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## **14 COVID-19 AND THE VIRTUAL CHURCH: (RE)IMAGINING SPIRITUALITY IN A PANDEMIC CONTEXT AND BEYOND**

### *Abstract*

The emergence of Covid-19 paralyzed the global religious systems and disoriented the norm especially in the operations of the church activities. In the African continent the far-reaching effects of coronavirus on the church was felt when governments ordered a full shutdown of all but essential services. This meant that churches were not on the “essential list, thus, a virtual engagement became an exception. With the notion of COVID-19 and the virtual church on the fore, this chapter focuses on the Zimbabwean situation, drawing examples from African Initiated Churches (AICs). Qualitatively, the study uses a phenomenological approach, interviews, observations and documentary analysis to gather information which shows that AICs in Zimbabwe are a spiritual and physical entity. The chapter argues that the new norm of a virtual church bred both benefits and challenges for indigenous adherents’ spirituality. Partially, communication patterns, prayers and prophecies for believers have become easier to an extent of having a broader and often global reach. However, believers struggle to work out how best to worship and to feel connected to their faith in the absence of physical presence. This led some AICs to escape the government lockdown COVID-19 rules and regulations by resorting to forests as hide out places of worship. This is because most adherents are much more concerned about not being able to attend church, with all the trusted emotional and material support that it entails, than about COVID-19 itself. As the chapter (re)imagines spirituality in a pandemic context and beyond, it concludes noting that conservatism in AICs’ religiosity requires re-adjustment from the norm and embrace a spirituality that is endorsed by virtualization of the church.

**Keywords:** African Initiated Churches, COVID-19, pandemic, spirituality, virtual church, Zimbabwe

## Introduction

Christianity is the leading religious tradition followed by the indigenous people in Zimbabwe. In its current trends, Zimbabwean Christianity has witnessed the dominance of African Independent Churches/African Indigenous Churches/African Initiated Churches (AICs), whereby about 37% of Christians in Zimbabwe belong to the Apostolic Churches (Chingono 2021). For clarification purposes, the nomenclature Apostolic Church serves to represent AICs. An appealing characterisation of these churches is given by Appiah-Kubi (1977:117) when he says that

these are churches founded by Africans for Africans in our special African situations. They have all African membership as well as all African leadership.

Movements of these churches which this study calls sects or church groups include Zionist, Apostolic and Ethiopian Churches as well as Pentecostal-Charismatic Churches. This specification is a manifestation of heterogeneity in their ideological make up. Of late, differences in spirituality among AICs have been noted in their response to mandatory vaccination and virtual worship as per COVID-19 rules and regulations in Zimbabwe. They used to be popularly known as white garment churches, but there are now assorted colours for their garments which include: blue, red, yellow, purple, green, pink and grey. Furthermore, in some instances, the garments are decorated with a lot of symbols like the sun, moon, stars and crosses. This is due to the AICs' continuous intensification and expansion. However, one thing in common about their spirituality is that they usually regard themselves as Spirit-type churches (Muguranyanga 2011) or *chechi dzeMweya*, and consequently base their religious beliefs and practices primarily on *Mweya* (Spirit) or *Izwi raMwari* (Voice of God). They receive advice and or guidance from the Holy Spirit or Voice of God through the mediation of prophets or church leaders who happen to be faith leaders. Their days of worship range from Thursday to Sunday. Their worship places, whether it is under a tree, on a mountain, or on open air surrounded by flags of various colours, capture what it means to express indigenous African Christian faith, and to be communally physically connected to one another and ultimately to God. With the emergence of COVID-19, the worship patterns became altered. This was after the obscurity of the pandemic led the Zimbabwean government to order a total shutdown of all but essential services. The lockdown was also extended to

churches, implying that churches were not on the ‘essential list’ (Openshaw, et al. 2021). At face value, the pandemic had wrecked the AICs which had been in existence for about a century in Zimbabwe. The advent of coronavirus simply called for a radical change in AICs’ mode of operation to withstand their relevance in a new normal social life. This new normal had abandoned physical gatherings in preference of a “church without walls” something which had been deemed inconceivable in AICs before the emergency of the pandemic. In theory, the pandemic had brought the virtual church to the indigenous adherents’ doorstep and virtual worship seemed to be prodded even beyond COVID-19 times. Online ministry was meant to reach thousands via social media, notably WhatsApp, Facebook and YouTube (Patterson 2021). It became a new era for a new missiological mandate of going into the entire world without limits to geographical boundaries. Participants would take part in the cyber practice of religion, complete with other identities, rituals and practices (Patterson 2021).

