

## **Small Christian Communities: Sharing the Tanzanian Pastoral Experience**

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**NOTE:** This is a talk originally given in Swahili at the Mwanza Metropolitan SCCs Workshop on the theme “Small Christian Communities (SCCs) Embrace the Word of God” at the St. Dominic Pastoral Centre in Mwanza, Tanzania on 20 May, 2014.

In order to understand the reason for the success of the Small Christian Communities (SCCs) in Africa south of the Sahara, one has to go back to its cultural and political history. The Bantu society was basically built on the clan system. People of the same clan felt a nearness and as the clan became very big it was divided into sub clans which in the long run became clans with the older ones becoming umbrella clans. In this way the family was never isolated, it was a part of the clan and the clan gave it social protection and preserved the community morals. Outside the clan there was no social action.

After the Second Vatican Council (1962-65) the Catholic Church started looking for better ways of living as the Family of God. The ideal was to try and get as much as possible the replica of the early Christian Community of the apostles in Jerusalem. In Latin America they had the development of the Basic Christian Communities (BCCs) to answer their local needs. In Zaire (now Democratic Republic of the Congo) even before the council they were looking for an African way of living this ideal. It was AMECEA in Eastern Africa that came up with a concrete plan for the Small Christian Communities.

### **I. AMECEA AND THE SMALL CHRISTIAN COMMUNITIES INITIATIVES**

Seminars and studies were made even here in Tanzania to see how to put into practice the Vatican II ideal of the Church as Family. Of all the AMECEA countries the first effective action was taken by Bishop Patrick Kalilombe, a Missionary of Africa, then bishop of Lilongwe Diocese, Malawi. He held a diocesan synod which initiated a diocesan pastoral plan based on Small Christian Communities.

Starting from the 1973 Bishops’ Plenary Assembly, AMECEA concentrated on a pastoral plan based on Small Christian Communities. The 1976 Plenary Assembly held in Nairobi Kenya declared as its key statement “*Systematic formation of Small Christian Communities should be the key pastoral priority in the years to come in Eastern Africa.*” From then on the Small Christian Communities became a permanent agenda of AMECEA. The AMECEA plenaries of 1976, 1979, 1992 and 2002 concentrated on the SCCs. This is the reason why when AMECEA held its plenary session in Dar es Salaam Tanzania in 2002 celebrating 25 years of the Small Christian Communities; the placards read “Welcome AMECEA, the Mother of Small Christian Communities”.

## II. TANZANIA AND SMALL CHRISTIAN COMMUNITIES

The first Tanzanian President, Mwalimu Julius Kambarage Nyerere capitalized on the traditional family institution in his *Ujamaa* political setup. He started the ten cell governing *Ujamaa* system. Every 10 families would establish a self-governing and self-sustaining unit. This increased the peoples' participation in the political, social and economic governance from the grassroots.

Some Catholic religious leaders became interested in the *Ujamaa* ideology. The most remarkable among them was Bishop Christopher Mwoleka of Rulenge Diocese who went as far as to live in an *Ujamaa* village participating in all their activities. From there he brought the idea effectively into the church in the name of Small Christian Communities. He was the first bishop in Tanzania to make the Small Christian Communities the official pastoral priority of his diocese and the basic means of evangelization. In 1974 he could boldly and proudly be able to tell the Tanzanian bishops of his choice. In fact he already made a governing structure with different functions for members of the SCCs. Much of this was copied by other dioceses and finally by the national directory of Small Christian Communities.

From 1976 the Tanzania church took seriously the decision of the AMECEA bishops that the SCCs is the way forward in evangelization. In 1977 a national seminar was called to study how to implement the decision. It was decided that the priority of the Tanzania church from then on was to build the SCCs. This would be the small local church whose work is to pray together, listen together to the Word of God, reflect together on it and propagate it. The members are to encourage each other in living the gospel values. The SCCs are to base themselves on the Word of God and the Holy Eucharist which would strengthen the members in faith, love and hope (*Koinonia*), witnessing to the risen Christ whom they proclaim as God and Savior (*Kerygma*); and show it with their services among themselves and to the needy (*Diakonia*). This was incorporated in all parish, diocesan and national directives.

