

The Western Missionary Instituted Churches: Any room for Dialogue with the African Instituted Churches (AICs) in South Africa?

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Abstract

This study discusses the critical issue of the relationship between Western Missionary Instituted Churches and African culture in Southern Africa. It argues that in Africa, Dialogue between Western Missionary Instituted Churches and African culture is not an option but rather a matter of necessity in light of their missionary mandate. The necessity for Dialogue with African culture has been demonstrated since the 1950s and 1960s by African Initiated Churches' successful attempts of appropriating critical elements of African culture and values. This development indicates that the African context is dynamic with traditions that can enrich the Western Missionary Instituted Churches' self-understanding and make them capable of doing mission contextually and *ipso facto* more relevantly. The article argues that the concept of relationship in the form of a family can enrich the Western Missionary Instituted Churches' self-understanding and the manner in which it can engage mission. Therefore, an ecclesiology centred on the African concept of family constitutes a key principle for missional praxis in Africa.

Key words: African, church, context, culture, Dialogue, independent, missionary, South Africa

1. Introduction

In December 2005, the then Archbishop of Cape Town, Njongonkulu Ndungane, responded to "Some rumblings [by some members of the diocese of False Bay] regarding the slaughter of a beast as part of the celebrations of the inauguration of the new diocese" (Tulleken, 2005:8-11). He went on to admonish that, "I believe it is imperative that all of us avoid the temptation to expect inculturation to be the absorption of our own culture at the expense of the others" (2005:8-11). He went on to conclude that, "It is about so much more than the addition of a few choruses to the liturgy. As we reach out to each other in the Christian family, it involves personal; and communal sacrifice: the relinquishing of judgementalism, a readiness to share and adopt and a shedding of the misconception that 'my culture' is superior" (2005: 8-11)."

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In this statement, Ndungane suggested that there was resistance on some Anglicans representing Western Christianity to enter Dialogue with critical elements of the African culture as represented by Black members of the Anglican Church. Ndungane raised the issue of context, culture, and Christianity – how the three interact and relate. Implicitly, he was calling for Western Christianity, particularly Anglicanism in the diocese of False Bay, to enter serious Dialogue with critical aspects of African culture and spirituality.

This episode raises the question of the Western Missionary Instituted Churches, also known as “older mainline churches,” notably, Anglican, Dutch Reformed, Lutheran, and Roman Catholic Churches in South Africa, dialoguing with key elements of African culture and spirituality. David Bosch has highlighted the contextual nature of mission (2014:437). He states that “*Mission as contextualization* involves the construction of other local theologies” (2014:437). So, he notes, as “an experimental theology. . . [it entails] an ongoing dialogue [that] is taking place between text and context, a theology which, in the nature of the case, remains provisional and hypothetical. . .” (2014:437).

This study seeks to address this issue, especially in light of the experiences of the African Initiated Churches (AICs). In attempting to do that, this article poses the question: What can the older “mainline” churches possibly learn from the AICs engagement with issues of African culture and the Church’s mission in Africa today? My primary focus is on the exploration of African culture and not the institution of the AICs *per se*.

It is in the face of such a situation that contemporary African theologians are seeking a new way of achieving a more effective breakthrough in the communication of the Christian message to Africans: the way of Dialogue between Christianity and the indigenous thought-system. The role of the AIC is simply to serve as a conduit for the exploration of the positive values of the African culture through their experiences that I believe can serve as a case study. Therefore, there is an urgent need for the older western mission-founded churches to intentionally enter into a serious Dialogue with African cultural values like the AICs have been doing in their ministry and mission within the African context for decades. If the western mission-founded churches do not engage seriously with African cultures, they risk not only being irrelevant to the issues facing Africans and their contexts but also a decline in numbers (Jurgens & Erasmus, 2001:41-65).

What are the contextual and cultural issues that define and characterise the church’s mission in Africa today? Of course, there are many. One can think of gender, environment, governance, politics, economics, and the list go on. However, I have chosen to explore the issue of African culture, specifically the experience of life as a ‘community’ with its stress on the value of relationships, fellowship,

and participation in relation to the AICs. The AIC tradition, to a degree, has managed to blend African culture in its theological and missional identity, vocation, and witness. However, this indigenous ecclesial movement and tradition has largely been despised, ignored, and marginalised by the older “mainline” churches which precisely because of issues of status, feelings of being socially and theologically superior, and fear (feelings of insecurity) fail to negotiate issues of gospel and culture that are not western.