In a bid to explore the spirituality of AICs in a pandemic context and beyond, knowledge and information was coaxed using interviews, observations and documentary analysis. The following questions were central during the fieldwork: Is it feasible to have a virtual church when members always interact through their social network systems? Do the churches have the resources to embrace online worship? Does the concept ‘virtual church’ make sense when the place of worship they use is designated by the Holy Spirit? Is ritualistic worship and healing possible online? The study found out that AICs cling tenaciously to their conservative way of worship; being reluctant in giving up physical gatherings in favour of virtual Christianity. For them, the social communication platforms did not promote communication with the Holy Spirit. The new mode of worship was a threat to AICs’ traditional power structures. Key to AICs’ complacency in embracing the virtual church were the following commonly held myths: the internet and cyber gadgets were filthily filled with sin, too secular, source of Satanism, only for young people and distract people away from the church. Yet some AICs readily embraced virtual worship and healing to avoid the spread of the deadly pandemic.

## **Conceptual Framework**

The conceptual analysis of this study is based on the notion of ‘networked religion’. The concept networked religion is well theorized in this study

using the term virtual. According to Vocabulary.com Dictionary (n.d) it is an adjective which describes something that exists in essence but not in actuality. The perception ‘networked religion’ provides a framework for discussing how religion is practiced virtually through various digital media, in order to consider the broader shift in how people conceive of and practice religion in digital culture enforced by COVID-19. It fits in well in this study to unpack some of the dominant patterns and assumptions shaping popular belief and practices related to AICs spirituality. These traits of networked religion have important theological and practical implication of the spiritual life of the adherents (Campbell, n.d). The concept also provides a framework for discussing significant alterations in everyday religious practice to understand implications these alterations have for AICs groups. The framework provided by ‘networked religion’ suggests that AICs’ relationships, identities, and understanding of their religious rituals are being transformed as they engage with newer technologies such as the internet, cyber gadgets and social media platforms.

‘Networked religion’ in this study is closely related to ‘networked community’. It has a sense of membership, integration, and fulfilment of needs together with a feeling of shared emotional connections (IGI GLOBAL, n.d). The question is: are AICs operated as online or offline communities? This question is raised on the pretext that in matters of spirituality in a COVID-19 setting, the primary function of a networked community is to spiritually achieve the defined goals using interactive technology-supported internet backbone (IGI GLOBAL, n.d). For networked religion to thrive, it needs a set up created by a networked community suggesting that the communities function as loose social networks with varying levels of religious affiliation and commitment. The rationale behind (re)imagining AICs spirituality in a COVID-19 context and beyond in networked religion and networked community is grounded on the following bases: First, AICs in Zimbabwe acknowledged the existence of the coronavirus. Second, some AICs adhered to COVID-19 rules and lockdown measures. Third, education and commerce in AICs localities were done online during lockdown times. Fourth, in the same religious landscape, some mainline churches and Pentecostal churches in Zimbabwe had already embraced virtual worship even before the emergence of COVID-19. Fifth, a close relationship between AICs and the ruling ZANU PF government had a bearing on AICs’ response to government COVID-19 rules and initiatives.

