

# **The Experience of the Church with MCP: The Perspective of the Organization of African Instituted Churches**

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## **The Journey of OAIC**

The Organization of African Instituted Churches (OAIC) is the communion of African Independent Churches (AICs). These are churches founded by Africans. A common trait of the AICs is the regard for African culture whose values they attempt to inculcate into the Christian faith.

Among AICs are churches which, on the one hand, view multiple partners - in this case wives - as acceptable in the Christian faith, and those on the other hand that view multiple wives as a practice against the teachings of the Christian faith. These are issues which have been at the centre of theological discussions in many AICs for long.

Rather than painting a picture of what marriage should be, this article focuses on how the OAIC has dealt with the issue of multiple partners in marriage based on the realities on the ground. To this end, the OAIC put in place an AIDS program in 1991. The program focused on creating awareness among member churches and the communities in which they are located. The awareness creation process focused on providing facts about HIV and AIDS and mobilizing congregations and community groups to give care and support to people living with HIV and AIDS (PLWHA) and those affected by HIV. By 1995, the OAIC had realized that the program was not engaging effectively with the cultural and theological issues. The critical issues identified at that time were:

- Multiple wives
- Widow and widower inheritance
- Sexual cleansing

The OAIC had to review the mobilization and training methodology that was being used. To do this effectively, the OAIC worked with MAP International to organize a workshop in western Kenya. This meeting brought together senior church leaders from AICs in the region. This meeting served as a laboratory for developing an appropriate methodology for engaging AICs on cultural and theological issues around HIV and AIDS.

At the end of the meeting, a statement was issued which the churches used to mobilize their communities around the cultural issues mentioned above. Consequently, the leaders of the churches started engaging the followers in discussions around the whole concept of multiple sexual relations in and outside of marriage.

## **Lessons Learned**

### *1. Dealing with reality as it is rather than what it is assumed to be*

It is important for the Church to acknowledge the fact that MCPs are accepted in many local cultures, even beyond Africa. The OAIC recognizes the fact that in many cases, there is a gap

between the Church's position and the behavior of the people in their day to day lives. We have to reach people from the reality of where they are and start working towards transformation of behavior. This calls for more work, beyond the issue of HIV and AIDS, in order to transform people's understanding of sex and its place in society.

### *2. Illuminating realities*

AIDS is multi-faceted. The work of the Church is to bring to the surface the various factors leading to high rates of infection. The teachings of the bible and the facts about HIV and AIDS should not be used to create judgmental attitudes which result in stigma around HIV and AIDS. Instead, they should shed light on the accepted norms, for example in regard to MCP, which are still putting many people at the risk of HIV infection.

### *3. Creating communities of accountability*

It is important for individuals and families to be part of a community they can be accountable to. For this to happen, there needs to be an affirmation of values which promote the well being of individuals, families and communities. This is best illustrated by a recent discussion I had with a colleague, Rev. John Gichimu, who is a pastor with the Africa Independent Pentecostal Church of Africa (AIPCA). We started looking at the structures in place which can be used to engage men in discussing family issues. John cited a recent function in Kirinyaga in Central Kenya where elders in a local congregation invited him for a goat eating afternoon. During their discussions, they put the whole subject of family on the table. They agreed that family issues are critical and that, as men, they can use such forums (goat eating) to look at ways they can strengthen family life.

The Church as a whole will have to identify the various structures that can be used to mobilize men and women to deal with the issues affecting individuals and families. Creating structures for accountability is important for the well being of individuals and families, even in a society that is rapidly changing due to urbanization and ease of mobility.

### *4. Working for real faith-based responses*

The Church needs to go beyond the short term responses that are implemented with external resources which are mainly financial. The Church's response should be first and foremost rooted in the resources found in the Christian faith. The fact that the Church was faced with theological challenges when AIDS first came to the surface does not mean that the Christian faith is not relevant. The Church's role is to transform. This is where the OAIC's role is to use the scriptures in critiquing and transforming the norms, cultural beliefs and behaviors that deny individuals and communities the opportunity to experience the abundant life which Jesus Christ would like them to have according to John 10:10. This has been a critical text in the work of the OAIC as the organization works to facilitate Christians to identify and deal with the issues that deny them, as well as their families and communities, the abundance of life.

## **Conclusion**

The Church has a critical role in enabling people to transform their behavior and rebuilding broken lives. However the Church is caught up either in denial or in working as an instrument for programs designed somewhere else. As much as it is important for the Church to learn from what is going on in the global response to AIDS, it is equally important that the Church embarks

on a process of reflection and charting a new way of working. Behavioral change has for long been marginalized in the discourse around HIV and AIDS, and yet, responding to MCPs calls for change of our behavior. It is also important to recognize that churches have always worked for strong families and they did that even before the emergence of HIV and AIDS. This means that the foundations for dealing with MCPs were laid even before AIDS was here. What the Church needs is a clearer understanding of HIV and AIDS, to continuously work towards eliminating stigma and denial, and then to bring this resourcefulness to the whole society.