2. Theoretical Considerations:

2.1 A Sociological-Anthropological Approach

Since this study focuses on Dialogue between western churches and African cultures, it falls within the conceptual framework of inculturation theology. Justin Ukpong defines inculturation theology as “a contextual theology that involves making a particular context the subject of interpretation of the Christian faith” (Ukpong, 1999:109). He further elaborates that The aim is to give expression to Christianity in African religious-cultural terms, to work towards creating a synthesis between Christianity and African culture and religion, to present Christianity in a way congenial to the African’s view of reality, and to integrate Christianity into his world view. The final goal is to help the African live out Christianity authentically within his cultural milieu and to integrate his/her religious personality (1999:108). It entails three elements: a text, a context, and an interpretive framework. Context denotes, “The human environment or situation in which the word of God is situated for theological reflection” (1999:109). It is the lived experience of people that interacts with the Christian faith. In this respect, Ukpong follows what he calls the sociological-anthropological approach. This approach views culture holistically, “As a system of symbols and their meaning” (1999:103).

The sociological-anthropological approach endeavours to develop a holistic inculturation theology that creates an encounter of the Christian message with both the religious and the economic, political, and social context. It seeks a radical interpretation of the Christian faith using an African conceptual framework of reference. Inculturation theology involves identifying the *context*, *text*, and an *interpretive framework*, all of which function collectively and co-jointly in the interpretive processes (1999:109). As Yusufu Turaki states, “The strategy of moving from the Text to the Context wants to preserve the essence of Christianity, which is found in the Holy Scriptures and this essence should be translated accurately and should be made relevant to the recipient context” (1999:20).

This study identifies the *context* as South Africa, located within a traditional African cultural perspective. It identifies the African family, and specifically, the Nguni family, as the *value*, that is, a resource to interpret and understand the traditional Western ecclesiological model. This study has chosen the Zulu family model pre-

cisely because it is the only major ethnic group so far in South Africa that this issue has been researched on. Michael Nel (2007) has highlighted the relationality of the Zulu family unit structure, especially with reference to the ancestors. Employing Ukpong's term, this unit structure is a *value*, that must be understood and interpreted within the African *interpretive framework* of "communality, corporality, and unity of life" (See Ukpong, 1999:110-112). This is the core of the African worldview, an African theological-anthropological paradigm, into which the Zulu family, as a value, can be understood as a model.

Ukpong asserts that text specifically denotes biblical texts or themes, "and the church teachings used in a theological reflection" (1999:109). They entail aspects of the Christian faith in the interpretation process (1999:111). Within this framework, the core value is "fellowship" and "participation." The interpretive framework is cultural hermeneutics. This study has identified the African Family as an *ecclesial model* at the centre of which are two crucial cultural values, namely; "belonging" and "embrace."

2.2 Context, Text, Culture and Dialogue

John Gumperz asserts that context relates to human interactions within particular historical and spatial settings. In other words, contexts comprise human interactions that constitute content (1992:44). They "consist of patterns of relationship and social structures, historical trajectories and local particularities, status and power configurations, values and commitments that intrigue contemporary social analysis...meaning and identity are always contextual, and content is hidden unless contexts become accessible to critique and open to transformation" (1992:44). Luke Pato argues that, "The task of relating Christian faith to the African context is essential also in the sense that Christianity is not an abstract system, but one that expresses itself in concrete cultural forms" (Pato, 1989:160). Pato gives an example of Saint Paul who adapted his message to different congregations, accordingly, and sought to work with the existing cultural and religious heritage that the people already had (Pato, 1989:160). "He proclaimed the gospel in such a way that it should become part of the people, so that they should be able to own it fully. Failure to do this diminishes the gospel message. Converts also remain estranged from their new faith because the gospel had not been communicated in familiar and meaningful thought forms and expressions" (1989:160). Tinyiko Maluleke (1997) has stressed the significance of African culture in relation to Dialogue with Western Christian theology. He said, "African culture and African Traditional Religions (ATRs) have long been acknowledged as the womb out of which African Christian theology must be born" (1997:10). He further asserts, "From various

fronts, African Christians insisted that the church of Africa and its theology must bear an African stamp” (1997:10).