## **Technological compliance in AICs: A Virtual church is possible**

A survey carried out by the study showed that some of the AICs are technology compliant. During lockdown periods, the Zion Christian Church (ZCC) led by Bishop Nehemia Mutendi was one typical virtual church in the family of AICs. Mutendi was on record saying that cancellation of traditional church gatherings in favour of virtual services was in compliance with lockdown rules and regulations to harness the spread of the global pandemic virus. However, he always assured his followers that Jesus Christ was present in their homes as he delivers his sermons. For example, during major Christian festivals, the faith leader reached out to his congregants in different parts of the world virtually. On the 9<sup>th</sup> of April 2020 at 1500hrs CAT, the church live streamed its service dubbed Masvohwani Big Thursday. The service had 8417 views. Study Participant A, a beneficiary of this online worship responded saying “I had no option except following the bishop’s sermon online because I had missed church service”. She further pledged to help other congregants join the ZCC online worship platforms for spiritual edification (Interview with Study Participant A, July 2022). Sticking to their liturgical year calendar, the ZCC church has managed to broadcast its message and songs to congregants online using Facebook, YouTube and WhatsApp. The 10 July, 18 October and 21 December videos containing Bishop Mutendi’s messages to his followers are found on various media platforms for public consumption.

Looking at the ZCC operations, there is evidence that the indigenous church has sophisticated technology. This is because for a proper implementation of an online church service, there is dependence of high technology on information or communication systems, those systems that create, capture, move, organize, and retrieve information (Sims, n.d). The virtual ZCC is powered by the pervasiveness of high technology as the defining characteristic of the contemporary society which has been hard hit by COVID-19. Study Participant B succinctly affirmed that “This is what is expected of a modern church organisation. Bishop Mutendi is transforming the indigenous church to suit global standards” (Interview with Study Participant B, August 2022). This shows a shift in the spirituality of the ZCC whereby technology in information systems have been integrated into their worship patterns and outreach drives.

The above optimistically shows the possibility of having a virtual church even beyond the COVID-19 era. Contrary to the widely held belief that AICs members are illiterate, the study observed that technical expertise was found to be existing in AICs. A visit to their workplaces and residences showed that some have knowledge and proficiency in operations of cyber gadgets. This was notably found to be the case with people who are in the civil service and in parastatal institutions. Their knowledge was found to be handy in advocating for a renovation of AICs into virtual churches. In other words, technology can be discussed in terms of tangible things as well as intangible belief systems, attitudes and ways of thinking (Sims, n.d).

In an interview with Study Participant C, he explained that when the ZCC resorted to virtual worship, the reason was to ensure safety of the congregants, convenience for the followers to receive the word of God in the comfort of their homes and efficiency in reaching out to many people in the world (Interview with Study Participant C, June 2022).

However, commenting on ZCC virtual worship patterns, Study Participant D felt that, the new normal had affected the spirituality of this church by fashioning a worship experience of isolation both on the part of the leader and his followers. He stressed that in all this, what is missing is reverence and participation (Interview with Study Participant D, June 2022).

If this continues after COVID-19, there is no doubt that technology has eventually reshaped ZCC spirituality to fit into the dictates of the pandemic rules and regulations. This is because the goals of technology in COVID-19 situation are safety and convenience. In Study Participant E's words, considering the size of our church, about 20000 people gather for Easter festivals at Mbungo shrine, so congregating for worship was highly risky. Since I was in South Africa, it became more convenient, comfortable, safe to attend an online church on Facebook" (Interview with Study Participant E, July 2022).

However, there are a lot of ZCC congregants in rural communities who claimed not to have benefited from the innovation. An elderly Participant F stressed that she missed out the sermons because of lack of modern communication gadgets and data bundles (Interview with Study Participant F, August 2022).

This was also found to be the case with the majority of AICs groups, mainly which are under resourced. They worship under trees and the

bulky of their followers are from lower class of the society. Thus, virtual worship in Zimbabwe seems to be for the elite.

## **Mobile phones: networked AICs spirituality in action**

The preceding paragraphs depicted sophisticated technology being used by the ZCC to power its virtual church activities. This is not the case with other AIC sects in Zimbabwe which lack the necessary resources to embrace online ministries. They do not have building structures, but what is available is unsophisticated technology like ordinary mobile phones. This casts doubt on the possibility of imagining virtual AICs in Zimbabwe beyond a COVID-19 context. However, the prospects of virtual operations are open. The starting point in the establishment of a virtual church is to recognise what is readily available in their technological information systems. The majority of AICs adherents possess mobile phones, whether rich or poor, literate or illiterate.

