



Religion, water and climate change: Are theologies of African Initiated Churches in Zimbabwe adaptable?



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An eco-theological analysis of African Initiated Churches (AICs) has revealed that most of these churches use water for a myriad of rituals ranging from baptism to consecratory rites. Their affinity with water even qualifies them to be dubbed water-based churches; yet, the world is faced with an imminent scarcity of this natural resource. The United Nations echoed that access to safe water, sanitation and hygiene are the most basic human needs for health and well-being; but it has observed that unless the water situation improves, by 2030, billions of people will lack access to these services because of climate change. Given this reality, there is a genuine need to examine the possibility of having the eco-theologies of AICs adapted to suit these emerging realities. The paper explores how water is used in the religiosity of the AICs in an effort to elucidate the possible challenges to be encountered because of climate change. It then examines the possibility of realigning the water uses to the current climatic trajectory. The article is largely based on desktop research which utilises secondary sources.

Contribution: This article makes a critical contribution to the body of knowledge by making an analysis of the adaptability of AICs' conceptualisation and use of water in a climate change context. An eco-theological analysis is crucial as it enables the nuancing of AICs' theologies so that they conform to a world in a climate crisis.

Keywords: African Initiated Churches; eco-theology; rites; water; Zimbabwe.

Introduction

The intention of this article is to make an eco-theological analysis of how African Initiated Churches (AICs) in Zimbabwe conceptualise and use water. The article examines the historical background of AICs with a particular focus on the religio-political context within which they emerged. The use of water in religion in general is interrogated focussing on religions such as African Traditional Religion (ATR), Judaism, Christianity and Islam to establish the rationale and genesis of their aqua-theologies. This interrogation culminates in the examination of water use among AICs, which, of course, forms the backbone of this article. The purpose of examining these aqua-theologies is to assess their adaptability in the face of climate change. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) (2022) has defined climate change as:

[A] change in the state of the climate that can be identified by changes in the mean and or the variability of its properties, and that persists for an extended period, typically decades or longer. (n.p.)

This process can also be known as climatic variation or fluctuation (Jackson 2024). It has had and continues to have a negative impact on the availability and quality of water, among other things.

The United Nations, in their Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) Report (2022), echoed that access to safe water, sanitation and hygiene are the most basic human needs for health and well-being. It has, however, observed that unless the water situation improves, by 2030, many people will lack access to these services because of climate change. Given this reality, there is a genuine need to examine the possibility of having the eco-theologies of AICs adapted to suit these emerging realities.

This article endeavours to interrogate whether the Zimbabwean AICs' use of water can ever change given the present circumstances of climate change, which has seen a deterioration in the volumes of water available for use. In doing so, the article utilises the eco-theological approach in order to establish the adaptability of the AICs' theologies of water in a climate change context. For Conradie (2006:3), ecological theology is an attempt to retrieve the ecological wisdom of Christianity as a response to environmental threats and injustices. Eco-theology is understood by Deane-Drummond (2008:x) as 'that reflection on different facets of theology in as much as they

Note: Special collection: Interreligious dialogue.

take their bearings from cultural concerns about the environment and humanity's relationship with the natural world'. She further explains that eco-theology is a 'particular expression of contextual theology that emerges in the particular contemporary context of environmental awareness that has characterised the late 20th and early 21st centuries.' In order to put the discussion into its proper context, we provide the historical background of AICs in Zimbabwe in the next section.

Historical background of African Initiated Churches in Zimbabwe

It might be prudent to start by exploring the meaning of AICs. It is important to acknowledge that various definitions have been proffered since the emergence of scholarship in this area. From the definitions, it can be gathered that African Independent Churches are those churches founded by Africans for Africans and have an all-African membership and leadership (Amanze 1998). Mbiti (1986) defines African Independent Churches, also known as African Indigenous Churches, AICs, or African Instituted Churches, as Christian churches that were independently started in Africa by Africans, not by missionaries from another continent. This is supported by Banana (1993) who pointed out that the AICs came into being by the initiative of Africans and are led and controlled by Africans. These churches are a significant part of the religious landscape in sub-Saharan Africa and have contributed significantly to the expansion of Christianity in Africa. In Zimbabwe, there are several examples of AICs that have had a significant impact on the country's religious landscape and society in general. Some of these examples include Apostolic Masowe Sects who are known for their distinct religious practices and traditions, Zion Christian Church (ZCC) of Samuel Mutendi, Johane Marange, Johane Masowe WeChishanu, African Apostolic Church, Independent African Church, and many others.

