

DOING MISSION AT THE MARGINS OF SOCIETY: HARNESSING THE RESOURCES OF LOCAL VISIONS

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I. Introduction

At the time of Edinburgh 1910, a century ago, Christians met to strategize on how to evangelize the unreached world. At that time the Holy Spirit was beginning to speak in a new way, unrecognized by the mission delegates gathered in Scotland. The Azusa Street Pentecostal experience in the United States of America, and the emergence of African Independent Churches on the African continent, were distinct manifestations (though historically linked) of a new and revolutionary movement of the Spirit. This was a moment of recognition of the fresh understanding of mission - the spirit of God was beginning to speak from the margins. In this study we focus specifically on the visions emerging from the margins of the African Independent Churches (AICs) as resources for contemporary mission.

In the Organization of African Instituted Churches (OAIC) – which is the continental umbrella body for AICs - an African Independent Church is defined as a church that acknowledges Jesus Christ as Lord, and which has either separated by secession from a mission church or an existing African independent church, or has been founded as an independent entity under African initiative and leadership.¹ OAIC recognizes three broad types of AICs:

- *Nationalist* - those churches that were founded as part of a broader movement to seize political power from the Europeans;
- *Spiritual* - churches in which the power and gifts of the Holy Spirit are central, and which are close to African culture. These churches often created alternative ‘counter’ communities of the Holy Spirit in opposition to colonial or missionary models of society;
- *African Pentecostal churches*, founded after since political independence, influenced by the global Pentecostal movement, strongly oriented towards the future but retaining roots in African culture.

African Independent Churches are also called ‘African Instituted Churches’, ‘African Indigenous Churches’ and ‘African Initiated Churches’ – even, since the spread of AICs into the Diaspora, ‘African International Churches’. Without entering into the discussions over which name to use, we prefer to use here the simple acronym ‘AIC’.

This paper attempts to locate the mission of AICs in the concept of their founding visions and explores how these visions have motivated people at the margins of society to play their role in different eras of the past century and how they can continue to serve as resources for Christian mission today and tomorrow. We understand ‘vision’ here in two, connected, ways. Vision is an experience where a person gets divine guidance about the present and the future. At the same time, (and from a sociological perspective), vision can be seen as an individual’s or a collective construction of a future or a desired state of society that is different from the current state. In both senses of the word, a vision is something that moves people to action..

I understand marginality in two ways that are intrinsically related: (1) being on the sidelines of dominant movements and activities in society due to social status i.e., being financially poor, unemployed, non-literate, living in the slums, or in poor rural homesteads; (2) doing mission in a way that challenges the established understanding of mission. Someone’s capacity to do mission in this way (i.e., their methods and values) is usually derived from that person’s origins in, or identification with, the visions of those who are socially at the margins. It usually results in the rejection of the missionary by the sections of

¹ Slightly modified from D. B. Barrett’s definition, in *Schism and Renewal in Africa*, p. 50.

society and the institutions that have given themselves the power to define acceptable models of mission. Whatever your social status is, these received values will push you to the sidelines as someone or a community of people who have erred. From their foundation, this has been their experience of the AICs and many of the Pentecostal churches - and continues to be so to the present day. It is this second category of marginality which the Holy Spirit uses to breakdown the wall between the resource-poor and the resource-rich.

II. Characteristics of AIC

2.1 Founding visions

In the OAIC we have been engaging with the concept and reality of the founding vision for the last 13 years. The OAIC defines the founding vision as what the people of faith hear God telling them to do (often through the leadership and guidance of a prophet or preacher), what they believe about the world around them, and how they understand their call to live out their faith in the particular society they belong to.² At first we used the term ‘founder’s vision’, but we later realized that this was seen as limiting. Christians who are involved in mission in the contemporary environment - as for example, care givers and educators on HIV and AIDS, trainers in sustainable agriculture, church planters, evangelists, and dramatists - felt excluded as the concept was understood to refer to people who had worked in a specific era which is past. With such challenges from the present day ‘founders’ we decided to redefine the concept so that ‘founding’ can also be seen as an ongoing process, because the Holy Spirit who is our chief missioner has never stopped inspiring, equipping and empowering fresh founders in each generation.

