

1961-- 2015 Timeline in the History and Development of Small Christian Communities (SCCs) in Africa Especially Eastern Africa

AMECEA is an acronym for "Association of Member Episcopal Conferences in Eastern Africa." It is a service organization for the National Episcopal Conferences of the nine countries of Eastern Africa, namely Eritrea (1993), Ethiopia (1979), Kenya (1961), Malawi (1961), South Sudan (2011), Sudan (1973), Tanzania (1961), Uganda (1961) and Zambia (1961). The Republic of South Sudan became independent on 9 July, 2011, but the two Sudans remain part of one Episcopal Conference. Somalia (1995) and Djibouti (2002) are Affiliate Members.

NOTE: Small Christian Communities (SCCs)¹ developed as a result of putting the ecclesiology of the Second Vatican Council (1962-65) into practice. Latin America, Africa

¹ Small Christian Communities (SCCs) is an umbrella term used in this timeline and is the common expression for this new way of being church in Eastern Africa. Different terms are used in English on the continent of Africa. BCC means "Basic Christian Community" and BEC means "Base [Basic] Ecclesial Community" and is sometimes written "Ecclesial Base [Basic] Community." Even some writers in French prefer the term SCC because it indicates the "scale" of the communities. A variety of names are used in the USA. I have visited parishes and institutions in the USA where the specific name "Small Christian Communities" is not known or used, that is, it has very little "Name Recognition." Yet people would immediately recognize "small groups" or "small prayer groups" or "Small Church Communities" or "Small Faith Communities." The challenge is to create successful "branding." For example, "*jumuiya*" (the short form of Small Christian Communities in Swahili) is immediately known in East Africa.

A background paper for the "International Consultation on Rediscovering Community" at Notre Dame, Indiana in the USA in December, 1991 compiled over 3,500 different names, titles, terms and expressions for SCCs/BCCs worldwide:

Healey, Joseph. "Evolving A World Church From the Bottom Up: An Analysis and Interpretation of 3,500 Different Names, Titles, Terms, Expressions, Descriptions and Meanings for and about Small Christian Communities/Basic Christian Communities in the World with 11 Case Studies From Six Continents," Background Paper for the International Consultation on "Rediscovering Community -- International Perspectives," University of Notre Dame, South Bend, Indiana, USA, 8-12 December, 1991, Notre Dame: Printed Paper, 1991, 33 pages. Sections of this paper were published in the *Newsletter of Latin American/North American Church Concerns (LANACC)*.

What is important is the best name for the local situation, the local context. A useful distinction is: "Basic communities usually emphasize social change by the power of Christ's gospel. Church Homes are focused on building up marriage and family life. Cell groups are designed to evangelize the world by multiplying new groups." Presentation Ministries Website, retrieved on 19 March, 2012.

<http://www.presentationministries.com/brochures/IntroCommunity.asp>

and Asia (especially the Philippines) all pioneered the development of a SCC Model of Church or a BCC/CEB Model of Church. After considerable research and debate, many specialists feel that quite independently of one another these three areas of the Catholic Church in the Global South simultaneously experienced the extraordinary growth of SCCs. Thus the African experience² did not come from Latin America but developed on its own. The 1961 – 2014 **Timeline**³ is as follows:

1961: At its 6th Plenary Assembly from 20 November to 2 December, 1961 the Zaire Episcopal Conference (now the Democratic Republic of the Congo or DRC that is a neighbor to Eastern Africa) approved a pastoral plan to promote "Living Base Ecclesial Communities" (also called "Living Christian Communities"). *Communautés Ecclésiales Vivantes de Base* (CEVB) is the full French term for SCCs. The bishops opted for these communities to be more important than the well-known mission structures (church buildings, schools, hospitals). These Living Base Ecclesial Communities were said to be the only way to make the church more "African"⁴ and close to the people.⁵ Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC)

² Irish SCCs animator and writer Father James O'Halloran, SDB makes the interesting observation: "I feel it was a pity that our [expatriate] missionaries did not go to Africa with a communitarian model of church in the first instance, because traditionally there was a great sense of family and community there even before we arrived. Indeed their strong sense of family and community is a special gift of the African groups to the rest of the world." *Living Cells: Vision and Practicalities of Small Christian Communities and Groups*, Dublin: Columba Press, 2010, p. 206. NOTE: In this timeline the term "missionaries" will always be qualified with a descriptive adjective such as "expatriate missionary" and "African missionary."

³ A good historical overview and commentary is found in Zambian diocesan priest Febian Pikiti, "Small Christian Communities: A Key Pastoral Priority for the Church in the AMECEA Region." Mwanza: Printed Paper, 2014.

⁴ In a symposium in Germany in 2013 Democratic Republic of the Congo Sister Josée Ngalula, RSA stated that the Basic Christian Communities were a response to basic African intuitions and a desire to root Christianity in an African reality. She traced the origins of BCCs in Africa to the Zaire (now Democratic Republic of the Congo) Bishops Conference in Africa in 1961 and to the initiatives of Maryknoll missionaries in northwestern Tanzania starting in 1966. "History, Development and Status Quo of Basic Christian Community (BCC) in Africa" in Moerschbacher, Marco (ed.), *Proceedings of the International Symposium on In the World of Today? The Church on Her Way in Basic Christian Communities*, Tübingen, Germany, 17-20 January, 2012, page 1-2, posted on the University of Tübingen Website at <http://www.uni-tuebingen.de/en/faculties/catholic-theology/lehrstuehle/religionspaedagogik/basisgemeinden-symposium/presentationen-der-vortraege.html>

⁵ The actual launching of SCCs in DRC goes back to the period 1971-1972 when there was a confrontation between President Mobutu Sese Seko and the Catholic Church. Mobutu's "authenticity" campaign suppressed the missionary institutes and associations. To meet the crisis the church established the priority of the creation and organization of SCCs. The pioneering and visionary Cardinal Joseph Malula of Kinshasa Archdiocese, DRC stated: "The

Scripture Scholar Father André Kabasele Mukenge states that “a firm decision was made to align pastoral care by setting up vibrant Christian Communities.”⁶

So the very first Small Christian Communities in Africa started in the then Zaire in 1961, the very year that AMECEA started.⁷

1962: Then came the historic Second Vatican Council (1962-65).⁸ Small Christian Communities developed as a result of putting the communion ecclesiology and teachings of Vatican II into practice.⁹ Small Christian Communities make real the vision of Vatican II that calls on the Church to be (shine forth as) “a people made one with the unity (brought into unity) from the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit” (No. 4 of *Lumen Gentium, Dogmatic Constitution of the Church of the Church*).

No. 9 says that we are even saved “not as individuals... but rather to make them into a people.” We are most whom we are when we gather as an assembly for prayer and worship. Living this kind of Christian life reflects our deepest identity, that we are created in the image and likeness of God. This identity manifests itself in our deepest needs for love, happiness, community and family.

No. 17 refers to the Trinitarian understanding of the church as “the People of God, the Body of the Lord and the Temple of the Holy Spirit.”¹⁰

No. 26 states:

Living Ecclesial Communities are slowly becoming the ordinary place of Christian life with the parish as the communion of the Living Ecclesial Communities.” This included emphasizing lay ministries and implementing Vatican II’s theology of laity, “the People of God.”

⁶ André Kabasele Mukenge, “The Biblical Approach of Basic Ecclesial Communities: Aspects of Their Fundamental Principles” in Krämer, Klaus and Vellguth, Klaus (eds.), *Small Christian Communities: Fresh Stimulus*, p. 3.

⁷ A good summary is found in the section “From African Dioceses to Small Christian Communities” in John Baur, *2000 Years of Christianity in Africa*, Nairobi: Paulines Publications Africa, Second Edition, 2009, pp. 389-392.

⁸ 11 October, 2012 was the 50th Anniversary of the opening of the Second Vatican Council and a *Kairos* moment to deepen the vision, spirit and practice of the teachings of this historic meeting.

⁹ Filipino laywoman Estela P. Padilla, the Pastoral Coordinator of Bukal ng Tipan – CICM, is presently carrying out very interesting research on “BECs in Africa, Latin America and Asia and their Reception of Vatican 2.”

¹⁰ Vatican Website, retrieved 30 September, 2011, http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19641122_lumen-gentium_en.html

This Church of Christ is truly present in all legitimate local congregations of the faithful which, united with their pastors, are themselves called churches in the New Testament.¹¹ For in their locality these are the new People called by God, in the Holy Spirit and in much fullness... In these communities though frequently small and poor, or living far from one another, Christ is present. By virtue of Him the one, holy, catholic and apostolic church gathers together.

No. 10 of the *Decree on the Apostolate of the Lay People* describes “Church Communities” including different types of ecclesial communities especially the parish.

The spirit and content of the Second Vatican Council mirror what St. John XXIII described as “reading the signs of the times” when he originally called the council. The *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World* (commonly known by its Latin title *Gaudium et Spes*) has the explicit call to scrutinize the signs of the times. For African SCCs this means reading the African signs of the times in the light of the Gospel and at the same time interpreting the Gospel in the light of the African signs of the times. This is an approach to doing theology that American theologian Father David Tracy describes as “mutually critical correlation.”¹²

In giving enthusiastic support to Base Ecclesial Communities Honduran Cardinal Oscar Rodriguez Maradiaga, SDB,¹³ Archbishop of Tegucigalpa, Honduras describes them as “the great fruit of Vatican II.”¹⁴ The Kenyan book of prayers and songs, *Tumshangilie Bwana*, has this interesting description: “Small Christian Communities are one of the fruits of the Second Vatican Council and an awakening of the church as the ‘Nation of God.’” A good explanation is found in “Vatican II’s Impact on Small Christian Communities,” in Chapter One in *Communities for the Kingdom: A Handbook for Small Christian Community Leaders* by Irish missionary and theologian Father Kieran Flynn, SPS.

Although the term SCCs is not mentioned specifically in the documents of Vatican II, some of the great theologians of the council emphasized them in their writings in the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s. The French Dominican theologian Father Yves Congar, OP in *Lay People in the Church* wrote that SCCs are “little church cells wherein the mystery is lived directly

¹¹ Another translation of this sentence reads: “The Church of Christ is found in every group of the faithful in a given neighborhood or area who together with their pastors are also called the church in the writings of the *New Testament*.”