A brief background to the emergence of these churches might be helpful in understanding why AICs have an affinity with nature in general and water in particular. However, we cannot understand the history of AICs without first having a clear picture of the history of the Christianisation of Zimbabwe itself. This is so because the Christianisation of Africa in general and Zimbabwe in particular forms the basis of our understanding of the emergence of AICs.

Mudenge (1986) traces the Christianisation of Zimbabwe back to the arrival of Portuguese missionaries in the Mutapa State in the 15th century who, however, failed to make any meaningful impact owing to their concentration on trading more than mission work. Bhebhe (1979) posits that the missionaries who first came to evangelise among the Shona and Ndebele faced challenges. These challenges were because of several reasons that range from negative attitudes towards African customs, to failure by the Christian God to address the challenges such as droughts and other natural disasters bedevilling the indigenous people. To make matters worse,

even amid the marauding droughts, the missionaries would condemn the rain-making rituals as acts of paganism. Even when the people in the Mutapa empire attempted to explain to the missionaries that the rain-making ceremony was a ritual to ask for rain from God, this still was in vain (Isichei 1995).

As Chitando (2004) aptly puts it, the phenomenon of the emergence of AICs was about domesticating Christianity. Chitando asserts that through the translation of scriptures into African languages, the provision of social services and other strategies, Christianity succeeded in capturing the African imagination. This led many Africans to convert to Christianity. Chitando maintains that the notion of Christianity as the white person's religion was profoundly challenged as Africans had then embraced the faith in large numbers, but admits that these mass movements of Africans to Christianity were not without problems. For example, in Southern Africa, Africans experienced racism as many white Christians discriminated against black people, regarding them as junior brothers and sisters. This refusal by white people to accept black people as equals became one of the main reasons for the rise of AICs. Africans also felt that the style of worship in the mission churches was too static, and they endeavoured to implement a lively style. The demonisation of most African beliefs and practices by the missionaries also encouraged Africans to inevitably seek alternative havens of belonging. Daneel (1987) adds that the lack of leadership opportunities, personal ambitions, theological controversies and other factors also resulted in the rapid multiplication of AICs.

The AICs have, therefore, adopted the use of a hybrid identity. Chitando, Gunda and Kuegler (2014:9) argue that we need to acknowledge the diversities of AICs in Zimbabwe. They say:

... there is need to acknowledge the massive diversity within the AIC movement ...

Some use the Bible, while others do not ... Some AICs are millenarian in outlook ...

Others are quite 'here and now' in orientation. Some worship on Sunday, but others

Have adopted Thursday or Sunday as the day of worship. Some put on white garments

While others put on khakis. Many AIC men shave their heads completely, but others have dreadlocks ...

The diversity that Chitando, Gunda and Kuegler allude to is also evidenced by the various worshipping and healing methods. As above-mentioned, we focus on their use of water as this appears to run through all AICs in Zimbabwe. In order to put this into perspective, we analyse the use of water in religions in general.

