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(101) HISTORY AND PROFILE OF OAIC

John Njeru Gichimu

Introduction

The Organization of African Instituted Churches (OAIC) is an umbrella organization for African Independent Churches (AICs) on the continent. Its head office is located in Nairobi, Kenya. This chapter examines the identity of AICs and their mobilization towards the formation of the OAIC; the movement's early struggle to define its own identity, rooted in the key concept of 'founding visions'; the development of programmes to express this concept practically; and the recent transformation of OAIC through reorganization and continued self-questioning, to its present position as an African Christian body in close contact with village level communities, yet able to contribute significantly to international debates.[1]

Identity

The terms 'African Independent' or 'African Instituted Churches' (AICs) are used synonymously for a large number of heterogeneous faith communities across sub-Saharan Africa. AICs are essentially 'home-grown' churches, often among the poorest communities. The OAIC understands an AIC to be a church that acknowledges Jesus Christ as Lord, and which has separated by seceding from a mission church or an existing African independent church, or has been founded as an independent entity under African initiative and leadership.[2] The first AICs were formed as Christian movements to preach the gospel and to protect African values and forms of society against the impact of colonialism, and against any negative or overly restrictive aspects of missionary-founded churches. They saw their churches as prophets of a new, reformed and more humane form of society that was both African and Christian, replacing the colonialism that had deprived African people of their initiative, freedom and sense of self-worth.

Although AICs date back to the nineteenth century, they began to be founded in considerable numbers from the 1920s onwards. For simplicity, they can be grouped into three broad categories:

- *Nationalist* – those churches that were founded as part of a broader movement to seize political power from the Europeans, and which saw recovering ownership of their churches and their country from the hands of foreigners as part of their divine calling. 'Nationalist' is an outsider's term; members of these churches more usually call themselves *Ethiopian* (Southern Africa), *African* (West Africa), or simply *Independent* (East Africa). Unfortunately, these terms are ambiguous when employed outside their immediate context. Pending agreement among AICs themselves on an appropriate term,, we continue to call them *Nationalist.*
- *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. Other names of these churches are *Aladura* (West Africa), *Roho* or *Akurinu* (East Africa), *Zionist* or *Apostolic* (Southern Africa).

[1] In preparing this chapter, I wish to acknowledge the assistance of the Rev. Nicta Lubaale, OAIC General Secretary, Prof. Victor Molobi of the University of South Africa, Dr John Padwick, who served with OAIC, 1978-1985 and again 1993-2010, and the Rev. Dr Thomas Oduro of Good News Theological Seminary, Ghana.

[2] Slightly modified from David B. Barrett's definition, in *Schism and Renewal in Africa: An Analysis of Six Thousand Contemporary Religious Movements* (Nairobi: Oxford University Press, 1968), 50.

- *African Pentecostal churches* – founded after political independence, influenced by the global Pentecostal movement, and strongly oriented towards the future but retaining roots in African culture.

Mobilization: OAIC origins and the First and Second General Assemblies

In John 17:20-26, Jesus prays for the unity of believers, 'that they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me'.

The AICs' desire to come together to form councils has a long history. Initially, AICs were unwilling to join the so-called 'mainline' church councils which were generally hostile to their formation and even their very existence. This led AICs to work for their own councils from as early as 1913, but with limited success, and at a local level. In 1978, this desire found international expression when the OAIC was founded in Cairo with support from the ecumenical churches.[3]

The 'quest for belonging' by the African Independent Churches had resulted in several initiatives after 1930 to relate to the ancient African and Orthodox churches of Egypt and Ethiopia. When, in 1976, the Coptic Church under Pope Shenouda III consecrated Bishop Antonious Markos as Bishop of African Affairs, to be stationed in Nairobi, part of his brief was to develop relationships with AICs. Independently, the Anglican Consultative Council and the Archbishops of the Anglican province of Africa had also become interested in these churches. In Nairobi, Bishop Markos met experienced Anglican researcher David Barrett, who enabled the Bishop to contact dozens of Kenyan AICs and to arrange visits to AICs in DRC, and in West and Southern Africa.[4] In 1978, twenty AIC leaders were invited to Egypt by Pope Shenouda to visit the roots of African Christianity.[5] The leaders were genuinely interested in the Coptic tradition, particularly as an African and non-western source of legitimacy for their own churches. Visits to the Egyptian 'Biblical sites' and to monasteries in the eastern and western deserts strengthened AIC leaders' understanding of the African roots of Christianity. One South African commented, 'We thank God that we have come to a black church, a church that goes back to the first black Apostle of Jesus Christ.'[6]

