luke (1976:148), referring to Mbiti's statement that all theology is essentially christology, commented that he found hardly any evidence of African theologians really wrestling with christological ideas. As a result he called for this subject to be given top priority in African theology. In recent years the situation has changed to such an extent that Nyamiti (1991:3) claims without hesitation that 'christology is the subject which has been most developed in today's African theology'.

One of Mbiti's early attempts to highlight christological features in African Christianity focused on the West African Independent Churches (Aladura). He showed that these churches' main interest was in Christ's birth, healing miracles, triumphal entry into Jerusalem, death and resurrection. From this he concluded that a Christus Victor was being propagated (Mbiti, in Schreiter 1991:20) – a tendency he attributed to the traditional myths of Africa which lacked a future dimension and held out no hope of human immortality.

There is nothing in traditional concepts promising or hoping for a reversal of the experiences described in myths of the past. There is nothing to redeem man from the loss of immortality, resurrection and rejuvenation. This never dawned on the thinking of our peoples nor did they ever conceive of a supra-human conqueror of evil among men (Mbiti 1968:55).

In view of this lacuna, the AIC portrayal of a Christus Victor, despite obvious doctrinal limitations and one-sidedness, conveys an extremely important message. The traditional void is filled by victory over the destructive powers that had prevailed in the past. The concepts of hope, victory and salvation introduce new and enriching dimensions into the mythology and time concepts of Africa.

Other theologians, too, have noted the tendency to see Christ as the

victor. A number of them claim that the AICs, particularly those known as messianic movements, accept a *theologia gloriae* at the expense of a *theologia crucis* (Daneel 1982). Bosch (1974:24), for instance, notes that Christ's incarnation and atoning death feature less conspicuously in African than in Western theology. He considers this to be an obstructive *theologia gloriae*, which could render Paul's claim of 'My power is made perfect in weakness' (2 Cor 12:9) even more incomprehensible and unacceptable in Africa than in Europe.

From our discussion of African christologies below it will be obvious that there is far greater awareness of the suffering and crucified Christ nowadays. A broader spectrum of christological theologising – including inculturated portrayals of Christ as ancestor, chief, master of initiation rites, healer, and so forth – makes it impossible and inappropriate to apply an either-or evaluative scheme in the sense of *theologia gloria* versus *theologia crucis*. Nevertheless, Nyamiti (1991:18,19) correctly observes that the existing written African christologies have had little appreciable influence on the life of African churches. They are mainly systematic academic reflections on the mystery of Christ in the midst of African realities and need to be complemented with christologies that really function in the life of the African church. In this respect I consider the unwritten yet very real and distinct christological 'models' in the enacted theology of the AICs to be of great significance. The subject is too big and diversified for detailed consideration in this chapter. At most one could attempt to outline a few outstanding characteristics of an emerging AIC christology – that of Christ the earthkeeper, which is presupposed or manifest in our earthkeeping ministry. The importance of this exercise is, first of all, that it highlights an aspect of African christology which has received little attention from black African theologians so far. Secondly, it illustrates the extent to which AIC praxis complements and enriches not only African Christianity generally but written African christologies in particular.

#### 4.1 Christ's Lordship and the mission of the church

Christology and ecclesiology are as inseparable as Christ, the head of the church, is from the communities of believers who constitute his body, the church (Nyamiti 1991:16). It is surprising, therefore, how often this integral link is overlooked or obscured in African theology.

African christology generally, and Christ's lordship in particular, have been insufficiently related to the missionary nature of the church – a deficiency pointed out by Mbiti (1986:176–227). He maintains that although African theologians have written a great deal about the role of foreign missions in Africa – their evangelising, educational and medical work – there is almost nothing about active missionary participation by the African church (Mbiti 1986:177). In a brief review of recent missiological literature he indicates that Ofori (*Christianity in tropical Africa*, 1977) mentions only ten out of a total of 2 859 items in which African theologians deal with this subject; that Verkuyl's *Contemporary missiology: an introduction* (1978) contains not a single contribution by an African theologian; and that none of the contributions by African theologians in Horst Burkle's *Missionstheologie* (1979) approach missiology from the angle of the African church.

This theological omission is particularly serious in view of the fact that the church in Africa is probably expanding faster than anywhere else in the world, which suggests that there has been and still is an intense response to Christ's missionary/evangelising commission in African church praxis without a corresponding, supportive development in written theology. This again underscores the great value of the still largely unrecorded missionary traditions which the AICs have developed on the basis of their own understanding and experience of the biblical Christ figure – traditions which should be focal in future theological reflection on African christology and ecclesiology.

Let us briefly consider one such tradition, as it antedates and influences current AAEC developments in this field. In the Shona Spirit-type churches paschal celebrations culminate in the celebration of the eucharist. This is the context in which the church as a group concerns itself, directly or indirectly, with its outreach into the world. Christ's classic missionary commandment (Mt 28:18–19) often features prominently. Bishop Samuel Mutendi of the Zion Christian Church in particular used to challenge thousands of his followers, as they prepared for the climax of their festivities, 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 included detailed planning of the countrywide missionary campaign which followed each Paseka. Regular prayer meetings focused on the Zionist church's out-

reach into 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 Zionist response to the Lord's command.

In the ensuing campaign, teams of Zionists went on two-week or one-month missionary tours. These included pastoral care, faith-healing services, mass conversion ceremonies, baptisms, the establishment of new congregations and the expansion of existing ones and, at the end, a report-back to the parent congregation at Zion City. Meanwhile at ZCC headquarters the people kept up a vigil of intensive intercession for Zion's mission to the world. There are many variations of these campaigns, also in the related *Ndaza* Zionist movements (the most strongly represented group of churches in the AAEC), but generally speaking the massive Zionist response to Christ's commission, triggered by sacramental celebration of his crucifixion and resurrection, derives from recognition of his kingship. This recognition is reflected in acceptance of the iconic leadership of the church's founder.

In his treatment of Matthew 28:18–19, the late Bishop Mutendi seldom dwelt on the actual meaning of the words 'all the nations' and he rarely specified the objective of missionary endeavour. Yet he assigned conversion, baptism and church growth 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 also protested against some of his followers' halfhearted response to the church's mission, citing Romans 11:25 which refers to the hardening of the Israelites' hearts. Ecclesiologically, the Bishop interpreted his movement as an extension of the pre-Reformation universal Catholic church and his leadership as rightfully continuing the apostolic succession. His missiology may not have been precisely defined. But his preoccupation with the great commission and his success in regularly mobilising his entire movement into a missionary force suggest acute awareness of the fact that *all believers* – not just a select group of zealous followers – are missionaries, at the cutting edge of the church's movement in and into the world. Judging by the Bishop's own insight and experience as a missionary, he would have concurred with a definition of *missio dei* which included both a *sending*, inspiring and guiding deity and a sent body of believers – the church, in which humans share responsibility with God for

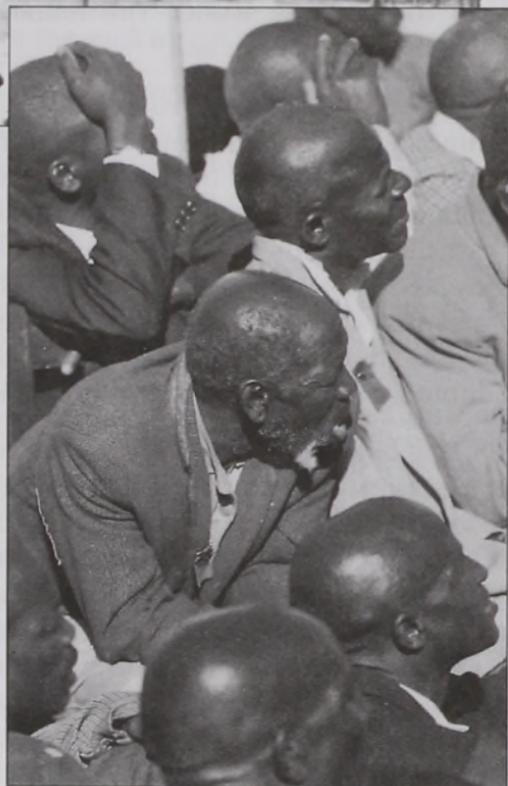


Plate 27 Bishop Samuel Mutwidi preaches about Christ's mission command during a *Paseka* at Zion City, in preparation for a countrywide missionary campaign (top). ZCC elders listen intently to the man of God's sermon (bottom)

establishing the good news of *shalom* as a tangible manifestation of God's kingdom in a torn world.

In 1965 Bishop Mutendi sent off his missionary task force in a rather militant mood. He likened their task to that of an Israelite battle force: 'When you go out to fight against your enemies ... do not be afraid of them, for the Lord your God, who rescued you from Egypt, will be with you' (Dt 20:1). The Zionists, too, had to advance like soldiers: 'Now that we say, "Fire!" after *Paseka*, you must go out like one man to preach God's word ... You are going to fight Satan because you are the soldiers of God.' The Bishop also did not hesitate to contextualise his call in an oppressive colonial situation, in which he himself had suffered. He said: 'Let the cowards who cringe when they see a white man sit down, because they will not make good soldiers anyway. In the old days 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 in the world. The followers brought in (to Zion City) will be like the sand of the sea.'

Against the background of his own resistance to white rule and periodic detention by the white government, Mutendi was implying that the good news to be proclaimed during the campaign included liberation from the colonial yoke. His identification with Israel's struggles suggested that he accepted being cast by his followers in a Moses-like liberator role in the then only anticipated *chimurenga* struggle. His reference to a 'deliverer from Zion' also reflected a form of self-interpretation of his own leadership in Zion City, modelled on Christ. The growth of the black Zion of Africa undoubtedly was integral to the expansion of God's kingdom on earth.

Although Mutendi himself never presumed, as a black Messiah, to usurp Christ's position, some of his followers tended to see him as a Christ-like deliverer – a 'man of God', as he was popularly known among ZCC members. He preached, and lived, much more than just a purely spiritual message. To a large extent he was to his followers the creator of a new order, free from oppression and white control. In this sense he was an *iconic leader* (Sundkler 1976:309–310; Daneel 1988:109f) – *the epitome of the Christ figure in rural peasant society*. To the ZCC Zion, the church, and God's kingdom were parts of a totality. Response to Christ's

missionary command, as voiced by the black icon in Zion, therefore, meant the expansion of Zion and the building of Zion City as a divinely authorised activity within the kingdom of God. Limited as this interpretation of the great commission may be, it accords with the characteristic realised eschatology of African Zionism. The new heaven and the new earth have to be experienced here and now, and the contribution of humans, in partnership with Christ, plays a key role.

This theology does not necessarily rule out individual salvation in Christ and faith in some form of eternal life in heaven. Bishop Mutendi in his posthumous state is believed to stand at the gates of heaven, where he mediates admission for deceased ZCC members as a kind of preliminary introduction, pending Christ's mediation and God's judgment. Many ZCC mission sermons, moreover, contain appeals for conversion based on texts such as Hebrews 13:14 which view 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 counterbalance to preoccupation with the enactment of salvation here and now (Daneel 1980:112-113).

The AAEC's tree-planting eucharists are extensions of Zionist paschal traditions in that they, too, provide a platform for a specific christological and ecclesio-missiological thrust. Significant parallels are noticeable. The lordship of Christ, for instance, remains the basis for whatever missionary work is attempted. The difference, however, is that another set of biblical texts is used, either in conjunction with or independently of the classic missionary command, to highlight Christ's incarnated presence as earthkeeper or protector of all creation. Instead of triggering the expansionist soul-saving drive of a particular church such as the ZCC, the eucharist, now an ecumenical sacrament - without losing sight of the soteriological implications for humans - culminates in another form of divinely and ecclesiologically inspired mission, namely earth-care. In other words the church, as a united force, is called to accomplish a neglected part of its missionary task through a broadened perception of the gospel *as salvation for all creation!* Whereas the ZCC campaign described above leads to individual change, spiritual growth and church expansion, the AAEC aims at recruiting churches to expand Christ's earthkeeping mission. The ministry of earth healing itself, it is realised, has its own salutary dynamic of facilitating the spiritual change and growth of individual tree planters.

Whereas most member churches of the AAEC conduct several paschal celebrations annually, over and above their tree-planting eucharists, it should be noted that the two strands of ecclesio-missiological action triggered by this sacrament complement and enrich rather than exclude or replace each other. Both human and cosmic salvation is at stake!