I remember when I was Secretary General of the Tanzania Episcopal Conference (TEC) in every plenary meeting we had to give a report on the implementation of the SCCs. Also almost in every annual Lent message there would be a paragraph on SCCs. For example in the 21 November, 1993 pastoral letter *Good Conscience -- Vision of Our Nation* the bishops appealed to the SCCs to help their members to improve their income for good of their families. In the 1995 Lenten letter *The Laity of Tanzania You Will Be My Witnesses* the bishops asked the church to give seminars and sermons to help the Christians read the scriptures and understand the Word of God especially in the Small Christian Communities. Even recently in 2008 in the letter *God is Love – 'Deus Caritas Est*, they remind the people in the SCCs to remember the poor and needy in their midst. They advised each SCC to have a fund to help the needy. They say this fund can help in life necessities like education, health and catastrophes.

The Tanzanian bishops in their 1997 Plenary ordered the Commission of Canon Law to revise the Constitution of the Laity Council and in 1998 when passing the new *Constitution of the National Lay Council*, they put in a requirement that all elections of lay leaders in Tanzania had to start at the level of SCCs and move upwards. In this way one could not be a leader in the parish, diocese or national level if he/she did not have his/her roots in the SCC. This was a bold and decisive step that strengthened the SCCs and reinforced the Laity Council at all levels. The year 2007 – 2008 was declared by the

conference as “The Year of the Small Christian Communities.” It was inaugurated in the dioceses on Pentecost Sunday, 27 May, 2007 and on the national level during the plenary meeting of TEC on 1 July, 2007.

Thus not only at the national level but at all levels, the SCCs have been a priority in the pastoral plans. This is shown by the diocesan synods that have been held over the years like Mwanza, Musoma, and Rulenge-Ngara in which the proposals for strengthening of the SCCs has been in the fore.

### **III. MY EXPERIENCE OF SMALL CHRISTIAN COMMUNITIES IN DAR ES SALAAM (2000 – 2010) AND BUKOBA (2010 – 2014)**

I lived in Dar es Salaam for 20 years, 10 as Secretary General of TEC and 10 as Auxiliary Bishop. Here I will speak of the last 10 years. In these 10 years I experienced the SCCs on one side as an Auxiliary Bishop and overseer and on the other side as a member of one of the SCCs. The second experience was the most interesting. Also I will speak of my Bukoba experience.

#### **a. The SCCs as Experienced as a Bishop**

In Dar es Salaam as in Bukoba the SCCs are the hinge on which pastoral work evolves. To access to pastoral services one starts in the SCCs. They look after their sick people and inform the clergy where service is needed. Forms are filled and signed by the SCC leaders. All communication goes through them and even fundraising for community and parish needs starts with the SCCs.

The Archdiocese of Dar es Salaam declared the year 2006-2007 as “The Year of the Small Christian Communities. The year was inaugurated on the feast of St. Joseph which that year was celebrated on 20 March, 2006. To give a noticeable symbol the chairpersons of the SCCs were given a candle lit from the paschal candle as a sign that they had to be a light in the darkness. The parish priests were given salt to show that they had to a salt of the SCCs. The year before the men had been given salt with the same idea as they are normally reluctant in attendance. In this year we noted the successes and weaknesses of the SCC in the archdiocese and tried to map out ways to remedy the situation. We also took the chance to celebrate the SCCs and propagate them through seminars, conferences, celebrations and radio programs. The greeting was: One says “Small Christian Communities” and the other responds “The instrument of evangelization.”<sup>1</sup> The year was a success.