During the research, it was noted that the use of mobile phone gadgets was multivalent. Study Participant G explained that he uses his cell phone to communicate a wide range of issues including his religious life. “As a faith leader, followers raise questions about their spiritual lives when they have challenges at their homes or work places” (Interview with Study Participant G, July 2022).

The following excerpt from an interview conducted with Study Participant H aptly sums the views of the study participants in this category: “Mobile phones are used for making appointments when one intends to meet the prophet for healing. In some cases, communication about the day to day running of the church is done online through WhatsApp messages, WhatsApp voice notes and voice calls. WhatsApp helps us to link with a lot of our church followers who are in the diaspora, for example, our children are working in South Africa, UK, Botswana and Namibia. Funds to sustain our church especially during festival holidays like Easter reach to us via platforms like Western Union, Mukuru and Ecocash whereby we use mobile phones to access the monies” (Interview with Study Participant H, July 2022).

Most participants confirmed that the majority of AICs adherents have unknowingly operated in virtual environments. Prophets could detect a problem in the life of a church member and use gadgets like mobile phones to address the problems. They use mobile phones to record manifesting evil spirits. Study Participant J explained the efficacy of mobile

phones saying “These days if a prophet receives a vision of a congregant’s troubled life, he/she alerts the person using mobile phones”. He continued saying “One day my prophet simply called me saying she had seen me intending to undertake a journey to South Africa, her advice was for me to cancel off the trip to avoid a fatal accident that would befall me” (Interview with Study Participant I, August 2022).

In Masvingo, a prophet instructs his people to use their mobile phones if they want to be helped spiritually. Those who seek for his help are instructed to take hold of their mobile phones and lift them high enough in front of their faces, they dip a finger in water and put a drop on the top surface of the gadgets. As the drop rolls on the screen of the phone, the owners will be saying out their problem areas which need divine intervention. As soon as they finish their petitions, the faith healer wherever he will be, in spirit knows that they are done and starts praying for them. Study Participant J confirmed that this is how her marriage problem was successfully solved and now she is in a marital bliss with her husband. She said they made their petitions alone at her matrimonial home in Masvingo, while the prophet who helped her was in Mutare that time (Interview with Study Participant J, August 2022). Given this scenario, one can safely argue that there is generally an acceptance of the use of technology in AICs in matters to do with prophecy.

Prophets and faith healers work with messages, audios, pictures and videos to deal with problems presented to them by those who seek for spiritual intervention. In Victoria Falls, there is an AIC prophet who has confirmed that he is helping people online, especially using social media platforms like Whatsapp and Facebook. On 1 March 2021 Ncube, a Nehanda Radio journalist reported that a prophet called Musawenkosi Vundla who lives in Sizinda village, Victoria Falls has taken his healing business to social media where he uses Facebook and WhatsApp platforms to attend to those seeking “divine intervention.” During lockdowns when physical gatherings were prohibited, Vundla said social media kept him busy. He explained how he did his prophetic healing activities saying the following:

“One can send his or her name and surname or picture on WhatsApp and I use the information to establish their problems. I then explain my findings to the client and if he or she is happy that’s when I prescribe a solution. I use Facebook to do live prophecy and link up with clients but then revert to WhatsApp platform for consultation for purposes of privacy” (Ncube, 2021, para. 7).