¹² “Theological Interpretation of the Bible Today” in David Tracy, *A Short History of the Theological Interpretation of the Bible Today*, Fortress Press, 1984.

¹³ It is interesting that Rodriguez Maradiaga was appointed to be the coordinator of a group of eight cardinals worldwide established by Pope Francis to advise him and to study a plan for revising the *Apostolic Constitution* on the Roman Curia.

¹⁴ In August, 2007 the Social Commission of the Brazilian Bishops Conference stated: “We wish to reaffirm decisively and give new impetus to the life and prophetic and sanctifying mission of the CEBs ... They have been one of the great manifestations of the Spirit in the Latin American and Caribbean Church since Vatican II.” “Base Communities ‘Edited Out,’” *Tablet*, 15 September, 2007, p. 34.

and with great simplicity...“the church’s machinery, sometimes the very institution, is a barrier obscuring her deep and living mystery, which they can find, or find again, only from below.”¹⁵

The German Jesuit theologian Father Karl Rahner, SJ in the chapter on “Church from the Roots” in *The Shape of the Church to Come* wrote: “The church in the future will be one built from below by basic communities as a result of free initiative and association. We should make every effort not to hold up this development, but to promote it and direct it on the right lines.”¹⁶

The founding fathers of AMECEA had a vision of implementing Vatican II’s ecclesiology of communion in Eastern Africa that focused on the communion (*koinonia*) and service (*diakonia*) aspects. Tanzanian Scripture scholar Father Titus Amigi states: “After the Second Vatican Council (1962–1965) doors were opened and the Spirit of God brought a new Pentecost with the introduction of Small Christian Communities in Africa.”¹⁷ Tanzanian theologian Father Nicholas Segeja states: AMECEA started laying emphasis “on developing SCCs as a concrete expression of, and realization of, the Church as Family Model of Church which reflects the ecclesiology of communion of Vatican II.”¹⁸ In reflecting on the reception of Vatican II in Africa, Nigerian theologian Father Emmanuel Orobator, SJ comments:

AMECEA has developed an admirable profile in the African Church in the area of regional ecclesiastical collaboration. Arguably, the most concrete and best achievement of AMECEA is its pioneering role in developing Small Christian Communities (SCCs) as a new way of being church.¹⁹

As a personal witness to visioning the Church as the People of God, American Maryknoll missionary priest Father Michael Snyder, MM states: “Throughout my years in pastoral work in Tanzania, parish leaders were always selected from the Small Christian Communities. SCCs were the core of parish life in the dioceses where we served. Vatican II has been extremely formative in shaping our generation’s pastoral approaches to mission.”²⁰

¹⁵ Yves Congar, *Lay People in the Church*, First published in 1953, (London: Geoffrey Chapman Revised Edition, 1985) p. 341.

¹⁶ Karl Rahner, *The Shape of the Church to Come* (New York: Seabury Press, 1974).

¹⁷ Titus Amigi, “Jumuiya Ndogo Ndogo Small Christian Communities in Tanzania,” *Bulletin Dei Verbum* 86/87, 2006, http://www.c-b-f.org/documents/Gemeinschaften_e.pdf

¹⁸ Nicholas Segeja, “Summary Notes” on *The Development and Ecclesiology of Small Christian Communities (SCCs) in AMECEA Countries*, Nairobi: Unpublished Course Notes, 2010, p. 4.

¹⁹ Agbonkhianmeghe E. Orobator, “After All, Africa is Largely a Non-literate Continent: The Reception of Vatican II in Africa,” *Theological Studies* 74 (2013), p. 299.

²⁰ Michael Snyder in an email message to the author dated 25 June, 2013.

Latin America,²¹ Africa and Asia (especially the Philippines²²) all pioneered the development of a SCC/BCC/BEC Model of Church. After considerable research and debate, many specialists feel that quite independently of one another these three areas of the Catholic Church in the Global South *simultaneously* experienced the extraordinary growth of SCCs. Thus, contrary to some misinformed interpretations, the African experience did not come from Latin America, but developed on its own. African SCCs developed mainly as a pastoral, parish-based model of church. O'Halloran confirms this by saying:

During the 1971 [World] Synod of Bishops the Africans present noted that Small Christian Communities already existed in Africa. And this quite independently of what had happened in Latin America. One cannot say for certain where the modern [SCCs] groups began. They sprang up spontaneously throughout the world at roughly the same historical period by the power of the Holy Spirit.²³

²¹ It is generally agreed that this SCC/BCC/BEC/CEB Model of Church started with the CEBs in Barra do Pirai Diocese, Brazil in 1956. The language was Portuguese. O'Halloran states: "Leonardo Boff traces their beginning to the lament of a humble old lady [called the 'Rosa Parks of CEBs'] so her words may be among the most momentous uttered in church history. 'Christmas Eve,' she complained, 'all three Protestant Churches were lit up and full of people...and the Catholic Church closed and dark!...Because we can't get a priest.' The question naturally arose why everything should come to a standstill simply because there was no priest. This led to an initiative by [Brazilian Bishop] Agnelo Rossi, Bishop of Barra do Pirai Diocese in the Metropolitan of Rio de Janeiro, to launch a community catechetical [evangelization] movement in Barra do Parai, out of which small communities eventually emerged." *Small Christian Communities: A Pastoral Companion*, Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1996. p. 18. See also Leonardo Boff, *Ecclesiology: The Base Communities Reinvent the Church*. Maryknoll, N. Y. Orbis Books, 1986, p. 3. American Holy Cross theologian Robert Pelton adds that they began as "Sunday Services without Priests." Robert S. Pelton, CSC, *From Power to Communion: Toward a New Way of Being Church Based on the Latin American Experience*, Notre Dame and London: University of Notre Dame Press, 1994, p. 64.

²² Basic Ecclesial Communities started in Mindanao in the Philippines in 1967 and 1968. Conversation with American Maryknoll Missionary Father Jerry Burr, MM, 6 August, 2013. Officially their beginning was the first Mindanao-Sulu Pastoral Conference in 1971. Filipino Bishop Francisco Claver, SJ states:

We in Mindanao-Sulu woke up one day and realized what we had been doing in the dioceses of the region all along since 1971 was actually what Latin Americans were calling *Comunidades de Base* – small basic (Christian) communities, In fact we also realized that any church community that tried making itself into a dialogic, participative and co-responsible community [traits that characterize an authentic Vatican II Church] was quite automatically forming itself into a Basic Ecclesial Community.

Francisco Claver, *Making of a Local Church*, Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2008, p. 88.

²³ James O'Halloran, *Small Christian Communities: A Pastoral Companion*, p. 23.

Orobator explains:

Small Christian Communities are present in various forms in different parts of the world, but they gained a distinctive ecclesiological notoriety in Latin America. In this wider context the specificity or uniqueness of SCCs in Africa does not appear obvious. In some instances they have been compared to and confused with the Latin American model of *Comunidades Eclesiales de Base*. The similarities between both models of SCCs are noticeable, but the distinctions are clear. The same can be said of the historical trajectory of the two models. On the evidence of history, they are contemporaries, albeit they developed on opposite ends of the globe. Their emergence is coterminous, such that ‘it would be hard to establish clearly whether one was prior to the other in logic or historical development’ [American theologian Father Roger Haight, SJ].²⁴

Other historical misconceptions: First, that Eastern Africa SCCs are a cell model of church with its communistic and socialistic overtones. This has resulted in unfounded fears of control, uniformity and politicizing. Second, that SCCs are a parallel church along the lines of the independent Christian sects. As a clear pastoral, parish-based model the experience of Small Christian Communities in the AMECEA Region is very Catholic and within ecclesial church structures and guidelines.²⁵

Although Venerable Pope Paul VI’s Apostolic Letter *Africae Terrarum* in 1967 does not specifically refer to SCCs it contains these statements: No. 1: “The fervor and vitality of the new Christian Communities, in particular, showed us clearly that Africa is opening itself to the Kingdom of God.” No. 12: “As regards community life – which in African tradition was family life writ large – we note that participation in the life of the community, whether in the circle of one’s kinsfolk or in public life, is considered a precious duty and the right of all.”

Ngalula points out that these strong magisterial affirmations continued in Venerable Pope Paul VI’s speech to the representatives of African Episcopal Conferences in Kampala, Uganda in 1969. “With two of his sentences, he gave a strong cry:

²⁴ Agbonkhianmeghe E. Orobator, “Small Christian Communities as a New Way of Becoming Church: Practice, Progress and Prospects,” in Krämer, Klaus and Vellguth, Klaus (eds.), *Small Christian Communities: Fresh Stimulus for a Forward-looking Church*, Volume 2, “Theology of One World” series of Mission Aachen, Quezon City, Philippines: Claretian Publications, 2013, p. 115.

²⁵ Based on a conversation with Zambian Archbishop Thesphore George, the Archbishop of Lusaka, Zambia in Lusaka on 30 November, 2013.

You, Africans, you are henceforth your own missionaries (...) To be your own missionaries means that you, Africans, you must continue to build up the Church on this continent." And: "An adaptation of Christian life in the pastoral, liturgical, catechetical and spiritual field is not only possible, but is encouraged by the Church (...) you can [may] and you must have an African Christianity.

These two strong affirmations were an important "pacemaker" for many African bishops. It is thus not amazing to see some bishops, from 1970 onwards, to realize creative pastoral initiatives.²⁶ Paul VI's challenges pave the way for the Local Church in Africa to develop its own local pastoral structures such as SCCs.

Although 1973 and 1976 are considered the official starting points for SCCs in the AMECEA countries, the seeds were sown earlier. Our research on the history of SCCs in Eastern Africa uses the metaphor of a trickle of water that grows into a small stream that grows into a narrow river that is fed by many tributaries and slowly grows into a mighty river that became the AMECEA SCCs Key Pastoral Priority. The tributaries are identified as articles, booklets, books, bulletins, conversations, conferences, discussions, DVDs, grassroots experiences, interviews, leaflets, sheets, cards, local experiments, meetings, minutes, newsletters, plans, printed handouts, radio programs, reports, research, seminars, sound-slide shows, speeches, synods, talks, TV programs, videos and workshops coming from the different AMECEA countries.