The phenomenon of water in religion

The philosopher of antiquity, Thales, is famous for his remark that everything is water. Although not immediately clear

what he exactly meant, our common knowledge of the three states that water assumes may tempt us to assume that Thales meant that water resembles everything. Water has been widely regarded as a source of life. Oestigaard's (2005) perspective on water is:

Water is always in a flux. The fluid matter changes qualities and capacities wherever it is, and it always takes new forms. This transformative character of water is forcefully used in ritual practices and religious constructions. Water represents the one and the many at the same time, and the plurality of ritual institutionalizations and religious perceptions puts emphasis on water's structuring principles and processes in culture and the cosmos. (p. 38)

This insight is perhaps the same as that of Zumdahl (2024) who views water as:

Water is a substance composed of the chemical elements hydrogen and oxygen and existing in gaseous, liquid, and solid states. It is one of the most plentiful and essential of compounds. A tasteless and odourless liquid at room temperature, it has the important ability to dissolve many other substances. Indeed, the versatility of water as a solvent is essential to living organisms. Life is believed to have originated in the aqueous solutions of the world's oceans, and living organisms depend on aqueous solutions, such as blood and digestive juices, for biological processes. Water also exists on other planets and moons both within and beyond the solar system. In small quantities water appears colourless, but water actually has an intrinsic blue colour caused by slight absorption of light at red wavelengths. (n.p.)

These unique qualities obviously set water apart from other matter.

Water in religions

As already alluded to, religion and water have a very close relationship. Different religions may differ on how they use water, but the use of water remains a common phenomenon across religions. This section unveils the uses of water in selected religions.

Judaism has been associated with water throughout its history. It is asserted that the tribes of Israel lived on the edge of a desert, and hence to them, water was their source of life. This is evidenced by Jewish scriptures that are full of references to water and of particular interest is Psalm 65:9–10 which says:

You care for the land and water it; you enrich it abundantly. The streams of God are filled with water to provide the people with grain, for so you have ordained it. You drench its furrows and level its ridges; you soften it with showers and bless its crops. (New International Version [NIV]) (n.p.)

Therefore, from antiquity, we see water being portrayed as an essential part of God's creation, right at the start of creation. According to Genesis 2:4–5, water is a requirement for life on earth as the account explicitly states that before the availability of water, there was no plant nor herb of the field had yet sprung up because God had not caused it to rain upon the earth. (NIV)

In the New Testament, Christians reinterpreted and gave a somewhat new dimension to the Jewish traditions. Notably, now water is used more frequently as both an image and an important component of ritual. According to Tvedt and Oestigaard (2005):

... there is a strong line, continuing the Jewish tradition which sees water as the source of life. There is an immediate spiritual parallel, in which water is taken as the source not only of physical life, but also of spiritual life. This theme is continuous with the themes in the Old Testament, which are perhaps best illustrated by the vision of the new Jerusalem in Ezekiel 47, in which spiritual renewal is identified with the new river of life emanating from the restored temple. Water is here seen as an indication of God's grace, and streams of water are an allegory for the continual outpouring of God's spiritual riches. (p. 371)

For Tvedt and Oestigaard (2005), this imagery is repeated in the book of Revelation in which the author has a vision of a new Jerusalem after the first earth together with the sea had passed away. This end of the sea is interpreted to signify the end of the role of water as the source of chaos in the first creation. In the vision of the author of Revelation, the loss of the sea is seen as the defeat of disorder in the new creation.

Another essential quality of water found in the New Testament is that of water as a source of purity. Tvedt and Oestigaard (2005) maintain that water was, thus, seen both as the source of cleanliness and as a symbol of spiritual cleanliness, and, hence, of inner purity. With the coming of John the Baptist, we see ritual washing assuming the form of baptism, as a way of washing sins.

Water equally plays a significant role in ATRs, serving various purposes. Through ritualistic engagements with water, practitioners seek to establish a profound connection with their ancestral lineage, harnessing the wisdom, guidance and blessings of the ancestral realm. This communion with the ancestral waters fosters a deep sense of cultural continuity, spiritual resonance and the perpetuation of sacred traditions within ATR(s).