Probably the single most significant difference between the ZCC and the AAEC missionary eucharists is the emergence in the AAEC context of a *whole new generation of iconic leaders*. Whereas Bishop Mutendi mirrored Christ by sending his followers to preach, teach, convert and baptise, the AAEC icons add yet another face or type of presence to the incarnate Christ: that of healer, saviour or liberator of *all the earth*. Instead of a single leader embodying the presence of the Messiah in African rural society by way of mediating rain and good crops for peasants, faith-healing, education and sociopolitical involvement, all concentrated in or emanating from a single holy city, the focus is broadened: it now encompasses a whole group of icons, united and moving out from their respective Jerusalems, Moriahs and holy cities to establish the grace and salvation implicit in Christ's presence in the creator's neglected and abused 'garden', thus declaring the entire *oikos* God's holy city. Through these iconic leaders Christ reveals a disturbing truth in the African context, namely that all agro-economic progress is meaningless unless it is accompanied by a message of environmental sanctification, of nature's restoration, of an ecological economy which, under the reign of Christ, consciously strikes a balance between exploitive agricultural advancement and altruistic restoration. This is the true purpose of an expanded missionary message proclaimed by the new breed of iconic leaders as they respond to their messianic calling. Moltmann (1985:227f) describes such a calling for all humanity as follows:

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 *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.

As a group of dedicated Christians, the core of AAEC leadership is giving expression in the African context to the messianic *dominium terrae*, not so much in conference debates, not primarily through constant references in sermons to Christ's lordship in creation, but by mediating the power of Christ (Mt 28:18) and through their day-to-day presence in village life where commoners – the masses of the people, anyone who wants to join in – are empowered to share in a new *dominium* of service. In tree planting the attitude shifts from fatalistic, helpless enslavement in the face of a deteriorating environment to meaningful sharing in the divine rule of restoring the earth, in actively establishing new hope for the earth for its own sake, and in the process gaining a constructive sense of destiny. Hence the mediation facilitated by the earth-keeping icons does not obscure Christ's lordship or saviourhood, but unveils and illuminates dimensions of it which have gone unnoticed by many, believers and unbelievers alike. For the church and its outreach in the world, the implications of 'ruling with Christ' crystallise in the church's action of earth-care and in the living examples of the iconic leaders at the centre of that action.

Aware of their limitations and the relative sense in which they can be the saviours or healers of creation (Duchrow & Liedke 1987, *supra*:90), all the AAEC's iconic leaders – bishops, prophets and women leaders – belong to peasant society, rely on the land for sustenance, and therefore are ideally placed to demonstrate convincingly their own and their churches' solidarity with nature. Their identification with Christ's lordship is reminiscent of the Old Testament prophets who related Israel's salvation to the history of their holy land. Just as Amos prophesied the fall of the kingdom of Judah because of Israel's weakening faith, over-exploitation of the land and disregard of the poor, so the iconic prophets are increasingly attributing wanton destruction of the earth and the related droughts, floods, famine and the like to human hubris and defiance of the universal reign of Christ. Just as Hosea warned against the loss of the covenant and the land (Hs 2:3; Carmody 1983:87) by using environmental and fertility images, so the AAEC icons are relating environmental instability, diminishing crops and the accompanying threat to quality of life to the ecological sins of humans,

spiritual stagnation and the church's insensitivity to the cosmic implications of Christ's headship. Hence, as in Old Testament times, salvation, peace and well-being correlate with land husbandry and agricultural efficiency.

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 creation larger in its purpose than Israel's prosperity.

In this respect the AAEC represents a remarkable breakthrough. Although pragmatic motives are noticeable in the importance assigned to human progress and prosperity deriving from a restored environment, the earthkeeping icons' emphasis on altruistic stewardship, for the sake of God's kingdom and for the salvation of all of creation in its own right, is unquestionable.

Who, then, are the prominent icons in the AAEC context, and how do they collectively proclaim or enact their respective messages regarding Christ's lordship and the mission of the church in tree-planting eucharists? I mention only a few. Both Bishops Farawo and Wapendama are living examples of church leaders who have accepted the earth-keeping lordship of Christ as the condition for an alternative life style. Consequently, as mentioned already (*supra*:46-47), they have changed and remodelled their church headquarters to become earth-healing institutions. To the extent that they devote their lives to an environmental ministry, which includes the mobilisation of their church communities and of schools in tree-planting ventures, they epitomise the Christ figure's concern for all creation and establish a vivid understanding in peasant society of a truth which has long remained hidden in African Christianity, namely that in Christ 'all things hold together' (Cl 1:15f). Not only are they living examples of what Christ's presence and incarnation in African society as earthkeeper would entail; they also propagate the implications of that presence for the church. We have

seen that Wapendama preaches about the war of the trees as an extension of Christ's healing ministry, and hence focal in the church's mission (supra, p ...). Bishop Farawo, perhaps less eloquent than Wapendama, concurs in that he uses the nursery at his headquarters in Chivi district as a means of witnessing and strengthening interfaith ties. He says:

The nursery with its trees is part of the church. Because of Christ's attitude the church cannot manipulate this tool of healing and say: 'I give trees only to you the (Christian) believers because you qualify.' No! The trees from our church nurseries are given to all people, regardless of their faith. You cannot tell non-Christians: 'Go away, because you don't believe!' ... Besides, we don't do this for money. The churches mobilised by the AAEC will do this out of conviction, even if we should die empty-handed, without any compensation.

Considering the tendency among Zionists to emphasise the exclusiveness of the body of believers and its holiness, purity and separateness from the world during the celebration of the sacraments, Bishop Farawo's words show a remarkable flexibility. The church in its earth-keeping endeavour is envisaged as an *open-ended institution*, moving into an abused world and serving it courageously and at the risk of being misunderstood. The church nursery itself opens up a new dimension of the good news in the context of a ravished land, in that it empowers both Christians and non-Christians to develop a fellowship of compassion for the earth. Moreover, the ecumenically open tree-planting eucharist, where traditionalist chiefs and spirit-mediums can observe their fellow fighters in the war of the trees participating as icons of Christ in an otherwise highly exclusive church ceremony, underscores the witness character of the church-linked yet hope-giving service to the entire world.

Raviro Mutonga of the Women's Desk and Farai Mafanyana, a ZIRRCO research worker, in their turn represent a *theology of abundance and compassion*. At ceremonies their regular use of the slogan: 'Zvose, Zvose, Women's Desk!' (Everything, Everything, Women's Desk) illustrates their conviction that Christ's lordship implies a comprehensive ministry, encompassing all of life. The Women's Desk they are involved in combines socioeconomic upliftment of people with earth-healing action. Their own personal liberation, in the form of social status and

influence, is expressed not so much in abrasive leadership as in dedicated service. This is evident at ceremonies when they prepare food together with the local women, assist at all levels of ceremonial procedure, notably in song and dance, and generally show a compassionate concern for humans and the environment from a position of devout Christian discipleship. In their support of female initiatives in community development and ecological programmes they live a message of opportunity and wellbeing for all women. Add to this their spontaneous promotion of networking between traditionalist and Christian Women's Desks, and it is apparent that their vocation represents the *antithesis of gender and religious discrimination*. Their willingness to serve both people and the environment with unselfish care and joy indicates an understanding and acceptance of Christ's lordship manifested in servanthood and loving humility. In their understanding Christ requires a comprehensive mission of compassionate outreach, unfettered by a strictly defined mission policy.

Then there are the regulars, Bishops Machokoto, Chimhangwa, Hore, Nhongo and others, who turn up with some of their followers at most AAEC tree-planting ceremonies. Each of them applies his own insight into the Christ figure and his mandate for the church to the proceedings. Their regular attendance at executive and conference meetings, as well as their perseverance at tree planting in the field, give credibility to their roles as black icons of Christ: teachers, philosophers, green activists, liberation theologians, etc. Bishop Chimhangwa, for instance, keeps referring in his sermons to the centrality of Christ in the green struggle. 'Today we are planting trees as an act of reconciliation, in Jesus Christ, between us and all creation,' he said one occasion. 'We thank Christ for his atonement, which has made this act of reconciliation possible' (appendix 1:370). In Chimhangwa's understanding, Christ's salvific work is clearly the basis of and incentive for the church's mission of holistic reconciliation on earth. At a tree-planting ceremony at his village (4 August 1993) Bishop Chimhangwa qualified tree-planting as an *inheritance from Christ*:

We are here at a *kugara nhaka* (inheritance distribution) ceremony. This means that we did not go and fetch this earthkeeping responsibility from another country, but inherited it directly from our Lord Jesus, the one who generates such activity. Let us consider this inheritance where it starts in the Book. According to Genesis 2:15

Mwari set the example by placing humans in the Garden of Eden. They had to look after the trees and animals. Then God followed this up by sending his son, the son of Joseph. This son, Jesus, went right into his father's carpentry shop *to work there with his hands*, doing carpentry. Thus God affirmed that working with one's hands is good!

So if we do this work, we know it was instituted by Jehovah, and affirmed by his son. Tied to this is another aspect of our inheritance: we as humans shall eat by the sweat of our brow. Is that not what is happening right now? Are we not sweating out here in the heat, doing God's work?

This is no small matter! Observe distant South Africa, Germany, Holland and other countries. We receive visitors from all these countries. Some come to study. Others support us with funds. They also inform their people back home about what we are doing. Likewise we want our children and coming generations (future inheritors) to know and follow what we are doing ...

To Chimhangwa the inheritance of ecological stewardship is as imperative as the inherited human struggle for survival. He has no hesitation in identifying, with a few deft strokes, drawing on both Old and New Testaments, the source of that struggle: Jesus Christ who, as saviour and earthkeeper, affirms the work of his father, the creator. Christ's incarnate presence in peasant society gains existential validity when he is portrayed as a carpenter working with his hands, a vocation endorsed by Mwari. In a subsistence economy reliant on manual, agricultural labour, it makes sense to present the church's earthkeeping task as a duty inherited from the carpenter of Nazareth. After all, for all his love for creation, he also needed trees for his trade.

Although Chimhangwa did not specify tree planting as a mission of the church, the tenor of his sermon clearly implies an inherited task for the ecumenical body of Christian believers – in other words, the local and universal church. His reference to visitors from South Africa and abroad reflects both pride of achievement and the realisation that Christ's commission has global significance. The sense of belonging to a universal Christian fellowship engaged in a common mission or struggle is all the more remarkable in view of the relative isolation of numerous rural AICs for many years. Chimhangwa has no illusions about the sacrifice,

in terms of time and effort, exacted by environmental renewal. To spend days upon days in ritualised afforestation, sweating under tropical skies in bishop's regalia, is no joke. Yet in the African context an inherited duty means both privilege and obligation; it is more imperative – against a backdrop of white colonialism – than a command or a commission. In Chimhangwa's view, Christ has, in a very real sense, established a blood line between himself and his church. His inheritance therefore perpetuates the earthkeeping task from one generation or 'family' of believers to the next. Seen thus, holistic mission in Christ becomes the inalienable right, duty and privilege of the local and the world church.

Three of the movement's most influential iconic leaders operate from ZIRRCO's administrative centre. First, Bishop Reuben Marinda, the former 'scribe' of the movement, is known in the ritual context as *Mutiusinazita* ('the tree without a name'). This nickname was deliberately chosen as a reminder that our preoccupation with *chimurenga* names could lead to such emphasis on individual performance and honour that Christ himself, the Lord and guardian of creation, would be eclipsed in our earthkeeping worship. To further counteract any such tendency Bishop Marinda built a strong christological focus into the liturgy of our tree-planting eucharist (appendix 1:365–366). He also elaborates on Christ's role as saviour earthkeeper in all his sermons. At Bishop Mupure's tree-planting ceremony (February 1992), for example, he said:

In Jesus Christ all things hold together, it says in Colossians 1:17. He is the head of the body, the church. *He* is the beginning of all creation and he reigns supreme. God reconciled all things in heaven and on earth with himself through Christ. Christ is Lord over all creation. He works salvation for humankind because humans are the crown of creation. *Humans, in turn, have the duty to extend salvation to all of creation.*

If we look at the history of sin offerings in the Old Testament, we are told that each person had to bring an animal or bird to be offered at the Tent of Meeting before the Lord. The priest had to burn these sacrificial animals on a wood fire on the altar of burnt offerings. This was in fact a cruel practice, because many animals and birds had to die for the iniquities of humankind. Trees were



Plate 28 Three of the AAEC's most influential iconic leaders: Bishops Ruben Marinda (top), Muzambiringa Zvamaka (middle) and Moses Daneel (bottom)



felled in great numbers to provide firewood for the burnt offerings. Christ came as the last offering, to forgive the sins of the entire world. Through his death on the cross he saved the animals, the birds and the trees. *So he saves his entire creation!* The plan of God's salvation of humankind through Jesus Christ included the salvation of all creation (appendix I:365).

Here is the AAEC's ecological christology in a nutshell. The movement's focal credo – 'in Christ all things hold together' (CI 1:17) – confesses Christ's lordship over creation. The salvation thus available to human beings is to be extended by them to the entire earth. As Christ's disciples and co-workers, therefore, human beings have an obligation to liberate creation from exploitation. This, to Bishop Marinda, is an undisputed component of the church's mission. To him salvation experienced by believers within the church can only be real to the extent that it is made manifest to all creation. His own ministry as caretaker of the environment at his church headquarters and home village in Gutu south bears witness to this. Yet there is no human merit in such an undertaking. In his own way, the Bishop relates Christ's cross to the animals, the birds and the trees. In this theology the cross is decisive for salvation. Through Christ's final sacrifice the sacrificial destruction of nature ceases. New life and hope is given to all the earth.