2.3 Inculturation as a challenge to the Mainline Churches

Most churches that originated from Western missionary enterprises in the late 19th century, among others, Anglican, Dutch Reformed, Methodist, and Roman Catholic Church, despite some initiatives in ‘inculturation,’ find it nearly impossible to take a ‘completely’ African shape (Magesa, 2019:264). As Bosch states, “The decisive consideration may, then, not be whether a church is Roman Catholic, Anglican, Presbyterian, or Lutheran, but whether it has its home in Africa. . . .” (2014:464). The mainline churches fail to give expression of the faith in the manner that the Early Church did with Hellenistic culture or later on with the Imperial Roman culture. Moreover, the ‘official’ theology of these churches as taught in their seminaries or theological colleges, or Bible Schools, very much run along European models of knowledge systems that continue to impart a theology informed by the spirit and ethos of the enlightenment, whose approach tends to run in conflict with the African view of reality and ethos. A ‘rational’ approach to the gospel stories sharply contrasts with a fundamentalist approach to the gospel in the AICs. In other words, in the former while the gospel is explained, its authority is entirely affirmed in the latter.

Older mainline churches continue to operate within inherited Western theological paradigms as well as structures of Church polity and ethos whose language or idioms are alien to African culture. Examples of this are concepts such as *The Church Order* in the Dutch Reformed Church, the *Canons and Constitution* in the Anglican Church, or the *Canon Law* in the Roman Catholic Church. These seem to have very little or nothing in common with traditional African polity of governance and order. These statutes are in the term of Ukpong, *texts*, which reflect the value systems and ethos of Western Europe and tend to relate very little to the African values of reciprocity and relationality. The churches’ inability to engage with local context contrasts with the government’s positive affirmation of some *values* of African culture.

Since 1994, the government of South Africa has gone ahead of the churches in appropriating in the term of Ukpong *values*, in the form of idioms, and symbols, which it uses to promote its approach of service delivery. For instance, it has adopted the Sesotho concept of *Batho Pele*, to highlight the point that “people take a priority” in its social service delivery programmes. It has adopted the Xitsonga concept of *khomanani*, meaning (Shilunane & Geyer, 2014), “Hold one another’s hands,” to engender the spirit of collaboration in community development (2014). The government has adopted values such as *imbizo*, *indaba* or *lekgotla* to pro-

mote democratic tendencies. In an African village in Southern Africa, an *imbizo* or *lekgotla* opens space for people to own decisions taken collectively. It is a space where no set agenda has been drawn, but each member brings up his or her own concerns. This tends to ensure maximum participation. Could a church synod not be run on similar lines and spirit as the *imbizo*, *indaba*, or *lekgotla*? Can these churches recognise the value of *the Ubuntu* spirit? These are critical African contextual issues.

Mbiti puts the problem succinctly: “Even though attempts are made to give Christianity an African character, its Western form is in many ways foreign to African peoples. This foreignness is a drawback because it means that Christianity is kept on the surface and is not free to deepen its influence in all areas of African life and problems” (Mbiti, 1975:185). In his article, “Veneration of Ancestors in the House of God,” Klaus Nurnberger (2007) has demonstrated the fundamental weakness of the theology and practice of mainline churches in not engaging African contexts seriously. He points out the issue of authority and power; presenting a Christology that does not resonate with African cultural concerns and lacks elaborate ritual in mainline churches (2007:60, 64-67). However, Peter Houston (2020) argues that the mainline churches *do* have rituals, such as Baptism and Confirmation, but they lack the ones that would cover “all of life” of an African. Houston’s point is valid.