Water is used for purification and cleansing. In this purpose, water is used to cleanse and purify the body, mind and spirit. It is used in rituals to wash away negative energies, transgressions and impurities. Water is also used in ancestor veneration, whereby it is offered to ancestors as a symbol of respect, gratitude and to honour their memory. For example, among the Shona people when a spirit possesses its medium, the first thing the medium does is to ask for water which they drink and sprinkle on their bodies and on the attendants as well. In healing and divination, water is used in healing ceremonies, and its movements or patterns may be interpreted by diviners to communicate messages from the spirit world. Water is also associated with fertility and prosperity, and its presence is believed to ensure abundant harvests and healthy livestock. Lastly, water is used in initiation rituals to symbolise spiritual growth, transformation and rebirth.

It can, therefore, be asserted that water plays a pivotal role in rites of passage, communal rituals and initiatory ceremonies within ATR(s). Initiates may undergo purificatory rituals involving water immersion or symbolic purification, signifying their transition into new phases of life, spiritual maturity and communal responsibility. These rituals foster a sense of communal bonding, spiritual interconnectedness and the transmission of sacred knowledge within the cultural fabric of ATR(s). Although these uses vary from culture to culture, water remains a sacred and essential element in ATRs. Having looked at the use of water in the generality of religions, we can, therefore, focus on the use of water in AICs.

The use of water in the African Initiated Churches

The use of water in AICs encompasses a rich tapestry of spiritual, symbolic and ritualistic significance, playing a central role in ceremonies, healing and the expression of spiritual beliefs. Mugambi (2003) stressed that water is intricately woven into the sacred symbolism and mythology of AICs. It is often associated with deities and primordial forces, embodying the essence of fertility, regeneration and the cyclical nature of life. Mythological narratives often feature water as a transformative and regenerative element, symbolising the spiritual journey of creation, sustenance and renewal. Daneel (1987) is of the view that bodies of water are revered as sacred portals for Holy Spirit communion and spiritual revelations within AICs' religious practices.

Rieger (2007) argues that the use of water holds significant ceremonial and symbolic importance within the practices of African Independent Churches. Water is revered as a fundamental element that embodies the essence of life, creation and divine presence within the AIC worldview. Kaulem (2006) asserts that within AICs, water is often associated with the primordial forces of creation and the divine origin of existence. Kaulem (2006) further asserts that water is perceived as a sacred medium through which the spiritual and physical realms intersect. This intersection symbolises the interconnectedness of the human, natural and supernatural worlds. Water plays a pivotal role in a myriad of rituals and ceremonial practices, serving as a conduit for spiritual communication, purification and the invocation of the holy spirit and divine blessings. Immersion in bodies of water is a common ritual practice that demonstrates the spiritual sanctity attributed to water within AICs' religious contexts.

Zvobgo (1996) stressed that in the realm of AICs' healing and spiritual purification, water is regarded as a potent vehicle for cleansing, rejuvenation and restoration of the spiritual equilibrium. Ritual baths and the use of consecrated water are integral components of healing practices, reflecting the belief in the transformative and restorative properties of water within the spiritual healing paradigm.

The AICs in their variety have inherited and embraced the various uses of water. Their close affinity with water has even tempted some sections of Christians to view some of AICs' sects as associated with marine spirits. Walter Magaya, a Zimbabwean cleric and the founder of the Prophetic Healing and Deliverance (PHD) Ministries, was once involved in a verbal war with some members of AICs after he had claimed that the latter were a marine cult. As indicated earlier that the emergence of AICs is tied to the decolonial agenda, it is, therefore, important to acknowledge that some of the ritual and worship practices in the AICs are a hybrid product of Christianity and ATRs. As such, it requires us to exercise caution whenever approaching these practices.

Barrett (1968) argues that bodies of water, such as rivers, lakes and waterfalls, are revered as points of spiritual convergence and communication within AICs' religious practices. They serve as conduits for divine revelation, holy spirit communion and the reception of spiritual wisdom. These sacred sites are often frequented during ritual pilgrimages and communal gatherings, fostering a deep sense of spiritual interconnectedness and reverence for the natural world. The reverence for water within AICs' religion extends to the ethical principles of environmental stewardship and ecological harmony. Water is regarded as a precious and sacred resource, necessitating responsible custodianship and the preservation of natural water sources. This ethos underscores the intrinsic connection between spiritual beliefs, environmental ethics and the sustainable management of natural resources within AICs' religious paradigms.