The gathering (subsequently called the 'First OAIC General Assembly') proceeded to form a continent-wide association of AICs with the name Organization of African Independent churches.[7] Primate Adejobi of the Church of Lord (*Aladura*) from Nigeria became Chairman, and Bishop Markos Organizing Secretary.[8] Other committee members were the General Secretary, Bishop I. Mokoena, South Africa – St John's Mission; His Eminence J.K.N. Diangienda, DRC – Kimbanguist Church; and Ntate S.A. Muhono, Lesotho – Moshoeshoe Berean Bible Readers' Church. This committee was charged with convening a second OAIC Conference.[9] Assembly resolutions focused on the development of programmes described as 'Spiritual Teaching and Training'. This term embraced Bible teaching, leadership training, training for Sunday School and youth work, and the promotion of theological training for qualified leaders – all in a form acceptable to AICs of diverse traditions and often with members of little formal education.[10]

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[3] David B. Barrett and John Padwick, *Rise Up and Walk* (Nairobi: Oxford University Press, 1989), 13, 40.
[4] Barrett was the chief editor of the *World Christian Encyclopedia* 1st edition. (Nairobi: Oxford University Press, 1982).
[5] Barrett and Padwick, *Rise Up and Walk,* 40.
[6] Njeru Wambugu, '(*1943-2008*)*, The Organization of African Instituted Churches: An Introduction and Brief History*', (Nairobi: OAIC, 1996).
[7] In 1985, the word 'Instituted' replaced 'Independent' which had proved unacceptable to the Kenyan government during the process of registration. See Wambugu, 'The Organization of African Instituted Churches'.
[8] David A. Shank, 'Mission Relations with the Independent Churches in Africa', *Missiology,* Vol. XIII, (1985): 37-38.
[9] Barrett and Padwick, *Rise Up and Walk,* 41.
[10] Shank, 'Mission Relations with the Independent Churches', 38. An 'African Independent Churches Service', to provide a variety of help for member churches, was also agreed, along lines originally proposed for the All Africa

Significant funding for the Assembly came from European and North American ecumenical churches, expressing the then widespread concern to find ways of bringing AICs into the wider Christian family, and a recognition that earlier attempts to do this had largely failed.

The OAIC held its Second General Assembly in 1982 at the conference centre of the All Africa Conference of Churches (AACC) headquarters in Nairobi. The meeting of 48 leaders addressed the serious task of facing the problems of independence in the African church scene.[11] The Assembly adopted a constitution, and resolved to set up a General Secretariat in Nairobi. Although the Second General Assembly was held on ecumenical premises, and largely financed by ecumenical partners, it decided at this stage not to seek affiliation with any other Christian body, expressing simply a willingness to co-operate with such bodies. The OAIC needed to become properly conscious of its own identity before seeking closer relations with larger, well established associations of churches.[12]

The Challenge of Grassroots Theological Education

The Cairo meeting had focused on training and theological education, and the first programme to begin was Theological Education by Extension. This was the second option, after an initial funding proposal for a theological institution for AICs sent to WCC was rejected.[13] In 1980, the United Presbyterian Church (USA) seconded to the OAIC two TEE programmers experienced with such work in Chile – the Rev. Agustin and Mrs (later Rev.) Rosario Battle.[14] Two Kenyan TEE enablers were trained initially as part of a pilot project. By 1996, the programme had trained twenty-one Trainers of Trainers (TOTs) – six were women – from Tanzania, DRC, South Africa, Ghana, Cameroon, Madagascar and Kenya. Many of the TEE texts were produced by trainees on the course. Initially, there was no formal syllabus – texts were written in response to expressions of need from the churches. TEE proved to be an excellent tool for mobilizing isolated AICs and introducing them to the wider AIC community and the catholicity of the church. Its participatory methodology recognized from the start the principle of listening to and valuing voices from the grassroots as equals to those of theological professionals.