3. The dynamism of African culture

By nature, cultures are dynamic as they influence peoples’ lives and conduct. Culture may enhance the quality of life. Culture is the transmitter through which societal values are communicated to build communities. In essence, therefore, cultural values can transform the lives of people either positively or negatively. In his book, *The Power of African Cultures*, Toyin Falola (2003:55) stresses the power of African culture as a source of social cohesion in the community precisely because the African worldview is the basis from which relationships and values give fuller expression to the humanity of the individual (2003:55). Thus, he asserts that, “To be human is to belong to the community, and to do so involves participating in the beliefs, ceremonies, rituals and festivals of that community” (2003:55). Participating in cultural values provides purpose for human existence, meaning to life. They are values through which humans connect with life.

Community and relationships in Africa enhance social cohesion; thus, it is an area in which the mainline churches in South Africa must seriously consider engaging. David Lochhead (1988), in *The Dialogical Imperative*, describes Dialogue as a state in which two parties enter a mutual conversation, a dialogical relationship where they ‘open to each other’ as partners and are engaged in negotiation (1988:9-12). According to Lochhead, the interaction in the process opens the pos-

sibility of one party being transformed, converted to the other party's view. Dialogue is dynamic, transformative (1988:9-12).

However, Stanley Skreslet cautions that no culture is stagnant. He argues that precisely because culture is dynamic, it has to enter into constant Dialogue with held theological principles. ...Submerged values and taken-for-granted assumptions about Christian norms may be brought to the surface and demand to be examined" (Skreslet, 2012:69).

Historical contexts play a critical role in forming and shaping Christian thought and practice. In entering Dialogue with the African cultures and traditions, the AICs transformed themselves. They came up with a new ecclesiological understanding and practice of their ministry and mission. In the same manner as the Early Church dialogued with Hellenistic philosophy, the Medieval Church with Platonic philosophy, Roman (and imperial) culture consequently was transformed, so the AICs using African cultural resources, concepts, systems of thought to enhance its mission in the African continent have been transformed. This development suggests the religious significance of culture.

4. The rise of the AICs – a challenge to Missionary Churches' approach

The dynamics of contexts in Africa have given way to the emergence of AICs. To a degree, the rise of the AICs in the 19th century and throughout the 20th century, and their continual growth today, ought to be viewed as a failure of the "main-line" Churches in not taking African cultures and traditions seriously enough (Jurgens & Erasmus, 2001:41-65). These African churches successfully adapted some *valuable* elements of Western Christianity within African socio-cultural and religious systems (2001:41-65). They were involved in the process of 'indigenising' Christianity in Africa (2001:41-65). However, it would seem as if in the 1950s the Western-originated Churches in Africa took a cue from the AICs (Ntombana, 2015:104-119). Subsequently, in the 1950s and throughout 1960 and the 1970s, in various forms, processes such as 'indigenisation' or 'inculturation' came to be on the agenda of African Christianity, and it has never left it. I do not see it leaving Africa in the foreseeable future (Kalu, 2007:309).

The period between 1950 and the 1980s in Africa brought to the fore multicultural and multireligious issues more urgently than ever before, which came to have a bearing on the church's mission today (Bediako, 1997:355). Kwame Bediako (1997:355) highlighted the importance of inculturation when he asserted that "Adaptation as the missionary activity of the Church is thus the extension of the incarnation of the Word, the adaptation of God to man, and operates following the analogy with the Incarnate Word" (1997:355). In other words, "adaptation" or "incultura-

tion” or “incarnation” is the effective way by which Christianity can be meaningful to the African context. Similarly, to highlight the significance of such an engagement some scholars have described this process as the quest for the Christian faith to be “‘caught’ in the ‘webs of significance’ that are African culture” or “it must be clothed in African garments” (Brand & Lang, 1973:5; Bosch, 2002:31-32).

What Hilary Mijoga (2002) observed regarding the AICs in Malawi might equally apply to the rest of Africa, including South Africa. He asserted that African Independent Churches can be viewed from two perspectives: negatively as “An outright failure of mainstream Christianity to meet the fundamental needs and aspirations of the African peoples of Malawi” and positively as “An attempt by Malawian Christians to apply the resources of the Scriptures to their own life in their own time and place” (Mijoga, 2002 184,185); (see also Bediako, 1999:305). I do not regard this as a question of either/or, but both/and. The mainline churches’ failure to engage with African cultures more creatively perhaps reflects a lack of understanding of the dynamism of African cultural values as resources that could enhance the mission of God. According to Todd M. Johnson and his colleagues (2017), by 2018, Africa had 599 million Christians, 49 million more Christians than the whole of Europe. To appreciate why Christianity continues to grow numerically at a very fast rate, it is important to explore the dynamism of African culture.