Within AICs, water is often perceived as an embodiment of primordial elemental forces, representing the fluidity of existence, the interplay of creation and destruction, and the cyclical nature of spiritual renewal. For Macauley (2009), it is intricately connected to other elemental forces, such as earth, air and fire, forming a holistic cosmological framework that underscores the interconnectedness of the natural and supernatural realms. Uses of water among AICs range from baptism to healing. The uses are considered as follows.

Baptism

According to the Catholic Encyclopedia (2023), the English word 'baptism' comes from the Greek word *baptizo* which means to immerse or wash. This suggests that baptism requires a complete immersion in a liquid, in this case, in water. Biblical baptism is, therefore, a submersion into water. The Bible regards water baptism as a symbolic act through which a new Christian identifies with Christ's death, burial and resurrection. It also serves as a profession of a person's repentance. Some AICs, such as ZCC place great emphasis on acquisition of power through baptism in the river. Natural bodies of water, such as rivers, lakes and springs, are venerated as sacred sites imbued with spiritual potency and symbolic significance. These sites are often regarded as points of spiritual convergence, where the divine and

elemental forces converge, fostering a profound sense of sacred interconnectedness and spiritual renewal.

In essence, the use of water in AICs transcends utilitarian applications; it represents a profound embodiment of spiritual interconnectedness, cosmological significance and the enigmatic tapestry of sacred symbolism within the rich tapestry of AICs' belief systems. A greater risk is taken by those who insist on baptism in running river water. This sometimes exposes congregants to drowning.

Healing

Healing is important in AICs in Zimbabwe. It is regarded as one of the major reasons why people become members of the AICs. It has also been a notable drive of church growth among the AICs. The more the healing powers in a particular church, the more the members. In Anderson (1999)'s opinion, a person joins an AIC because felt needs are met and this includes healing from physical sickness and discomfort. As such, prophets in AICs are viewed as 'healers par excellence, the ones to whom the faithful must go when they or their loved ones are sick or affected in any way' (Anderson 1999). The healing regimes take forms which include exorcism and cleansing. In doing so, the use of symbolic objects is common in these churches, water included. Anderson (1996) avers that this healing relies heavily upon various symbols, especially sprinkling with holy water which is a sacrament practised in many AICs. This sacrament provides ritual purification and protection. Shah (2008) stressed that AICs use holy water for healing, for instance, within the context of the ZCC (Mbungu). This has been referred to as hydrotherapy.

Devkate (2016) views hydrotherapy as any process which uses water at any temperature or form to relieve pain and treat illness. This suggests that water is employed for its perceived spiritual and healing properties within the church's practices. The spiritual dimension of water is also depicted by the use of *mbiya*, an African traditional household utensil. The storage of water in this sacred utensil is testimony to its sacredness. The practice of storing water in these utensils is a common phenomenon at AICs' shrines during religious ceremonies or rituals especially among the Johane Masowe eChishanu in Zimbabwe. The practice further emphasises the ceremonial significance of water within the religious practices of African Independent Churches in Zimbabwe. Daneel (1987) posits that some church members may take some water from their baptismal river *Jorodhani* [Jordan] during a baptism to use as medicine. Through their belief in transubstantiation, the baptismal water identified with the power of God's Spirit to such an extent that the water itself is regarded as possessing intrinsic power. It is then drunk or sprinkled as *muteuro* [holy water] to secure a state of health, salvation or protection to the believer.

Exorcism

Exorcism is a common feature in the AICs. Exorcism is believed to bring relief in cases where other methods have

failed (Kitshoff 2007). As such, exorcism has become one of the main activities within the AICs and among faith healers (Oosthuizen 1992). This phenomenon can probably be attributed to African cosmology. Africans have strong beliefs in demon-possession and for them, only faith healers are best equipped to handle demon-possessed patients. One of the common methods of exorcism believed to be effective is the use of water that has been prayed over (Kitshoff 2007).

