

Using the Pastoral Spiral (See, Judge and Act Process) in SCCs in Africa

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1.0 INTRODUCTION

This paper seeks to present the Pastoral Spiral (See, Judge and Act Process) in Small Christian Communities (SCCs) in Africa. The Pastoral Spiral helps the community to move from praxis to alternative praxis via theological reflection. I am going to use an example of the ministry I had at St Louis Montfort Small Christian Community in Sitima Parish, Zomba Diocese, Malawi where they had the annual evaluation of the community in the year 2010 to demonstrate this method. First and foremost, “SCCs are one important means of renewal and transformation in our institutional church. SCCs are a significant new way of “being Church” in these discouraging times and serve as a vehicle of parish and spiritual renewal. The SCC model of church is a way to build up the parish community from within.”¹

The ministry to the Small Christian Communities offers a fullness of life that is deeply rooted in Jesus’ teaching to his disciples. It is believed that SCCs are “the church in the neighborhood, and the Sunday celebration in the larger parish is the gathering of the community of communities.”² All in all, SCCs bring together members of a local parish into different sections to deal with the pastoral and social life of the people.

Before the Second Vatican Council the church was seen as a hierarchy in which the pope, the college of bishops, the cardinals and the priests were the main decision makers. The laity was given a one-directional catechesis, the “banking” form of education. In this conception of the church they are seen but not heard and their feelings, views and objections do not count for much. However, with the Second Vatican Council and the new model of the church as “The People of God,”³ there is a new understanding of the people of God as active,

¹ Joseph G. Healey and Jeanne Hinton (eds.), *Small Christian Communities Today: Capturing the New Moment*, (Nairobi: Pauline Publications Africa/Daughters of St. Paul, 2006), 3.

² Frans Wijssen, Peter Henriot, Rodrigo Mejia (eds.), *The Pastoral Circle Revisited: A Critical Quest for Truth and Transformation*, (Nairobi: Pauline Publications Africa/Daughters of St Paul, 2006), 39.

³Vatican Council II, *The Church: Lumen Gentium*, (Ndola: Mission Press, 1978), 327.

constructive and contributive participants in the ministry of God and of the church. With this in mind, the church calls people to read “the signs of the times.”

In other words, this model helps communities or individuals to find God in all things or “finding God’s loving involvement in the practical matters of everyday life.”⁴In this respect, the activities of the Church, and the experiences of believers, are the grounds of departure. The main focus here is self-evaluation and self-realization of the true mission of the church through the ministries depending on the place and the time. In this regard, Pastoral Spiral becomes one of the methods that brings the self-actualization of the Small Christian Communities and gives a more life giving praxis. In other words, Pastoral Spiral helps in a self-corrective reflection of the Small Christian Communities’ mission in the light of Christ’s mission in order to foster human flourishing in faith.

2.0 PASTORAL SPIRAL METHOD

First it has to be understood that “more and more SCCs in Africa are using various reflection processes and methodologies to reflect pastorally and theologically on their experiences, often using the tools of social analysis to identify the new signs of the times and to respond creatively to them.”⁵One of the methods people use is the Pastoral Spiral. Pastoral Spiral is a method developed by Joe Holland and Peter Henriot to assist groups in responding to social issues. It involves Experience, Social/Cultural Analysis, Theological Reflection and Pastoral Planning. This method, in one way or another, is similar to the method proposed by Cardinal Joseph Cardijn of “See, Judge and Act.”

2.1 Experience

This Stage, in some methods of Pastoral or Practical Theology, is called immersion or insertion. Here one, or the community, gets involved in the activities of the people. It is part of being with the people, participating in their daily activities. In other words, “the lived experiences of individuals and communities must be the foundation for all pastoral responses. What people are feeling, what they are undergoing, how they are responding, these are the experiences that constitute primary data.”⁶ This Stage demands asking good questions, observing behavior and interacting with the people. It helps one, or the community, to have good experience or information and to observe well what is happening on the ground. It is from this that we get first-hand information of the ministry. Here a person, or the community, is invited to read the signs of the times. Looking at the experience at St Louis Montfort Small Christian Community, we find that the members of the community shared with one another their own experiences in the Small Christian Community. In other words, the members had time to get in touch with the lived experiences of one another.