Nevertheless, an evaluation of the programme by Prof. Douglas Waruta of the University of Nairobi in 2000 underlined as a critical issue the task of ensuring that the 'content of theological education [is] commensurate to the identity and integrity of African instituted churches' – thus indirectly recognizing the existence of AIC theology, and the difficulty of determining its key elements across the variety of AICs, especially since AIC theology in general is oral and not written.[15]

Developing Appropriate 'Development' Education for AICs

Some AICs distrusted any programme aimed at improving living standards as 'un-spiritual', believing that 'development' had an external agenda and threatened the integrity of African communities; others, often under pressure from national governments, welcomed it as part of the modernising agenda; yet other

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Conference of Churches, but never implemented by the AACC. This service eventually became integrated into the Research and Communications programme of the OAIC.

[11] Sam Babs Mala (ed.), *African Independent Churches in the 80s* (Nairobi: OAIC, 1983), 3.

[12] Mala, *African Independent Churches,* 3-4.

[13] Wambugu, (*1943-2008*), *The Organization of African Instituted Churches'*.

[14] Augustin and Rosario Battle, 'Theological Education by Extension Training for African Independent Churches: Second Anniversary report', in *African Independent Churches in the 80s,* ed. S. Babs Mala (Nairobi: OAIC, 1983).

[15] Douglas Waruta, 'Evaluation Report on: TEE and its future in AICs', 2000. An earlier evaluation was done by Rosario Battle in 1988 under the supervision of CORAT-Africa. See 'TEE Programme Report: OAIC Third General Assembly held 23rd-30th August 1997' at Limuru Conference Centre, Kenya. Rosario Battle's evaluation of 1988 was never presented to the OAIC Executive.

churches thought 'development' should be used primarily to improve church structures rather than the lives of people in the community. The second programme Rural Development by Extension (OAIC/RDE), under Dr Roger Sharland, was not started until 1990, and had to define itself carefully. Its training focused on empowering people with grassroots practical skills, in agriculture, agro-forestry, health, environment, handicrafts, etc. Advice was given on small-scale institutional projects (nursery schools, carpentry workshops, clinics, village polytechnics, etc.) and on the use of appropriate technology. The general objective of the programme was to reach the 'poorest of the poor', especially smallholders and women.

A pilot project was started in Kenya, in which churches were asked to identify two co-ordinators, one man and one woman, to be trained as TOTs and then to return to work in their church and community. Although seminars subsequently were held in Tanzania and Ghana, the programme was slow to move beyond East Africa. On the positive side, it was noted that some churches had begun to grapple with the meaning of development. Moreover, as early as 1991, RDE offered teaching on HIV and AIDS – well in advance of many other church programmes. Nevertheless, the programme was challenged for not being distinct *conceptually* from other contemporary models of grassroots development, having insufficient roots in AIC thought and practice, and was subsequently replaced.

Founding Visions

This term refers to the original AIC founders' understanding of the world and of the gospel that they had embraced, which had moved them to act as African Christians in that world. Such visions were crystallized in the formation of AICs, in their traditions, teachings and ways of life, and have been passed down (and modified) by subsequent generations. Such visions initially empowered AIC members (and still do) to critique and to stand against dominant models of society and development.

The concept of founding visions emerged from the process of clarifying AIC values vis-à-vis these dominant models, and was first articulated at an OAIC workshop in Johannesburg in 1996.[16] It has assisted AIC members working in practical programmes to identify the sources of the values which motivate them in their sacrificial service to the community.[17] It also lies behind recent attempts by the theological programme to encourage AICs to recover their founding visions, and to reflect upon them in the light of contemporary challenges, so that their ministries and mission may be more effective, and the gospel of Jesus Christ communicated afresh to new generations and cultures. The concept of 'founding visions' has thus become a significant link between the OAIC's theological and more practical programmes.