2.2 A period of intense reflection

Historically, the AICs’ founding visions were created at a time of crisis in the lives of Africans. It was a period when African Christians were faced with a three dimensional challenge of what they considered to be cultural domination, political domination and spiritual domination.

- Colonialism was taking root, and its impact was being increasingly felt in every aspect of life.
- The gospel of Jesus Christ was being spread - churches, hospitals, and schools were being built.

At the same time people were beginning to read the Bible for themselves, in their own mother tongues. They found Jesus Christ the healer, and the Holy Spirit who dwells in their midst, who can reveal the future, who guides and gives power to overcome evil.

2.3 The resourcefulness

The context and the Christian gospel provided AIC Christians with the resources for action:

2.3.1 *The Holy Spirit and the African world view.*

The African worldview understands reality in terms of both the spiritual and the physical. Blessings, misfortunes, sickness, success and failure are deemed to emanate partly or fully

² More technically, a ‘founding vision’ can be defined as the reality that is constructed by the founding members of the faith by which they interpret events around them and which shape their reactions and guide their decisions.

from the unseen spiritual world. Therefore the AICs sought (and seek) to act in both physical and spiritual realities in order to deal with the challenges that faced them.

2.3.2 Bringing to the surface the role of the Holy Spirit in society

The missionary churches had not put adequate emphasis on the role of the Holy Spirit in the lives of individuals and communities. Healing was confined to the medical clinics, yet people were struggling with their understanding of reality that looked at causes of illness or suffering beyond the way they are defined by modern medicine.

2.3.3 Voices of resistance to political and cultural domination emerged.

Prayers for the removal of the colonialists were said continuously throughout this early period, and prophecies confirmed their impending departure. Symbols were developed which were spiritual but also carried political messages. For example, in western Kenya the churches carried flags identifying their own denominations. At a time when 'raising a flag' was a political act in defiance of the colonial Union Jack, the denominational flag asserted people's loyalty to another reality – to the Kingdom of God, not the British Empire.

2.3.4 Voices from the margins

Prophecy from the margins, overcoming fear, inspires people to speak to power. Both historically and at the present time, the verses from Joel 2:28-29, have been key to the growth and development of AICs. In the contemporary situation, young people are starting their ministries, and women are founding churches. Even in local cultures where women are not allowed to be in leadership, they bring their contribution through prophecy, visions and dreams. In the AICs it is not uncommon for a young girl to stand in the midst of the congregation and to deliver a message of rebuke to church leaders for their sins. Through these means women gain the courage to speak to power in their local environments.

2.3.5 AICs thus carried out both a priestly and a prophetic role in the community.

They identified evils in the present, and prospected for the future, hunting for resources in the scriptures, and in their own society (occasionally, too, borrowing from colonialism social structures such as schools and churches), with which they could begin to build their alternative vision of society.

2.3.6 The priesthood of all believers

Even if there were specific individuals who were recognized leaders in the AICs during the founding period, members in these movements value and operate on the principle of the priesthood of all believers. This is what empowers groups of women, men and young people to propagate the gospel of Jesus Christ in their workplaces and neighborhoods. It is out of this understanding of mission that common people or people who are of low status in society can hold senior positions in their churches. What matters is the calling and the evidence of the Spirit of God and the commitment to live out the values of a specific community of missionaries. People in the AIC movement regularly get visions or dreams and warn their communities about what is going wrong. The congregations and fellowships also spend a lot of time praying and fasting over the issues that have been predicted that might have an adverse impact on the community. Prayer is a major part of the mission at the grassroots. Collective prayer is also a process of collective reflection. It leads to a collective or common understanding of the issues at hand³ and agreement on possible actions that arise out of that understanding.