With this ministry at St. Montfort Small Christian Community the leaders of the community visited individual homes of the members of the community. The community did charity works such as maintaining houses for the elderly members, visiting and taking sick

⁴ Frans Wijzen, Peter Henriot, Rodrigo Mejia (eds.), *The Pastoral Circle Revisited: A Critical Quest for Truth and Transformation*, 37.

⁵ Agbonkhanmeghe E. Orobator (ed.), *Reconciliation, Justice, and Peace*, (Nairobi: Action Publishers, 2011), 60.

⁶ Joe Holland and Peter Henriot, *Social Analysis: Linking Faith and Justice*, (New York: Dove Communications and Orbis Books, 1983), 8.

members to the hospital, donating food and items to the needy, especially in the Lenten season. They also had weekly meetings.

According to the community's register and records, St. Louis Montfort Small Christian Community has 30 families. The families are from different ethnic groups such as Yao, Lomwe and Mang'anja. The community conducts its meetings on Fridays at three o'clock in the afternoon. At first it was part of St. Charles Small Christian Community but the parish council divided it because the number of families had increased. The Small Christian Community has a well-organized structure of leadership; that is Chairperson, Vice Chairperson, Treasurer, Vice Treasurer, Secretary and four board members.

St. Louis Montfort Small Christian Community, in one of its meetings, observed the following: the love which members of the community express toward one another; active participation of many members, especially women, toward community activities such as charity works; the visitation of the parish priest and sisters to the community; and *Bible* sharing during community meetings. All these activities help the community to achieve its goal of helping the people to actively participate in the life of the church. It also helps the members to grow in faith, love and reconciliation. In addition to this the parish council visits St Louis Montfort Community once in every three months. This makes the members of St Louis Montfort community feel encouraged, belong to the church and participate in the new evangelization.

St. Louis Montfort Small Christian Community, in one of its meetings, realized that it was facing some challenges. The main challenge the members noticed is that there is conflict of leadership roles or responsibilities. This challenge exists though the leadership structure is well-stated in their constitution and that of the parish. The members observed this because there was a challenge concerning who was to handle information or to keep information about the community. In other words, there was a confusion of who was to take community minutes, keep money, make community programmes, facilitate community meetings and order discipline in the community. The community also discovered that it faced the challenge of low male and youth participation in the community activities such as meetings and charity works. They said that a Small Christian Community is like a family made up of different families. This calls all members of families to participate in community activities. Again they said that some men forbid their wives from joining the community.

2.2 Social/Cultural Analysis

This step involves understanding, and exploring the data on the Small Christian Community found in the process of experience. "Social/Cultural analysis examines causes, probes consequences, delineates linkages and identifies actors. It helps make sense of experiences by putting them into a broader picture and drawing the connections between them."⁷ One, or the community, comes to grasp the unnoticed or unrealized possibilities in the data gained during the experience step. Joe Holland and Peter Henriot describe this step as "The effort to obtain a more complete picture of social situation by exploring its historical and structure relationships."⁸ In my own words, I say that here the community finds, in the case of St. Louis Montfort Small Christian Community, the causes of the strengths and the

⁷ Joe Holland and Peter Henriot, *Social Analysis: Linking Faith and Justice*, 8.

⁸ Joe Holland and Peter Henriot, *Social Analysis: Linking Faith and Justice*, 8.

challenges. They ask questions such as, why is it like that? If these challenging elements are looked into, the mission will flourish more. Therefore, “if we are to help the Christian community to be faithful witnesses to the gospel and to lead good lives, we must understand their challenges and opportunities in their society.”⁹ In this case, St. Montfort Small Christian Community ought to understand the challenges and opportunities they face.

In their analysis, the community members discovered that there are many reasons that encourage members, especially women, to actively participate in the community activities. First, charity works are done enhance love among the members for they feel loved. Second, prayer life brings them together as members of one family that helps them to love one another. These make the members do the same to other people. Third, the visitations the parish council to the Small Christian Communities help the community members to feel that they are part of Sitima Parish. In this respect the members are encouraged to participate actively in the life of the church. Again it helps to strengthen the bond that exists between the members for the parish council sometimes comes with the message of reconciliation, forgiveness and love. Fourth, the members discover that *Bible* sharing is very important in the life of the community. It helps the members to hear the scriptures from their own life situations.