Third General Assembly 1997, Limuru, Kenya

This was the most representative meeting of AICs in history and clearly established their identity as a self-conscious community of Christians. The meeting renewed the OAIC Executive Committee (elected at the previous General Assembly back in 1982). The leader of the Eternal Sacred Order of the Cherubim and Seraphim churches from Nigeria, Baba Aladura Dr Otubu, was chosen as Chairman, and the Rev (later Archbishop) Njeru Wambugu of the National Independent Church of Africa – Kenya was confirmed as General Secretary. The Assembly also started the revision of the OAIC constitution, so that power and

[16] In a paper presented by N. Lawford, 'Imunde, 'The Vision of the Founders: Towards a Theology of Development for African Independent Churches in Africa', Background Paper No. 1, OAIC Johannesburg Theology of Development Workshop 28th November-8th December 1996: 'Imunde's term was "founders' vision", subsequently changed by the OAIC to "founding vision" to take away the implied emphasis on individual founders.'

[17] John Padwick and Nicta Lubaale, 'Harnessing Popular Visions for Social Transformation: The Experience of the OAIC in its Work with African Independent Churches', in Gerrie Ter Haar, *Religion and Development: Ways of Transforming the World* (London: Hurst, 2011), 315-30.

decision-making might be transferred to the regions – already in existence but not hitherto formally recognized. These were: West Africa (Anglophone), West Africa (Francophone), Nigeria, DRC, Southern Africa, Madagascar, East Africa, and North Africa.[18]

The Assembly was preceded by a consultation with the World Council of Churches on how AICs could contribute to the forthcoming WCC General Assembly in Harare – marking a significant shift towards alignment with (and subsequent membership of) the world ecumenical movement. One emerging issue was the conflict between the AICs' long-established practice of standing on their own feet and of seeking assistance from outside (as smaller and poorer AICs now wanted to do). How to move into relationships of interdependence with richer or more powerful bodies remains relevant to the present day.

Building Community Support Systems

As in the mid-1990s, AICs' suspicion of 'development' had driven the OAIC to the articulation of the 'founding visions', so in the next few years the urgency of countering the spread of HIV and AIDS led the OAIC to re-evaluate AICs' relationships with and commitment to their local communities.

RDE (Rural Development by Extension) was renamed 'Programme for Participatory Development' (PPD), recognizing the change in direction and its use of participatory methodologies.[19] RDE had often found itself going over the heads of church leaders in order to reach people in the villages. The new goal was to build the churches' abilities to work with their local communities, so that together they could plan and carry out development themselves. This involved capacity-building of the churches through the training of development facilitators; management training for church leaders; and civic and political education.[20]

Though, in 1997, HIV and AIDS had been recognized as a programme in its own right under the Rev. Nicta Lubaale, in practice, both the PPD and the HIV and AIDS programmes worked closely together. A number of new approaches characterized the programmes' evolution. First, senior church leaders were facilitated to look critically at theological issues and any risky cultural practices leading to the transmission of HIV, enabling them to becoming *owners* of their cultures and teachings, the better to direct and control them. Next, leaders were facilitated to uncover critical issues in the church and wider community underlying the disease's spread. These included issues of governance (the dominance of men in structures of power); theology and culture; and poverty, health and nutrition. The process required listening to social peer groups (women, youth, children and men). Alongside this, the programmes sought to value already existing community and church structures, and to build on their social and spiritual capital in order to help them engage with emerging realities. The immediate aim was to secure support for the most vulnerable children and orphans, but the new approach had a wide impact on OAIC practice.

This gave rise to the name 'BUCOSS: Building Community Support Systems'. Through BUCOSS, leaders were mobilised in twelve countries, and 125 TOTs and 1,247 community-level enablers trained. Its major achievement was the emergence of strong community-level responses to the pandemic.[21]

In 2004, a conference, 'Reclaiming Our Space', was held in Pretoria to celebrate and communicate AICs' achievements in their ministry in HIV and AIDS, their ability to act effectively in the community

[18] OAIC, 'Organization of African Independent Churches Second Conference Nairobi, Kenya 1982, Conference Papers'.
[19] Organisation of African Instituted Churches: Report of the Programme for Participants for the year 2000.
[20] OAIC, 'OAIC HIV/AIDS & Development Programme: An Introduction', Nairobi, n.d. but c. 2005. In East Africa, support and training for small business and micro-enterprise groups continued.
[21] See OAIC, *Our Lives Our Initiatives: Initiatives on HIV/AIDS from African Independent Churches and Community Organizations in Uganda and Kenya* (Nairobi, 2005).