2.3.7 Building Community

³ Freire

The ability to build cohesive communities at the margins of society, where people care for each other. In the early 20th century the AICs were building alternative communities. The Spirit of God enabled them to critique and reject the individualism and secularism which was coming with modernity. In the founding vision AIC members linked these alien values to colonialism and to the presence of the missionaries. Together, these new alien forces were introducing Africa to the pressure of the market. AICs understood that it was the attraction of new consumer items that made colonial rule acceptable to many, and as a result in some instances refused to buy the newly imported goods. In the same way they rejected witchcraft and the ritualistic and clan demands from African traditions which were heavy on individuals. So these new AIC communities 'of the Spirit' moved to the middle and became counter-cultures to both the western model of society and also to some aspects of African local cultures. It is this resourcefulness in community-building that the OAIC develops today to enable the member churches to support people living with HIV and AIDS, children in need, and people struggling with unemployment to mention a few.

2.3.8 Faith and social action

People develop their understanding of mission through listening to the voice of the Spirit and reading the scriptures in the situations in which they are placed. This is done both individually and collectively in fellowships. The women in Nyamarimba congregation of Africa Israel Nineveh Church started praying over the issue of the increasing number of orphans in their community. Out of this process of prayer they felt guided to start a ministry to support orphans and other children affected by HIV and AIDS. To date they have formed an organization which is caring for 1,200 orphans and other children in need in Kisumu District in Kenya.

2.3.9 Development of informal training models

AICs carry out training through informal training processes. Training and nurturing takes place in the context of small groups where there is mutual encouragement, rebuke and peer advice. This mode of training is used to mobilize and train missionaries in their own environments. The training continually focuses on the realities in which the churches operate. This enables the emerging leaders to appreciate the challenges in their mission field even before they are ordained or given bigger responsibilities. This mode of training can also be adopted and used to increase the number of theologically trained ministers in urban informal settlements and rural areas where church workers cannot easily take up full time training schedules. This process of informal training creates a critical mass – which is needed to move people from reflection and dreaming to action and to advocacy. Books, seminars and conferences, radio and TV are also sources of knowledge for this process. Learning how to understand these sources of information is made easier by the fact that the information is read ideologically - that is, from the position of a counter-culture.

2.3 The gaps

2.3.1 Continuing marginalization from those who are part of the center.

Movements on the margins continue to grapple with the inability of powerful theologies to understand popular Christian movements. To many they are simply not respectable. The accepted methods of engaging with civic issues are always outside the spirituality of the AICs. So they have to take on the dominant model of civic education which hardly recognizes the motivation of the Holy Spirit to speak to power. The received models of civic education weaken the conscientization process that takes place through the reading of the word, prayer and listening to the voice of the Spirit individually and communally.

2.3.2 Visions are practiced but not concretized or objectified.

The fact that the visions are passed on through oral processes i.e. song, preaching, dreams, prophecies and sermons and are not written down means that the resourcefulness of the AICs cannot be communicated to the wider church. It also hinders some of the churches from dealing with some of the issues that act as barriers to abundant life in the lives of individuals and communities.

2.3.3 Local gender roles remain dominant

The economic inequalities that women in Africa suffer and the patriarchal models of leadership still hold them back from realizing their full potential as compared to the men even if they are working in the same environments with access to the same empowerment of the Holy Spirit. It is also expected of that a young man can start a church but not a young woman. So women are mainly found in the social ministries (Miller and Yamaori). This implies that the understanding of the working of the Holy Spirit is still confined to the local understandings of the gender roles in different cultures.

2.3.4 Reluctance to recognize generational change

There are inadequacies which come with an attempt to use methods in mission which were relevant for a different era but are no longer relevant. Restraining the younger generation from dreaming, visioning and acting in relation to the demands on mission in their era leads to the frustration and departure of young people.

2.3.5 Integrating and carrying on with the inadequacies of local African cultures and an unclear understanding of realities.