On the other hand, St. Louis Montfort Small Christian Community discovered that there are many reasons that make them face the challenge of conflict of leadership roles or responsibilities. The members realized that this happens because the leaders do not know much of what they are supposed to do in their respective positions. This can be seen by the fact that sometimes it was the chairperson taking community minutes or keeping money. Likewise the treasurer could use money for projects without consulting other members of the group. Some leaders remained idle without contributing to the affairs of the community. It also happens because some leaders, who are in different positions, were voted for not because they can deliver community activities, but because they were close friends and relatives of others. Or perhaps they were voted for because they are rich and have greater influence in the community. This comes because the old leaders underrated the newer or younger leaders in the community council. This can be seen from the fact that the old leaders wanted to do things without involving newer or younger leaders in the council. It also happens because the leaders do not share important information for the Small Christian Community with others. This makes some leaders fail to carry out their responsibilities for they do not know what to do. This brings working relationship challenges.

2.3 Theological Reflection

On theological reflection, the community tries to discover whether social analysis reflects reasonably to the reality of what they have experienced. Theological reflection is a way of shining the light of faith on the experience that has been analyzed. Here the community chooses materials that will take them beyond initial impressions and responses or, in other words, that will help them to improve the strength and to minimize the challenge. Joe Holland and Peter Henriot say that this moment is an “effort to understand more broadly and deeply the analyzed experience.”¹⁰ *Gaudiam et Spes* states that the church has the “duty of

⁹T. Howland Sanks and John A. Coleman, *Reading the Signs of the Times: Resources for Social and Cultural Analysis*, (New York: Paulist Press, 1993), 3.

¹⁰Joe Holland and Peter Henriot, *Social Analysis: Linking Faith and Justice*, 9.

scrutinizing the signs of the times and of interpreting them in the light of the gospel.”¹¹ In this respect, the community seeks for how they can improve the active participation and address the conflict in leadership roles; hence it involves theological reflection on the discoveries in line with the Scripture, the tradition of the church, works of theologians and one’s, or community’s, experience. The Word of God raises new questions, suggests new insights and opens new responses. This means that the Small Christian Community tries to understand the meaning of the situation, in the light of their faith and values. The leading question is how are we to live more faithfully within the vision of God’s service in the world? Or “what does this mean to us as Christians?”¹² Together with the community, we found Scripture passages, Catholic Church teaching texts, works of theologians and proverbs (sayings) from Malawi that reflect the situation at hand.

In order to improve the active participation, which helps the community members to serve one another, to bear witness to the society and to help the members grow in their spiritual life, the following Scripture passages, church teaching texts and works of theologians are important. First, *John* 10: 10b, “I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full.” This is fundamental for all members of the Small Christian Community, because all the members have the responsibility to show light to other members. In other words, men and the youth have to bring abundant love to the community. They can do that by actively participating in the life of the community. Therefore all the members should bring full life to the community and they should be sources of hope to the members of the society. Second, *Sacrosanctum Concilium* tells us that, “Mother Church earnestly desires that all the faithful should be led to that full, conscious, and active participation.”¹³ From this we can say that through Small Christian Communities people should be helped to actively participate in the life of the church. Third, in 1947 Pope Pius XII, in “*Mediator Dei*” number 105, encouraged the laity’s active participation. Each person has to take part in the activities of the community, in order that the mission of the community grows deep; just as Malawians say *You cannot pick up a pebble with one finger*. There is need for active participation. Through this Christians will feel they belong to the church. In other words, the Christian will not be a Christian only of Sunday, but a Christian in his or her life.

