During his study of religious factors in Zimbabwe’s political liberation struggle (chimurenga), Professor M. L. Daneel became aware of a widespread need in African grassroots society in the Masvingo Province for effective engagement in the preservation of a fast deteriorating environment. After initial discussions with rural traditionalists and Christians it was decided to engage in a new liberation struggle, this time on behalf of God’s creation. Thus the “war of the trees” was declared; a war which targeted three environmental concerns: tree planting, wildlife conservation, and the protection of water resources; a war, moreover, which was to draw on similar sources of religious inspiration, as did the pre-Independence chimurenga.

The “green army” of earthkeepers which came into being was composed of two sister organizations: AZTREC, the “Association of Zimbabwean Traditionalist Ecologists,” and the AAEC, “Association of African Earthkeeping Churches.” The former comprises traditionalist chiefs, clan elders, and spirit mediums who engage in environmental reform at the behest of the senior guardian ancestors of the land (varidzi venyika) and the oracular high-god cult at the Matopo hills. The latter is made up of some 150 to 180 African Initiated Churches (AICs), mainly of the prophetic or pentecostal type, i.e. Zionists and Apostles, that represent an estimated total of two million adherents throughout Zimbabwe.

Together the two sister organizations belong to a financially and tactically empowering agency called ZIRRCON (Zimbabwean Institute of Religious Research and Ecological Conservation) – an expanded version of Professor Daneel’s original empirical research unit. This body today represents the largest NGO for environmental reform at the rural grassroots of Zimbabwe.
Zimbabwe. Some 8 million trees have already been planted in several thousand woodlots since the inception of the movement in the period 1986 to 1988. Twelve main nurseries in various districts of the Masvingo Province each cultivate between 50,000 and 100,000 seedlings annually. Through AZTREC and the AAEC peasant communities are mobilized on a massive scale to establish their own woodlots near stable water points. Satellite nurseries for seedlings are also developed by women’s clubs, youth groups at schools, and AIC theological training centers. A great variety of trees are planted for commercial, religious, aesthetic, and ecologically-protective purposes. ZIRRCON and its sister organizations cultivate larger numbers of indigenous tree seedlings than any other institute in Zimbabwe.

The main ‘weapon’ used by the AAEC in its quest for a liberated, rejuvenated creation is a eucharist of tree planting, popularly and aptly referred to by AIC participants as the maporesanyika, i.e., ‘earth-healing’ ceremony. As a thoroughly contextualized sacrament in the African context, this ceremony represents a compelling challenge to African churches and the world church, as regards Christian stewardship in creation.

The ceremony is always ecumenical in nature. Green fighters of numerous churches attend to provide momentum from a united platform. In addition, a contingent of traditionalist AZTREC members are invited to participate, in recognition of religious pluriformity in the struggle, as well as the concern for all of life, the entire earth-community. The liturgical sequence of the eucharist starts with the digging of holes and related preparations, e.g. fencing in the new woodlot, called “the Lord’s Acre.” The preparation of the holy communion table, with tree seedlings and sacramental elements standing side by side, is followed by song and dance in celebration of the renewal of God’s earth. Leading AIC earth-keepers preach rousing sermons,
the contents of which profile the emergence of an intuitive grassroots theology of the environment.

The sacrament itself is introduced by public confessions of ecological sins, such as random tree-felling, causing soil erosion through riverbank cultivation and the use of sledges, etc., under the guidance of Spirit-filled prophets. Communicants then proceed to the communion table, seedling in hand, as if to draw creation symbolically into the inner circle of Christ, the Redeemer of all creation. As they move from the communion table to “the Lord’s Acre” the communicants further enact the ritual incorporation of earth-community in sacramental celebration by addressing the seedlings to be planted, as follows:

You, tree, my brother…my sister

Today I plant you in this soil

I shall give water for your growth

Have good roots to keep the soil from eroding

Have many branches and leaves so that we can

− sit in your shade

− breathe fresh air

− and find fire wood.

Personalizing humans’ relations with nature in this manner fosters new attitudes of respect for the inanimate members of earth-community and promotes sound after-care of the trees planted. In conclusion, a healing ceremony for afflicted earthkeepers is performed with laying-on of hands, sprinkling of holy water, and prayers to the tune of rhythmic dance and song.
Thus the tree-planting sacrament integrates the healing of earth and humans as witness of Christ’s good news to the world.