## Defiant spiritualism against Satanism: No to ICT gadgets

Contrary to the above, within the AICs groups there are some which are pessimistic regarding the place of a virtual church in their spirituality. Study Participant K strongly believed in convergent worship practice (Interview with Study Participant K, August 2022). Bearing in mind that AICs were started by Africans for African specific problems (Appiah-Kubi 1977:117), there is no doubt that AICs thrive in an African communal set up. The indigenous people of Zimbabwe have a strong network system based on *ukama* (relationality), religious affiliation, and neighbourliness (Humbe 2021). Participant K emphasised his belief in the following words “We are black people, the true essence of a church is realized when people gather to worship. Worshiping online is not characteristic of African religiosity for our spirituality is communal-oriented” (Interview with Study Participant K, August 2022). Maybe, this is premised on the fact that in some cases, the African Christians follow what the Holy Spirit says. In their spirituality, it is the Holy Spirit which prescribes time for worship, the places for worship, regalia and colour for worship. It was observed during the study that as they gather at their worship places there is a greater involvement of signs and symbols in worship through water, holy stuff, clay pot artefacts, cloth banners, crosses, plants, and clerical vestments. It explains why at the height of COVID-19 from 3-17 July 2021, about 20000 Johane Marange Apostles gathered at Mafarikwa village in Bocha for Passover festival. Ironically, the government through its law enforcement agents did not disband the physical gathering (Nyangani 2021). In this case, the government was conflicted because it has been using these Apostolic churches as a source of votes during election times. This was a sign that it is not easy to realize a virtual church from these apostolic sects since violators of the COVID-19 rules should have been reprimanded.

Spirituality of some of the AICs discourages their followers from accessing the internet as recommended by some of the Johane Masowe and Johane Marange sects. In the same light, Study Participant L opined that “our church does not allow us to use internet, smart phones and television sets, social media platforms like Whatsapp and Facebook” (Interview with Study Participant L, August 2022). This is buttressed by Matare (2022) who avers that African Apostolic Church (AAC) goes as far as forbidding its followers to watch television and use social media in order to keep their sanctity. Study Participant M shared the following perspective: “we are

forbidden from using internet, social media platforms and televisions channels because they are a source of Satanism". She added that "barring the church from accessing internet and social media has helped immensely in shaping the behaviour of our children" (Interview with Study Participant M, August 2022). What the participant said implies that technology, internet and social media platform have become chief culprits of moral decadence in the name of modernisation. This modernisation has resulted in indigenous Africans dumping their culture for western life. In this process, indigenous Africans have embraced technology without censorship, they adopted everything including all the bad, hence, the prevalence of moral decay in the modern African society. Children at tender ages are exposed to extreme violent gaming, vile language and all the toxic things. Adults are also not spared, some technologies have come with addictive components that derail personal growth (Matore 2022). For example, about 70 percent of men between the ages of 18 and 34 who visit a pornography web site at least once a month, includes believers and church-goers (Sims, para. 15). Given this scenario, AICs which are pessimistic about feasibility of a virtual church, question the sincerity of using the secular world technologies to edify the spirituality of their members. However, Study Participant N criticized the negative attitude towards the use of ICT gadgets arguing that, that is a defeatist approach (Interview with Study Participant N, July 2022). From these sentiments, it can be said that avoiding technology produces a crop of backward adherents who are always out of touch with reality in the global world. Their conformist approach to the church authorities has barred the members to review or challenge any existing church doctrines since the leaders claim to be leading the church under the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

## **African indigenous church separatist reality**

As the Internet has increasingly become part of many people's everyday lives, the use of virtual worship promotes adherents and non-adherents' connections. The church becomes home to everyone. This becomes a problem especially since the AICs' spirituality emphasises church strictness ideology. Strictness refers to the existence of particular expectations, and enforcement of such expectations, for churches' members or active congregants (Flynn 2010:4). They view themselves as having a separate spirituality from that of the western churches which happen to be pioneers in virtual worship. Study Participant M regarded his church as

strictly reserved for the saved ones and not for heathens (Interview with Study Participant L, August 2022). However, Study Participant N objected arguing that these church groups have a tendency of being very secretive in some of their ritualistic practices (Interview with Study Participant N, August 2022). Thus, virtual worship will provide a platform for outsiders whether westerners or not to become acquainted with what they do. This is well supported by Musoni (2021) when he says that Johane Masowe formed this black African movement to withdraw from all of the white man's initiatives to resocialise and appropriate the traditional African way of reaching out to God. The sect has a radical message of withdrawal from all European influences, the destruction of all religious books, including the Bible, and the shunning of all inventions by whites (Musoni 2021).