1966: The very beginning of SCCs in Eastern Africa²⁷ (and perhaps the whole of English-speaking Africa) can be traced back to the joint pastoral and missionary efforts of the American Maryknoll missionaries in three parishes in the Luo-speaking Deanery (Nyarombo, Ingri and Kowak Parishes²⁸) in North Mara in Musoma Diocese in northwestern Tanzania in 1966. This new stage of evangelization began with research on the social structures and community values of the African Independent Churches among the Luo Ethnic Group carried

²⁶ Ngalula in Moerschbacher, *Proceedings of the International Symposium*, p. 2.

²⁷ This early history of SCCs in Tanzania was enriched by the author's discussions with Tanzanian bishop and Church Historian Bishop Method Kilaini in Mwanza, Tanzania, 20-23 May, 2014. See Kilaini, Method, "Small Christian Communities: Sharing the Tanzania Pastoral Experience," Mwanza: Printed Paper, 2014. 7 pages. The Swahili version of this paper is *Jumuiya Ndogo Ndogo za Kikristo (JNNK): Uzoefu wa Kichungaji wa Tanzania*. http://www.smallchristiancommunities.org/images/stories/pdf/small_christian.pdf

The historical significance of the Lake Victoria Zone in northwestern Tanzania was emphasized. It comprises eight dioceses (Mwanza Archdiocese and the dioceses of Bukoba, Bunda, Geita, Kayanga, Musoma, Rulenge Ngara and Shinyanga): The first African Cardinal, Laurean Rugambwa, came from Bukoba. The first Tanzanian President, Servant of God Julius K. Nyerere, came from Musoma.

²⁸ Laurenti Magesa suggests that a complete history of the origin of SCCs in these parishes be written up as part of this important historical record.

out by French cultural anthropologist laywoman Marie-France Perrin Jassy.²⁹ The first terms used were *chama* (Swahili for "small group;" the plural is *vyama*) and "small communities of Christians" (forerunner of SCCs).³⁰

The Maryknoll missionaries focused on the formation of small natural communities that were neighborhood groups of Luo-speaking people in the rural areas. By 1968 Nyarombo Parish had 20 small communities,³¹ Ingri Parish had 22 small communities and Kowak Parish had 25 small communities. As many of 80% of the local Catholics participated.³²

English diocesan priest Father Gerry Proctor points out that this "Catholic experience of SCCs was an African response to an African problem. It was not copying from another continent of a model of Church that might or might not prove pastorally useful here."³³

Around the same time in the mid-1960s American Maryknoll missionary Father George Cotter, MM was one of the first pioneers in Sukumaland (the Catholic dioceses in Tanzania where the Sukuma Ethnic Group live) to facilitate small reflection groups of Sukuma people to use proverbs to get a deeper understanding of Scripture. This experience helped the local Sukuma people appreciate more the wisdom of their Sukuma proverbs and the *Bible*. This can be called a "Sukuma Reading of the *Bible*."³⁴

1969: During the Seminar Study Year (SSY)³⁵ in Tanzania in 1969 coordinated by the Bukumbi Pastoral Institute in the then Mwanza Diocese the concept and praxis of SCCs that

²⁹ A five-page typed history of Perrin Jassy's stay and research in Tanzania is found in Daniel Zwack, *Nyarombo Mission Diary*, 27 March 1967.

³⁰ See Marie-France Perrin Jassy, *Forming Christian Communities*, Kampala: *Gaba Pastoral Paper* No. 12, 1970 and *Basic Communities in the African Churches*, Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1973. Perrin Jassy's work is also found in Marie-France Perrin Jassy, "Face au changement: Former des Communautés de Base," *Ceeba* I, vol. 8, 1981 and Marie-France Perrin-Jassy, "La communauté de base dans les Églises Africaines," *Ceeba*, series II, vol. 3, 1970, wherein she specifically discusses Maryknoll.

³¹ See Daniel Zwack, *Nyarombo Mission Diary*, January, 1968.

³² Some of this explanation is based on a conversation of Michael Kirwen, MM with the author in Nairobi on 30 April, 2014.

³³ Gerry Proctor, *A Commitment to Neighborhood: Base Ecclesial Communities in Global Perspective*, Liverpool: Unpublished MPhil Dissertation, 2012, p. 70.

³⁴ Based on the author's conversation with George Cotter, Maryknoll, New York, USA, 25 June, 2013.

³⁵ The driving force behind coordinating the SSY was American Maryknoll missionary priest Father Francis ("Ace") Murray, MM, the Secretary of the Pastoral Department of the TEC and the Director of the Bukumbi Pastoral Institute. For an overview of the process, see F. Murray, "1969 -- A Study Year for the Church in Tanzania," *African Ecclesial Review (AFER)*, Vol. 12., No. 1 (January 1970): pp. 71-73 and F. Murray, "No End to SSY," *African Ecclesial Review (AFER)*, Vol. 12, No. 2 (April 1970), pp. 168-171.

were then called "local Church communities" were first articulated as a priority in both rural and later urban parishes. American Maryknoll missionary Father Daniel Zwack, MM presented the plan of the rural parish of Nyarombo in Musoma Diocese (see above).³⁶ American Spiritan missionary priest Father Joseph Kelly, CSSP points out:

This contribution by Fr. Zwack contained some of the salient facets of what was later to become Small Christian Communities in Eastern Africa; however their hour had not yet come. This part of his Position Paper was hardly mentioned when the questions for discussion were drawn up in preparation for the National Seminar.³⁷

Dutch Missionary of Africa Father J. Brouwer, MAfr presented the plan of the town parish of Tabora in Tabora Archdiocese that had six wards. Each ward had small groups of Christians that consisted of ten to 12 families. These SCCs met regularly to pray, read the *Bible*, discuss their problems and explore how they could best live their Christian lives.³⁸

These Tanzanian case studies and examples were first documented in articles in the journal *Service* first published by the Bukumbi Pastoral Institute with headquarters in Mwanza and now called TAPRI (Tanzanian Pastoral and Research Institute) that is part of St Augustine University (SAUT) with headquarters in Mwanza. Gradually the names Small Christian Communities (SCCs) and in Swahili *Jumuiya Ndogo Ndogo za Kikristo* (JNNK) became commonly used.

In 1969 Small Christian Communities started in St. Charles Lwanga Catholic Church, Regiment Parish in Lusaka Archdiocese, Zambia. German Missionary of Africa Father Andreas Edele, MAfr explains the process of starting SCCs in the parish through a three year visitation of parishioners in their homes beginning in 1968. He adds, "We got valuable hints on how to form BCCs from Europe and South America." But he was keen to improve on what he had heard by including "every Catholic family... not just a small percentage of the Catholic population."³⁹

Years later when the implementation of the 1994 First African Synod was going slowly in Tanzania, Archbishop Anthony Mayala of Mwanza Archdiocese, Tanzania told the author, "We need another Father Ace Murray to help us."

³⁶ Daniel Zwack, "Problems and Possibilities in Rural Parishes of Tanzania," Position Paper No. 9, 1969 National Seminar Study Year, Bukumbi: Printed Paper, 1969.

³⁷ Joseph Kelly, "The Coming of Small Christian Communities to Eastern Africa, in "Report on Consultation on Methods of Research to Find Out How the *Bible* is Being Used in Small Christian Communities in Africa," sponsored and organized by BICAM, Nairobi: Privately Printed, 1989.

³⁸ J. Brouwer, "Problems and Possibilities in Towns and Cities of Tanzania," Position Paper No. 10, 1969 Seminar Study Year, Bukumbi: Printed Paper, 1969.

³⁹ Andrew Edele, MAfr, "Establishing Basic Christian Communities in Lusaka, Zambia," *Pro Mundi Vita Bulletin* 81 (1980), p. 22.

Edele writes:

At the beginning of 1969, sitting together with Sr. Simone Marceau MSOLA, who meanwhile had joined the Parish Team, and Catechist “Seba,” we planned a new strategy, borrowing ideas from South America, namely establishing “Small Christian Communities”. To start with, we chose an area of twenty to thirty Catholic families. We visited each one of them and invited them for an initial meeting in one of the houses. We explained our intention and asked them to attend eight sessions, at the end of which they were asked to choose leaders for the different services needed in the community. Then we celebrated the Eucharist in the community as a sign that “the Small Christian Community” had been established.

Amazingly, other areas within the parish pleaded with us (like St. Paul) to start similar communities in their place. Therefore we trained leaders to help us in the work of establishing new communities. Within a couple of years, the whole area of Libala, New Chilenje, Chilenje South and practically the whole parish was covered with SCCs. Soon afterwards, they were adopted as pastoral priority in other parishes of Lusaka. Therefore Regiment Parish can be truly considered as the cradle of the SCCs in Zambia.

I often asked myself, why this pastoral policy was much more effective in town than in rural areas. A possible answer is that as a Church, we succeeded to present the SCCs as a “family”. City dwellers miss the natural family. Furthermore, the African family consists not only of the living but also the living dead (ancestors). When we introduced “Patron Saints” it gave to the people an additional identification. In town the SCC gives the family security and solidarity which still exists in rural areas especially in times of misfortune like accidents or deaths. During the whole process, I received more of theological insight from the people, than I was able to give them.⁴⁰

In 2013 this parish is still going strong with 29 active SCCs in five geographical zones. On Saturday, 30 November, 2013 I participated in the Patron Saint's Day Mass of St. Andrew SCC in St. Charles Lwanga Parish. Of the 30 SCC members there were 4 men, 12 women, six youth and eight children. It was a joyous occasion celebrating SCCs as a "communion of families," one of the choices in our SCCs Poll for November-December, 2013. The SCC members wore their St Andrew's T Shirts and the women dressed in *chitenge* cloth that had the title “St. Charles Lwanga Catholic Parish, Regiment Church Lusaka, Zambia” with a drawing of St. Charles Lwanga and the names of all the SCCs in the parish.