As auxiliary bishop in Dar es Salaam, besides my personal great interest in the SCCs I made it my duty to visit and encourage the SCCs. To be frank it was never a burden to do this as the people were so good and welcoming whenever you went to visit them. It was a feast. I am afraid in the end it took the place of recreation and I made it known that I am happy to be invited. I was happy because the presence of the bishop in the SCC gave the members another reason to come together and plan together.

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<sup>1</sup> One says “*Jumuiya Ndogo Ndogo*” and the other responds “*Chombo cha uinjilishaji.*”

In Bukoba the experience is the same. Once in two years we have the pastoral visit of the parish. Normally the bishop stays in the parish for three to four days including a Sunday, that is, for confirmation. Besides getting the parish report on the SCCs one day I visit one of the SCCs in the parish, celebrate mass with them and spend the day listening to them, sharing their joys and sorrows, successes and preoccupations. In both places in the city of DSM and in the villages of Bukoba the atmosphere is the same. The only difference is that you have more drumming and dancing in the village than in the city.

### **b. My Experience as a Member of a SCC**

When I became auxiliary bishop of Dar es Salaam, I was given the old Apostolic Nunciature, a lonely isolated place in a rich area of the city, Masaki, Oysterbay. As I did not do the office at home, nobody came to our house. It was very lonely. Once we joined the SCC in our area, our doors were open to the neighbors from government ministers and judges to Mama Ntilie<sup>2</sup> and kiosk vendors. Children sometimes came to study in our gardens and we were able to organise different liturgies for the different seasons of the year. The surrounding SCCs became envious of not having a bishop member and so a federation was formed of Masaki Small Christian Communities and we had sometimes common meetings and events. This was a beautiful experience. One looked forward to the next prayer day.

The economic and social status of the people in the city differs very much from millionaires to beggars, from the president of the country to homeless street vendors, from family people to prostitutes and from people living in palaces to those in overcrowded ghettos. There are saints and bandits; graduates and the illiterate.

The challenge of the archdiocese is to unite the Catholics from all those diverse origins with different status into one cohesive church. To have these people who are uprooted from their cultural home setting and are in an anonymous milieu keep their personal respect reinforced by mutual support in doing good. To give them a new clan and a new tribe whose cohesion is based on faith, love and care. In other words, to give them an extended family in the city that they left at home in the village.

In Masaki where I lived most of the houses are enclosed by walls. On the gates are notices of ferocious dogs, electrical alarms and big security companies. Thus no outsider can come in without a special invitation. At the same time there are lonely families shut among themselves, lonely persons even among the rich, sick and needy who cannot communicate with a neighbor next door. All of these are city life's challenges.

Fortunately the Small Christian Communities are a solution to the above problems and more. The Small Christian Communities have become a liberator from loneliness and segregation, from anonymity and despair. This challenge is less in the villages but all the same there is a need of solidarity in the ever changing world where selfishness and malice are growing.

## **IV. WHY HAVE SMALL CHRISTIAN COMMUNITIES**

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<sup>2</sup> The woman street food vendor.

**a. Small Christian communities as builders of the church in the neighborhood**

In Dar es Salaam as in other dioceses the Small Christian Communities have formed neighborhoods of people who now know one another and relate together. As the meetings of the SCC meet alternatively in different houses, the members come to know each other and enter in other peoples' homes and cultivate friendships. Slowly they share their graces and sorrows, their riches and worries and learn to help each other in need.

We formed youth groups, women groups and the Holy Childhood both at SCC and zone levels. Unlike in many SCCs, in our SCC the men were always very exemplar in attendance. Some said it is because the bishop is a man!!! In many other SCCs although the men are active in occasional special activities, they are wanting in the weekly attendance of the meetings.