One seeks in vain for a full exposition of the missiological implications for the church of the earthkeeper's *theologia crucis*. Perhaps it is enough that the AICs enact their growing ministry of earth-care so consistently as a united front. One is reminded of Hoekendijk's (1950) statement that the church on the move in its apostolic missionary outreach to the world should not get bogged down in inhibiting introspection. Bishop Marinda would agree with this. Nevertheless, his personal identification with, and commitment to, Christ in all afforestation rituals is evident in sermons reminiscent of the biblical rendering of Christ's own words. At a tree-planting ceremony at his own village in 1993, for instance, the Bishop said in his sermon: 'There is nothing that I want in this world. I only want to complete God's work. My time to go is at hand. But I first have to fulfil my calling. I am not seeking honour in this world but to do the work of him who sent me ... I told you I am not seeking leadership in the church.' These words do not signal black messianic aspirations or presumption. Instead, they reflect the vocational conviction of an iconic leader whose holistic ministry is entirely Christ-centred.

Second, Revd Solomon Zvanaka's nickname in the green struggle is *Muzambiringa* (the vine), a name aptly chosen as a reminder of ecumenical unity in Christ the vine (Jn 15). More than any other leader in the movement, Revd Zvanaka promotes a spirit of reconciliation and positive cooperation in a religiously pluriform situation. Burdened with heavy responsibility as my successor to the ZIRRCON directorship, Zvanaka remains an unruffled and fair negotiator and peacemaker in any disputes or conflict within the movement. In a very demanding position the man's wise, irenic spirit reflects the image of Christ the vine providing life and sustenance for his disciples, the shoots. But Zvanaka's ecumenical vision stretches beyond unity among AICs. To him the shoots of the vine, at least in the earthkeeping context, represent all people. In both attitude and teaching he at all times promotes close ties between AZTREC and the AAEC, traditionalists and Christians. The ZIRRCON director's theological stance is illustrated by the following summons to concerted action in a sermon at a tree-planting eucharist at Bishop Mupure's village in February 1994:

The bishops, ministers and dignitaries of the church are not only called to preach and convert people. They also have a great responsibility for guarding creation, for without trees there can be no human life. We recognise differences in religious persuasion, as we know full well that those of the traditional faith are not with us during our Sunday services. The spirit-mediums, likewise, have their own ceremonies which the bishops (ie church people) do not attend. *But when we plant trees it does not matter who attends.*

Do we say the oxygen of this or that tree goes to a bishop or a spirit-medium? Certainly not! Whoever you are, you simply breathe the fresh air produced by that particular tree...

Remember the saying: '*Rimwe ... rimwe, harikombi chinhu*' (a single endeavour does not achieve anything). Therefore this is not a task for a solitary individual or for the church alone, but for many, for all of us! We unite our efforts: the women, the nursery keepers, the chiefs, the churches, each of us doing his or her duty. Once the task is completed you of the churches can then rest, go to heaven, knowing you have fulfilled your task of guarding creation. And you *vanhu venyika* (literally 'people of the earth', traditionalists) will be seen as proper descendants of those ancestors who have left you the task of keeping the land.

For a Spirit-type leader, fully aware of Zionist and Apostolic leaders' exclusivist if not judgmental attitudes to traditional religion, this is a bold statement. It was made in the realisation that, however important Christian identity and witness remain in Christian discipleship, Christ's lordship mysteriously levels human religious divisions, shattering the presumption and self-righteousness inherent in the distancing of the so-called elect from fellow human beings. In a perception of God's kingdom which embraces all creation environmental concern in a sense acts as a great equaliser of all human beings. A dedicated Zionist, Zvanaka intuitively grasps this truth. His words are not just the empty verbiage of an ecumenical tactician. At all AAEC ceremonies this iconic leader invites traditionalists to participate, and at traditionalist tree-planting rituals he respectfully and attentively sits next to the chief or medium conducting the beer libation on behalf of the ancestors. Greatly interested in the old high-God cult, he also seizes every opportunity to visit the Matopo shrines as part of the annual AZTREC delegation. His accepting friendship with traditionalists increasingly opens up new prospects of uninhibited interfaith dialogue and united action. Thus he paves the way for an AIC reappraisal of its *theology of religions*, a vitally important component of an emerging earthkeeper's 'missiology'. All humankind, the living and the living dead, and not just a select group of Jesus disciples, are challenged to be the shoots of the vine. For the earthkeeping good news is that Christ's limitless grace is open to all humans and creatures without exception, and remains so as long as consciousness or life itself enables them to respond to the giver of life.

In the third place, I include myself in this category of leadership because of the role in which the AAEC has cast me. During the past few years (1992–1997) the AIC leaders have insisted that the nickname *Muchakata* (Daneel 1998:206) refers to my 'traditionalist' identity and that AZTREC should continue using it, but that in the AAEC context I should be called Bishop Moses. Somewhat embarrassed by this name, I have so far tended to joke about it at ceremonies, as I make no pretence of being a Moses figure. Nevertheless it has become common practice for me to don a bishop's robe at AAEC tree-planting eucharists and to be addressed or referred to in sermons as Bishop Moses. Despite my own misgivings about the negative implications for the movement if I were to become a patriarchal cult figure, it is understandable that after 35 years of close association with the AICs some

people will be inclined to single out the liberationist impact of my work. The AIC movements I have founded and helped to build did in fact bring a degree of liberation from erstwhile ecclesiastic isolation, lack of theological training, lack of community development opportunities and non-involvement in environmental reform.

It is from this position that I tend at afforestation rituals to speak about Christ the earthkeeper, the ultimate guardian of the land who, as creator and ancestor, fulfils and expands the ancestral guardianship of the holy groves and the land generally, which Africa has known all along. With reference to Matthew 28:18,19 I emphasise Christ's reign as a form of empowerment which keeps vitalising and mandating the church's missionary task through the ages. As humans already living in God's kingdom, we are freed to proclaim and spread a gospel which focuses on conversion and church planting, but which is not complete if this process of Christian discipleship does not consciously reach out and embrace the full richness the earth. In other words, I attempt not to dilute the evangelical thrust of the church's outreach but to liberate it from its overly spiritualised, pietistic insulation and to widen the perception of Christian mission through an inculturated, missionary conception of earth-care. Texts like Colossians 1:17 and Ephesians 1:10 are brought to bear on this broadened interpretation of the church's mission, an interpretation which always acquires immediacy and urgency because of the signs of environmental abuse and degradation where our ceremonies are held. In qualifying the church's mission, the interwovenness of witness and unity on the basis of such seminal texts as John 17:21,23 is frequently mentioned as a reminder of the biblical basis for the existence of the AAEC. And insofar as human endeavour features prominently in the church's holistic mission, texts like Isaiah 41:19,20 ('I'll set in the desert the cypress, the plane and the pine together; that man may see and know ... that the hand of the Lord has done this') serve as warnings against the pitfalls of human hubris in what essentially remains *missio dei*.

This picture of AAEC christology and its bearing on ecclesiology remains somewhat fragmentary. However, pinpointing some characteristic features of iconic leaders' individual contributions provides some questions and clues for future theological reflection. How, for instance, can the image of Christ as the liberator of women through their ecological activities, as an expression of a theology of abundance, oppor-

tunity and compassion, be given greater substance in the church's drive to help establish justice in this world? What are the prospects of developing the ecological care-taking function of the church as an inherited mission within the framework of African inheritance and related kinship obligations? How does the biblical lordship of Christ, in our context of unity and fellowship between traditionalist and Christian earthkeepers, inform a praxis-oriented theology of religions? Is our emphasis on ecumenism and interfaith unity in the green struggle moving in the direction of assumed religious universalism and relativism at the expense of the uniqueness and 'offensive' (*skandalon*) witness character of the Christian message? Are the roles of those Christians who somehow cross the divide as part-participants, part-observers at traditionalist rituals justified on account of what Rahner would call 'anonymous Christianity', an unwitting acceptance of Christ's lordship which extends well beyond the boundaries of the visible church?

What both the ZCC tradition and the AAEC tree-planting eucharist convincingly demonstrate is that to the AICs the sacrament of holy communion is the key to constant renewal of missionary awareness and inspiration of the church's outreach to the world. In a sense the AAEC's tree-planting eucharist is the earthkeeping church's mission. This crossing of frontiers between humans and the rest of creation is the most meaningful ritual expression of acceptance of Christ the earthkeeper's lordship. At present this mission takes ecological shape mainly in tree planting and the protection of water resources. It is bound to expand further into the creation of wildlife sanctuaries and related activities. Can all this be theologically validated as a legitimate ministry of the church? And if so, does the image of Christ the earthkeeper not only affirm the development of a new environmental ethic but also require the church to incorporate in its mission an ecologically legislative and disciplinary function, as some AIC leaders are requesting? In the previous chapter I cited Bishop Nhongo and his son's convictions that the church as the keeper of creation should introduce strict environmental laws and the means of exercising discipline accordingly, an ecclesiastic function which assumes that Christ as head of the church is, amongst other things, environmental law-giver and judge (*supra*:70-72). Seeking to express and plumb the implications of Christ's law of love for all the earth in human society promises to be an exciting, if daunting, undertaking.

## 4.2 The suffering Christ

African theologians in South Africa have understandably related their interpretation of the suffering Christ to the sociopolitical dilemma of their country during the apartheid era. The central theme in both Setiloane's poem 'I am an African' (Setiloane 1976:128-131) and Buthelezi's article 'Daring to live for Christ' (Buthelezi 1976:176-180) is black South Africans' identification with Christ on the cross from their own existential experience of oppression and dehumanisation. Setiloane depicts the irresistible attraction of the suffering figure on the cross:

And yet for us it is when He is on the Cross  
This Jesus of Nazareth, with holed hands and open side,  
like a beast of sacrifice:  
When He is stripped naked like us,  
Browned and sweating water and blood in the heat of the sun  
Yet silent  
That we cannot resist Him.

Setiloane's poem is embedded in the African context: a proud affirmation of the black self, aware of a close bond with the ancestors. By directly identifying Yahweh of the Bible with such African deities as Umvelinqangi, Unkulunkulu, Modimo and others, he is introduced into the world of African religion as the great God in whose presence the ancestors dwell, mediating between the living and God. At this point it seems as if Yahweh is assimilated into the God of Africa to the extent that he cedes his Old Testament role of interacting directly with humanity to the mediating ancestors, the 'little gods, bearing up the prayers and supplications' (Setiloane 1976:129).

Even so, the traditional concept of God transcends and transforms this indigenised, somewhat attenuated African God. The cleansing blood of the suffering, dying, sacrificed Christ, the son of Yahweh, Modimo, and Nukulunkulu, breaks down the barriers of skin colour, race and tribe, the confines of ancient Israel and of African tribes:

His blood cleanses  
not only us,  
not only the tribe  
But all, all mankind:

Black and White and Brown and Red  
All mankind.

Thus, while Setiloane clings to the traditional portrayal of the God of Africa by identifying him with Yahweh, the breakthrough from a locally confined tribe to a universal concept of 'all mankind' in the atoning death of Christ introduces a completely new dimension – the 'totally other' – which by implication also transforms the old conception of Modimo, Unkulunkulu and Umvelingqangi (Setiloane 1975:24–38). Setiloane admits that because of blacks' experience of slavery, colonialism and exploitation, some black Christians are calling for a rejection of the pale white God and the worship of a 'God as black as black as we!' (Setiloane 1975:37). Despite this, he believes that the majority of black Christians still consider God to be one: 'He gathers into one herd friend and foe, exploiter and exploited, oppressor and oppressed, apartheid-ist and those he sets "apart"' (Setiloane 1975:37). This poignantly expresses the universal dimension and the essential liberation (salvation) effected by the suffering Christ: it is valid for all people, oppressor and oppressed.

In 'Daring to live for Christ' Manas Buthelezi (1976) refers to the false dichotomy between *human life* and *Christian life*, which led to blind spots in the pre-1994 South African situation. It allowed some Christians to call for an encounter at the foot of Calvary without realising that this meant that Christian human beings must meet at the foot of Table Mountain to make laws for the body which is the temple of the Holy Spirit. To the extent that Christian behaviour ceases to float in a vacuum and becomes incarnated in social, economic and political structures, Christian life becomes an ordinary, everyday human phenomenon:

To dare to live for Christ means to have a Christian impact on these structures. It is a daring act because it involves the risk of suffering just as Christ suffered as he made concrete his love for humanity (Buthelezi 1976:178).