1970: In 1970 Small Christian Communities started in Iten Parish in Eldoret Diocese, Kenya. They were called *Kokwet*, the natural local unit meaning “neighborhood” in the language of the Kalenjin people. The Christian *Kokwet* “met about twice a month in the

⁴⁰ Andrew Edele, “The Beginning of Small Christian Communities in Zambia: Some Versions,” in Marc Nsanzurwimo, *Here We Are: 70 Years of Evangelization and Social Concern. Regiment Parish: St. Charles Lwanga Catholic Church (1939-2009)*, Ndola, Mission Press, 2013, pp. 6-7.

evening after work with the catechist, read selected passages from the *Bible* and discussed together what it meant to be a Christian. The emphasis was on service.”⁴¹

1971: During the World Synod of Bishops in Rome in 1971 the African delegates present noted that SCCs already existed in Africa.

In the early 1970s Tanzanian Bishop Christopher Mwoleka (who died in 2002), the Bishop of Rulenge Diocese in northwestern Tanzania, began to develop his vision and praxis of small communities based on *Bible* Sharing and practical action. He is considered the founder of SCCs in Tanzania. Mwoleka visited the *vyama* in North Mara in Musoma Diocese and other community experiments. He started lectionary-based small groups in Rulenge called *Vikundi vya Injili* (Swahili for “Gospel Groups”). Gradually they become known in Swahili as *Jumuyia Ndogo Ndogo za Kristo*. They were neighborhood groups of families that would come together for prayer, *Bible* Sharing and practical activities. They paralleled the *Nyumba Kumi Kumi* (Swahili for Ten Houses), the socialistic plan of President Julius Nyerere and the Tanzanian Government to group houses/homes/families together in the same geographical area. This was part of the policy of *Ujamaa* (Swahili for “Familyhood”).

1972: Malawian Missionary of Africa Bishop Patrick Kalilombe, MAfr (who died in 2012) was a great visionary of SCCs. He became the bishop of Lilongwe Diocese, Malawi in 1972. He understood the cultural importance of *Mphakati/Miphakati* (the Chewa, Malawi word for “small family” or “in the midst of/among the people”– referring to the wider family but smaller than a clan) and how they could be inculturated into Catholic pastoral practice. He envisioned these groups as being responsible for Christian formation and helping to raise children in the Catholic faith. Being a biblical scholar Kalilombe valued reading and reflecting on the *Bible*. So in 1972 he encouraged Catholic small family groups to regularly reflect on the Gospel. So SCCs were born in Malawi and *Mphakati* became the common name. He also hoped these SCCs would become eucharistic communities where the Eucharist would be celebrated on the grassroots level on a regular basis.

1973: In 1973-1975 Kalilombe held a Mini-Synod in Lilongwe Diocese, Malawi. He was the first bishop in Eastern Africa to start a diocesan pastoral plan of Small Christian Communities on the grassroots level. His “Biography” states:

In 1973 he wrote his first Pastoral Letter for Lilongwe Diocese entitled *Christ’s Church in Lilongwe, Today and Tomorrow*. The letter focused on building a self-reliant church. His intention was to build Lilongwe Diocese into a church that is self-ministering, self-supporting and self-propagating. To materialize this vision Bishop Kalilombe called upon all the laity to be actively involved in the whole life and mission of the Church. He thought that this would be possible if there could be small groups in various places where ideas of how to improve and develop the Church could be suggested and implemented at a higher level. Such small groups were to be called *Miphakati* (Small Christian Communities). Consequently a mini-synod was, later on, called where such ideas were to be discussed by the Christians at all levels; diocese, deanery, parish and outstation. The bishop had in mind that if

⁴¹ Irish Kiltegan priest Fintan McDonald, “Pastoral Experiment in Kalenjin,” *Mirror*, February, 1972, p. 2.

Miphakati would be established, discussions would not only be spiritual but also involve the integral life of a human being such as socio-political aspects of life involving human rights, justice and peace, education and health, employment in line with its conditions and public morality.⁴²

The AMECEA Catechetical Congress on “Towards Adult Christian Community” in Nairobi, Kenya in April, 1973 was one of the first AMECEA-wide meetings to reflect on SCCs. The results are contained in *Gaba Pastoral Paper* No. 29 (presently called *Spearhead*). German Fidei Donum missionary Father Max Stetter presented a slide show on SCCs in Kiyinda-Mityana Diocese in Uganda. He points out: “The new way of adult learning we discussed in the congress was an important step in seeing the community as subject and no longer just an object of catechetical and pastoral growth.”⁴³

This historical research is very enlightening. It shows that already in the five AMECEA countries – Kenya, Malawi, Tanzania, Uganda and Zambia – experiences of SCCs on the grassroots existed in both rural and urban areas before the famous AMECEA Study Conference on “Planning for the Church in Eastern Africa in the 1980s” in Nairobi, Kenya in December, 1973. This conference stated: “We have to insist on building church life and work on Basic Christian Communities in both rural and urban areas. Church life must be based on the communities in which everyday life and work take place: those basic and manageable social groups whose members can experience real inter-personal relationships and feel a sense of communal belonging, both in living and working.”⁴⁴ This pastoral policy was in the context of the statement: “We are convinced that in these countries of Eastern Africa it is time for the Church to become truly local, that is, self-ministering, self-propagating and self-supporting.”

At this conference Bishop Raphael Ndingi Mwana’a Nzeki of Nakuru Diocese, Kenya presented a sound-slide show on “Planning for the Church in Eastern Africa in the 1980s.” Two sections were on “Church as Community” and “Biblical Background.” The two slides on Christian Community had this commentary:

Our objective is to develop more Basic Christian Communities. To achieve this in Eastern Africa we have to take into account the existence of many other Christian Churches, other communities, religious organizations. African Independent Churches and [African] traditional religions.⁴⁵

⁴² “Biography Of Bishop Patrick Kalilombe, Missionaries of Africa (MAfr),” Episcopal Conference of Malawi Website, retrieved on 10 December, 2013, http://www.ecmmw.org/news_updates/kalilombe_BIOGRAPHY.html

⁴³ Max Stetter in an email message to the author dated 3 August, 2011.

⁴⁴ “Guidelines for the Catholic Church in Eastern Africa in the 1980s,” *African Ecclesial Review (AFER)*, Vol. 16, No 1 & 2 (1974), p. 10.

⁴⁵ Raphael Ndingi Mwana’a Nzeki, “Planning for the Church in Eastern Africa in the 1980s,” Text of Sound-Slide Show,” Nairobi: AMECEA Office, Privately Printed, 16 December, 1973.

Looking back we see the importance of putting into practice the challenge of Kalilombe. During this 1973 AMECEA Meeting he said that *every* bishop,⁴⁶ priest, brother, and sister (and as a corollary, every Catholic) should participate in a particular SCC – not as a leader, but as an ordinary member. This reinforces the key priority that ecclesologically all Catholics (priests, religious and lay people) participate in this new way of being church. Everyone by his or her baptism is a potential SCC member.⁴⁷

This is rooted in the theology that SCCs are not optional, but are the basic unit/basic cell/basic building block/basic foundation/pillar/most local expression of the Catholic Church. That is why ideally we should greet *all* people as Small Christian Community members. During a SCCs Workshop in Lilongwe, Malawi in December, 2013 we had a lively discussion in which some priests resisted this idea saying the priest serves all SCCs and show not show favoritism to one particular SCC. But it was pointed out that pastorally this can work easily. For example, a priest can become an ordinary member of the SCC in his specific neighborhood or geographical area (that is, where he is actually living). He is a member because he is a Christian, not because he is a priest. Then he serves all the SCCs in the parish in his pastoral role as a priest.⁴⁸

Let us remember that the leaders of the SCCs are lay people. This is one reason why SCCs are a new way of being church.⁴⁹ Priests, brothers, sisters and seminarians are

⁴⁶ It is often said that bishops are too busy, that they have no time to be with the local lay people, but consider this: There are 98 hours in a week (7 x 24). Participating in a one and one-half hour weekly meeting of a SCC as an ordinary member (with no leadership role) is only 1.53 % of the week. This is a unique opportunity for a bishop to visit the homes of African families and share their lives from the inside. Tanzanian Bishop Method Kilaini describes his participation as a simple member of a SCC in St. Peter's Parish in Dar es Salaam Archdiocese, Tanzania: "This makes me feel at home in my home surroundings with my neighbors whom I would have otherwise not known. Through them I feel part of the local community. Each week I attend the meetings and participate in all the tasks." In Rita Ishengoma, *Akamwani: The Challenges of Bible Sharing in Small Christian Communities*, Dar es Salaam: Old East Africa Ltd, 2009, p. 7. After moving to Bukoba Diocese Kilaini is a member of his local SCC that consists of the priests and sisters living on the bishop's compound. He says in an email message dated 12 May, 2014: "I love and believe in Small Christian Communities."

⁴⁷ St. Monica Parish in Palatka, Florida, USA has an interesting approach. Parishioners who do not participate in a Small Christian Community are invited to be extended members. Each SCC invites, welcomes, prays for and connects with them without any coercion. Shannon Scruby Henderson, "Small Christian Communities: Big Results," *St. Augustine Catholic*, July-August, 2013, retrieved on 30 July, 2013, <http://faithcatholicdigital.com/publication/?i=165210&pre=1>

⁴⁸ A full report, [Malawi Hosts National SCCs Workshop on the Theme "SCCs Embrace the Word of God"](#) is found on the SCCs Website and [MALAWI: ECM Hosts National SCCs Workshop](#) is found on the AMECEA Website.