In cases of spirit-possession, baptism may even be used as a form of exorcism, the tormenting spirit being called out and expelled by forceful immersion. The evil spirits are driven out by the 'powerful' water and health is restored. Evil spirits are driven out during baptismal ceremonies. It is believed that the force of the Holy Spirit in the water makes it impossible for the alien spirit to remain in the person being baptised. Should the spirit persist, the possessed person is 'lashed' with 'holy water'. Water, therefore, plays a pivotal role in the spiritual life of the AICs.

Cleansing rituals

According to Wepener and Müller (2013), we have a myriad of water rituals connected to cleansing or purification. This ritual or variations of it are performed in the following cases: all persons who have attended a funeral, someone who has touched a corpse, for a woman who gave birth, for a woman entering menopause, all persons who attended a court of law and a person who has sinned and any person coming out of prison. The first two rituals appear to be based on the biblical laws in the Old Testament, particularly Leviticus 12.

Wepener and Müller (2013) maintain that participants in the Sunday worship service sometimes have to be sprinkled with water when it happens that there are people possessed by bad spirits. By means of this sprinkling, the bad spirits are thus expelled and, according to members, the person is also calmed down by drinking of the water. He argues:

When the participants talked about the associations they have with water, or in conversations about the meaning of water and what the water does, the responses from both the interviews and the focus group were unanimous – 'Water is closely related to cleansing'. Cleansing as used in this ritual-liturgical context obviously does not refer to a literal cleansing, but refers to cleansing on another level, as the next ritual makes evident. (Wepener & Müller 2013:5)

In some AICs in Zimbabwe, cleansing rituals are performed at waterfalls. Therefore, water is important in cleansing – physically, spiritually and socially. The social dimension is evident in Mosala (1989) who stresses that the ritualistic use of water extends beyond individual spiritual practices to encompass communal healing, collective purification and the restoration of social harmony. Ritual baths of water are integral components of communal rituals, symbolising the collective pursuit of spiritual equilibrium, social cohesion, and the restoration of communal balance within AICs' religious contexts.

The reality of climate change

It is crucial to have an appreciation of how climate change has impacted on water. This helps us to have an understanding of how the use of water by AICs is likely to be problematic as climate change is worsening.

According to the United Nations (UN), climate change refers to 'long-term shifts in temperatures and weather patterns'. These shifts can be naturally induced by changes in either the solar activity or large volcanic eruptions. It is argued that since the 1800s, human activities have been the chief driver of climate change, primarily because of the burning of fossil fuels such as coal, oil and gas. Burning fossil fuels generates greenhouse gas emissions that act like a blanket wrapped around the Earth, trapping the sun's heat and raising temperatures.

The main greenhouse gases that are causing climate change include carbon dioxide and methane. These come from using gasoline for driving a car or coal for heating a building, for example. Clearing land and cutting down forests can also release carbon dioxide. Agriculture, oil and gas operations are major sources of methane emissions. Energy, industry, transport, buildings, agriculture and land use are among the main sectors causing greenhouse gases. The UN, in its SDGs Report indicated that about two billion people worldwide do not have access to safe drinking water today (SDG Report 2022).

Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) has further argued that approximately 50% of the world's population is experiencing severe water scarcity for at least part of the year (IPCC 2022). According to the World Meteorological Organization (WMO), these numbers, scary as they are, are expected to increase as climate change and population growth take its toll on the earth (WMO 2021). To make matters worse, it is estimated that only 0.5% of water on Earth is useable (WMO 2021). As asserted by Musoni and Gundani (2019), AICs, including Johane Masowe weChishanu are known for congregating on open spaces without proper sanitary provisions. This has resulted in the spread of water-borne diseases such as cholera and typhoid.

