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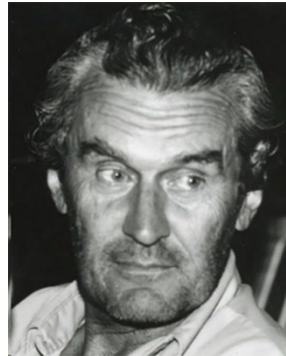
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Celebrating the Witness of M. L. “Inus” Daneel

By Dana L. Robert Daneel⁴⁰

The death of M. L. “Inus” Daneel on July 29, 2024, marked the end of the era of mid-20th century pioneer missionary researchers on African Initiated Churches.⁴¹ Among AIC scholars, Daneel’s research in Zimbabwe was marked by a solidarity that helped him to produce the most in-depth study of “African Independency” in one ethnic group—the massive three-volume *Old and New in Southern Shona Independent Churches*.⁴² To remain in Africa during the fifteen-year liberation war that gave birth to the nation of Zimbabwe, Daneel turned down the professorship of missiology and religions at the Vrij Universiteit Amsterdam. Instead, he itinerated thousands of miles, even in war zones, to run an ecumenical Theological Education by Extension (TEE) program in alliance with AIC leaders across Masvingo Province, Zimbabwe.⁴³



In all his writings, Daneel insisted on seeing AIC leadership as iconic, rather than according to the “bridge back to heathenism” evaluation of the early G. C. Oosthuizen and the early Bengt Sundkler.⁴⁴ His lifetime spent among the Shona people coupled with his native fluency in Karanga (a dialect of Shona) led Daneel to argue that AICs were missionary churches in their own right and were not mere reactionary movements.⁴⁵ Daneel’s kinship with AIC

⁴⁰ Dana L. Robert Daneel is the William Fairfield Warren Distinguished Professor at Boston University, Director of the Center for Global Christianity and Mission, Former Vice-Chair of ZIRRCO, and an Associate Editor of the *Journal of African Christian Biography*.

⁴¹ Daneel’s older peers included missionary scholars Bengt Sundkler (South Africa), David Barrett (Kenya), Edwin and Irene Weaver (Nigeria), and Harold W. Turner (Nigeria)—with each of whom he corresponded and visited in the 1960s and 1970s.

⁴² M. L. Daneel, *Old and New in Southern Shona Independent Churches: Background and Rise of the Major Movements*, vol. 1, Change and Continuity in Africa (The Hague: Mouton, 1971); M. L. Daneel, *Old and New in Southern Shona Independent Churches: Church Growth: Causative Factors and Recruitment Techniques*, vol. 2 (The Hague: Mouton, 1974); M. L. Daneel, *Old and New in Southern Shona Independent Churches: Leadership and Fission Dynamics*, vol. 3 (Gweru: Mambo Press, 1988). Many of Daneel’s writings have been scanned and are freely available online at <https://sites.bu.edu/shonareligion/books/>.

⁴³ M. L. Daneel, *Fambidzano: Ecumenical Movement of Zimbabwean Independent Churches* (Gweru, Zimbabwe: Mambo Press, 1989): xiii-xviii.

⁴⁴ Bengt Sundkler, *Bantu Prophets in South Africa*, 2d ed., Lutterworth Library, v. 32. Missionary Research Series, No. 14 (New York: Oxford University Press for the International African Institute, 1961); G. C. Oosthuizen, *Post-Christianity in Africa: A Theological and Anthropological Study* (Grand Rapids: W.B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 1968).

⁴⁵ On Daneel’s groundbreaking work of partnering with AICs for theological education, rather than trying to convert them from “heresy,” see David A. Shank, “Mission Relations with the Independent Churches in Africa,” *Missiology* 13, no. 1 (1985): 23–44. See Inus Daneel, *Quest for Belonging: Introduction to a Study of African Independent Churches* (Gweru: Mambo Press, 1987). Bishop Sundkler attended Daneel’s dissertation defense at the Vrij in 1971 and placed his mantle on him. Daneel, in multiple conversations, helped convince

leaders was best expressed by his adoption as a son by Samuel Mutendi, the founder of the Zion Christian Church in Zimbabwe, and his consecration as an Ndaza Zionist bishop for remaining with the people during the liberation war. Chiefs with whom he worked considered Daneel a *svikiro* (spirit medium) who mediated with their ancestors for the service of the people.⁴⁶ Although Daneel was a devout Christian theologian and church elder in the Reformed tradition, his ecumenical stance caused him to be long labeled a heretic by some missionaries in the church of his birth.⁴⁷

Another important aspect of Daneel's witness, in addition to his solidarity with AICS, was his ecumenical stance toward the priests, spirit mediums, and praise women of the traditional Mwari shrine in the Matopos. After two years living as the only white person in a communal area in the Matopo Hills, Daneel was admitted into the oracular cave of the traditional deity. Mwari, speaking in an ancient Rozvi dialect and in the voice of a woman, instructed Daneel to warn the Rhodesian authorities that if the white people did not return land to the black inhabitants, there would be war.⁴⁸ Accompanied by Mwari's messenger from Gutu, his friend Vondo Mukozho, Daneel delivered Mwari's message to the District Commissioner. Of course the message was rejected, despite Daneel pointing out that during the rebellion of 1896, the priests of Mwari and the spirit mediums led the war against the white settlers.⁴⁹ As Inus and Vondo left the DC's office to meet with the waiting council of chiefs, it began to rain. The two men raised their fists and shouted the rain-making praise names of Mwari, as women ululated in the distance.