Buthelezi distinguishes between 'oppressive suffering' and 'redemptive suffering'. The former stifles all initiative to a point where suffering becomes fatalistic, a way of life that destroys God's purpose for the victim. As an example Buthelezi cites the inadequate educational facilities in the old South Africa (a situation which is likely to continue for some

time even in the new post-1994 political dispensation), which create a culture of ignorance that holds the victims in its oppressive grip. By contrast there is redemptive suffering, modelled on Christ, which is not an end in itself and which issues in love for the other so that the other may be freed. This is self-sacrificing suffering which relinquishes personal security and interest for the sake of the other. Articulation of personal suffering and that of others is the beginning of the redemptive phase of suffering. Buthelezi (1976:180) concludes as follows:

At this moment in South African history the suffering of black people is becoming redemptive. The black people are now regarding their suffering as a step towards liberation instead of a pool of fate and self-pity. Black consciousness is an instance of how the black people have transmuted their present suffering into the medium of liberation towards self-esteem. This is redemptive suffering.

Despite Buthelezi's reminder that human redemptive suffering should be modelled on Christ's suffering and his emphasis on the sacrificial motive for love, he appears to ascribe an inherently self-determined quality to blacks' suffering which suggests personal merit and is therefore theologically suspect. Can human suffering be redemptive? It seems to me that human suffering, insofar as it is consciously *identified* with the suffering of Christ, can only take on a character of witnessing to the saving and liberating power of Christ. Christ alone can suffer redemptively, and human suffering is only 'redemptive' when fully identified with the source and author of redemption.

Other black South African theologians have also placed the image of the suffering Christ in the context of their people's sociopolitical plight and need for liberation. Hence Bonganjalo Goba's (1980:27) assertion: 'Christ opens the path of liberation as he shares our common humanity and with God in his forsakenness suffers with us as the one who is crucified.' Siqqibo Dwane urges a 'detheologising' of the Christian message so that the person of Christ, identified in Western society with the middle and upper classes, can emerge in its full humanity as one of the poor and humble. This means 'to discover the man who died on a city dump outside Jerusalem' (Dwane 1977:8-9).

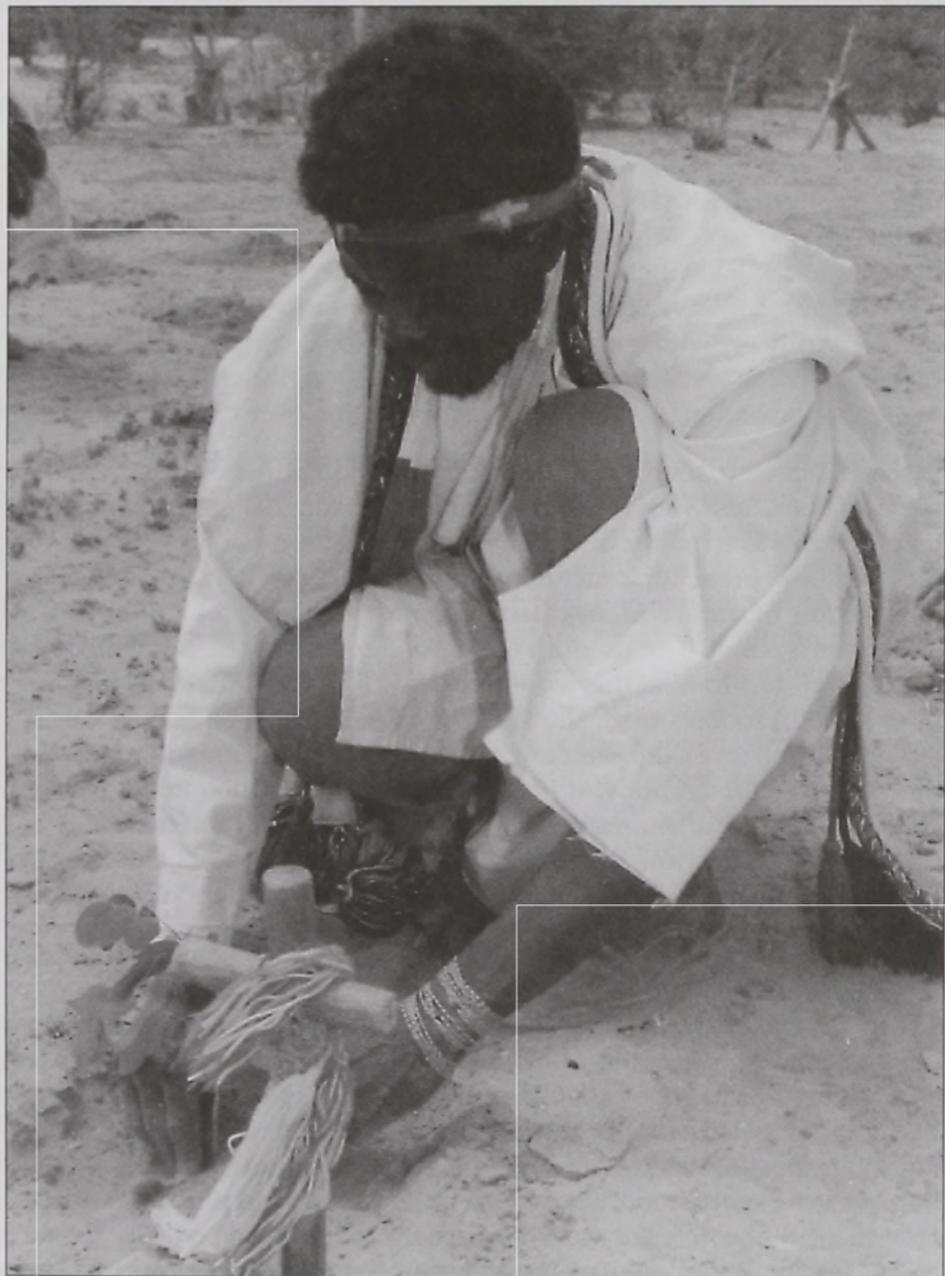
AAEC theology adds a new dimension to this focus of South African theologians on the cross of Christ in humanly oppressive socioeconomic and political circumstances. Christ's suffering relates not only to the

plight of humanity but to that of all creation. The tree-planting eucharist illustrates this point in several ways. First, the symbolism of earthkeepers partaking of Christ's blood and body while holding seedlings to be planted as part of the sacrament is a powerful statement that Christ's cross has relevance for all the earth. In this symbolism Christ's suffering and death connote a *new message of hope*. Death is not the end of the line. In Africa it is a communal event which does not negate individual self-expression or sever ties between deceased and living. Christ's death holds the promise of new life. In the tree-planting eucharist the perception of community is widened to encompass all the denizens of the earth: humans, all living creatures, all forms of vegetation, trees, grass, shrubs, etc. The seedling in the earthkeeper's hands at the communion table and the seedling addressed as brother or sister are a recognition of the entire earth community as partakers or recipients of holy communion, a way of extending the hope of reconciliation and new life, emanating from the cross, to all creation.

In a sense the tree-planter's eucharist gives expression in the widest sense of the word to an African theology of the cross as proposed by Kwesi Dickson (1984:185-199). In an attempt to overcome the negative and pessimistic features associated with Christ's death on the cross in Western theology, Dickson proposes an approach more compatible with African perceptions of death. The cross, he says, should be presented in 'glorious affirmation of it as that which is the *basis of Christian hope*' in that it 'demonstrates human degradation and evil, but it also *demonstrates triumph*' (Nyamiti, in Schreier 1991:8). In the eucharist believers share both the death of Christ on the cross and life with one another. The seedling going into the soil expresses human sharing of life with each other and the denizens, animate or inanimate, of all the earth, not in naive triumphalism but in a humble act of proclaiming the good news of the cross, which at no point loses sight of resurrection and salvation.

Second, the liturgy of the tree-planting eucharist relates Christ's body and blood directly to all creation (appendix I:365). Christ's sacrificial surrender, according to Bishop Marinda, has nothing to do with fatalistic helplessness. His liturgy portrays Christ's expulsion of the merchants from the temple in Jerusalem as a deliberate show of strength 'to save the animals and the birds from the cruel fate (of sacrificial offering) that awaited them'. This demonstration of power and authority

Plate 29 The message of the cross is symbolically present while a Zionist communicant plants and addresses the seedling he had held at the communion table



is integral to the crucifixion event, a prophecy of the kingship which is to come about after Christ's resurrection as the foundation of mission to, and deliverance of, the whole world.

In the third place, the tree-planting eucharist provides the context for considering the twofold nature of the body of Christ as *church* and as *creation* (*supra*:42, 43): the body of believers sacramentally mobilised for holistic mission, and the cosmic body of the saviour-earthkeeper present in creation. It is this latter image, taken from the AAEC's core text (Cl 1:17, 'in Christ all things hold together'), which adds a new dimension to the understanding of the suffering Christ. In ceremonies which repeatedly refer to the abuse of nature and its restoration at the behest of an ever-present earthkeeper, Christ emerges and is sensed, by preachers and listeners alike, as *the wounded healer*, the one who feels and is saddened by the destruction of his own body, creation.

Discussions with some of the AAEC's leading figures about the suffering body of Christ within the earth and in relation to tree planting indicate that this is a matter of growing consensus and not just the pet subject of a few preachers, including myself. Said Revd Tawoneichi: 'Our destruction of nature is an offence against the body of Christ (which) suffers as a result. The random felling of trees hurts the body of Christ. The church has to heal this wounded body ... (That Christ's body is part of the earth) follows from the biblical creation story, because Christ's spirit hovered over the waters.' And Bishop Mupure responded: 'Yes, the earth is Christ's body. It is his dwelling place which holds his footprints. It is part of him and everybody relies on it, whether they are Christians or not. Now that Mwari is withholding rain because of people's abuse of this body you can observe their dependence. Everybody, believers and unbelievers alike, is looking at the heavens, seeking help. They say: "Oh God, what have we done?"'

These remarks reveal close identification of Christ with a suffering earth. Christ himself suffers because, as Mwari's co-creator, his spirit once hovered over the primordial mass of waters, as a result of which he feels the destruction of his body, the earth. Yet as a person he also dwells in creation where his footprints are symbols of intimate interaction with the earth community, and he is grieved by all forms of desecration of his wonderful world. When the rains fail because of God's anger and/or Christ's suffering, human beings are overcome by their

guilt of earth-destruction and start seeking means of repair. Hence being in Christ as individual parts of the body of believers means sharing in his suffering. In the AAEC such suffering ceases to be fatalistic acceptance of the earth's demise, and in the planting of trees it proclaims hope of renewal. It witnesses to the redemptive suffering of Christ which is liberating creation from oppressive exploitation.

The tree-planting eucharist highlights the bond between the suffering earthkeeper and his fellow earthkeepers. In taking the sacrament, a legion of Christ's co-workers share the earth's wounded state and show their willingness to transform that burden into dedicated environmental action as a message of redemption. That is the upshot of the communicants' partaking of the crucified body of Christ as members of the church and in the communion of his cosmic body, the wonderful yet broken earth.

Inasmuch as the tree-planting eucharist strengthens the earthkeepers' identification with the wounded healer and their resolve to wage war against the forces of environmental destruction, the image of a suffering Christ is inevitably also reflected in the lives of the movement's iconic leaders. It has been pointed out that engagement in the green struggle sometimes takes a heavy toll. Here I merely mention the late Leonard Gono, the movement's field operations manager, who exemplified in a powerful if unpretentious manner the presence and acute agony of Christ the suffering earthkeeper in the context of our struggle (Daneel 1998:204, 259). Fired by a vision from beyond and with a great love for trees, wildlife and rivers, Leonard in the space of a few years spent himself in a cause where the need of the earth was always greater than his own. As *Mabvamaropa* (literally 'which brings forth blood', the kiaat tree) he established, organised and maintained nurseries; mobilised entire communities to plant and nurture trees in new woodlots; gave direction to earthkeeping planning, policies and project implementation; and inspired both traditionalist and Christian earthkeepers by example. Leonard Gono had his fair share of ordinary human failings but these never interfered with his environmental mission. To us he was the epitome of the earthy missionary, his soul attuned to creation and its maker. He rarely spoke about Christ, but he drove himself uncomplainingly in testimony to the one who is suffering in the barren earth. He left us a legacy of the meaning of the earthkeeper's mission in Africa, a legacy not recorded in books but living on

in the hearts and activities of thousands who know the agony of withering crops under a scorching sky and who find promise and hope in a greening countryside.

### 4.3 Christ in kinship

One of the commonest analogies which African theologians draw between the African religious world and the dispensation of Christ is that of his humanity in relation to the traditional kinship structure. Pobee – who outlines an African christology against the background of the West African Akan tribe – states that, in contrast to Descartes's *cogito ergo sum*, the Akan maintain a position of *cognatus ergo sum* – 'I belong through kinship therefore I am.' In other words, among the Akan one becomes fully human by belonging to society. The goal and sense of existence is determined by belonging to a family, clan and tribe. 'Since belonging to a kinship group is a mark of a man,' says Pobee (1979:88), 'our attempt at constructing an African christology would emphasise the kinship of Jesus.' Jesus' membership of a family underlines the fact that fullness of life consists largely in community, in breaking down individual isolation. To the Akan it is a pain and a curse to be alone. 'The fullness of a man's humanity is underscored by the relationships he has, a point which is well made by the extended family system in Africa' (Pobee 1979:89). To the Akan Jesus' circumcision illustrates this bond with a kinship group, and his baptism is a rite of solidarity with the rest of humankind.

