LEADERSHIP TRAINING IN AFRICAN INDEPENDENT CHURCHES — WORKING WITH WHITES

Leny Lagerwerf

This paper¹ wants to draw attention to the fact that since the beginning of the 1960s white missionaries from mainline churches have become involved in the training of leaders and ordinary members of African independent churches (AICs).² At first sight this seems a rather remarkable phenomenon. For although the label ‘independents’ has been imposed from outside — the greater part of these churches rather call themselves spirit churches — it cannot be denied that generally the leaders are strongly opposed to any interference. In the course of time, however, mutual criticism seems to have disappeared, and both type of churches are now sometimes “linked by means of informal relations in the form of various mutual services.”³ It is not unknown, however, that in many cases leaders of AICs remain pretty suspicious of missionaries who offer to come and assist them. Therefore a number of questions come to the fore: How did these relationships start? What were the motives on either side? What kind of programmes were elaborated? Were there specific problems in these relationships? What was the outcome: was the idea fruitful?

Without going into many details I shall try to deal with these questions by presenting three rather different ‘case-studies’, namely: Fambidzano (Zimbab-
we), Mennonite Ministries, and the Kimbanguist Church (Zaire). The focus will mainly be on theological training, leaving other programmes aside.

Fambidzano yamaKereke avaTema

1. Historical introduction

First the result of labour migration to South Africa, AICs rapidly spread in Zimbabwe (then Rhodesia), with some very notable churches in the 1930s and 1950s. Most of these AICs operated in isolation, since they regarded their church doctrines -- real and tangible communication with God through speaking in tongues -- as the best, and hence contact with other independent churches (ICs) in the neighbourhood of little significance. In line with this theological training and formal education were rejected, schools being regarded as profane synagogues. The mainline churches in turn rejected ICs as syncretistic and not very respectable.

During his research among the Shona churches in 1965-67, however, M.L. Daneel, a missionary of the Dutch Reformed Church in South Africa and brought up in Zimbabwe, became more and more convinced of the Christian character of these churches and the undesirability of their isolation. With much tact and patience he brought the leaders of twelve ICs together, who in 1972 founded the African Independent Church Conference (Fambidzano yamaKereke avaTema). In the course of time many more churches followed.

Two goals were formulated: improving ecumenical ties both between ICs themselves and with the mainline churches, and theological training. Till 1981 Daneel devoted much of his time and energy to Fambidzano, including financial management, fund-raising tours in Europe, and the development of the Institute of Theological Education by Extension and correspondence courses. Later two more objectives were added: to facilitate the implementation of development projects by member churches (1984) and the improvement of the status of women.

2. Theological education

Although in many ways deeply impressed by the faith and worship of the sometimes barely literate ICs members, Daneel felt that at least some theological training was desirable to address shortcomings like insufficient bible knowledge, a weak Christology, an over-accentuating of the work of the Holy Spirit and the role of the prophets therein, ignorance about church history in general and that of AICs in particular, and legalistic tendencies, e.g. loyalty to

---

4 'Kereke' comes from the South African/Dutch word 'kerk' (church).