## **Meeting virtually is virtually not meeting: Physical healing in AICs**

Earlier on, the chapter showed that AICs faith healers use cell phones in their healing operation making it possible for these churches to operate virtually. However, during fieldwork, it was also noted that it is the same healing discourse that has proved to be difficult for AICs to operate virtually. During the study, it was observed that at times the patients go to their sacred worship places (*sowe, kirawa*) where they make confessions and later receive healing. AICs leaders agreed that operating virtually as churches proves to be difficult because people flock to these churches to get spiritual assistance. Mostly, this needs physical presence of both the faith healer and the person to be healed. There are also clay pot artefacts and plants like reeds planted at the sacred worship centres. Besides, in some cases, AICs regularly go on pilgrimage to sacred forests and mountains which they believe have mystic powers to deal with their spiritual problems. Thus, according to Musoni (2021) the Johane Masowe Chishanu congregating under sacred traditional African trees or near traditional African sacred shrines, such as pools, hills and mountains is a conscious decision. For example, Johane Masowe Chishanu yeNyenyedzi church in Zimbabwe's sacred places are the Chivavarira Hill and the Ngarikure Pool (Musoni 2021). So, use of technology at these sacred worship places is an 'insignia of colonialism' (Musoni 2021).

Closely related to Modiko's (2011) template, there are several steps to the procedure of healing. The first step is to access the worship place through a ritualized entrance (*gedhe*). In some instances, there is a holy

rite of spiritual vetting at the entrance manned by prophets. Secondly, there is some preparation that takes place before a patient is healed. At times there must be a lot of singing, clapping of hands and dancing until the prophet goes into a trance where he will communicate spiritually. Thirdly, confession of any wrong doing is an essential and primary part of the healing service in AICs where it is regarded as self-cleansing to ensure successful healing Modiko (2011). This activity is also known as *kupupura/kupfuudza* and it all means confession. Fourthly, the prophet or faith healer traces the cause of the suffering. Fifthly, is treatment which sometimes also incorporates exorcism. The exorcism usually happens when a member is baptized (*kujorodhwa*). Mostly, the divine treatment part is done through laying on of hands, blessing various mundane objects, such as strip of cloths, strings, papers, needles, walking sticks and water to confer healing and protection (Modiko 2011:89). It is done in order to provide protection against magic, spirits, witchcraft or demonic attacks. Of late, the most common mode of healing in some AICs is *kudira magate* (pouring anointed water from clay pots). According to Study Participant H, it ensures *zambuko/kundiso* that is spiritual victory (Interview with Study Participant H, August 2022). This is because AICs emphasise so much on purification which is brought by anointed water.

## **Possibility of a virtual church in Zimbabwe?**

### **A Discussion of the Findings**

Disregarding physical presence has become a necessity in the operations of AICs in a COVID-19 context. In a way, there is virtualisation of prophetic healing activities. Due to the fact that the faith leaders and the followers believe in its efficacy, there has been reliance on this type of prophecy without any vehemence of face-to-face interaction. That strong spiritual network system has managed to connect the faith leaders and their congregants or patients conveniently. Vundla succinctly said that “I started attending to clients online even before the outbreak of Covid-19 as I considered the distance that people have to travel for consultation. On social media, I attend to an average of 70 people per day” (Ncube 2021, para.3).

Due to the intensification of COVID-19, Vundla’s clientele base has expanded to countries like Botswana, Germany, South Africa, Swaziland and Zambia. To this end, one is persuaded to maintain that technology is now the defining element of the modern society. It has produced a culture

of self-orientation that is designed to procure a comfortable and individualistic lifestyle of what prophet Vundla is doing. Thus, science and technology are the standards against which all claims are evaluated (Sims, n.d, para.15). The internet, mobile phones, television, videos, radio, etc., all have made it possible to interact with the world without actually confronting the world face-to-face. As what emerged from the findings, diasporans have helped the local AICs with financial resources for the sustenance of the churches. So, it is possible to talk about e-giving when the AICs have turned virtual.