When Ian Smith declared the Unilateral Declaration of Independence in November of 1965, Daneel heard it over the radio as he was helping to deliver a Shona woman's baby in the back of his truck. Because of his ministry among the Shona, he claimed conscientious objector status and refused to bear arms. When summoned before a military council by Colonel Hartley, Daneel was accused of being a "traitor to the white cause" and threatened with imprisonment. Later, to process his war experiences, Daneel interviewed former guerilla fighters and wrote a historical novel under his adopted clan name Mafuranhunzi Gumbo, *Guerilla Snuff*, that in 1997 was given the literary prize by the Zimbabwe International Book Fair, and then selected in 2004 as one of the best 75 works of fiction written by a Zimbabwean in the 20th Century.⁵⁰ 25 in English, 25 in Shona, and 25 in Ndebele were selected from 5600 nominations to comprise "classic" Zimbabwean literature. Daneel's book was the only winner written by a white Zimbabwean.

After the civil war ended, in 1981 Daneel accepted a position as full professor of missiology at the University of South Africa (UNISA). As the anti-apartheid faculty of Afrikaners, UNISA theologians were educating the largest number of African students of any major tertiary institution during the late apartheid era. Missiologist David Bosch, of course, made the

Sundkler that AIC leaders in southern Africa were not supplanting the place of Christ.

⁴⁶ "Interviews with Chiefs Chikwanda, Chivi and Murinye, 'Muchakata and the War of the Trees,'" in *Frontiers of African Christianity: Essays in Honour of Inus Daneel*, eds. Greg Cuthbertson, Hennie Pretorius, and Dana Robert (Pretoria, South Africa: Unisa Press, 2003), 43-54.

⁴⁷ As late as the 2000s, at a meeting of Mashonaland missionaries of the NGK (Dutch Reformed Church) that Inus and I attended in Pretoria, South Africa, an older missionary apologized to me for having considered my husband a heretic for thirty years.

⁴⁸ M. L. Daneel, *The God of the Matopo Hills: An Essay on the Mwari Cult in Rhodesia*, Communications, 1. (The Hague ; Mouton, 1970), 77-80.

⁴⁹ Daneel, 30-33.

⁵⁰ Mafuranhunzi Gumbo, *Guerrilla Snuff* (Harare, Zimbabwe: Baobab Books, 1995).

missiological faculty of UNISA known worldwide.⁵¹ Together Bosch and Daneel were the full professors in the department. Bosch taught the “A stream” (European theologies) while Daneel taught the “B stream” (African and black theologies). Daneel produced the first prescribed academic study guide on African theologies, which was well-received at UNISA and shaped the emerging consciousness of hundreds of post-graduate students.⁵² In 1995, Daneel retired from UNISA and moved part-time to the Boston University School of Theology, where he taught African religions and theology for 15 years, while living six months a year in Africa. In 2001, Inus and I founded the Center for Global Christianity and Mission, partly as a way to support outreach and research in Zimbabwe.

A major area of scholarly contribution and activism by Inus Daneel was his commitment to environmental justice and ecological mission. After the civil war ended, he stood with chiefs and spirit mediums overlooking the scenery at Morgenster Mission, where he had grown up as a missionary kid. The group lamented that even though the lands had been returned, they had been destroyed by war and its aftermath. Cultivation of riverbeds and destruction of contour ridges, uncontrolled tree chopping, digging up land mines, and other practices were legacies of war, injustice, and social breakdown. In response to the shared lament over the degraded landscape, in 1984 Inus sold his car and his house to seed a tree planting movement among traditionalists. Called AZTREC (Association of Zimbabwean Traditional Ecologists), the group called upon the ancestors to help them protect the land. AIC leaders were also interested, and so a Christian wing called AAEC (Association of African Earthkeeping Churches) was founded. The two groups collaborated in an organization called ZIRRCO (Zimbabwean Institute for Religious Research and Ecological Conservation), that mobilized thousands of people.⁵³ Daneel raised money from Dutch and German church development agencies and requested sponsorships from local businessmen in Masvingo. Daneel and ZIRRCO founded dozens of nurseries and woodlots across Masvingo Province, raised seedlings, held arbor day events at schools and other public spaces, and planted hundreds of thousands of trees a year. Undergirded by religious rituals emphasizing earth care, ZIRRCO flourished for over fifteen years, with Daneel commuting to Zimbabwe while teaching at UNISA and then at Boston University.