(their *agency*: 'the ability to act to bring about change rather than being acted upon as a patient'[22]), and to value their particular heritage at this critical period in African history – thus starting the continuing process of encouraging AICs to 'reclaim their space' in African forums and decision-making. A key expression at the conference was 'critical solidarity'. This term describes OAIC's relationships, and those of its facilitators and trainers, with member churches and participating communities. 'Critical solidarity' requires long-term commitment to a church or community and recognition of its strengths and values, while remaining free to critique its weaknesses and failures.

The Reorganization of the OAIC

For a number of years, the OAIC Secretariat sought to transform the organization to be more responsive to the needs of member churches, and able to draw on the founding visions while engaging effectively with the challenges produced by rapidly changing local and global environments.[23] From 2005 to 2007, under the leadership of the new General Secretary, the Rev. Nicta Lubaale, the OAIC worked to translate the lessons learned into a long-term strategy, 'Visions for a Better World', approved in 2009.[24] This process was informed by a profound reflection on the freshly clarified vision and values of the organization:

OAIC Vision Statement

The people of Africa transformed by the good news of Jesus Christ:

- Blessed by the Spirit of God,
- Building on their cultures,
- Living abundant life in community for their children and the world.

The effect of this paradigm shift can be seen in all the current programmes (Just Communities, Theology, Livelihoods and Health) but is illustrated here with examples from the first two.

Just Communities

This programme was launched in September 2010. AICs' struggles for social justice are based on *Ubuntu,* an understanding that the well-being of all is the basis on which each person can stand in welfare and community with others. Well-being is impossible however unless the institutions of society – the family, economy, politics, government, culture and so on – can be transformed into the fulness of life which Christ has provided (John 10:10).

The key aims of the programme are grounded by Proverbs 13:23: 'The field of the poor may yield much food, but it is swept away through injustice.' Just communities enable AICs to harness their voices and speak out on issues of social justice and governance. It starts with recognizing the resourcefulness of the people. It requires a deeper understanding of the causes of poverty and injustice, and a capacity to question and challenge institutions (particularly in areas of public policy formulation and accountability for public

[22] Amartya Sen, *Development as Freedom* (New York: Anchor Books, 1999).
[23] The link between founding visions and practical engagement with socio-political challenges is indicated by an introduction to the OAIC's Vision and Mission: 'The OAIC is motivated by the AIC members and millions of Africans who look forward to a society in which all can enjoy well-being. These visions are rooted in an African philosophy of life in which care, reciprocity, acceptance, openness and equality are core values. AICs are a Christian outworking of these African values and they remain important in the AICs' ability to mobilize people to engage with the challenges facing contemporary African societies: www.oaic.org/?page_id=51 (accessed 5 May, 2015).
[24] OAIC, 'OAIC Visions for a Better World: Abundant Life for All in Community', Strategic Framework, 2009-2013.

services and resources) on the basis of how well they enable everyone to live life in dignity.[25] It draws on OAIC's earlier experience in facilitating workshops at the village level in which participants with no technical background were enabled (for example) to recognize the impact of Structural Adjustment Programmes in their own experience.[26] The methodology has also been used with groups of other or mixed faiths.

Theology Programme

How can OAIC facilitate the living and working out of its vision by AICs (that is, the *mission* of the AICs to the world) through *theology and theological education*? An OAIC concept paper of 2005, 'Facilitating AICs to articulate their theologies in the global context', had addressed the challenges that had led to the fossilization of the original TEE programme. The paper proposed a working definition of theology in the AIC setting: 'Theology is people making sense of God in the midst of their histories, cultures and contemporary struggles for survival.'[27] A consultation on this paper held in Nairobi in 2009 examined the OAIC's vision from a theological perspective, highlighting its positive valuation and critique of African culture as the inescapable, God-given, historical context for the reception and interpretation of the gospel, and the creation of the original AIC theologies ('the Founding Visions'). It recognizes the power of the gospel to continuously transform people, theologies and churches so that the challenge of the gospel remains fresh and focused on contemporary realities. It led to an affirmation of the church as *movement* – of the people of God called by him and empowered by his Spirit to undertake new initiatives in mission. This mission is to be seen especially in the building of *Ubuntu* (i.e. *shalom*), a humane society without poverty, exploitation or disease, and in the articulation and communication both within Africa and globally of this vision of the human community under God.