Mbiti points out that in African society one is not fully human until one has been officially incorporated into the community by the rites of passage. Against this background the African is particularly interested in the birth, baptism and death of Jesus, which make him a complete person via the necessary rites of passage (Mbiti 1968:56). With regard to the cross, he says that Africans do not think primarily of the atonement (not that they deny the salvific significance of the cross) but see it as symbolising Jesus's complete humanity (Mbiti 1968:57). Mbiti also shows how *kinship* dominates all of traditional African life. It operates vertically by uniting the living with the dead, and horizontally by declaring the individual in his village and neighbourhood a relative of every other person. In such a context an individual's self-awareness is experienced only in terms of community and tribal solidarity. Mbiti then



Plate 30 As an extended family of earthkeepers in Christ, the AAEC states its unity of purpose and action at the communion table (top) and in prayer for the healing of Mother Earth (bottom)



suggests that the church, as the body of Christ, can transform this traditional self-awareness into ecclesiastic solidarity rooted in Christ. A black Christian experiences the new community by saying: 'I exist because the body of Christ exists.' 'At the individual level,' says Mbiti, 'this is what the *new kinship in Christ* should mean: a discovery of one's true being as hidden in the *Man par excellence*, and a discovery of one's existence as externalised in the Body of Christ' (Mbiti 1968:62). Mbiti quite rightly infers that it is by discovering kinship in Christ that the church in Africa can have a meaningful and deep impact on life.

It is true to say that to a large extent the AICs had already in their own right – before the formation of the AAEC – discovered what the new community, the new kinship in Christ, signifies in their own diverse contexts. It is equally true that within the framework of AAEC activities this unfathomable yet very real kinship in Christ is acquiring ever wider and more enriching connotations. By perceiving Christ as earthkeeper, the new family or tribe – the extended family of churches who accept earth-keeping kinship and give expression to it by constantly proclaiming the unity of the shoots (churches) in Christ, the vine – receives a new leit-motif: a ministry of earth-care.

In the extended family of earthkeepers Christ is portrayed by some of our green bishops as an elder brother. Said Bishop Farawo: 'Christ is our *mukoma* (elder brother). He is happy when we plant trees, because it shows that we are his family and that we care for all of his creation. Christ is particularly happy if we preach the gospel of tree planting.' The image of Christ as *mukoma* in Shona society is apt, in that the elder brother has authority over his younger siblings and is therefore in a position to determine the direction of the family's activities. As name bearer of the family head the elder brother inherits, at his father's death, ritual responsibility for the family. In the ritual context he then acts as the deceased family head. Applied to Christ, the Shona analogy of relations between elder brother, father and family is quite striking. This analogy is fulfilled and transformed in its biblical qualification. As Penoukou (in Schreiter 1991:45) puts it:

What Christ has in common with God the Father, he expresses in terms of *communion of being* but in a *relation of filiation*: 'That they may be one, as you, Father, are in me and I in you' (John 17:11,

21). Furthermore, what Christ has in common with the human being is also expressed in terms of *communion of being*, but in a relation of *union of siblingship*: 'That they too may be one in us ... as we are one, I in them as you in me ...' (John 17:21–23). And: 'Whoever does the will of my Father is a brother to me ...' (Mark 3:32–35) ... It is this communion which is experienced and confirmed in the sacraments.

Where the 'elder brother' is recognised as keeper of the earth, the union in siblingship is manifest in the new family. As siblings, the member churches of the AAEC accept new ecological codes of conduct. These are based, first of all, on identification with the destructive sins of the first Adam, evidenced in the AAEC's ecological confessions which form part of the tree-planting eucharist; and, secondly, on a comprehensive response to the second Adam, Christ, who effects the undoing of the first Adam's disobedience – in this instance by involving his siblings in the liberation of creation. We have already described how this family concern promotes a new understanding of the church and how it proliferates in a wide range of earthkeeping activities, including the development of a green ethic. Thus the AAEC's earthkeeping ministry signals understanding of and identification with the comprehensive nature of Christ the Earthkeeper's kingdom and care. In the words of C de Witt (1991:112):

... the reach of Christ's work extends everywhere (Eph 1:19–23; Col 1:15–20). The work of the last Adam, Jesus Christ, is as broad as the reach of the damage wrought by the first Adam. The work of Christ impacts all human relationships – those with God, with others and with the cosmos ... redemption is our calling to all of them, and not one to the exclusion of others.

Here we see a unique feature of the AAEC: the establishment of an extended family of earthkeepers, whose activities in siblingship recognise and affirm particularly the ecclesiastically much neglected dimension of the elder brother's redemptive work on behalf of the cosmos. In networking across the boundaries of ecclesiastic diversity, the will to establish a just order in all of society, especially on behalf of inanimate members of the kin group (trees, grass, birds, animals, water), is apparent. The communal will in the new family to erect convincing signposts of Christ's social justice for all humankind and eco-justice for mother

earth emerges daily in the ZIRRCO team's search, through Bible study and prayer, for the 'elder brother's' green guidance and strategy. In this endeavour the boundaries of gender, class, authority and socio-economic privilege between team members pale significantly ... so that all the earth, in our small corner of the world, may live and breathe.

In African society, as Mbiti has indicated, kinship inevitably links the living and the dead. Without the ancestors the African kin group is incomplete! Hence the image of Christ as a kinsman necessarily raises the question of his relationship with the living dead, the *midzimu* (ancestors), who in all Shona belief systems – both traditional and Christian – keep influencing the lives of their living relatives. On the whole the Shona AICs, and the Spirit-type churches in particular, have refrained from calling Jesus a *mudzimu*, probably because they reject ancestral demands for veneration as contrary to the Christian message. In the AAEC context church leaders may be even more hesitant to portray Christ as an ancestor because of their awareness that many of their traditionalist counterparts in AZTREC tend to view Christ merely as a white *mhondoro* (tribal spirit), equal in standing to such national hero-spirits as Chaminuka. To my knowledge only the Apostles of Johane Maranke use the term *mudzimu* with reference to the Christian Godhead. They refer to the Holy Spirit as *Mudzimu Unoyera* (literally 'holy ancestral spirit'), but the revelations of the Holy Spirit in their church are so starkly opposed to traditional ancestral demands that the name causes little if any conceptual confusion in the Apostles' understanding of the Spirit's Christian nature and work.

Nevertheless, several African theologians have depicted Christ as ancestor in their attempts to develop a contextualised christology. Nthamburi (in Schreiter 1991:67) discusses Pobee's (1979) attempt in this regard. 'Pobee,' he says, 'maintains that Jesus has a heavy *Kra* (Akan, 'soul') which links him to God. The superiority of the ancestorship of Christ is demonstrated by the fact that since Christ has authority over all cosmic powers he has authority over other ancestors as well.' According to Ambrose Moyo (1983:97) the Shona traditionally referred to God as *Mudzimu Mukuru* (great ancestor). Jesus, being his direct offspring, is therefore *Mudzimu*, with powers of intercession. As the 'heavenly one' Jesus is also the 'supreme universal ancestral spirit' who links all of humankind (Nthamburi, in Schreiter 1991:67). Nyamiti, again, emphasises the importance of death in the making of

an ancestor: 'Through his death, therefore, Christ becomes our brother-ancestor in fullness. By being linked with Adam, Christ's ancestorship acquires a transcendental quality since he is able to transcend family, clan, tribal and racial limitations in a way that our own ancestors cannot' (Nthamburi, in Schreiter 1991:67, with reference to Nyamiti 1984).

Although the AAEC earthkeepers refrain from calling Christ an ancestor, the tendency to proclaim his lordship over all creation and to envisage him as the controller of all cosmic and life-giving forces strengthens the perception of an earthkeeper who, as part of the human family, necessarily relates to the ancestral world as well. And the analogy to this interrelationship which immediately comes to mind is that of Christ as the universal *muridzi venyika* (guardian of the land). In a number of tree-planting sermons I have myself compared Christ's earth-care with the Shona tribal guardian ancestors' concern for the environment. The theological assumption in this portrayal is that through the ages the traditional guardian ancestors have, by virtue of their closeness to Mwari the creator, sensed and accepted their responsibility for the land under their political jurisdiction. Thus they were prototypes prefiguring Christianity among the Shona. Christ's role as *muridzi venyika*, therefore, both fulfils and transforms this ancient guardianship. Through his Spirit, Christ, the earthkeeping *muridzi*, somehow inspires and holds sway over generations of Shona *varidzi*. Through them he appeals to all their living descendants of whatever religious persuasion to share and extend their responsibility for the earth. As Pobee would say, Christ shares ancestorhood with the living dead on account of his *Kra* (soul) linking him with God. However, he also transcends the regional and tribal confinement of the African senior ancestors by linking the local Shona environment and kin group with the universal cosmos and the universal family of humankind (as inferred by Moyo and Nyamiti). The same theological extension to an increasingly continental and global perspective is, of course, also evident in AAEC praxis in the form of widening ecumenical horizons and financial and moral support from the Christian earthkeeping community worldwide.

Irrespective of whether Christ is actually depicted by the AICs as ancestor or not, the earthkeeping fellowship can deepen and enrich his link with the ancestral world by paying attention to the biblically based doctrine of Christ's descent into the underworld (referred to in Western

theology as the *descensio* (or *descensus*) *ad inferno*, 'descent into hell'). J V Taylor (1963:164) accentuates the triumphal aspect of Christ's descent – a familiar trend in Anglican theology – for African theology. Christ's death and resurrection, he says, offer Africa two tremendous innovations: the fact that there is life for the dead because Christ has conquered that realm, and the fact that the present state of the dead is not the end of the story. Similar triumphalist trends are also noticeable in Roman Catholic and Lutheran theology. In the *Catechismus Romanum*, for instance, the purpose of the *descensus Christi* is to announce his triumph to the demons and to release the deceased fathers from the *limbus patrum* (Berkouwer 1953:190). In Reformed theology, on the other hand, the *descensus* is usually interpreted as 'indicative of the humbling of Christ, in which the power of his exaltation and resurrection was already active' (Berkouwer 1953:195).

Sundkler (1960:292) maintains that modern Africans interpret the *descensio* soteriologically: 'It is also mainly from the point of death and *descensio Christi* that the African pastor verbalises the sense of the Holy ...' The essence of the gospel, he says, is experienced by many Africans as forgiveness of sins by Christ alone, a truth revealed by Christ to both the dead and the living. Mbiti (1971:175) develops the soteriological theme in Christ's interaction with the ancestors in an intriguing if speculative interpretation of 1 Peter 3:19. The text deals with Jesus's preaching to the deceased spirits in prison. Mbiti claims that such proclamation offers the dead a choice and the possibility of change. Spiritual transformation after death therefore has to be a real possibility. Mbiti argues that the Bible does not rule out the possibility of salvation for those who have died 'without Christ'. Hence 'the opportunity to hear or assimilate the effects of the Gospel is continued in the life beyond the grave (cf 1 Peter 3:19f), and death is not a barrier to incorporation into Christ, since nothing can separate "us" from the love of God (cf Rom 8:38f)'. Although he does not explicitly say so, Mbiti does at this point offer a theological answer to the often-anxious question of first-generation African Christians about the salvation of ancestors who have died 'without Christ'.

Mbiti's views leave little scope for any final eternal punishment. He says quite plainly that it is virtually impossible to accept that punishment or rejection of the dead will last forever. It is impossible for the soul to flee indefinitely from the Spirit of God. God's persistence must ultimately

be more powerful than the soul's resistance to repentance. Thus redemption is ultimately granted even to the soul undergoing 'eternal punishment' (Mbiti 1971:180).

The question does, of course, arise whether Mbiti's somewhat speculative universal salvation – which all people ultimately inherit – sufficiently acknowledges the eschatological summons to the living to repent, and the finality of divine judgment about which the New Testament is quite explicit. In terms of purely human considerations, such as the strong desire for meaningful life after death, Mbiti's projections are very tempting. He runs the risk, however, of missing the intention of the gospel, which apparently does not exclude the radical nature of divine outreach and judgment in relation to humanity. This objection, to my mind, does not necessarily imply that universal salvation is excluded in the final victory of God's kingdom over all evil forces. But one *can* – indeed, *must* – hope for it only in full recognition of, and faith in, the risen Christ's sovereignty over heaven and earth, a realm which as yet remains shrouded in the mystery of the divine dispensation and is not as readily accessible to doctrinal definition as Mbiti's reference to 'the historical plane of human existence' may suggest.