As he became a prophet for ecotheology, of particular importance was Daneel’s 1991 speech at the Brighton Conference—the first international global conference on Pentecostal theology.⁵⁴ The organizer, Pentecostal ecumenist Harold D. Hunter, recalls that Inus’s powerful paper on “African Independent Church Pneumatology and the Salvation of All Creation” changed

⁵¹ David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission*, Twentieth anniversary ed., American Society of Missiology Series ; No. 16 (Maryknoll, N.Y: Orbis Books, 2011).

⁵² M. L. Daneel, *Missiology (B.Th.): Christian Theology of Africa: Mission as Liberation, Third World Theologies* (Pretoria, South Africa: Unisa Press, 1989); M. L. Daneel, “African Indigenous Models of Mission,” in *Missiology: Introduction to Missiology*, ed. Willem Saayman (Pretoria, South Africa: Unisa Press, 1992), 144–91.

⁵³ M. L. Daneel, *African Earthkeepers: Interfaith Mission in Earth-Care*, 1st ed., vol. 1 (Pretoria, South Africa: Unisa Press, 1988), <https://uir.unisa.ac.za/handle/10500/19419>; M. L. Daneel, *African Earthkeepers: Environmental Mission and Liberation in Christian Perspective*, vol. 2 (Pretoria, South Africa: Unisa Press, 2000).

⁵⁴ See the program of this groundbreaking conference, https://www.academia.edu/4020171/Brighton_91_First_Global_Pentecostal_Conference. Harold D. Hunter and Peter D. Hocken, eds., *All Together in One Place: Papers from the Theological Section of the Brighton Conference on World Evangelization* (Sheffield, England: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993), 281. Reprinted with a new introduction by Wipf and Stock in 2019. On Hunter’s evaluation of the paper and its importance, see his introduction to the video of Daneel’s lecture at Brighton: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=n2MFVg2xBUY>

the course of Pentecostal theology and launched his own commitment as an early Pentecostal ecologist. Hunter indicated that Daneel's paper was the most influential of the papers at this seminal conference.⁵⁵

In his last decade of living in Zimbabwe, following the destruction of the rule of law around the year 2000, Daneel's mission became primarily that of Christian presence. He supervised a small TEE program, laid hands on people for healing, preached in churches, and participated in the opening of a new Mwari shrine by a traditional woman ecologist. As a minority white person living in a situation of severe racial tension, he tried to maintain a positive presence, speaking Shona, and witnessing to his Christian faith. Much of the work he had pioneered was closed or destroyed.⁵⁶ Even so, his missionary vocation remained. The earthkeeping movement he had founded and wrote about became an African model widely admired throughout the world. By 2014, advanced age and ill health required that he spend most of his time in the United States where I could care for him. He continued his witness to Christ in Boston, blessing and praying for African students up until his death shortly before his 88th birthday. Although my husband was keenly aware of his sinfulness under God, he trusted the Lord for his salvation. In his last days, he continually gave thanks for our long and loving relationship, for his ministry, and for the people of Zimbabwe.

Inus Daneel left behind a prodigious amount of primary research, including over 10,000 hand-written pages of AIC sermons from the 1960s and 1970s, thousands of photographs, interviews with priests and spirit mediums from the traditional religion, and more. To protect them from destruction, the research materials were moved to Polokwane, South Africa, in the early 2010s. The full dimension of Inus Daneel's contribution will take many years to sort out and to evaluate.⁵⁷ Preserving, scanning, translating, and annotating the M. L. Daneel Archive is a new project jointly of the Center for Global Christianity and Mission at the Boston University School of Theology, and the African Studies Library at Boston University.

⁵⁵ See the paper (reprinted with permission in this issue): M. L. Daneel, "African Independent Church Pneumatology and the Salvation of All Creation," *International Review of Mission* 82, no. 326 (1993): 143–66.

⁵⁶ See M. L. Daneel, "Zimbabwe's Earthkeepers: When Green Warriors Enter the Valley of Shadows," in *Nature, Science, and Religion: Intersections Shaping Society and the Environment*, ed. Catherine M. Tucker (Santa Fe: School for Advanced Research Press, 2012): 191-212. The anthropologists who produced this book dedicated it to "Marthinus 'Inus' L. Daneel, Environmental activist, inspiration, and friend," (Tucker, *Nature*, viii). On Daneel's ecological spirituality, see Benjamin Webb's interview with Inus Daneel, "Africa's Independent Churches and the Earthkeeping Movement," in *Fugitive Faith: Conversations on Spiritual, Environmental, and Community Renewal*, ed. Benjamin Webb (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1998): 193-205.

⁵⁷ This paper shares only a few highlights of Daneel's vocation. His life as a missionary kid, his education in the Netherlands, his solidarity with the Shona AICs in wartime, his adventures as grade-A hunter and fisherman, his friends and family, his existential loneliness as self-described "nomad" caught between worlds, and his work as ground-breaking missiologist and ecumenist, will need to be the subject of a full biography.