Cultural beliefs and religious beliefs are sub-sets of each other. C.M. Mwikamba (1992) has stressed the values of religion and African cultural beliefs. He asserts that in Africa, “Religion and beliefs are considered a source of life. They influence believers; this, in turn, influences their conduct, and their conduct influences the society at large” (1992:88). Even though religion and culture strictly speaking are not the same thing; however, the distinctions between them are very fine in some respects. Biblical scholars inform us that to access the ‘message’ of the texts we need to ‘negotiate’ through complex frontiers of cultures and other contexts. As Maluleke asserts, “There is no such thing as a pure African Christianity” (Maluleke, 2010:376). It is an undisputed fact that the 19th century missionaries brought a Gospel wrapped in a Western colonial culture, which to a degree tried to relate to an African cultural setting albeit with consequences which the missionaries seemingly failed to envisage, let alone control (Bediako, 1999). Hymns or Prayer Books, church structures and church polity reflect Western contexts and perhaps have very little to do with missional issues facing the Church in Africa.

Since a natural nexus exists between religion and culture, the church in Africa cannot afford to take the cultural contexts seriously as these influence the success or failure of its mission. According to Hilary Mijoga (2002:185), the successes of the AICs are largely due to the fact that it has managed to utilise critical elements of the African cultures and traditions, and in certain respects, refined them and then presented them in an innovative way.

In this respect, more importantly, Mijoga notes that, “They have attempted to bring Christian Faith and practice into closer relationship with African culture, and some of them have attempted a synthesis with aspects of African religion” (2002:185). As a result, Mijoga stressed “. . . their character of being friendly to African traditional culture wins them thousands of adherents” (2002:187). In other words, their openness to African cultures has enriched the AICs rather than impoverished them.

4.1 East African Ecclesiological Models

African scholars have put forward several African ecclesiological models. Like the concept of *ujamaa*, human relationships constitute a core value, which fosters social outreach (Fouere, 2014). *Ujamaa*, a concept that stresses the importance of community building, solidarity, rejection of all forms of superiority, mutual existence, and common ownership, affirms the equality of all its members with a view to realise the dignity of all (2014).

Likewise, John Mary Waliggo has also shown that the church can be understood as a clan where “every believer is a brother or sister to the other” (1990:125). “This model puts emphasis on ecumenism, seeing all as God’s people and true relatives” (1990:125). In this respect, according to Waliggo, “The Church characterises the African concept of the extended family life. In order to build a viable and meaningful community, every member of that community must be respected, appreciated and able to make his own contribution. A community that forms the fellowship cannot last where some members are mere spectators” (1990:125).

As Zablon Nthamburi asserts, “The Church must then be a participatory community where discipline, self-control and tolerance make it possible for all members to work together for the kingdom of God” (1990:45). Despite the hierarchical nature of the congregations and patriarchy, the Corinthians are very much a congregational based church that fosters the spirit of communal participation. According to Amanze, the AICs are an “organisation which brings people together as a family of God to live together in love and peace . . . [and] places a great deal of emphasis on Philadelphia – brotherly love” (1998:125-126). He goes on to say that, “Understood as a Christian version of African traditional values [they are] characterised by corporate life, community, group solidarity, hospitality and the like” (1998:125-126). He concludes, “This movement has brought a new quality of corporate life and responsibility, a new *koinonia* (sharing) of warmth, emotion and mutual caring in the Christian community together with a new philanthropy towards all” (1998:125-126).

One should express caution in stressing the successes of the AICs. From the perspective of Sociology of Religion, this could be a passing phase of development. When the time comes for them to face paradigm shifts in the political, social, and

economic order, they too may become what the mainline churches are now experiencing. What might be theologically and ecumenically the most significant feature in the AICs ecclesiologies is the fact that they have “testified to the existence of some generalized trends in the African response to the Christian faith in Africa terms.” Most of their churches are communal in orientation. Having evaluated these models, I would like to propose that we consider an African-centred family model as it is conceptualised in Southern Africa.