⁴⁹ Another way of understanding this "newness" is Brazilian Theologian Father José Marins' valuable distinction that Basic Ecclesial Communities/Small Christian Communities are not a movement in the Catholic Church, but the "Church on the Move."

animators and formators, not bosses. An AMECEA Bishop speaking at a World Synod of Bishops in Rome reminded his brother bishops that priests, brothers and sisters are 1 % of the Catholic Church while laymen and laywomen are 99 %. Tanzanian Bishop Christopher Mwoleka of Rulenge Diocese, Tanzania stated: “In today’s world there is a vocation to Small Christian Communities. The laity are the leaders in responding to this call.”⁵⁰

1974: At the October, 1974 World Synod of Bishops IV Ordinary General Assembly *On Evangelization in the Modern World* Tanzanian Bishop James Sangu of Mbeya Diocese, Tanzania (who died in 1998) was a General Relator. He presented the report on the continent of Africa called “Report on the Experiences of the Church in the Work of Evangelization in Africa” that was compiled from the answers to the questions of the *Lineamenta* (the Latin word for “Outlines” – the first document in the process of a meeting such as a synod) from the African National and Regional Episcopal Conferences. Section V on “Communication of Experiences of Evangelization” treats the 12 subjects related to evangelization in the second document, the *Instrumentum Laboris* (the Latin word for “Working Document”), but states: “The order of subjects has been changed to state better the priorities and concerns of evangelization in Africa.”⁵¹

After No. 1 (“Interior Life”) and ahead of No. 3 (“Liturgical Renewal”) and No. 4 (“Young Churches”), No. 2 on “Small Communities” stated:

The Church in Africa strongly emphasizes the creation of small local Christian communities. Church life must be based on the communities in which everyday life and work take place: those basic and manageable social groups whose members can experience real inter-personal relationships and feel a sense of communal belonging, both in living and working.⁵² Christian communities at this level will be best suited to develop real intense vitality and become effective witnesses in their natural environment. In such authentic communities it will be easier to develop a sense of community whereby the church can exist in Christ’s Body, consisting of many parts (clergy, religious, laity) with many charisms, but making one Body in one Spirit.⁵³

African bishops present at the synod, after examining the specifically African problems related to evangelization, published a famous “Declaration of the Bishops of Africa

⁵⁰ Christopher Mwoleka in Robert Pelton, *From Power to Communion: Toward a New Way of Being Church Based on the Latin American Experience*, Notre Dame, University of Notre Dame Press, 1994.

⁵¹ James Sangu, “Report on the Experiences of the Church in the Work of Evangelization in Africa,” Fourth Synod of Bishops on “On Evangelization in the Modern World,” in Raymond Hickey (ed.), *Modern Missionary Documents and Africa*, Dublin: Dominican Publications, 1982, p. 215.

⁵² This sentence is quoted directly from the 1973 AMECEA Plenary Meeting. This priority resulted from Sangu being responsible for the “Africa Continental Report” that was prepared by him and his AMECEA advisors in Dar es Salaam in 1974.

⁵³ James Sangu, “Report,” p. 217.

and Madagascar Present at the Fourth Synod of Bishops on Communion and Co-responsibility in the Church.” The section on “Living Christian Communities” stated.

In the spirit of ecclesial communion so clearly proclaimed by Vatican II, the Bishops of Africa and Madagascar emphasize the essential and fundamental role of Living Christian Communities: priests, religious and laity united in mind and action with their Bishop. It is the clear task of these communities, rooted and integrated as they are in the life of their peoples, to search deeper into the Gospel, to set the priorities of pastoral planning and activity, to take the initiative called for by the mission of the Church, to discern, in a spirit of faith where there can be continuity between culture and Christian life and where cleavage is necessary in all aspects of life that hinder the penetration of the Gospel. Every activity in the process of building up our Churches must operate in constant reference to the life of our communities. Starting off from these communities we must bring to our Catholic faith, not only those cultural and artistic experiences which are part of our heritage – real even though as yet modest Africanization – but also a theology which enables us to tackle the challenges arising out of our historical background and the ongoing evolution of our society.

During the synod itself the seven AMECEA Delegates divided the major themes with Kalilombe being responsible for “Basic Christian Communities.” Ugandan Archbishop Emmanuel Nsubuga (who died in 1991) of Kampala Archdiocese in Uganda’s intervention on “Formation of Christian Communities” stated:

Discussions about Small Christian Communities are going on nearly everywhere, but since the local situation is so different the conclusions show a wide variety. We want to stress in particular that these communities have to learn to be more outward-looking.⁵⁴

At the end of the synod the seven delegates from the AMECEA countries issued eight *Messages to Eastern Africa*. The *Message to Laity* emphasized the catechists’ role as “animators of small local communities” and that the responsibility of the laity “to coordinate Small Christian Communities at the grassroots lies on the shoulders of lay councilors in cooperation with the clergy.”⁵⁵ So already the AMECEA SCC Key Pastoral Priority was beginning to take shape.

In 1974 the Masaka Diocesan Synod in Uganda decided to start SCCs throughout the diocese.

On developments in Tanzania Kilaini reports:

⁵⁴ Emmanuel Nsubuga, “Three Archbishops from Africa Elected to Synod of Bishops Council,” *AMECEA Information*, 24 October, 1974, p. 1.

⁵⁵ “Messages to Eastern Africa Are Highlight of Synod of Bishops Follow-up,” *AMECEA Information*, 13 November, 1974, p. 1.

Mwoleka was the first bishop in Tanzania to make the Small Christian Communities the official pastoral priority of his diocese and as 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.⁵⁶

1975: In June, 1975 the Tanzania Episcopal Conference passed a resolution to promote SCCs throughout the dioceses. In November, 1975 Mwoleka and the Diocesan Directors of the Lay Apostolate implemented this resolution by developing a step-by-step plan for starting SCCs throughout Tanzania. He coined the saying: “There is no blueprint for building SCCs.” SCCs grow, develop, evolve in different ways from below. If SCCs are a new way of being church from the local level up, a certain searching, experimentation and dying and rising will continue as the grassroots tries to evolve this new inculturated model of church and the seed of a new model of society. Mwoleka also stated that in his diocese “the entire pastoral work will be carried out by means of Small Christian Communities.”^{57 58} Over the years this term “pastoral work” has evolved in a wider and more holistic sense to touch all of life including social development and justice and peace priorities.⁵⁹

We have a rich history of SCCs in post-conciliar documents. The World Synod of Bishops took place in Rome in October, 1974 and Venerable Pope Paul VI's Apostolic Exhortation *On Evangelization in the Modern World* was published in 1975. Section No. 58 on “Base Ecclesial Communities” distinguishes two types of *Communautés Ecclésiales de Base*: those within the structure of the Catholic Church and those outside (where the name is strictly a sociological name). A description of the former is:

In some regions they appear and develop, almost without exception, within the Church, having solidarity with her life, being nourished by her teaching and united with her pastors. In these cases, they spring from the need to live the Church's life more intensely, or from the desire and quest for a more human dimension such as larger ecclesial communities can only offer

⁵⁶ Method Kilaini, “Small Christian Communities,” p. 2.

⁵⁷ This is documented in *Small Christian Communities in Tanzania*, Sound-slide show of 94 color slides converted into a video, Nairobi: SONOLUX Media, Africa Service, and Maryknoll: VIDCOM, 1978. The description reads: “The life of Christians in a small, rural village in Western Tanzania is a life of sharing in community. The video shows an example of how the pastoral priority of the Catholic bishops of Eastern Africa -- building Small Christian Communities -- is put into practice on the local, grassroots level.”

⁵⁸ This priority is emphasized in other parts of Africa. For example, St. Andrew Parish in Rwanda has the motto “Everything in Small Christian Communities.” Each SCC has its own structure, organization and program coordinated through the parish. Christians are brought together through the SCCs.

⁵⁹ The life, apostolic activities and vision of Mwoleka are described in John Joseph Rwechungura, *Mjue Askofu Christopher Mwoleka: Mtume wa Upendo Upeo wa Yesu*, Karagwe. Tanzania: Privately Printed, 2012.

with difficulty, especially in the big modern cities which lend themselves both to life in the mass and to anonymity. Such communities can quite simply be in their own way an extension on the spiritual and religious level -- worship, deepening of faith, fraternal charity, prayer, contact with pastors -- of the small sociological community such as the village, etc. Or again their aim may be to bring together, for the purpose of listening to and meditating on the Word, for the sacraments and the bond of the agape, groups of people who are linked by age, culture, civil state or social situation: married couples, young people, professional people, etc.; people who already happen to be united in the struggle for justice, brotherly aid to the poor, human advancement. In still other cases they bring Christians together in places where the shortage of priests does not favor the normal life of a parish community. This is all presupposed within communities constituted by the Church, especially individual Churches and parishes.

These BECs are called “a place of evangelization for the benefit of the bigger communities especially the individual churches... a hope for the universal church ...and proclaimers of the Gospel themselves.” This authoritative voice of the pope and the universal church confirmed the direction that the AMECEA countries were taking in building SCCs.

Another important text that can be applied to SCCs is Venerable Pope Paul VI's challenge in No. 63:

Evangelization loses much of its force and effectiveness if it does not take into consideration the actual people to whom it is addressed, if it does not use their language, their signs and symbols, if it does not answer the questions they ask, and if it does not have an impact on their concrete life.

African SCC members have a unique opportunity to communicate the Word of God to people on the local, grassroots level. This is the heart of inculturation in Africa.

Another challenge is No. 41:

For the Church, the first means of evangelization is the witness of an authentically Christian life, given over to God in a communion that nothing should destroy and at the same time given to one's neighbor with limitless zeal. As we said recently to a group of lay people, "Modern man listens more willingly to witnesses than to teachers, and if he does listen to teachers, it is because they are witnesses"... It is therefore primarily by her conduct and by her life that the Church will evangelize the world, in other words, by her living witness of fidelity to the Lord Jesus -- the witness of poverty and detachment, of freedom in the face of the powers of this world, in short, the witness of sanctity.

African SCC members are important witnesses of Jesus Christ and Christian values in their local communities, neighborhoods and parishes.

These ideas were reinforced by St. John Paul II. In his 1979 Apostolic Exhortation *On Catechesis in Our Time* Section 67 on “In the Parish” refers to “more pertinent and effective small communities” (see also the original stronger worded “Proposition”). In his 1988

Apostolic Exhortation on the *Vocation and Mission of the Lay Faithful* Section No. 26 on “The Parish” states: “So that all parishes may be truly communities of Christians, local ecclesial authorities ought to foster small, basic or so-called ‘living’ communities, where the faithful can communicate the Word of God and express it in service and love to one another; these communities are a true expression of ecclesial communion and centers of evangelization, in communion with their pastors.”⁶⁰ In St. John Paul II’s 1990 Encyclical Letter *The Mission of the Church* Section No. 51 on “Basic Ecclesial Communities” states that BECs are “a force for evangelization...good centers for Christian formation and missionary outreach...a great hope of the church.”