The AAEC’s treeplanting eucharist represents ecclesiological reorientation and change. Through repeated implementation of this sacrament the church’s mission obtains a more comprehensive liberationist and ecological thrust. Whereas the Zionists and Apostles have always used the annual *Paschal* celebrations with their climactic eucharistic ceremonies as ‘launching pads’ for wide-ranging missionary campaigns, the earthkeeping eucharist itself, in this instance, becomes the witnessing event, the proclamation of good news to all creation. It is enacted in nature and in the presence of non-Christian fellow fighters (of AZTREC) in “the war of the trees.” The implication here is not that the classical mission mandate of Matthew 28:19, with its call for repentance, conversion, human salvation, and church formation is overridden. But mission in this context derives from and re-enacts the healing ministry of Christ. It relates to the believer’s stewardship in service of all creation, as required in the Genesis story, and is strengthened by faith in Christ “in whom all things hang together” (Colossians 1:17).

During a tree-planting eucharist Bishop Wapendama, leader of the “Signs of the Apostles Church,” preached about the church’s environmental mission as follows:

“We are now deliverers of the stricken land…Deliverance, God says, lies in the trees. The task that Jesus has left us is the one of healing. We, the followers of Jesus have to continue with his healing ministry…So, let us all fight, clothing, healing the earth with trees! It is our task to strengthen this mission with our [large]
numbers of people. If all of us work with enthusiasm, we shall heal and clothe the entire land.”

In his call for engagement in the earthkeeping mission, Wapendama shows awareness of the fact that God is the one who initiates deliverance and restoration of the ravaged earth. But he emphasizes that the responsibility to deliver the stricken earth here and now lies with the Christian body of believers, i.e., the church. Wapendama’s insights also reflect the understanding of African earthkeeping Christians that the church’s mission involves much more than mere soul-saving. Through their earth-care commitments they share a vision similar to the one held by Bishop Anastasios of Androussa, that “the whole world, not only humankind but the entire universe, has been called to share in the restoration that was accomplished by the redeeming work of Christ” (quoted in Messer 1992: 69-70).

How then does the ‘green mission’ affect the life and shape of an earthkeeping church? First, there is a noticeable shift of the healing focus at AIC church headquarters. The black “Jerusalems” of Zion are still healing colonies where the afflicted, the marginalized, and the poor can feel at home. But the concept hospitara now includes the connotation of “environmental hospital” to care for the wounded earth. The ‘patient’ is the denuded land; the ‘dispensary’ becomes the nursery with its assortment of medicines, i.e. exotic, indigenous, and fruit-tree seedlings; and the entire church community becomes the healing agent under the guidance of the church’s principal earth-healer. Second, in the context of the AAEC a new generation of iconic church leaders is emerging. They replace the first-generation icons, such as Bishop Mutendi of the Zion Christian Church and Prophet Johane Maranke of the vaPostori who featured as “black Messiahs” to their followers. Now, instead of a single leader mirroring the presence of the
biblical Messiah in Africa’s rural society, the mode of operation is shifted to an entire group of “Jerusalems” enacting and proclaiming the grace and salvation implicit in Christ’s presence in the Creator’s neglected and abused world. Thereby the entire oikos is declared God’s “holy city.” Third, the AAEC’s afforestation programs have stimulated a need for the formulation and implementation of new ethical codes. Leading earthkeepers increasingly insist that the church is an institution with legislative and disciplinary powers, the vehicle of uncompromising struggle as it discerns and opposes evil forces that feed on mindless exploitation of the limited resources of the earth. In this mission the militant church is at risk, prepared to be controversial, to suffer and sacrifice whatever discipleship in this realm requires.

The AAEC’s message of and struggle for liberation is holistic in nature. By virtually standing in embrace with trees at the communion table the earthkeeping communicants acknowledge Christ’s Lordship over all the earth (Matthew 28:18). In this demonstration of respect to all “members” of earth-community the AICs substitute exploitive perceptions of human dominion over nature with a service of humble stewardship. At the same time this form of earth-care underscores the empowerment of poor and marginalized people to make a contribution of such significance that it captures, for once, the imagination of the nation, the recognition of the government. It incorporates quality of being for the earthkeepers, their liberation from obscurity in remote rural areas of Zimbabwe, their overcoming of marginality and futility as news media repeatedly report on their work, and their liberation from the hopelessness of poverty as salaried nursery keepers and office workers, budding woodlots and small-scale income-generating projects at least revive some hope for a better future. Hence, the dehumanizing shackles of decades of colonial rule and the desecration of nature caused largely
by disproportionate land apportionment, are both shaken off in the quest for salvific healing for all life on earth.

Inus (M. L.) Daneel, Boston University School of Theology

Further Reading