4.2 Towards a Nguni-Family centred Ecclesiological Model

The issues of ecclesiology and the church’s mission are critical in a multicultural, multiracial society. Stephen Bevans and Roger Schroeder (2004:40) have highlighted the significance of understanding the ecclesial nature of the church in its missionary praxis. They argue that the constitutive nature of the church or model has implications for the manner in which it engages in mission (2004:42). This issue is critical for this study. In South Africa today, one of the critical issues facing the multiracial “mainline churches” among others, Anglican, Dutch Reformed, and Roman Catholic, is how to give expression authentically to the cultures of all its members during service (regular or occasional) without marginalising those of the other racial group. In other words, how can a culture of one racial group find expression in a multiracial worship service without marginalising that of the other? To be specific: how can Black people who like to enjoy movement (dance) feel at home in a worship service where another racial group sees such culture as ‘alien’? The former Archbishop of Cape Town, Ndungane, has shaped the issue in this way, “How can one racial group have space in the church to practice their spirituality without alienating another?”

In light of Ukpong’s enculturation praxis, this study has identified the Southern African Nguni, specifically, the Zulu family model as a *value*; and the text being the Western ecclesiastical structure, commonly known as the “mainline” church structure. In this respect, life conceived as an integrated whole and interrelated with no distinctions between the sacred and profane, where participation in this *vital force* is crucial, as the core of an African cosmology (Mulago, 1969:138), constitute the interpretive framework of enculturation. Kinship, among the Zulu and Africans in general, defines close family blood-relationship (Nel, 2007:99). Nel puts it as follows, “As an emotional unit [it] describes the *interconnectedness* of family members” (2007:13). It is the bonding that defines the character of membership. It gives meaning to what it means to belong to a Zulu (Nguni) family. Consequently, *relationality* and *belongingness* characterise the essence of the family.

Nel goes on to assert that, “This mutuality of relationships means that each member of the emotional unit is affected by each other and the system as a whole” (2007:13). Consequently, the entire system affects all members (2007:13). This encompasses,

“The family as an emotional unit includes members of the nuclear, *extended family* and multigenerational family which includes the ancestors.” (2007:13). At its core, it is a profound sense of being connected. First, each person’s “individuality” is concerned entirely with the context of the family. Following from this, the second dimension is “communality,” and its corollary, “commonality.”

Nel further asserts, “Belonging, for the African, is not about ownership. It is also more than being a member of a family or an organization. At its core it is a profound sense of being connected” (2007:27). This sense of belonging stresses what finds resonance in the Sesotho value of *Batbo Pele*. The concept engenders a “people-centred” value that stresses the priority of humanness as an African sense of belonging to a broader family – beyond the living and corollary, a deep sense of fellowship. Like in the Judeo-Christian tradition, life centres on human relationships that transcends the living. A core concept in this model is “belonging.” Being human is defined by a sense of “belonging,” a person “belonging” to the broader and strong circle of “related” families and clans. Thus, bonds of fellowship become critical.

Second, “belonging” entails embrace. Traditional African society is characterised by members of the community that reach out to the other, extending their hand to the other. Feeling strongly as part of the other constitutes an important dimension in defining one’s belongingness, and *ipso facto*, identity. Identity defines belongingness and fellowship – as in Greek *koinonia*. “Embrace” denotes seeing the other person in oneself and recognising another’s humanity. It is about inclusion and diversity, the collective as opposed to the individual. The opposite is exclusion and marginalisation. It is the anti-thesis of individuality. The underlying principle is fellowship – a sense of belonging to all and for all. In turn, these characteristics engender values of mutuality, reciprocity, and openness.

The idea of a fellowship is important to understanding the ecclesiology of the AICs. Africans live in close-knit communities where relationships are jealously guarded. To have fellowship with one another then is to have a common bond that unites individuals in a cohesive group where individualism withers away. In the midst of the loss of African cultural identity, and the consequences of socio-economic alienation, AICs advocate a return to authentic African humanising communities (Nthamburi, 1990: 44-45).