AICs have largely thrived because of their enculturation ideology. According to Modiko (2011) enculturation involves the insertion of the tradition of Christian faith into a non-Christian culture and a subsequent ongoing dialogue between that faith and the culture into which it is inserted. If the African church succeeded in merging Christian tradition with African cultural tradition what is expected of the African church in times of pandemics is to incorporate information technology and go by virtual worship. As such, virtual worship should be part of the church's enculturation and assimilation practice.

However, on the other hand, there is a pessimistic slant which rejects technology and brings about a sense of hopeless despair toward a virtual church. The discoveries in research painted a gloomy picture of the possibilities of an online church. In some AICs, there is no motivation to embrace technology since the church groups are not very active in virtual campaigns of proselytization. Investment in virtual church is done as a marketing strategy for the church's material and financial needs. The lack of zeal in this endeavour is a testimony that AICs are not missionary churches which rely heavily on communication strategies. It is only the 'netizens' who benefit from online church endeavours.

When virtual worship was popularised as the alternative to physical gathering during the COVID-19 era, more AICs groups migrated into inaccessible places than ever before, prompting this study to call the current generation of AICs "the age of migration". They misconstrued the ban in physical gatherings as a direct way of advocating for a destruction of the church, an attribute given to Satan. The increasing pressure to worship online was not appreciated for the same gadgets which they viewed as promoting Satanism and sin would be used for the purposes of worshipping God. There are some AICs which perceived a symbiotic relationship between technology and Satanism. They understand the internet as a product of satanic innovation aimed at reaching the world community in

its propagation strategies. This mind-set has stifled the developments in use of virtual worship in AICs. Thus, they saw it fitting to withdraw to the forests than compromising their spirituality. In the city of Masvingo, AAC followers embarked on the endless religious marches to the forest for spiritual fulfilment. In that regard, members of this sect had repugnance for government unilateral regulation to stall spiritual edification. Instead of concentrating on uploading videos onto Facebook and scheduled posts, their focus was on circumventing COVID-19 rules and escapist solutions. Their rejection of a virtual church has nothing to do with lack of resources, but it is theologically oriented.

It should be also pointed out that some of the AICs sects could not conceive of a church which can survive separate from their worship places where they have personal connection for engagement. The authority vested in the church leaders might be compromised. This persuades some commentators to think that the way these church groups are run resembles cults. Founders detest use of internet in their churches because the internet provides individuals unique opportunities to influence others in ways that challenge religious leaders and authority structures. When the churches congregate to worship in the periphery of the society, in the bushes under trees, they are accused of carrying out abusive practices especially those associated with women. They want to keep the face of their churches hidden.

Like what has already been seen for ZCC virtual worship, the church evaluates itself by the same standards as those used by the culture of technology. Since technology provides immediate information and feedback, the church has begun to operate on a poll basis. Because the contemporary technical driven culture requires efficiency, convenience, and entertainment, then the Church must provide that. So the Church has tried to meet the standards of technology in order to remain relevant to the contemporary society. The Church, because of desperateness to succeed by the standards of technology, has become more and more acculturated (Sims, n.d, para.20). From the findings it seems that in the AICs, virtual worshipping is a real challenge. The sects showed that they will remain conservative even if pandemics continue ravaging their communities.

## Conclusion

The use of technology in AICs for worshipping purposes has proved to be possible. In future, the possibility could be realized when faith leaders acknowledge that a ban of physical gatherings does not mean a ban of Christianity. In the context of a networked religion frame, Churches are allowed to worship virtually to avoid the spreading of contagious diseases. This should be the same with AICs groups which have the capacity to have a virtual church. Bearing in mind the chaos that prevailed during lockdown periods, these AICs sects should consider having new ways of keeping the church afloat to save it from sinking. This should be a holistic approach of merging physical gatherings and virtual worship.

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