To reflect on the challenge of the conflict of roles among the leaders, *John* 13: 13-15 demonstrates that Jesus is a good model of Christian leadership. “You call me ‘teacher,’ and rightly so, for indeed I am. If I, therefore, the master and teacher, have washed your feet, you ought to wash one another’s feet. I have given you a model to follow, so that as I have done for you, you should also do.” The leaders at St. Louis Montfort Small Christian Community have to realize that they are called to serve not to be served. In this regard, they will discover that they are to work together as a community and be able to share responsibilities in order to avoid any role conflict. *Acts of the Apostles* 6: 1-7 tells the community about sharing and knowing of responsibilities. Here we see the community involved in choosing seven reputable men, who will share the responsibility with the apostles. In other words, the apostles will focus on prayer and the ministry of the word while the seven men will be responsible for the affairs of the community. This is in line with *Exodus* 18: 17-21. Here Jethro (the father-in-law of Moses) advises Moses to choose people who could help him,

¹¹Vatican Council II, *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World: Gaudium et Spes*, (Ndola: Mission Press, 1978), Number 3-4.

¹²Frans Wijssen, Peter Henriot, Rodrigo Mejia (eds.), *The Pastoral Circle Revisited: A Critical Quest for Truth and Transformation*, 39.

¹³Vatican Council II, *The Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy: Sacrosanctum Concilium*, (Ndola: Mission Press, 1978), Number 28.

especially in judging some of the cases of the people. Jethro also told Moses that he had to help those people chosen to know their work. *Sacrosanctum Concilium* says that “each person, minister or layperson who has an office to perform, should carry out only those parts which pertain to his office.”¹⁴ *Acts of the Apostles, Exodus* and *Sacrosanctum Concilium* will help the leaders and all the members of St. Montfort Small Christian Community to realize that leadership has to be shared and that each one has to know his or her role in the community and be able to carry out the responsibility he or she is supposed to do.

Patrick Kalilombe says that “the evident thing is to make sure that these local churches do have the appropriate leadership and organization capable of adequately structuring them and providing the required leadership and animation. What is needed here is first of all a good choice of leaders.”¹⁵ With this, it was thought that when choosing leaders, members of the community must realize that the role of the leader is so decisive that they need a person who can provide good leadership, coordination, animation and service. In other words, the church, as God’s household, needs wise and competent leadership. This will help to address the challenge of voting for people simply because they are friends or rich. Leaders, in other words, will be voted for because they are wise, competent and because they can serve the community. Wise and competent leaders will know how to perform their roles effectively. Experience says that *no man is an island*.

Therefore, it was agreed in the community that all members of St. Louis Montfort Small Christian Community should know that guiding a community is not a one-person business. All these passages say that in any community there is the need to share responsibilities. This improves the way we do our things and how we serve the community and the church. This helps the members of the Small Christian Community to bear good witness to other people as well as grow in their spiritual life.

2.4 Pastoral Planning

This is an important stage. It is the stage of alternative praxis. It is a stage of planning and taking concrete actions. The community moves through steps of policy-making and acting in order to effect the desired change in the situation. Here the community comes to pastoral action. Based on the insight from above, the community makes a decision on how to take the ministry deeper and how to improve it by responding to the issues at hand. More so, the community discerns how the activities will take place and what obstacles they anticipate. “In the light of the experiences analyzed and reflected upon, what response is called for by individuals and by community? How should the response be designed in order to be most effective not only in short term but also long term?”¹⁶ Here action does not always need to be tangible but also a change of behavior. It is important to note that in this stage of action the most important issues have to be dealt with first, then other issues later. “The objective of the pastoral planning step was to use the information gathered and reflected upon in the social/cultural analysis and theological reflection to develop a long term plan that could realistically bring about spiritual and social transformation”¹⁷ in the community. Pastoral

¹⁴ Vatican Council II, *The Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy: Sacrosanctum Concilium*, Number 28.

¹⁵ Patrick A. Kalilombe, *Doing Theology at the Grassroots: Theological Essays from Malawi*, (Gweru: Mambo Press, 1999), 70.

¹⁶ Joe Holland and Peter Henriot, *Social Analysis: Linking Faith and Justice*, 9.

¹⁷ Frans Wijssen, Peter Henriot and Rodrigo Mejia (eds.), *The Pastoral Circle Revisited: A Critical Quest for Truth and Transformation*, 84.

planning goes with the saying that “faith without works is dead” (*James* 3: 26). Likewise, the Pastoral Spiral process that “without response it is waste of time.”¹⁸ Hence the need for action.