Nonetheless, having noted the risks of speculation, it remains a matter of urgency that the *descensio Christi* and Christ's relatedness to the ancestors be developed to give greater christological depth and clarity to the AAEC's earthkeeping ministry. If Christ is indeed the 'elder brother' whose mission includes revealing himself to and instructing the deceased members of his family, does his message to the ancestors encompass more than the salvation of human beings? The image of Christ as guardian of the land, the one who fulfils the traditional intuition that salvation encompasses divine, human and cosmic wellbeing, already implies that he instructs the ancestors about a holistic salvation. If the entire family of humankind as perceived in Africa is similarly drawn into recognition of Christ's lordship over heaven and earth and into sharing a new responsibility for the liberation of an abused earth, the ancestors' traditionally conceived hold on the living and the debate about heathen and Christian ancestors can – at least in the minds of Christian participants – be defused and 'in Christ' be given new content. If the AAEC interpretation of the inspiration still provided by the ancestral guardians of the land for the chiefs and mediums in our green

struggle were informed by such an understanding of the *descensio Christi*, the prospects of even greater unity of purpose between traditionalist and Christian earthkeepers are improved and judgmentalism may well give way to intensified interfaith dialogue and action.

The need for a well-developed christology which clarifies Christ's relationship with the ancestors is evident, particularly in those tree-planting ceremonies which are attended by large contingents of both traditionalists and Christians. By way of example, here are a few excerpts of speeches delivered at the AZTREC ceremony in Chief Chivi's district on 27 August 1993. Following Bishop Chimhangwa's sermon, which included a plea for environmental stewardship on the basis of the garden of Eden story (Gn 2), a traditionalist, Muzenda, responded as follows:

We do not forget your message, Bishop Chimhangwa. When *sekuru* Chaminuka (a spirit-medium) knelt over there, it was in honour of all our ancestors. He said: 'You, our forefathers, are ahead of us. So talk to those you find there (in the world of the dead), those we do not know. Talk also to Mwari.' We surely do not forget Mwari. The ancestors, if they are determined, will emerge in the life of Mwari.

King Solomon asked only one thing from God, namely wisdom to rule Israel well. As chiefs we need the same wisdom. For things were complicated by these different religions all worshipping Mwari. If we want to succeed, let us worship Mwari. But right now, let us first call on spirit-medium Chaminuka to address us.

As spirit-medium Chaminuka rose to his feet the people cheered, saying: 'Forward with one family in Zimbabwe!' Chaminuka then proceeded to speak:

Down with hatred! Forward with tree planting! Forward with the protection of trees! Down with tree felling! ... *We are united here like one big Shumba family.* When you think of it, to be united is not such a difficult thing, but if you refuse to think it through you will not cooperate with each other.

When the comrades (freedom fighters) were in the bush they cooperated because of one purpose and one family. They were all *the children of one mother.* But nowadays they compare the sizes of their houses (are diverted by individualistic ambitions of luxury and

improved lifestyles). The decisive issue (for united action) is the soil (ie the ancestors identified with the soil). If the soil refuses, you have gathered here for no purpose whatsoever. In your union here today you fulfil the laws of the soil. For this occasion the *mutezo* (believer) who has come here is not the child of this father or that mother, or this church or that church but is simply of the forefathers, a descendant of the land. The driving force for this event is the soil (*vhu*) ... the council of (deceased) elders is right here. All the *madziteteguru* (senior ancestors) are congregated here. So you who are here are fulfilling the laws of those who have gone before, those who trod this earth. We are all of one heart!

We thank all the elders who have come here to Gwenyaya. You strengthen this ward of Nyanyingwe, which is situated in the chiefdom of chief Chivi. It is chief Chivi who has called *sekuru* Chaminuka (the Shona hero-spirit) to raise this matter. We of the soil (at this point the medium identifies with and talks as Chaminuka) only want love, that which inspires the youth when they observe tomorrow that our love has clothed the land. *In this we follow our forebears whose task was to build the family of humankind, to live in harmony.*

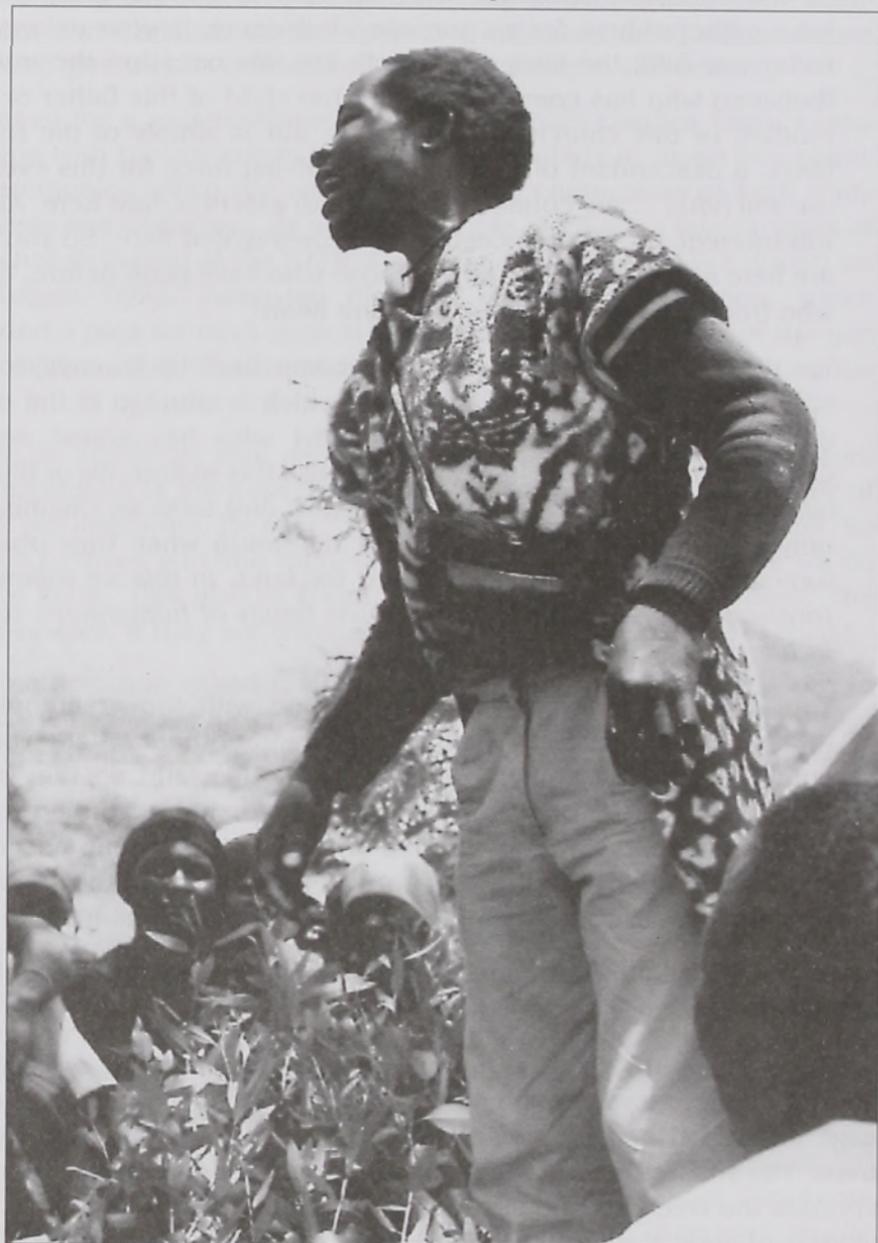
You must cooperate with Gwenyaya and with the grandmothers (older women) here, as well as the grandmothers where you all come from. Let us ululate in honour of this land so that *all of Zimbabwe can be one*, from those who worship according to the books (*vanonamata mumabhuku*) to those who worship according to the soil and the snuff horns (*muvhu nezvibako*)! In these laws of earthkeeping Zimbabwe unites. *Sekuru* (Chaminuka) affirms all this.

After much ululation the song '*Chaminuka ndiMambo*' (Chaminuka is king) was sung.

Towards the end of the ceremony medium Chaminuka once more addressed the crowd: 'We thank you for gathering the people of the lineage of the vaMhari (dominant tribal group in Chivi district) to plant trees. The soil (ancestors) will *unfasten the heavens* so that the rain will sprinkle the trees and ripen the fruit of tomorrow ... Chief Chivi, this work is of great magnitude. *It is the work of salvation (ruponeso).*'

The strength of the traditional worldview and faith in the ancestors is

Plate 31 Spirit medium Chaminuka (referred to as Tovera in previous volume) addresses fellow tree-planters



overwhelmingly evident in these speeches. Muzenda pays tribute to a Zionist bishop's sermon and acknowledges the connection between the ancestors and Mwari. He even complains about the confusion caused by different religions worshipping Mwari and calls for increased ardour in the worship of this divinity. But it is quite evident that for the present occasion the important matters are the soil, the ancestors. This is clearly borne out by spirit-medium Chaminuka's speech. Unity of purpose and action in the environmental struggle, in the whole nation of Zimbabwe and in the earlier struggle for political independence, emanates entirely from the soil, the ancestors. Moreover, the Shona hero-ancestor, Chaminuka, is considered to be present at the ceremony in the living person of the medium. Consequently those attending the ceremony and engaged in tree planting are seen as obeying and fulfilling the laws of the ancestors. The ancestors get credit for building the family of humankind and it is implied that they also instil religious unity by bringing together the worshippers who read books (Christians) and those who venerate the soil with sacrificial snuff (traditionalists). It seems that even the important work of environmental 'salvation', to which Chief Chivi referred, is somehow attributable to the ancestors.

When one considers the centrality of the ancestors in this ceremony, some cardinal reasons that the AAEC requires a clear-cut and convincing christology in relation to the spirit world are the following. First, some of the claims made by traditionalists conflict with AIC convictions. Tree planting in a pluriform religious context does not mean that everybody present is intentionally complying with ancestral directives, as Chaminuka implied. It could become quite confusing to well-intentioned AIC members, who are urged to fight the war of the trees in concert with traditionalists, if they lack a strong, clear-cut christology in the face of this kind of assertiveness about the ancestors. Christian participants could well feel that the witness-character of their faith should be repressed in these circumstances for the sake of ecumenical unity. It should be made clear that religious tolerance and ecumenical interaction do not exclude Christian witness. And the AAEC should give clear guidance about the meaning of Christ's lordship and his role as supreme earthkeeper amongst the Shona *midzimu*, the guardians of the land in particular. Christ's cross and resurrection need to be made manifest in the domain of the soil.

Second, there are many points of contact in the presentation given

above which could be fruitful for a contextualised christology. References to love and harmony in family life, religious interaction and unity, as well as environmental salvation reflect interaction between Christian and traditionalist values. These notions can be spelled out in greater detail if the soteriological nature of the *descensio Christi* can be convincingly applied in this context. For instance, the chief's interpretation of salvation probably relates to Chaminuka's claim that the ancestors 'unfasten the heavens' for the life-giving rain to fall. This interpretation could be the starting point for a more comprehensive teaching of salvation (*ruponeso*) – applied to both the human family and the cosmos – in Christ's communication with the ancestors.

Third, the numerous references to the importance of kinship and a united family as basic to success in the environmental struggle further illustrate the appropriateness of our theme of 'Christ in kinship', if Christ's incarnation is to achieve real meaning in the African setting. Due to Chaminuka's seniority as a national ancestor in the 'family of Zimbabwe', and his prominence in the spirit war council concerned with all forms of liberation struggle in the country, the universal position of Christ as Chaminuka's 'elder brother' and as chief 'councillor' relating to Mwari on all matters of salvation and liberation throughout Zimbabwe and all creation, requires explanation in AAEC circles – at least, if biblical criteria are to remain definitive in the development of a contextual christology.

An ancestor-oriented christology would be incomplete if it does not include the subject of the communion of saints, the *communio sanctorum*. Taylor (1963:166) writes that 'when the gaze of the living and the dead is focused on Christ they have less compulsive need for each other'. But need is not the only basis for relationships, and since Christ, the second Adam, promotes the corporateness of the community as a whole, Taylor believes that the time has come for the church to give the doctrine of the communion of saints the prominence that Africa wants to assign to it.

Taylor (1963:168) calls the intimate bond between the living and the dead in Christ 'the tender bridge'. The substance of this bond is prayer, reciprocal intercession, even to the extent that the prayers of the dead are solicited. In this Taylor assumes two things: first, that the Christian faith implies direct dealings and communication with the dead; and

second, that addressing the ancestors in traditional African religion is sufficiently devoid of worship not to pose a dilemma for the church in Africa.

The more conservative Christian traditions in Africa, such as the Reformed Protestants, evangelicals and pentecostally oriented AICs, will tend to reject Taylor's implicit synthesis of the Christian communion of saints with traditionalist ancestor veneration. Christians from these traditions may indeed feel compelled to pray for their non-Christian dead, but would be inclined to focus less on the realm of the living dead in deference to the centrality of Christ. Acceptance of the incompleteness of the present eschatological dispensation, as well as the unfathomable mystery of death, may give rise to the belief that it is sufficient for the moment to accept that the living dead are 'with Christ'.