Climate change has also affected the quality of water as higher water temperatures and more frequent floods and droughts are projected to exacerbate many forms of water pollution – from sediments to pathogens and pesticides (IPCC 2022). This makes baptism in rivers a big risk as flash floods are now a common phenomenon.

In 2021, there was a fatal incident in which members of the Vadzidzi Apostolic sect drowned in a sacred pool in Mazowe River in very mysterious circumstances. On 01 November 2021, Lupande – a *Herald* reporter – reported that eight AIC prophets drowned while conducting a baptism ritual. It could be that the depth of the pool had been increased because of flooding.

All this is happening at a time when the UN is pushing for the realisation of SDGs, SDG 6 in this case, which aims to achieve clean water and sanitation for all.

United Nations sustainable development goals

The 193 Member States of the UN at the General Assembly in September 2015 adopted *The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development*. The agenda outlines:

... a transformative vision for economic, social and environmental development and will guide the work of the Organization towards this vision for the next 15 years. This new road map presents a historic opportunity for Latin America and the Caribbean, since it addresses some of the region's most urgent priorities, such as ending extreme poverty, reducing inequality in all its dimensions, promoting inclusive economic growth with decent work for all, creating sustainable cities and addressing climate change. The 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) associated with the Agenda help the region's countries to gauge the starting point from which they set out towards this new, collective vision of sustainable development set forth in the 2030 Agenda and to analyse and craft the means of its implementation. (United Nations 2018)

Among the 17 goals is SDG 6 which aims at ensuring the availability and sustainable management of water and sanitation for all. This goal has implications on the worshipping traditions of AICs.

United Nations sustainable development goal 6 and African Initiated Churches

The UN SDG 6 as earlier on alluded to, aims at ensuring the availability and sustainable management of water and sanitation for all. The goal has eight targets that should be achieved by 2030 (United Nations 2018). It aims to achieve access to adequate and equitable sanitation and hygiene for all and end open defecation, paying special attention to the needs of women and girls and those in vulnerable situations. We see efforts towards the achievement of this goal being derailed by most AICs as they hold their worship sessions on open spaces that do not have ablution facilities (*The Herald*, 09 October 2024).

The goal also endeavours to improve water quality, by reducing pollution, eliminating dumping and minimising release of hazardous chemicals and materials. However, as indicated above, AICs are involved in pollution as they do not have proper facilities to dispose of any materials that contribute to pollution. The target to protect and restore water-related ecosystems including mountains, forests, wetlands, rivers, aquifers and lakes is grossly curtailed by many AICs who have instituted their Masowe in Wetlands especially in cities such as Harare (*The Herald*, 09 October 2024). Therefore, the realisation of SDG 6 lies much in a paradigm shift in the eco-theological traditions of the AICs. The major question that arises is whether these theologies are

adaptable, cognisant of the argument that 'climate change provides a different and yet parallel crisis and thereby an opportunity for theological development ...' (Northcott & Scott 2014:3). We proceed to offer insights on how these theologies can be adapted.

Towards an eco-friendly African Initiated Churches water theology

The issue of ecological transformation and eco-theology is not a new theme in African theological discourse (Werner 2020:51). Engelbrecht et al. (2024) note that Southern Africa (of which Zimbabwe is a part) is a region with a warm climate and pronounced wet-dry seasonality which is acknowledged to be water-stressed in the context of naturally occurring droughts. Despite this scenario of water shortage, Madise (2013) avers that many of the AICs' theologies continue to attach much significance to the use of water. He further argues that while the use of water by AICs is essential, they have not made a clear statement about the effects of global changes on water sources.