**b. Small Christian Communities and the internal mission**

More than half of the parishes in Dar es Salaam were founded by Small Christian Communities. Normally in new residential places a few strong Catholics would start a Small Christian Community and pray together in their houses. As they increased one faithful person donated an area to build a common prayer shed. The SCC divided as the faithful increased but the shed became common to all. As the Christians multiplied the faithful bought more land around the original plot or found a big plot in the neighborhood and asked permission to build a prayer house and kindergarten. The next step is that it becomes an out-station and later a parish. Through SCCs they develop a solidarity that builds parishes.

**c. Small Christian Communities and Christian life**

These communities improve very much the spiritual life of the Christians both in the city and in the villages. First the individuals are no longer anonymous but have a reputation and a status to protect. Each member of the community feels respected and can enter any house of the members and they come with respect to his or her house, however humble it may be. The Mama Ntilie enters the house of the government minister or judge of the high court and vice versa. Together they discuss what is relevant to them and the community. This gives dignity.

The children know one another in the SCC and associate together. This makes it possible for the parents to have a common effort in educating the children. Also if the child goes to the neighbor's house one knows who that neighbour is. The youth in the community get a chance to plan together their activities and recreation. This is the same for women groups. The ideal is when the SCC becomes one extended family, a family of God, a church.

**d. Small Christian Communities and church organisation**

The Small Christian Communities have facilitated organisation and communication in the parishes. The principal now is that all activity should start in the Small Christian Communities. The processing of the sacramental and para-sacramental services are initiated

in the Small Christian Communities. Even fund raising has very much improved due to the Small Christian Communities. As passed by the conference, the building of the Lay Council begins at the Small Christian Communities level. The ideas and opinions initiated in the Small Christian Communities are taken up to the parish, diocesan and national level by their leaders and those ideas coming from the top sift down to the individuals in the Small Christian Communities on the grassroots level.

The Small Christian Communities have also improved relations with other denominations and religions. The Small Christian Communities on various occasions invite people from other denominations who are their neighbours, friends and relatives to their meetings especially when they have celebrations. I was once approached by a Lutheran bishop asking me to show him how to start Small Christian Communities so that he can do the same for the Lutherans.

#### **V. The difficulties of the Small Christian Communities**

- a) One condition for success is the presence and positive action of the parish priest and his co-workers. Unfortunately it is not always forthcoming.
- b) Men though sympathetic with the Small Christian Communities and are ready to make the needed financial contributions, they are lax in attending the weekly meetings.
- c) In the city mobility is very high due to transfers and the increase of the rent of houses. This disrupts the smooth running of the SCC especially if the leaders are affected.
- d) Some Small Christian Communities have grown too big and the members are very reluctant to divide. This affects the good functioning of the SCC. In the village this gives the tendency to have the *Jumuiya Mama*<sup>3</sup> stronger than the real SCCs.
- e) Some families have nowhere to welcome the SCC members because they live in one room or the landlord is hostile to such meetings.
- f) The Small Christian Communities have not yet entered the crucial social life of their neighborhoods be it in villages or in the city. Here I mean the Justice and Peace issues which sometimes are seen as political. The Small Christian Communities I believe should not only heal wounds but should also prevent the wounds and ask why there are wounds. This part is delicate but possible. It includes sensitizing people so as to get good leaders in the local and national governments.

#### **VI. Conclusion**

The future success of the church in Tanzania depends heavily on the success of the Small Christian Communities. A few years ago I was in India and was happy to discover that some dioceses in South India have started the system of SCCs which they call "Basic Christian Communities." They were started less than 15 years ago but are using the same processes as our SCCs. One would think they copied from us. This shows the universal validity of the idea of the Small Christian Communities whatever name one gives them.

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<sup>3</sup> The Mother Small Christian Community that is the umbrella community of a number of SCCs.

Let us all give ourselves whole heartedly to build the Small Christian Communities as the sure way of evangelization. We thank AMECEA which has always given great support. One cannot forget Mwanajumuiya Padre Father Joseph Healey, MM, the companion of Bishop Mwoleka in the initial Small Christian Communities, and who still goes on to date.

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