It should be noted that the ancestor cult is often replaced by memorial rites in the African church, in which traditional elements are given Christian content. With reference to the Xhosa, Pauw (1960:210) writes: 'Christian services of thanksgiving or commemoration of the dead are held, usually accompanied by a feast, mainly for kinsmen and the local church members, for which something is slaughtered. This is then done *without calling on the ancestors*.' The omission of any direct address of the ancestors indicates that the traditional dependence on their mystical protective powers is being consciously replaced or transformed.

Black African theologians have also pondered this subject. Mosothoane (1973:87), for example, rightly observes that 'the ancestor cult's refusal to die has proved itself to be an asset to Christian theology, for there has in recent years been a rediscovery of the *Communio Sanctorum* by Christian theologians (Protestant and Catholic alike) and the 'problem' of the ancestor cult seemed to have contributed appreciably to this.' At the very point where the Western approach, with its strong emphasis on individualism and secularism, comes up against a conception of death which is most unbiblically reduced to an individualistic fringe phenomenon, the African death concept underlying the ancestor cult offers a new perspective. According to Mosothoane (1973:89), a positive approach to death and recognition of the closeness of the spirit world reduce the fear of death and help Christians to

grasp anew the biblical tenet that humans were created to transcend their earthly limitations.

In Africa the ancient Christian concept of the communion of saints acquires existential reality. It has greater immediacy and significance as a communion between the living and the dead and an implied union of the church militant and church triumphant than among Western Christians (Verkuyl 1975:384). The Christian confession of 'communion in Christ' and encouragement by a 'cloud of witnesses' (Hb 12:1, 2) acquires new meaning in terms of the African tendency to live with the dead.

How does the *communio sanctorum* relate to the member churches of the AAEC, the majority of whom radically reject the claims of ancestors and ongoing dependence on ancestral protection? The answer to this question revolves around the fact that the churches in question have replaced virtually all ancestral rites with adapted, imaginatively Christianised ceremonies which effectively accommodate traditional needs for communion between the living and the dead. A striking example is the replacement of the key rite, the *kugadzira* (when a deceased person is elevated to the status of ancestorhood), with the *runyaradzo* (consolation ceremony).

In the latter ceremony, instead of bringing the deceased home and inducting him or her into the realm of *midzimu*, the late believer is 'accompanied' (*kuperekedza*) to heaven and more or less presented to the Lord by the church (Daneel 1974:131). Instead of addressing the dead, as is customary in the *kugadzira*, *runyaradzo* sermons focus on positive and exemplary features which were evident in the life of the deceased believer. This emendation is one of the most significant aspects of the process of reshaping. In this way the rite is stripped of the old *kupira* (veneration or 'worship') connotation and becomes more of a positive commemoration of the departed. Hence the traditional custom of 'living with the ancestors' receives a Christian focus by awareness that it is inspired by the dedication and Christian discipleship of those who are believed to have died 'in Christ' (Daneel 1973:71).

In the *runyaradzo* context an earthkeeper's *communio sanctorum* makes sense. The AAEC has admittedly not paid much attention to this subject, possibly because there is as yet no consensus on a convincing

christology relating specifically to the ancestral world. In addition, the movement is still too young for commemoration of its pioneer leaders to have become a direct concern. However, once a number of leading earthkeepers have passed the divide between the living and the dead, yet another tradition in AIC ritual life is bound to be established. For *runyaradzo* ceremonies on behalf of deceased earthkeepers will no doubt entail lengthy narratives of their contributions as tree planters, nursery keepers, instructors and mobilisers of the people. Their exemplary lives, even their failings, will highlight the relationship they had, and continue to have, with Christ the earthkeeper, their elder brother, fellow ancestor, healer of creation and saviour. I anticipate that only during this phase of development will the inspirational impact of the Christian dead on the still living family of earthkeepers become existentially manifest. Only then can one expect a more comprehensive and definitive christology of the soil (ancestors) to take shape. For in the AICs it is only from the ritual enactment of experience that new tenets of theology are born.

The *runyaradzo* on behalf of the late Leonard Gono, ZIRRCO's former field operations manager, was in the nature of an earthkeeper's *communio sanctorum*. At that ceremony Leonard was presented as belonging to the 'cloud of witnesses' (Hb 12:1,2), as one who, through his love for the wilderness and dedication to full stewardship of creation, keeps reminding us of our union in Christ the earthkeeper – a union which somehow both accepts and defies the valley of death. As a man of the earth Leonard had no claims to holiness. Nevertheless, in his earthkeeping mission he served people of all religious persuasions without any judgment, thereby giving us all a glimpse of God's grace. Ongoing union with him could mean that the AAEC's interpretation of *communio sanctorum* and the cloud of witnesses will eventually extend beyond a mere focus on the departed Christian earthkeepers to reflect not only AIC participation but also Christ the earthkeeper's outreach in a religiously pluriform community. Leonard's untimely death could also inspire the inclusion of a commemorative ceremony in the AAEC's tree-planting eucharist, something which will deepen the union in Christ of living and deceased saints of the earth.

#### 4.4 Christ the healer

The traditional healer, the *nganga*, has provided the primary paradigm for

an indigenous christology since the inception of African Christianity. Setiloane (1979:64) believes that an authentic African christology should be sought in the healing practices of the *bongaka*. Pobee, again, considers the parallel between the Akan healer and Jesus a suitable illustration of the divinity, and especially the power and authority, of Christ. The similarity is that both are 'ensouled' by God during the process of healing. According to Pobee (1979:93) the difference, however, would lie in the intensity of such ensouling by God: 'Jesus was in a perpetual state of holiness, perpetually ensouled by God, so much so that the divine power was like a continuously flowing electric power in him, unlike the traditional healer, who has the occasional experience of it.'

Buana Kibongi (1969:52-54) gives the following description of the *nganga's* relationship with the Christian church in the former Zaire:

For good or ill, Christianity has not always escaped the heritage of *nganga*. The Christian missionary drew part of his authority, without knowing it, from the psychological state which *nganga* had created. The missionary was called *nganga Nzambi* (God's priest), as distinct from *nganga nunkisi* (the fetish priest). It goes without saying that the missionary benefited from the respect which was formerly due to the *nganga vankisi* ... The Congolese priest or minister is also called *nganga Nzambi*. He profits from the situation created by *nganga* and the missionary. *Nganga* has not only assured to some extent the social status of Church workers; he has also left them the legacy of religious and conceptual moral tools: it is undoubtedly *nganga* who created words such as *Nzambi* (God), *munuka* (to define oneself; hence *masumu*, sin) ... *Nganga's* work partly enabled the Bible to be translated into Congolese languages. The Christian preacher consciously or unconsciously uses part of the vocabulary left by *nganga*. This is where Congolese priesthood confronts Biblical revelation.

Kibongi also shows that the Congolese *nganga* was never a mediator between *muntu* (humans) and *Nzambi* (God), but only between human beings and the departed spirits. The *nganga's* activities evoked the concepts of liberation and redemption: '*Nganga* is certainly the saviour or the liberator of *Muntu*' (Kibongi 1969:54). Buana Kibongi evidently regards the *nganga* as the precursor of the priest and the minister - not only as a healer but especially as a religious leader. After all, the *nganga* is Christ's

precursor in Africa: he, as the new *nganga*, is the fulfilment of the traditional one. '*Ngangas* willed to save man, but did not succeed in doing so; Christ did so fully once for all. Christ has therefore accomplished the work of *Nganga*' (Kibongi 1969:55).

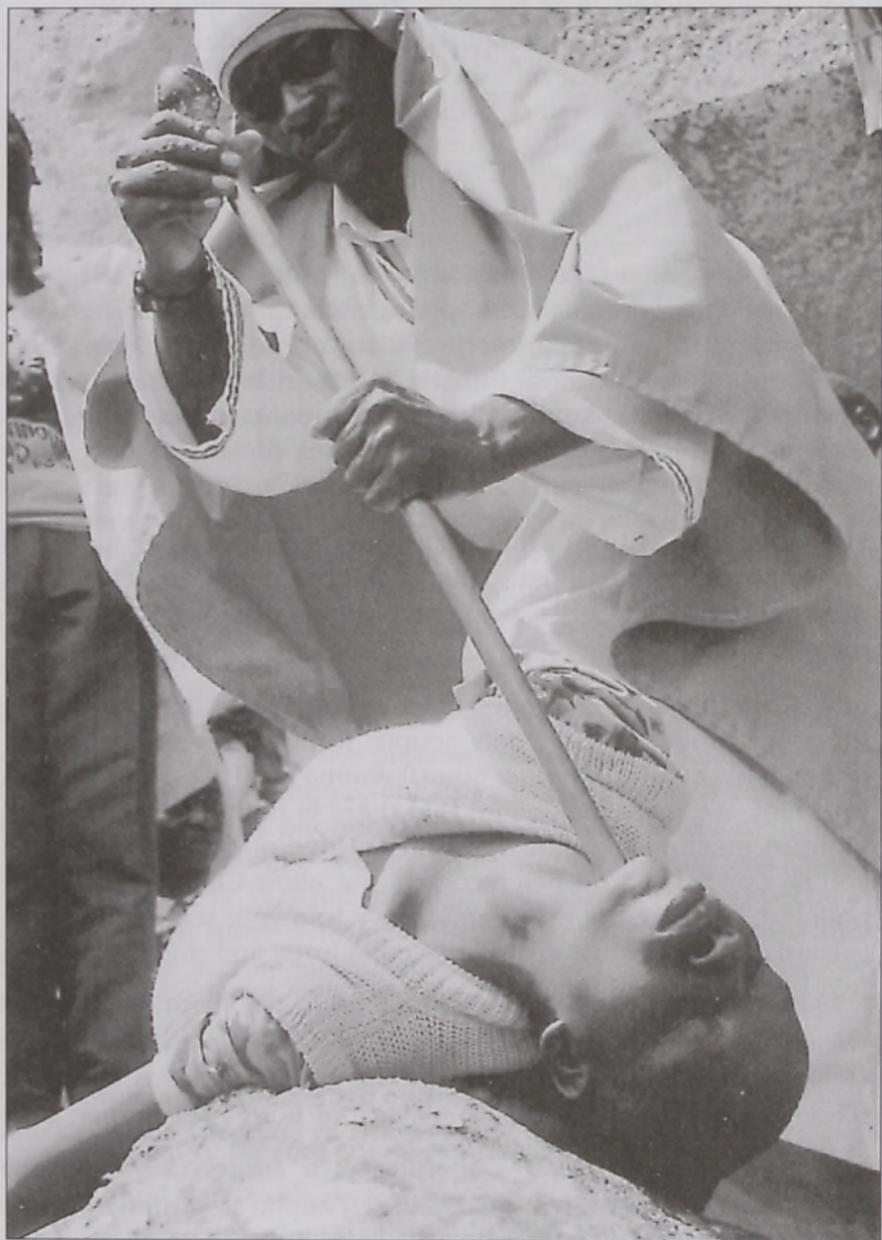
The prophetic Independent Churches illustrate the paradigm of Christ as the 'healing *nganga*' more vividly than any other churches in Africa. In this respect they are making a decided contribution to an African christology, one which African theologians would be well advised to note. In the Shona prophetic movements the prophetic healers naturally see their faith-healing activities as a substitute for, and in opposition to, traditional *nganga* practices (Daneel 1974:186f). Nonetheless, their diagnostic and therapeutic work – the focal point of these movements and certainly their most dynamic recruiting technique – is largely based on the ideas and techniques of the *nganga*. The chief similarity is that the prophet, like the *nganga*, ascribes disease, misfortune or lack of success to spirits, evil powers, magic and the like. However, the prophets explicitly state that their extraperception comes from the Holy Spirit and not from the divinatory means used by the *nganga*. The prophets insist that the spirits in question have no legitimate claim on the beleaguered patient. Therapy therefore does not consist in traditional sacrificial rites or the use of medicine, but in the exorcism of threatening spirits and symbolic actions representing the healing power of the Christian God. In their dealings with patients prophets emphasise mainly the work of the Holy Spirit. This does not mean that there is no christology, but rather that it is *presupposed* as the basis of all healing practices. In fact the prophets themselves personify the liberating and healing ministry of Christ. In them the *nganga* tradition is partly continued, even fulfilled, but it is also radically Christianised.

Through the activities of the AAEC the Shona prophetic movements are widening their perceptions and ministry of healing. Instead of being presupposed in the prophets' Spirit-filled outreach to afflicted humanity, Christ now emerges more decisively than before as the *healer of all creation*, as the one who deals consistently with both human and environmental illness. This is manifest in the AAEC's tree-planting eucharists which, in contrast to AZTREC's *mafukidzanyika* (earth-clothing) events, are called *maporesanyika* (earth-healing) ceremonies. The name places the main emphasis on healing. '*Maporesanyika* ceremonies,' says Revd Solomon Zvanaka (in ZIRRCO Annual Report 1994:10), 'combine with

Plate 32 The traditional African healer, *nganga*, provided the primary paradigm for an indigenous christology



Plate 33 Apostolic prophet-healer exorcises afflicting spirits from a patient



the eucharist, where Christians experience the newness of life in a novel way, where relationships are expressed, between God and man, and between man and all of creation. There is new theologising where celebrants express new perceptions of sins, salvation and reconciliation, the lordship of Christ and the unity of creation. Relevant biblical texts are read and interpreted to the people. What a novelty! What an impetus that drives people to exercise Christian stewardship over the earth! Zvanaka here captures something of the breadth and richness of the ritual context in which Christ emerges as *healer* and *saviour*.