1976: The AMECEA Study Conference on “Building Small Christian Communities” took place in Nairobi, Kenya in July, 1976.^{61 62} The key statement was: “Systematic formation of

⁶⁰ John Paul II, “On the Vocation and Mission of the Lay Faithful” *Christifideles Laici* (Vatican: The Holy See, December 30, 1988), http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_jp-ii_exh_30121988_christifideles-laici_en.html

⁶¹ At this meeting in July, 1976 President Jomo Kenyatta made the now famous statement: “The Church is the conscience of society, and today a society needs a conscience. Do not be afraid to speak. If we are wrong and you keep quiet, one day you may have to answer for our mistakes.” Quoted in the Kenya Bishops *Pastoral Letter* on “Family and Responsible Parenthood,” 27 April, 1979 and in Rodrigo Mejia (ed.), *The Conscience of Society*, Nairobi: Paulines Publications Africa, 1995, p. 50. At the AMECEA Study Conference in Nairobi, Kenya in June, 2011 President Mwai Kibaki said in a similar way: “I urge all Church leaders to freely speak out their concerns over issues affecting the lives of our people. As spiritual leaders in our society you shoulder the responsibility of pointing the right way forward, correcting us when we go wrong and ensuring that we remain God fearing men and women.” *AMECEA News*, No. 44 (August 2011), p. 6. This section of his speech on 29 June, 2011 is also found in the DVD on *AMECEA Family of God: Celebrating a Golden Jubilee of Evangelization in Solidarity*. Nairobi: Ukweli Video Productions, 2011.

⁶² It is interesting to note the similarity in time to Portuguese-speaking Africa. The First National Pastoral Assembly took place in Beira, Mozambique from 8-13 September, 1977 (two years after independence from Portugal) on the theme “The Ministerial Church and the Small Christian Communities.” The importance of ministries/services in SCCs was emphasized. Mozambique diocesan priest Father Bernardo Suate explained:

The main concerns of this First Assembly were: to move from a triumphant church to a simple and poor one; a Church-Family with freely given reciprocal services; a church well in the heart of the people and well inserted in society; a church that adopts the SCCs to allow creativity and responsibility of all the People of God in building the Local Church; and a Ministerial Church where each member takes his or her responsibility in the church understood as a community of servants (from the “Conclusions”).

A follow-up took place at the Second National Pastoral Assembly from 1-11 January, 1992 in Matola, Maputo on “Consolidating the Local Church” especially through formation starting in the SCCs. Suate explains: “The model of the SCCs was once more adopted as well as the one of a Ministerial Church, a church that is communion and family with active participation of each one of its members (from the “Conclusions”).

Small Christian Communities should be the key pastoral priority in the years to come in Eastern Africa.”⁶³ This is the single most important statement made about SCCs.⁶⁴ Kalilombe stated that this decision

is a basic commitment, a serious shift in pastoral emphasis. It is deliberately intended to modify deeply our pastoral system, policy, and practice...We need to adopt a new system, where the basic units of the church are those smaller communities where the ordinary life of the people takes place. If we want the church to live and function actually as a community, then we must go down to that smaller level at which people live and interact in their daily lives. It is in these smaller communities that the church can express itself in a meaningful Christian communion. Such a basic community would be the only realistic base for the church's existence and effectiveness. Here is where the church can exist in an authentic communion. The wider dimensions of the church are not one community, but a communion of communities. The parish is a communion of basic communities within the parish area.⁶⁵

Thus Kalilombe emphasized that the setting up of Small Christian Communities formed a “decisive turning point”⁶⁶ in the pastoral strategy of Eastern Africa. This renewal of pastoral method and structure was a logical consequence of a whole trend in pastoral thinking, planning and experimentation.

The meeting went on to affirm the essential ecclesial character and characteristics of Small Christian Communities by stating: “The [Small] Christian Communities we are trying

See Bernardo Suate, email message to the author dated 9 May, 2014.

Mozambique is one of the nine countries in Southern Africa that belongs to Inter-Regional Meeting of the Bishops of Southern Africa (IMBISA) with headquarters in Harare, Zimbabwe. It includes six episcopal conferences.

⁶³ 1976 AMECEA Study Conference on "Building Small Christian Communities," "Conclusions," *African Ecclesial Review (AFER)*, 18, 5 (October, 1976), p. 250.

⁶⁴ In SCCs Courses and Workshops today one or more classes is devoted to: "The AMECEA Key Pastoral Priority of Building Small Christian Communities in Eastern Africa." For example, see: Annotated Syllabus of Two Credit Course “Small Christian Communities as a New Model of Church in Africa Today,” Nairobi: Hekima College and Tangaza University College, 2013.

⁶⁵ Patrick Kalilombe, "An Overall Review of Building Small Christian Communities," 1976 AMECEA Study Conference, pp. 266-67. For a further explanation of this pastoral shift see Patrick Kalilombe, *From Outstation to Small Christian Communities: A Comparison of Two Pastoral Methods in Lilongwe Diocese*, Berkeley: University of California Unpublished Ph. D. Dissertation, 1983. An abridged version appears as *From Outstation to Small Christian Communities*, *Spearhead* Nos. 82-85 (June--October, 1984).

⁶⁶ Patrick Kalilombe, *ibid.* p. 266.

to build are simply the most local incarnations of the One, Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church.”

The Catholic bishops in Eastern Africa chose this SCC key pastoral priority as the best way to build up the Local Churches to be truly self-ministering (self-governing), self-propagating (self-spreading), and self-supporting (self-reliant and self-sustainable). The three selfs are essential characteristics of SCCs as the base/basic level of the church, and by extension, of the Local Church. This is a real self-actualization of the church. The family, the SCC, the outstation, the subparish, the parish, the deanery and the diocese reflect a “Communion of Communities Model of Church” starting from below, from the grassroots.

An important challenge was for the bishops themselves to take “ownership” of this pastoral priority and to make it their very own – not only to support it intellectually (from their head), but to internalize it so that it comes from their pastoral heart and is the source of their pastoral planning. In his “Introduction” to the Plenary Conclusions McCauley stated:

The fruit of the Study Conference, it was generally agreed, was the clarification of ideas and the deepening of convictions that the building of Small Christian Communities in Eastern Africa is a practical policy, and in the case of primary evangelization, a necessity. The participants pledged themselves to work for the conference’s aims and spirit among their associates in their home areas.⁶⁷

During this meeting the word “small”⁶⁸ was specifically chosen to avoid certain undertones of the word “basic.” Ndingi stated that to call our grassroots communities “small” instead of “basic” is another indication that the movement in Africa was growing on its own, quite independent of what was happening along the same lines in other places such as Latin America.⁶⁹

During this time some theologians in Eastern Africa especially the staff of the AMECEA Pastoral Institute in Gaba, Kampala in Uganda were articulating how SCCs are the groundwork for the structure of the whole church. In the “Theology and the Church” section of the book *The Community Called Church* the chapter on SCCs is significantly entitled “The Small Christian Community as Basic Cell of the Church.” The book explains “how the policy of building small communities as the most local cells of the church is solidly based on a vision of the church that is both new and old.”⁷⁰ The pastoral institute modified its nine month residence course at Gaba to include the theory and practice of SCCs.

⁶⁷ Vincent McCauley, “Introduction,” 1976 AMECEA Study Conference.

⁶⁸ Years later Pius Rutechura said: “Why do we say **SMALL** Christian Communities? Because *small* is beautiful, *small* is visible, *small* makes you feel like you belong.”

⁶⁹ Raphael Ndingi Mwana’a Nzeki, “Basic Communities: the African Experience” in *A New Missionary Era*, Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1982, p. 100.

⁷⁰ *The Community Called Church*. Volume 5 of an Experimental Source-book for Religious Education, *Spearhead* No. 60 (December, 1979), p. ii.

Kalilombe explained further:

The SCC is the smallest cell of the Church through which the Universal Church lives and breathes. It is the incarnation of the Church of the New Testament at the most basic level of people's lives. Through the SCCs, the Church, like Christ, becomes incarnated in the life of the people. She is led by the local people, meets and answers local needs and problems, and finds within herself resources needed for her life. This must be our goal if the SCCs in our parishes are to be dynamic, vibrant, self-reliant and self-ministering.⁷¹

American theologian Maryknoll Father Michael Kirwen, MM stresses the importance of one's theology of church. The SCC only becomes vital and the nucleus if the theology of church operative in the parish sees it as the foundation of the church, the basic building block of the church, the "little church." Otherwise the SCC is just another traditional society, apostolic group or parish organization like the Legion of Mary. I think most pastors still in fact deal with and conceptualize the SCC as a club, even though they might give a verbal acknowledgement of their building block nature.⁷² Another distinction is that these traditional societies, apostolic groups and parish organizations have their own special charisms in the church while SCCs are part of the very nature of the church.

The well-known Brazilian theologian Father José Marins states: "The BCC is the whole church in a concentrated form. Or to put it another way, it is a germ or a seed which has within itself all the essential elements of the Church of Jesus." Marins also points out that one of the main differences between SCCs and traditional societies/apostolic groups/parish organizations/movements is that the former inculturate from the bottom up (emerge and evolve according to local situations and needs), while the latter normally follow a universal plan from the top down, for example, the *International Constitution* of the Legion of Mary that is applied everywhere.

O'Halloran adds:

There is a helpful analogy regarding the small community possessing all the characteristics of the universal church. In a loaf of bread we find a variety of ingredients: flour, salt, water, yeast. Now if we break off a tiny piece, we find the same ingredients in the piece as in the entire loaf. Just so the Small Christian Community has all the ingredients – characteristics – of the universal church.⁷³

Claver's comment about the Philippines fits the Eastern Africa situation:

⁷¹ Patrick Kalilombe, "Biblical Background of Christian Communities," *AFER*, 1976, p. 12.

CHECK

⁷² Michael Kirwen in an interview with the author in Nairobi in September, 1983.