Protecting the founding vision in some cases is used to entrench values which marginalize those who are weak i.e. the place of women, young people and children in society. Many churches which emphasize the role of the Holy Spirit when they come face to face with present day issues like HIV and AIDS, the rights and well-being of women, children and young people slide back into local cultural restrictions and prejudices. It is common to find people who say the Holy Spirit has not told us to talk about HIV and AIDS yet. Some may turn simply to a call for repentance and others understand it as a problem caused by demons which if expelled from a person, healing will come. This has not been giving the missionaries the results they want. Many of the ministers and missionaries in these churches are challenged by the enormous problems in the environment they are operating in. Their ideological base is confronted by problems whose causes they do not understand fully. The reality of HIV and AIDS is rooted in the spiritual, social, political and economic realities of Africa and in the unequal relationships between the rich and poor countries.

When someone's ideological understanding is challenged in this way (Hull) refers to the experience as 'bafflement'. 'The experience of being baffled is always a conscious experience and it arises when... that knowledge which should be capable of giving guidance, of resolving perplexities, of pointing a way out of the labyrinth, seems to have met its match in an intractable problem which will not yield to this knowledge, and which has the effect of making the knowledge appear less potent than we had believed it to be. We thus do not know what to do next'. Many of these churches in the AIC movement are continuously finding themselves in this situation as they progress in their work and ministry.

2.3.6 Inadequate theological training

Even where this is taking place in most cases it is not linked to the values and principles in the founding visions of the churches. Frequently the theology is borrowed from evangelical or ecumenical sources, and little attempt is made to integrate it into the popular theology of the AICs at the grassroots. This leads to a two-level theology where what is most deeply believed by many people cannot be properly articulated; and what is 'respectable' in theological circles is not deeply felt. This is a significant constraint on contemporary AIC mission.

2.3.7 Prophecy localized

The use of the prophetic gift in AICs in most cases is focused on local evils - at family levels, in the local church, the denomination and communities where people live. It leaves out the national and the global issues unless they are interpreted in the local sense. There is an unconscious attempt to build a local community that reflects the kingdom of God where all are well and this wellness is achieved through the resolution of the spiritual problems and the physical, spiritual and social needs of the community members. This is necessary but it is only part of the solution.

2.3.8 Creating barriers

'Come ye out of them.' The call to come out of the world and to distinguish between the people of the Spirit and the people of the world has been a key element to the founding of Spiritual and Pentecostal AICs. This can lead to a failure to understand God's work in the community. In a workshop where the author was facilitating, a Pastor Waiswa from Uganda mentioned that he had to break barriers because he had been using a language like 'they out there', 'the Egyptians', the 'lost', the 'sinners' just to mention a few terms he had been accustomed to use to describe outsiders. I had to tell my church that we have been wrong and ignorant in the way we were alienating ourselves from the people we are supposed to minister to. We stopped using such statements and now we can get out and work with others as we deal with issues of HIV and AIDS, vulnerable children and food security.

2.3.9 The challenge to reach the Diaspora

AICs have spread to Europe and North America as part of the Diaspora. There they have founded many flourishing churches. But how can AICs move beyond ethnic divides and still work towards establishing a place in which Africans can feel at home? (Kalu). While many African missionaries from Pentecostal and spiritual churches are beginning to reach out to the local communities, many are still building congregations where 'they operate on levels of organization where doctrinal differences and ethnic exigencies do not serve as the most vital reference point. Rather in this case.....it is simply a place to share similar sentiments, a place to feel at home (Kalu: 513). This type of community building is critical for the immigrants, migrants and students who find themselves in new cultures where the understanding of community and the place of an individual in society is different from what they have always known. The short coming of this type of community building is that it excludes the host populations from benefiting from the enormous spiritual resources which the African migrants carry with them. In a conversation with the author, Peter Sleebos, the General Superintendent of Assemblies of God, said 'Who will help the African Pentecostal Churches in the Netherlands to realize that we need them? We need their way of worship but most of them are keeping it to themselves'. The missionaries in this case are in similar circumstances as their counterparts who struggle to earn a living at the margins of society in Africa, and focus on building mission strategies which focus on meeting the needs and aspirations of their own social class. This is necessary, but by itself it prevents the church from reaching out to other social classes.