Keen group awareness of Christ's presence as healer marks most *maporesanyika* ceremonies. Bishop Wapendama's sermons (*supra*:39, 41) illustrate the common interpretation of AAEC earthkeeping as Christ's work, an extension of Christ's healing mission. Other sermons confirm this trend. At Bishop Marinda's *maporesanyika* ceremony in 1993, Revd Machingura combined the themes of sacrament and healing as follows:

They (our friends from ZIRRCO) came here today because of the presence of Jesus Christ. This is a holy occasion, our Paseka, ordained by Jesus Christ, who gathered his disciples for the use of the sacrament ...

In 1 Corinthians 5 Paul says that we are the temple of God and therefore should become holy people. It must be seen that Jesus is drinking his cup (*mukombe*: gourd) among us. That is our covenant with him. We must make sure that there is nothing which prevents us from meeting the blood of Christ. Drive out the wicked among you (1 Cor 5:13)! You believers, do not allow Christ's blood to be polluted. Remove the evildoers! I have told you: remove the *varoyi* (wizards)! Will we look at one of the big trees and think of felling it? NO! Even if you are inquisitive, leave it as it is!

We are all sinners. We have to confess fully so that we can be cleansed. We confess because of the blood of Jesus Christ. His blood is *mushonga* (medicine) inside the body of a human being. Jesus's blood therefore has great *simba* (power) to heal.

In the past there were no hospitals. People ate fruit: *nhunguru*, *matunduru*, *mishuku* ... sweet and sour fruit. The fruit itself contained Mwari's medicine and was adequate to keep people healthy.

Likewise, if we follow Christ's directives today in our paschal celebrations, he will protect and keep us.

As is characteristic in the AICs, cleansing or purification of the communicants receives great attention in this sermon. The occasion is holy and therefore participants must prepare themselves to be worthy of communion with the body and blood of Christ. Significantly, the wicked who should be excluded from sacramental participation are not only the moral transgressors, but specifically also the wizards who destroy nature through wanton tree felling. The implication is that Christ's blood – that is, his person – addresses, cleanses and heals both people in the conventional sense and creation, through the body of sacramentally united earthkeepers. In the eucharist Christ features quite dramatically as healer in that his blood is perceived as medicine or 'life force' in the bodies of the celebrants – perhaps a combination of African symbolism, residual beliefs in the *nganga's* magical healing praxis and an indigenised version of Roman Catholic transubstantiation as regards the elements of the sacraments? Whatever the answer to this question, the preacher introduces the 'medicinal presence' of Christ in the communicants in the context of Mwari's natural provision for human healing in nature, a further indication of the interconnectedness of ecological wholeness and a healing christology.

Insofar as the Shona Spirit-type churches consider Christ's salvific work to be integral to healing, the preacher cited above is actually expressing, at the African grassroots, christological convictions very similar to those propounded by Shorter (1985:51–58), albeit less systematised. All healing, he contends, is directed to eternal life and wholeness: 'In the church this is realized through the sacraments, especially the Eucharist, which is the renewal of the mystery of Christ's cross and resurrection.' The sacraments are the works of the divine Spirit, whom Shorter calls 'medicine of life', since it continues Christ's healing mission (in Schreiter 1991:10).

The christological significance of the AAEC's tree-planting eucharist lies in its ritualised blending of the wide-ranging tenets of Christ's healing ministry. Observations by commoners participating in the *maporesanyika* ceremonies reflect a growing awareness of the comprehensive nature of this ministry; thus illustrating its conscientising impact. Said one of the villagers in a *maporesanyika* speech: 'The protection of trees

is a holy matter. The land is barren. The blanket of vegetation which should cover it has been torn away. In its nakedness the land is ill. We, too, the people of Mupakwa, are ill. *We have come to be healed, together with the land.* In Jesus' time you only needed to touch his garment to be healed. In clothing the land with trees we, too, are being healed.'

These words show a simple yet profound understanding that Christ came to heal the sickness of the entire world. Human and environmental illness are interlinked and the earthkeepers' care for the environment is part of the therapy for their own malady. Once again the AAEC's ritualised earthkeeping experience, verbalised by an unsophisticated peasant, corroborates Shorter's observation about an African healing christology when he says that 'healing becomes a possibility to establish and maintain harmony with the natural environment. Environmental wholeness is fundamental to human well-being' (in Schreiter 1991:10). Indeed, the villager quoted above realised that the disruption of nature's equilibrium was also distorting and threatening human life. Both shared a need for healing and salvation. Both were present at the tree-planting eucharist to seek and share in the deliverance wrought by the 'wounded healer' of Nazareth. For this AAEC earthkeeper healing and wellbeing lie in restoring harmony in creation, a function which requires sacrifice on the part of Christ's present-day fellow wounded healers.

Finally we consider the healing christology implicit in the various phases of the tree-planting eucharist.

#### 4.4.1 Healing and cleansing

In anticipation of Christ's healing presence in the sacrament, the communicants prepare themselves by publicly confessing their moral and ecological sins. The cleansing and spiritual self-renewal are necessary if Christ is to be 'seen' breaking the bread and drinking the cup of wine in the midst of his present-day disciples. Destructive attitudes of communicants, it is believed, should be prevented from polluting Christ's blood which heals the communicants and enables them to fulfil their own environmental healing task. So Christ is already actively present in the cleansing of communicants prior to the actual taking of the sacramental elements, confronting through his Spirit the unrepentant wizards who spoil the earth.

Here, too, the healing effected by Christ differs from that of the *nganga*. The prophets in charge of confessions do not as a rule impose ostracism on an exposed *muroyi venyika* (wizard of the earth), as the *nganga* would have recommended. Prophetic disapproval is expressed in public exposure of the wizard and, in the event of an unrepentant spirit, exclusion from the eucharist. But the prophet leaves the door of reconciliation open by keeping the *muroyi* in the church community. Hence there is still a prospect of Christ's forgiveness and healing (enacted in the *muroyi's* eventual change of heart), reinstatement in the community of believing earthkeepers and full participation in *maporesanyika* ceremonies. Strict as the conditions for confession and cleansing may be, Christ emerges at this juncture as a forgiving healer, whose mercy entreats wizards to change their ways from environmental destruction to earth-care. Healing thus entails reconciliation and harmony between humans and all creatures; it seeks to establish respect for life and mercifully defers final judgment of the as-yet heartless exploiters of creation.

#### 4.4.2 Healing and proclamation

In eucharistic sermons Christ emerges, as was shown above, as the Lord of creation who mandates his church to conduct an extended mission, which includes spreading environmental good news; as the earthkeeper who suffers because of the destruction of creation; and so forth. In all these images, however, Christ remains essentially the healer/saviour who fulfils the Old Testament prophecies of Isaiah 40–43, in that he brings life – water, trees and wildlife – to the wastelands. Through ZIRRCO's iconic leaders he provides the means for restoring and holding together (Col 1:17) the things of nature which are falling apart. The presence of numerous prophetic healers, moreover, who are living representatives of Christ's New Testament healing ministry, rekindles hope of harmony and wholeness in a better future. And the repeated messages about Christ's body and blood as 'medicine' for his disciples inspire commitment, in renewed health and vigour, to an otherwise all but impossible, daunting task of earth healing.

#### 4.4.3 Healing through sacramental empowerment

The earthkeeper's holding a tree seedling while partaking of the bread and wine symbolises identification with and dependence on the healing

powers of Christ. The queues of communicants from many and diverse denominations become a united army of healers at the communion table. In the sacrament their divisions are overcome as their union in the body of the great healer empowers them for their environmentally therapeutic task. As if touching the garment of the historical Christ, the communicants themselves are being healed in Christ, and their healing motive or task – both for the ‘soil’ and for humans – is somehow divinely affirmed. Hope is rekindled in the ranks of the earthkeepers, and they draw encouragement from the cleansing, ‘medicinal’ blood of Christ. Knowledge of the universality of Christ’s healing powers also makes the communicants aware of the global dimension of their regionally expressed service of stewardship.

#### 4.4.4 Healing the soil

Through the procession of communicants going into the new woodlot to plant their seedlings Christ the wounded earthkeeper addresses the eroded soil. It is he who, in the tree planters’ dialogue with nature, implores the seedlings to grow strong roots to prevent further soil erosion by water and wind. It is his healing hands which plant the seedlings in the soil, and with them the promise of protection and a new cycle of life. Some tree planters, on the other hand, consider the act of planting to be healing the soil, the abused cosmic body of Christ. Thus they witness to their union in the body of Christ, which has just been sacramentally affirmed, and their responsibility for it.

There is also a spiritual dimension to Christ’s healing of the soil. For the duration of *maporesanyika* ceremonies at least, concern for the traditional spirit provinces of the guardian ancestors and the old conflicts and rivalries associated with past conquests of the land are pushed into the background. The presence and participation of chiefs, headmen and a wide range of AIC members – all of them from the surrounding territories and all of them representing different, often inimical histories, myths and ancestral bonds with the soil – are conducive to mutuality and reconciliation rather than rivalry. It is at this juncture that the AICs involved in the ceremony could ritually develop this interaction between Christ and the *varidzi venyika* by intimating that the former’s lordship over all creation breaks down territorial divisions and mobilises spirit unity in the interest of concerted action for environmental restoration.

#### 4.4.5 Healing human beings

Finally, as the tired tree planters return to the meeting place where the sacrament was administered, the healing cycle comes full circle. Women with sick children, elderly people with ailments, young people with problems – all the *maporesanyika* fighters who seek help – flock to where the prophetic healers are getting ready to tend to the needy. Once again the drums of Zion, of the AAEC, can be heard beating rhythmically; rattles are shaken and the women start swaying in song and dance. The healers shake and speak in tongues to confirm the presence of the Holy Spirit. The spirit of Christ the healer moves in our midst. The late afternoon sun rays beaming through the flimsy leaves of seedlings in the new woodlot and in the expectant eyes of afflicted people tell their own story: *Christ's healing of the land and his healing of people join hands, are one!*

I stand among the healers, praying and laying on hands, sprinkling people with holy water, blessing newly filled bottles of water, healing and being healed. I have never claimed any healing vocation or powers, but I participate nevertheless, having learnt about diagnosis of illness in terms of African worldviews and about the value of the AIC symbols of Christ's healing and protective power. I am no longer surprised at hearing patients answer affirmatively when I ask questions about vengeful spirits, spoilt relations or *uroyi* (wizardry). Feeling the straining body in a state of possession or the heat of witchcraft medicine in a victim's system no longer disturbs me. Every time I am thus engaged the nagging questions of my rational mind recede and I find quiet and peace in the doing. Indeed, as the villager above observed: *'We have come to be healed, together with the land.'*

In front of us is a sea of black heads, faces with hopeful eyes, eyes full of pain, fear, rejection or joy. Hands, black and white, are laid on those heads in prayer, conveying a message of reconciliation and wholeness. They are the hands of icons, illuminating the presence, empathy, love of Jesus. They are wounded hands, suffering hands, still dusty from planting seedlings in the soil. In the dying sun they are the reassuring hands of the Lord himself, holding a promise of new life, resurrection ... where all evil ceases.

Cécé Kolié (1991:141–142) after surveying the emerging christologies in the Roman Catholic and established mission churches in Africa,

Plate 34 Final phase of the tree-planting exercise. Tired tree planter Bishop Marinda prays for a sick child



Plate 35 At sunset healing the land and healing people come full circle as Revd Solomon Zvanaka lays hands on a fellow earthkeeper – hands which still carry the dust of tree-planting



concludes that Christ the healer does not function convincingly in the existential reality of individual believers. This, he claims, is because the established churches are still foreign to the fundamental problematics of black people. 'Our liturgies,' he maintains, 'do not celebrate human beings fighting disease, or struggling so hard to get up on their feet, or striving to be free.' Consequently, he states, 'to give Christ the face of the healer in Africa (even though this was his principal activity in Israel) will not be feasible until the manifold gifts of healing possessed by all of our Christian communities have begun to manifest themselves.'

Kolié's criticism correctly identifies a serious limitation in Western-oriented Christianity in Africa. To many believers the face of Christ remains alien and masked when it comes to their existential problems. However, the AAEC's blending of a ministry of human and environmental healing clearly shows that both in liturgy and individual experience the healing features of Christ are being unmasked and revealed. The 'manifold gifts of healing' are emerging forcefully and understandably in the African context where Christ meets his fellow wounded healers. He does so in the prophetic diagnosis of all ills, cleansing confessionals, tree-planting hands, exorcising hands ... all to the rhythm of dancing feet in which the inner struggle for life, dignity and wholeness is fierce and relentless.