⁷³ James O'Halloran, *Small Christian Communities*, p. **ADD**

The hardest obstacle to overcome concerned the nature of BECs. Repeatedly it had to be said that it is not just another movement like the Cursillo or the Charismatic. Nor was it just another movement like the Knights of Columbus or the Catholic Women's League and hence in competition with these more established bodies. It had to be clearly shown it *is* church itself, the exemplar of a church of communion at the lowest levels of the church. And because it is such, members of any movement or organization must themselves belong to BECs, and help advance them with whatever special contribution to its life that their movement or organization can provide.⁷⁴

Tanzanian theologian Father Laurenti Magesa sums up this theological analysis by saying:

But what is the difference between SCCs and other sociological groupings in the [AMECEA] Region and in the world, even if these latter also espouse joy, justice, reconciliation and peace as their goal? The theological core of SCCs has to do with this question. The issue revolves around what values the different types of communities are based on. This determines their quality and status in the eyes of the church. Mere sociological groupings with this orientation are important and must be encouraged by the church, but they do not hold the same theological implications as SCCs.

SCCs are groupings of a drastically different, much deeper order: they are formed not only to achieve a goal, whatever that may be, but theologically *they are themselves the goal*. This is because they are the church; they constitute the root from which the wider church emerges. Without them the broader, or "catholic," church cannot be realized in the manner that Pope Francis describes it in his apostolic exhortation *The Joy of the Gospel*. At least, it cannot endure. Authentic love, joy, peace, justice, and the common good as illustrated in the Gospels grow as a result of *communion*, the theological element that is the essence of SCCs. SCCs are therefore not only "communities" in the usual sense of the word. Each is a communion analogous to a body of Christ that St. Paul elaborates on (1 *Corinthians* 12). Although there are other analogies of church, such as People of God or Family of God, this image of body is still unsurpassable to describe the reality, nature, and even organization of the church.

Any genuine SCC should be the incarnation of the universal church. The characteristics, qualities and functions or ministries of the church catholic must be incorporated in it at the same time as the church catholic reflects the characteristics, qualities, and functions found in SCCs. Arising out of the spirit of SCCs, the universal church becomes also a communion, a body with different parts and different functions, but each in harmony with the rest of the others and respectful of them.⁷⁵

⁷⁴ Claver, *Making*, p. 103.

⁷⁵ Laurenti Magesa, "The Joy of Community in Small Christian Communities," *New People*, No. 149, March-April, 2014, pp. 22, 24.

This Small Christian Community Model of Church is based on the church as communion (*koinonia*). In terms of contemporary theology this is part of Trinitarian Communion Ecclesiology and a “communion of communities” ecclesiology. There is an African saying *If God lives as a community, we must do the same*. SCC members are called to a life of sharing modeled on the Trinity. This communion also fits into the idea of World or Global Church mentioned earlier. Starting from the bottom up:

- a SCC is a communion of families.
- an outstation (also called an outchurch, prayer house or chapel) is a communion of SCCs.
- a subparish is a communion of outstations.
- a parish is a communion of subparishes.
- a deanery is a communion of parishes.
- a diocese is a communion of deaneries.
- a country (for example, the national bishops' conference) is a communion of dioceses and archdioceses.
- the World Church or Global Church is a communion of national and continental bishops' conferences.

Important new ideas and initiatives need a voice, a forum, a literature. Over the next two decades especially, the growth of SCCs was documented and fostered by many articles and reports in the *African Ecclesial Review (AFER)*, *AMECEA Documentation Service (ADS)*, *AMECEA Information*, the *Spearhead Series* of monographs (formerly *Gaba Pastoral Papers*), *Service* and other publications and communications media. There was a constant description of, and commentary on, the Small Christian Communities in Eastern Africa. Between 1973 and 1983, for example, 48 bulletins about SCCs were published in the *AMECEA Documentation Service*. A good summary of the 1970s period is found in the section “Towards Small Christian Communities” in the chapter on “Structural Localization” in Dutch missionary and historian Father Albert De Jong, CSSp’s book *The Challenge of Vatican II in East Africa*.

1977: At the 1977 Synod in Rome on “Catechesis in Our Time” most of the interventions made by the African bishops revolved around the experience of the Small Christian Communities and their importance in catechetical formation of new converts and seasoned Christians.⁷⁶

1978: 1978 saw the birth of *Bible Sharing/Gospel Sharing* at the Lumko Missiological Institute in South Africa. Excellent SCC training manuals were published that popularized the Lumko “Seven Steps” Method of *Bible Sharing/Gospel Sharing*. German Fidei Donum Bishop Oswald Hirmer (who died in 2011) states:

The Seven Steps were developed by the Lumko Pastoral Institute in South Africa and have spread all over the world. They constitute a kind of “agenda” for Small Christian Communities as they bring Christ into the center

⁷⁶ The bishops’ interventions appear in the entire issue of “The African Bishops Speak,” *African Ecclesial Review (AFER)*, Vol. 20, No. 1 (February, 1978).

and encourage active participation in the mission of the church in the neighborhood.⁷⁷

Altogether there are eight Gospel sharing methods that can be adapted to the local context and situation. These excellent training manuals have been used throughout the AMECEA Region. Lumko Courses have been conducted in Eastern African countries annually from 1992 to the present.⁷⁸ It is disappointing that these training manuals have not been revised and updated with contemporary examples, stories and references to newer church documents such as the two African Synods.⁷⁹ There are serious gaps in the content. Our evaluation indicates that new SCC manuals should be written on (alphabetically): Addiction, Ecology/Environment, Family, Human Trafficking, Marriage, Social Media and Youth/Adolescence.

A challenge to dioceses in the AMECEA Region came from Blomfontein Archdiocese in South Africa that went a step further in the pastoral planning and coordination that emphasizes SCCs by establishing this guideline: "If the pastor in a parish with active SCCs is transferred, there is an archdiocesan policy that his successor should also be committed to SCCs."⁸⁰

1979: The AMECEA Study Conference on "The Implementation of the AMECEA Bishops' Pastoral Priority of Building Small Christian Communities: An Evaluation"⁸¹ took place in

⁷⁷ Oswald Hirmer, *Our Joy in Being Catholic: Our Catholic Customs and Beliefs*, Nairobi: Paulines Publications Africa, 2007, p. 87.

⁷⁸ The facilitators of these courses are Kenyan Loreto Sister Ephigenia Gachiri, IBVM based in Nairobi and Ugandan layman Mr. Joseph Wasswa based in Tororo Archdiocese, Uganda who are both passionate about the "Lumko Way of Being Church. Wasswa is catechist who coordinates six outstations in his parish following the "Lumko Model of Church." See the "2013 Lumko East Africa Workshop Report" at Tabor Hill Spiritual Center, Nyahururu, Kenya from 9 September to 5 October 2013 by Deacon Joseph Odongo at: <http://www.smallchristiancommunities.org/images/stories/pdf/lumko.pdf>

⁷⁹ After years of discernment and study "the August 2013 Plenary Assembly of the South African Catholic Bishops' Conference resolved to 'park' [put on hold/suspend/stop] Lumko Pastoral Institute for about two years. The process has begun to ensure that the operations of the Institute cease in December. However, the conference center will continue to operate. All are encouraged to make use of this facility for retreats, conferences, workshops." Newsletter of the South African Catholic Bishops Conference *eKhanya*, Vol. 4: 6 (September 2013).

⁸⁰ One comment heard from lay people is, "We are the victims of the next parish priest that comes along." A similar comment: "We lay people are held hostage by the priorities of the next pastor." Practically this means that in the hierarchical-style of Catholic Church, a parish can have an effective pastoral plan of active SCCs, but a new pastor can come in and change this overnight.

⁸¹ Ghanaian Scripture scholar and Missionary of Africa Father Richard Baawobr, MAfr points out: "It might be good to establish five year plans with one or two points to implement during a definite period, with tools and formation in that line. The way you [AMECEA] promoted the Small Christian Communities in the 70s shows that when there is focus and a

Zomba, Malawi in 1979.⁸² There were case studies of “Christian Communities in Mbarara Diocese, Uganda” by Ugandan Bishop John Kakubi, “Small Christian Communities in Kigoma Diocese, Tanzania” by Tanzanian Bishop Alphonse Nsabi and “Community Building in an Urban Area in Zambia” by Zambian Bishop Dennis de Jong. The meeting emphasized that SCCs are the neighborhood church that is the embodiment of the One, Holy and Catholic and Apostolic Church and are the best way to renew the church and said: “Structurally the Small Christian Community is the most local unit of the Church...of its very nature it (the family) has to reach out to other families, and the Small Christian Community is made up of several family groups.” So the AMECEA Bishops actually went beyond the theology accepted by the Second Vatican Council.

Then the delegates clarified exactly what these SCCs were not: The Small Christian Communities should not be understood as a fringe group, nor a group for a few elite people,⁸³ nor a group formed for a particular purpose, such as a prayer group, a sodality, a Catholic Action group, a development group, a study group, though these are legitimate and valuable: it is precisely the means by which the one Church is present in each locality, touching the whole life of its members.

One pastoral resolution stated: “SCCs are an effective way of developing the mission dimension of the church at the most local level, and of making people feel that they are really part of the church's evangelizing work.”

1980: With SCCs highlighted and emphasized in three consecutive AMECEA Plenary Meetings the focus in the decade of the 1980s was on the implementation of SCCs as the key pastoral priority in the AMECEA Region. The results were uneven. Some dioceses and countries forged ahead. Others lagged behind. The reasons included church-centered reasons such as the reality that some bishops promoted SCCs, others did not and vast amounts of

common drive, things move forward.” “AMECEA Golden Jubilee Celebration 2011: Congratulatory Message of the Missionaries of Africa,” *AMECEA 50 Years of Evangelization in Solidarity: 1961 -- 2011*. Nairobi: AMECEA Secretariat, 2011, p.112.

⁸² During a visit to Mombasa Archdiocese in August, 2011 I learned an interesting footnote in SCC history. Kenyan Father Ernest Mutua, one of the founders of SCCs in the archdiocese, explained that when Kenyan Bishop (later Archbishop) Nicodemus Kirima (who died in 2007) was appointed as Bishop of Mombasa in 1978 he was initially against SCCs. He saw them as an offshoot of Protestant sects in Kenya. But then he went to the 1979 AMECEA meeting in Malawi and met and talked with dedicated animators of SCCs such as Mwoleka. Kirima was converted and came back and began to support SCCs starting in his diocese in 1979. This is a good testimony of the learning process that takes place during AMECEA meetings. Ernest Matua in a conversation with the author on 24 August, 2011.