This challenge has focused on recent developments in the Programme of Theology, defining key tasks (among others) as:

- Facilitating the articulation, communication and renewal of AIC founding visions and the development of AIC theologies.
- Enhancing the AIC understanding and practice of mission, especially in cross-cultural and urban settings, and among young people.
- Sharpening and re-focusing OAIC distance-education methodology and practice.
- Facilitating the strategic growth of AIC theological institutions.
- Promoting the positive teaching of AIC theologies and AIC issues in non-AIC theological institutions.[28]

In this consultation and another in 2013,[29] theological experts from conventional theological institutions and other churches were invited to participate and to offer their critique with solidarity. The process of developing an appropriate framework for theological education in AICs continues. It raises issues – not for the first time but still urgent – around the identity of AICs as a heterogeneous community of churches; how to develop a training framework relevant to this multi-tradition community; the exploration of theological themes significant to the AICs (e.g. the work of the Holy Spirit at work in the church and wider community, and the role in this work of prophecy, dreams and visions). It requires a curriculum to be

[25] Brochure: OAIC Just Communities.
[26] In this case, through the creation of 'time lines' developed from people's own experience.
[27] *Facilitating AICs to Articulate their Theologies in the Global Context: A Concept Paper for the OAIC Department of Theology*, 2.
[28] Consultation on AIC Theology and Ministerial Formation, Nairobi, 1st-3rd December 2009.
[29] OAIC Theological Education Consultative Meeting at CORAT-Africa, Nairobi, 2013.

developed for people who are at the same time sources of that curriculum. Unless the uniqueness of AICs is well reflected in the framework, the curriculum and writing of materials will not meet the requirements.

Ecumenical and Interfaith Engagement

OAIC has consistently worked with other Christian churches and organizations, evangelical and ecumenical. Through these various partnerships, OAIC seeks to share AIC insights and values, as well as learn from other Christian traditions. The organisation is involved in the WCC as a regional ecumenical organisation in a working partnership with the WCC and is now recognised as the World Christian Communion. The OAIC is actively participating in the work and leadership of the Global Christian Forum and has been a participant in the annual Conference of Secretaries of Christian World Communions. In 1996, OAIC became an associate member of the All Africa Conference of Churches (AACC). OAIC's connections also include partnerships with several European and North American agencies. The organization has also developed good working relationships with a number of African evangelical faith-based organizations and fellowships. At a continental level, OAIC's national chapters and regions have well-established partnerships with their national ecumenical bodies. For example, the OAIC Nigeria Chapter is an active member of the Christian Association of Nigeria. The Kenya Chapter is also highly involved with several Kenyan ecumenical groups including the National Council of Churches of Kenya (NCCK), the Ufungamano Inter-Religious Forum, and the Inter-Religious Council of Kenya (IRCK). The OAIC is a founding member of the Africa Council of Religious Leaders.

Making Our Voices Heard at Continental and Global Levels

On occasion, the OAIC has hosted international conferences to articulate popular responses to contemporary issues (e.g. 'Growing the Harvest: Rethinking Agriculture food security in sub-Saharan Africa' at Limuru in 2012).[30] The OAIC has brought the voices of the people from rural and urban settings across Africa to global forums as the organisation engages with multilateral agencies such as the UN and the World Bank.[31]

Conclusion

In 1978, AICs were largely out of touch with the ecumenical churches, and had no voice to represent them. In recent years, their visions and particular values – often those held most strongly by some of the poorest and less educated communities of Africa – have been heard globally through the OAIC's presence in a variety of forums. The development of the OAIC as an organization has been marked by continuing tensions: enabling the local (and often traditional) visions of the AICs to engage with contemporary realities, and with the experience and wisdom of the wider church, and keeping open channels of communication between grassroots voices and visions and the wider community at local, national and international levels, articulating these voices in such a way that they can be heard to be relevant far beyond their village origins. It has been a challenging journey of continual self-critique and courageous initiatives.

[30] Refer to the unpublished Conference report *Growing the Harvest: Rethinking Agriculture Food Security in sub-Saharan Africa*, by Alice Wainaina (18th-20th September 2012). Consult the OAIC website for more information.
[31] The OAIC participated in the process that shaped the statement *Ending Extreme Poverty: A Moral and Spiritual Imperative*.

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