Communal in character, this conception is located within the framework of the African worldview, which perceives life as a “fundamental unity of the different realms which constitute the cosmos” (1990:44-45). Respectively, humankind and nature are united; they are integrated (Kinoti, 1992:77). On the other hand, if humanity and nature belong together, the link between human beings is even greater (1992:78).

Essentially, the community is an extension of the family. It is the community rather than the individual that defines the character of the group. Fundamental

to this view is the centrality of human relationships. People belong to each other. Julius Gathogo puts this view as, “You are because you belong” (2008:6) in sharp contrast to the Western Cartesian adage, “I think, therefore, I am” (2008:6). A sense of belonging is important in African culture. On the other hand, the communal orientation of life fosters the spirit of sharing and participation.

The Western Missionary Instituted Churches, such as the Anglican Church, Roman Catholic Church, being racially heterogeneous, and multicultural, need to explore ways of functioning as an *extended family*, embracing cultural diversity within its folds. Creating space for cross-cultural openness will enrich respective cultural groups. In this respect, one area relating to the doctrine of saints is in relation to African ancestors.

In the process of exploring the role of the ancestors for African families, Whites and “Coloureds” may appreciate better the role of saints in their church tradition; possibly, saints and ancestors could be viewed as extended members of the household of God – as a part of a “. . . a great cloud of witnesses. . .” as is depicted by the writer to the *Letter to the Hebrews* (12:1). The stress here is the quest for experiencing a deeper sense of African community and communality; hence, corporality and deeper fellowship.

Nel also identified “interconnectedness” and “belongingness” as values in the Zulu family. Relationships in the family engender belongingness (2007:13). Belonging conveys the connotation of being in the right place, belonging to a home, being at home. The church as a household of God belongs to all. Some of these features have been displayed in the missionary activities of the Corinthian Church of South Africa (CCSA).

4.3 The Case of the Corinthian Church of South Africa

In the years 2008-2011, the writer and others² were involved in ritual studies in the rural congregation of the CCSA in Umlazi in KwaZulu-Natal and in Phepheni in the Eastern Cape. The annual festivals of the burning of the heifer (*isitsbisa*), that take place on the last weekend of October, draw to Umlazi not only the Corinthians but also ‘enquirers’ (God fearers?). The ritual burning and sacrifice of the red heifer, accompanied by the distribution of gifts to the poor and blind, is a celebration of thanksgiving to God. They come for various reasons, notably fellowship and friendship, to seek spiritual, social, and physical healing (Mbaya & Chetty, 2012). Physically, spiritually, and emotionally engaging – ritual is at the centre of their worship and celebrations (Mbaya & Chetty, 2012). This space seems to create a family ethos, closely-knit relationships, where almost every member has a sense of ‘belonging.’

In this space, friendships and fellowships develop and flourish, renewable every year in this same place. In this space, corporate Christian experience seems to

² Among others are Cas Wepener, University of Pretoria and Marcel Barnard, Protestant University of Utrecht, 2008-2011.

engender 'individual' personality; consequently, it creates room for a 'Christ-like' personality to emerge. In this atmosphere, Christian identity seems to transcend 'human' family ties. What seems to inform such bonding is a theology that centres on the celebration of life. In the CCSA, the *isitsbisa* "centers on the celebration and thanksgiving of life." "... [The Corinthians] believe that they receive God's blessings, begin new and strengthen old friendships.... For the Corinthians, the *isitsbisa* (an IsiXhosa word, Burning, viz, of the heifer) meaning the offering of the sacrifice – is both an occasion of thanksgiving to God for the gift of life and other blessings of life such as employment, as well as an act of offering and renewing themselves for his service in care for the blind and the needy (Barnard, Mbaya & Wepener, 2014:116).

It is "... a thanksgiving for God's gift, the... the gift of life to the blind and other needy in the form of food parcels and sharing a meal with them" (2014:116). The Corinthians view *isitsbisa* as a gift. In IsiXhosa, a gift, is understood as *umnikelo*, literary an 'offering.' In African traditional religion and culture, offered to the ancestors, *umnikelo* is properly termed *idini*, a 'sacrificial offering' (2014:116). For the Corinthians, *isitsbisa* is considered a gift offered as a sacrifice to God in appreciation for their shared life with the blind and needy. Thus, *Isitsbisa* seems to bind the Corinthians with the blind and needy.