After analysis and reflection St. Louis Montfort Small Christian Community came to the point that there is need for pastoral action. The community agreed to have seminars so that the members might learn different dynamics of Small Christian Communities. To do that, the community invited a group of catechists who go around Malawi teaching about Small Christian Communities. The idea was that men, and the youth shall be helped to understand the importance of Small Christian Communities so that they may actively participate in the life of the community. Through the seminar the members of the community were to be helped to actively participate in the life of Sitima Parish such as in providing food for the priests, constructing toilets for the parish and cleaning inside and outside the church. The members were helped to understand that active participation during their meetings can help the wellbeing of the community. Therefore each one should take part in *Bible* sharing.

Other actions that the community decided on include: changing the day of meetings from Friday to Sunday afternoon to allow those who go to the garden on Friday to have time to participate; the need to create a Small Christian Community for the youth where the youth can have a chance to share their experiences and where they can actively participate. “The place of youth in SCCs, and the pastoral care they require, calls for special attention.”¹⁹ The community also decided that some St Louis Montfort Small Christian Community leaders should visit men who do not actively participate in the community activities in their homes to encourage them and also to encourage their wives to come to the meetings with their husbands. Such expectations call for a new approach to evangelization.

To address the challenge of conflict of role the community decided to have a workshop of leadership empowerment whereby the leaders were to be helped to understand their roles and to develop leadership skills. The leaders were also to be helped to learn to serve, taking the example of Jesus himself (*John* 13: 13-15). In other words the community proposed to the parish council that they organize classes for the formation of leaders. This was because “it would not be fair to appoint a leader and then just leave him to fend for himself. He needs to be carefully formed, to be given the know-how, the techniques, the spirituality and the wherewithal needed to fulfill his role properly.”²⁰ The community said that through the workshop members of the community would be helped to know the qualities of a good leader. This was to help them during an election of leaders so that worthy leaders are voted, that is, leaders who can act and promote the mission of the community, which is to grow spiritually, to bear witness and to actively participate in the life of the Church.

2.5 Evaluation

Evaluation is needed in order to see how effective the whole process is. In other words, this is an evaluation of the ministry and of the methodology. This involves a self-corrective and reflective understanding of the process of the realization of the Christian faith.

¹⁸ Frans Wijzen, Peter Henriot and Rodrigo Mejia (eds.), *The Pastoral Circle Revisited: A Critical Quest for Truth and Transformation*, 47.

¹⁹ Joseph G. Healey and Jeanne Hinton (eds.), *Small Christian Communities Today: Capturing the New Moment*, (New York: Orbis Books, 2005), 104.

²⁰ Patrick A. Kalilombe, *Doing Theology at the Grassroots: Theological Essays from Malawi*, 70.

The community responds to the questions such as: Have we achieved the original purpose? What good things and challenges have we encountered and what is our way forward? What responsibility do we have as people of faith? Here the community has to see the strengths and weaknesses that have contributed to the success, or failure, of the process and to look for alternative means if necessary. The process can be revised if it needs any changes; otherwise it continues. After this the whole process begins again with other issues. This defines the reason why the method is called Pastoral Spiral Method and not Pastoral Circle Method. The community agreed that there is great hope that St. Montfort Small Christian Community will develop policies that will help them to actively participate in the life of the community. There is hope that they will develop policies that will help to address the challenge of conflict of roles in the community.

3.0 CONCLUSION

In conclusion, there are many activities in the church that need attention. To attend to such realities we ought to examine the social realities. This may be done by moving from praxis to alternative praxis via theological reflection. In this paper I have attempted to use this way of using the Pastoral Spiral (Experience, Social/Cultural Analysis, Theological Reflection, Pastoral Planning and Evaluation) Method in Small Christian Communities in Africa to analyze the ministry that I undertook at St. Louis Montfort Small Christian Community in Sitima Parish, Zomba Diocese, Malawi. Through theological reflection on the ministry in the Small Christian Community, the community discovered an alternative praxis which is more life giving, that is, by providing workshops for leadership empowerment and to actively participate in the life of Sitima Parish as well. This method of Pastoral Spiral can also be used during SCCs weekly meetings.

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