III. Engaging this spirituality in holistic mission

In order to facilitate AICs to be more effective in mission, OAIC needs to undertake a long-term programme of engaging positively with the spirituality of its member churches. This programme will include the following activities:

3.1 Documenting the founding visions,

Documenting the founding visions, and tracking the changes in the visions that have taken place in the various eras through which the AICs have passed. Without documentation the founding visions will be lost or will be changed imperceptibly over time as the churches absorb influences from the surrounding environment. In this way the founding visions can become a resource not only for AICs – and even for contemporary ‘founders’ - but also for the wider church.

3.2 Updating the founding visions

It is clear that the historical founding visions were created to deal with the challenges of their day. Many AIC missionaries have continued with values which were developed in resistance to the dominant model of development and church that was brought by the colonialists and missionaries. Some of the symbols and practices were relevant to this specific era but in a radically different environment, are no longer so. For example, the original resistance was directed to foreigners. The contemporary situation may require AICs to challenge their fellow Africans. This requires creating space for the present day missionaries to dream and see visions in their own generation. It requires a process of training and remobilizing and enabling the missionaries to read the word, listen to the Holy Spirit and scan the environment they are operating in.

3.3 Appropriate training

In this situation the OAIC has adopted a policy of walking alongside churches and church leaders in a position of ‘critical solidarity’. *Solidarity* requires commitment to a particular community, and to its faith or ideological stance, and is often costly. *Critical* solidarity demands an attempt to be honest to reality – both the reality of the partner (who may have a more ‘objective’ understanding of the challenge that the church faces) and of the church members (whose ‘spiritual’ perception of the situation may be profoundly true.) A recent example of the process was a meeting where OAIC sought to enable AIC leaders from Kenya to reflect on the political situation. An ‘objective’ overview was given by a political journalist, and then leaders were facilitated to discuss and reflect on the spiritual meaning of the political realities presented, and the resulting challenge to prayer and to action.

3.4 Illuminating social realities in which mission is carried out

Using Participatory Learning and Action (PLA) tools which have been created to illuminate the social realities of grassroots communities, links can be made with the scriptures. James, a grassroots development facilitator from Uganda, tells this story:

I used to go to the churches to train them in development but people were not enthusiastic at all because they felt that we were bringing worldly things to the church. I went back and studied the scriptures. I got the relevant scriptures and used them alongside the participatory learning and action tools. Out of the discussions generated in this process Christians who were at the beginning opposed to development training realized that they were practicing their faith against the scriptures they believe in. We also as facilitators learnt that we need to recognize the place of the Bible in social transformation. This resulted in the transformation of their understanding of the link between their faith and development. It is about people and communities being well and not focusing on amassing wealth.

Through processes like this, access to reality is illuminated by using sociological tools which have been developed over a period by development scholars and practitioners. Another example is the use of the access and control tools on resources by gender and age groups. The author has used these tools which reveal the great disparity in access to resources and power between women and men, and elders and young people. The results in most cases have not

been different among the people of the 'Spirit'; and those of the 'world'. This usually leads to a more informed debate in the church on these issues after congregations have been taken through the process of analyzing the causative factors of the unwanted situations in the lives of individuals, families and communities. It is this process that brings the people in the church and the rest of the community to work together to transform their lives for the better.

IV. Conclusion

God is concerned about the people at the margins of society and through the Holy Spirit and the scriptures, God will continue to empower them in unique ways. This empowerment leads to action which may sometimes be disruptive to our accepted models of mission. Unlike Christ's Disciples who said 'we saw a man driving out demons in your name and we told him to stop because he is not one of us' Mark 9:38, we should start looking at those in mission- especially those at the margins and say we found people who are doing things in a different way and we would like to enable them to sharpen their mission so that they can be more effective.