On different levels, rituals can engender fellowship and friendship. In contrast to other AICs, the Corinthians have successfully blended Christian with African rituals together with Islamic and some Hindu elements (Mbaya & Chetty, 2012). Like the Early Church, which stressed the role of the Holy Spirit and Jesus Christ as the healer, these churches take the work of Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit seriously as the healer; hence, in their worship services many believe that they experience healing and, therefore, live a fulfilled life. "The Holy Spirit creates the fellowship of the Church. Therefore, there is understandably a lot of emphasis on the work and person of the Holy Spirit within Independent churches. Everything happens as the Spirit directs" (Mbaya & Chetty, 2012).

Would recovering the centrality of the Holy Spirit as it was in the Primitive Church not enhance the ministry of the missionary-originated churches today? Amanze (1998:117), writing from the context of Botswana, observed that healing takes a central role stage in the worship services of these churches. For instance, in South Africa, a few years ago it was learnt that the neglect of this aspect of spiritual life encouraged the Black members in some "mainline" churches (such as the Anglican Church) to frequent these churches like the biblical Nicodemus seeking healing. While healings form the central activity in these churches, "What is not so common amongst the Independent churches is the celebration of the Eucharist" (1990:49). Sacraments are celebrated very rarely and are not a very strong feature of their ministry.

5. Reflections and implications

I suggest that there is a need for the “mainline” churches to take the African view of life more seriously, especially the aspects that stress a stronger sense of community and a stronger sense of belonging, where relationships foster a spirit of sharing, and participation, consequently spurring community involvement and outreach. In this respect, the AICs can provide a model.

Furthermore, understanding the church in the form of a Nguni family opens up the following possibilities: First, the church will be understood as a closely-knit family, where everyone belongs to each other through spiritual bonds of unity rather than blood kinship or culture. This precludes relationships that derive exclusively from racial or cultural homogeneity. It is a church that traverses racial and cultural barriers. Bosch (2011:282) refers to the church crossing the frontiers of culture. He states, “The message of the gospel is not viewed as something that we bring *to* contexts, but as something that we derive *from* contexts... You do not incarnate good news into a situation, good news arises out of the situation” (2014:440). In the Nguni family, one belongs to the broader network family.

Second, belongingness will be underscored by the membership of a broader family of networks and connections as “an emotional unit.” As Nel noted, “This broader context is the underlying assumption of the concept of *umuntu*.” A focus on the individual fails to appreciate the importance and power of relationships upon the individual’s feelings, thoughts, and behaviour.

Third, it makes the church more aware and accountable to all its members. Transparency and accountability could enhance the ministry of the church. Similarly, characterised by a stronger sense of belonging, the AICs fosters maximum participation of its members of the congregation, whose contribution is equally affirmed.

In conclusion, taking the African experience of the wholeness of life seriously, the AICs stress that physical and spiritual healing should encourage the mainline churches to approach life holistically. This is the area in which the AICs’ have stressed and affirmed the continuity of the religious experience between Primitive and modern Christianity. However, in doing this more effectively like the Pentecostals or Charismatic churches, they show that the mainline churches are powerless in this area and that their Westernised understanding of God does not bring healing.

The fact that the AICs, such as the Corinthian Church of South Africa, have managed to cross the frontiers of religion to Islam and Hinduism should also encourage the older churches to be ‘ecumenical,’ to fully embrace multiculturalism and engage multireligious contexts of our society more fully. This enables the church to view these not as threats or aberrations but as elements that can enrich rather than impoverish religious experiences. Finally, the AICs corporeal worship, another trait in the African lifestyle, engages and affirms the contribution of all its members.

The CCSA is very much a family church still bound to the Founder's traditions, and succession stays within the family. There is little sense of belonging to the broader church. Like all other AICs, this church tends to lack theological clarity or a well-developed doctrinal base. They celebrate the Eucharist less frequently. A majority of their leaders have not had a good grounding in theological training; hence, this church tends to lack doctrinal stability. It would be helpful to identify some of the threats within the AICs that the churches should seek to renew and transform. However, learning from the AIC does not mean doing exactly what they do. Each ecclesial community will have to translate what it means to be an African community from their own experiences.

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