Research by Kabongo and Stork (2022) in South Africa shows that most AICs do not actively protect the environment or adapt to climate change. Kabongo and Stork (2022), however, call for adaptation to climate change and note that AICs have the potential to become actors for such adaptation to climate change in their communities. In a study on Zimbabwe, Daneel (2006) describes AICs as potential vehicles of Earth-care in Africa. We contend in this article that AICs in Zimbabwe have the capacity to base their practices on eco-friendly water theologies through the adoption of lifestyles that are consistent with stewardship in the face of [a] climate emergency (Chitando 2022). This would lead to ecological transformation which, from Werner's perspective, starts with changes in attitudes, awareness and daily practices in local places (2020). We, therefore, suggest that AICs in Zimbabwe need to be intentional in altering some of their water theologies. For example, in terms of baptism, they may need to either construct or hire baptism pools or adopt the use of bathroom tubs as some Pentecostal churches in Zimbabwe are doing. This would come in handy in cases where river water has dried up or in times of floods. In their eco-theological critique of AICs in South Africa, Kgatle and Modiba (2023) argue that it can be hazardous when rivers are full because of climate change for people to be baptised as this can jeopardise their safety leading at times to loss of life. In their analysis, a theology of river baptism should be balanced with the safety of the individuals who are being baptised in mind.

Furthermore, AICs need to rethink their engagement with modernity if they are to be relevant in a climate change context. In other words, they need to embrace eco-friendly technologies that ensure that they do not tamper with natural water sources and at the same time conserve this precious resource. Earlier on, we explained that AICs in Zimbabwe perform some of their cleansing, exorcism or healing ceremonies at waterfalls. Climate change has led to most of these drying up. In such cases, where possible, AICs can move on to use showers in

modern bathrooms as alternatives. Where showers are not available, the prophets can pour some water on their patients in ways that resemble the natural waterfall. Such practices can be done in ways that keep the used water so that it can be used for other purposes such as watering flowers and trees. When this is done in public, it also ensures that women who have been perpetual victims of sexual abuse by AIC prophets (Manyonganise 2016) are protected. For Kgatle and Modiba (2023), this shift in AIC water theology need not be seen as a lack of faith, but a change that leads to the saving of many lives in a climate change context.

Apart from saving lives, the change would also ensure that the remaining natural water sources along rivers are not contaminated by the continual practice of baptism. As the natural water sources dry up, they may be contaminated themselves, such that if AIC members continue to either get baptised or draw water from them for healing purposes, it may lead to them getting exposed to waterborne diseases. De Klerk (2014) argues that baptism in most African rivers leads to pollution of the water. However, he suggests that baptismal celebrations can become a means through which baptised Christians can learn not to harm but respect and enhance the ecological value of water.

Conclusion

The intention of this article was to establish whether water theologies of AICs in Zimbabwe are adaptable in a climate change context. In order to do this, the article provided a historical background of AICs and their affinity to African Indigenous Religion(s). It also highlighted the significance of water in different religions as well as the effect of climate change on water availability. In the final analysis, the article makes the following conclusions: firstly, that water is central to AICs' practices of baptism, cleansing, deliverance and purification and that this water is usually drawn from natural water sources such as rivers, wells and waterfalls; secondly, that climate change has wreaked havoc on these natural water sources either through drying or flooding which, to a greater extent, may affect AICs' liturgies that require water usage; thirdly, that with a change in mindset, it is possible for water theologies of AICs in Zimbabwe to be adapted to eco-friendly ones. An eco-theological analysis of AICs' water theologies led us to conclude that they can adopt modern ways of baptism, purification, cleansing, among others. Going forward, an in-depth empirical research needs to be carried out which captures the views of AIC members on adapting their water theologies in a climate change context. Werner (2020) opines that current African theological discourses provide evidence that much more serious theological and empirical research is required to deepen historical, systematic, cultural as well as ethical insights into the ecological assets of African Christianity. He further notes that empirical research on AICs and their potential contribution for eco-ethics is still in its infancy stage. It, therefore, becomes imperative that future studies focussing on religion and SDG 6 consider the contribution of AICs in Africa in general and Zimbabwe in particular.

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Competing interests

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Authors' contributions

This is a co-authored article where M.M. was responsible for conceptualising the article, its methodology, formal analysis, investigation, project administration, data curation, resources, writing and supervision. T.M. was responsible for the formal analysis, investigation, writing, data curation and resources.

Ethical considerations

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Disclaimer

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