In a subsequent conversation with the now Kenyan Bishop Martin Kivuva of Machakos Diocese, he explained that in 1979 Father Matua started SCCs in St. Anne Parish, Mgange Nyika in Taita and the then Father Kivuva started SCCs in Our Lady of Fatima Parish, Kongowea. Martin Kivuva in a conversation with the author on 29 August, 2012.

⁸³ The leading CEB theologian in Latin America, José Marins, warns against elitism in SCCs, that is, SCCs members feel they are superior and better than the other Catholics in the parish.

time, energy and money were devoted to various church events such as papal visits to Eastern Africa, jubilees and anniversary celebrations. Other reasons were political, social and economic such as ongoing civil wars and internal unrest in the region and widespread poverty.

1983: Tanzanian theologian Father Magesa boldly stated: "Ecclesialogically they (SCCs) are the best thing that has happened since the *New Testament*."

1988: A group of pastoral theologians sponsored by Missio Aachen, Germany visited parishes in Eastern Africa with varying kinds and forms of SCCs to seek a new model of church that could be adapted to their needs at home.

1989: "Consultation on Methods of Research to Find Out How the Bible is Being Used in Small Christian Communities in Africa," Karen, Nairobi, Kenya, 31 January, 1989.

1990: In 1990 English Bishop James Holmes-Siedle, MAfr (who died in 1995) who spent many years animating SCCs in Kenya, Tanzania and Uganda was commissioned to do an evaluation of SCCs in the AMECEA Region that was published as "A Look at 17 Years of SCCs in Eastern Africa."⁸⁴ He recommended the introduction of mobile training teams to organize workshops and seminars on SCCs as was being done in Malawi.

1992: The AMECEA Study Conference on "Evangelization with its Central Issues: Inculturation, Small Christian Communities and Priestly, Religious and Christian Formation" in Lusaka, Zambia in 1992 focused on an "Evaluation of AMECEA." The research findings identified four AMECEA priorities that included "Promotion of SCCs" and recommended in-service training for animators of SCCs. This conference reiterated the SCC pastoral commitment by stating: "So we repeat that SCCs are not optional⁸⁵ in our churches; they are central to the life of faith and the ministry of evangelization."

1994: A major step was the First African Synod⁸⁶ in Rome in April, 1994 on the theme "The Church in Africa and Her Evangelizing Mission to the Year 2000" with five main topics: "Proclamation of the Good News of Salvation", "Inculturation," "Dialog", "Justice and Peace" and the "Means of Social Communications." Irish theologian Father Cecil McGarry, SJ (who died in 2009) emphasizes

the growing centrality of Small Christian Communities in the minds of the [synod] fathers and in the documents of the synod. As was seen, they only featured in passing in the Outline [*Lineamenta*]. By the end of the synod they

⁸⁴ James Holmes-Siedle, "A Look at 17 Years of SCCs in Eastern Africa," *African Ecclesial Review (AFER)*, Vol. 32, No. 6 (December, 1990), pp. 359-362.

⁸⁵ The English word "option" (or "optional") is easily misunderstood and is often used in a pastoral context as one choice among many, that is, not obligatory or necessary. If used to describe SCCs, the better meaning or expression is "preferential option."

⁸⁶ The full official title is the "First Special Assembly of the Synod of African Bishops."

were understood to be essential if the synod is to take root in the Local Churches and thus be effective and produce fruit.⁸⁷

Of the 211 interventions during the first two weeks of the First African Synod, there were 29 interventions on SCCs (the fourth highest number after the topics of justice, inculturation and laity). Bishops from the AMECEA countries were in the forefront in making these interventions. Tanzanian Archbishop Anthony Mayala (who died in 2009) of Mwanza Archdiocese, Tanzania said that "Small Christian Communities seem to be the best way for us of being a church in our African countries."⁸⁸ Kenyan Archbishop Zacchaeus Okoth of Kisumu Archdiocese, Kenya said that "Small Christian Communities help implement the ecclesiology of communion... It is of paramount importance that the Synod on Africa recommends the establishment of Small Christian Communities in the parishes, so that the new model of the parish for the year 2000 will be the one of a community of communities."⁸⁹

Regarding the "Ecclesiology of the Church-as-Family" the *Final Message of the Bishops of Africa to the People of God* in Section 28 on "The Church-as-Family and Small Christian Communities" states: "The Church, the Family of God, implies the creation of small communities at the human level, living or basic ecclesial communities... These individual Churches-as-Families have the task of working to transform society."

1995: 1995 saw the publication and promulgation of St. John Paul II's Apostolic Exhortation *The Church in Africa* in Yaounde, Cameroon, Johannesburg, South Africa and in Nairobi, Kenya between 14-20 September, 1995. Numbers 23 and 89 treat SCCs:

Number 23 under "The Family of God in the Synodal Process:" "If this Synod is prepared well, it will be able to involve all levels of the Christian Community: individuals, small communities, parishes, Dioceses, and local, national and international bodies."

Number 89 under "Living (or Vital) Christian Communities:" "Right from the beginning, the Synod Fathers recognized that the Church as Family cannot reach her full potential as Church unless she is divided into communities small enough to foster close human relationships. The Assembly described the characteristics of such communities as follows: primarily they should be places engaged in evangelizing themselves, so that subsequently they can bring the Good News to others; they should moreover be communities which pray and listen to God's Word, encourage the members themselves to take on responsibility, learn to live an ecclesial life, and reflect on different human problems in the

⁸⁷ Cecil McGarry (ed.), *What Happened at the African Synod?*, Nairobi: Paulines Publications Africa, 1995, p. 146.

⁸⁸ Anthony Mayala, "Ninth General Congregation," *L'Osservatore Romano*, 18, 1339 (May 4, 1994), p. 10.

⁸⁹ Zacchaeus Okoth, "Eighth General Congregation," *Ibid.*, pp. 5-6. Afrika World Website, retrieved on 24 August, 2012, <http://www.afrikaworld.net/synod/okoth.htm>

light of the Gospel.⁹⁰ Above all, these communities are to be committed to living Christ's love for everybody, a love which transcends the limits of natural solidarity of clans, tribes or other interest groups."

SCCs became an important part of the *National Plans for the Implementation of the African Synod* in the AMECEA countries. *The African Synod Comes Home -- A Simplified Text* (Pauline Publications Africa, 1995) and other post-synodal documents stressed the importance of SCCs in the follow-up⁹¹ and implementation of the recommendations of the First African Synod. This included developing SCCs as a concrete expression of, and realization of, the Church-as-Family Model of Church. This SCC Pastoral Priority was clear in Ndola Diocese, Zambia. The *Ndola Diocesan Guidelines* states: "We share in the universal Church's mission... This is achieved through the establishment of active and fully involved Small Christian Communities."

1998: A key turning point for the growth of SCCs in Tanzania was promoting a model of church from the bottom up. "The implementation of the new *Constitution of the National Lay Council* in 1998 required that the election of lay leaders in parishes throughout Tanzania start at the level of SCCs and move upwards. This insured that the Parish Council and Parish Pastoral Council⁹² leaders would be chosen from those who were already leaders in their SCCs – thus true representation from below. Such decisions gave full confidence to the faithful and opened new possibilities for the laity in the Local Church."⁹³ This can also be seen in diocesan synods on the local level. The booklet for the Synod of Mwanza Archdiocese in Tanzania in 2002 contains 105 references to *Jumuiya Ndogo Ndogo za Kikristo* (JNNK), the Swahili expression for SCCs.

2000: The year 2000 witnessed the active involvement of SCCs in the Jubilee Year. In Tanzania and other countries the Jubilee Cross was carried from SCC to SCC and then from home to home within a SCC. There were other related pastoral and liturgical activities spearheaded by choirs in the SCCs.

⁹⁰ Another wording is: "To look at the reality of life around us in the LIGHT OF CHRIST through the reading of the *Bible*." "SCCs Prayer Card," Queen of Peace Parish South B, Nairobi, Kenya.

⁹¹ A more accurate word is "follow-down" because the natural process is to get the recommendations down (that is, carried out/implemented) to the local, grassroots level.

⁹² Parish Pastoral Council (PPC) is a popular term used to emphasize that the council should have a pastoral focus. See the *1983 Code of Canon Law*, No. 536: "A pastoral council is to be established in each parish, over which the pastor presides and in which the Christian faithful, together with those who share in pastoral care by virtue of their office in the parish, assist in fostering pastoral activity." This council can have commissions on faith formation, finance, liturgy, etc. More and more of these PPCs in Eastern Africa include official representatives of SCCs.

⁹³ Christopher Cieslikiewicz, "Pastoral Involvement of Parish-based SCCs in Dar es Salaam," in Joseph Healey and Jeanne Hinton (eds.), *Small Christian Communities Today: Capturing the New Moment*, Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2005 and Nairobi, Kenya: Paulines Publications Africa, 2006, pp. 99-105.

2002: Next was the AMECEA Study Conference on “Deeper Evangelization in the Third Millennium” in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania in 2002.”⁹⁴ Section 7 of the Pastoral Resolutions is on “Building the Church as a Family of God by Continuing to Foster and/or Revitalize the Small Christian Communities,” No. 43 states: “We recommend that a program on the theological and pastoral value of Small Christian Communities be included in the normal curriculum⁹⁵ of the Major Seminaries and houses of formation of both men and women.” This and other recommendations were made in the context of a document on the vision of the association: *AMECEA 2002: A Holy Spirit Filled Family of God Committed to Holistic Evangelization and Integral Development.*”

December, 2002 marked the publication of *The Church We Want to Be: Elements for a Common Vision of the Pastoral Action of the Catholic Church in Ethiopia* – a Pastoral Letter of the Assembly of Catholic Bishops of Ethiopia. No 31 states:

The Church we want to be is a church distributed in **parishes that are a communion of communities**. A church determined to evaluate and revitalize its religious associations and lay movements and open to the new ways of building up Christian communities at a human size in the line of the AMECEA pastoral priority.

2005: The AMECEA Study Conference in Mukono, Uganda in 2005 on “Responding to the Challenges of HIV/AIDS within the AMECEA Region” has one pastoral resolution that emphasizes: "Active involvement of SCCs in reaching out to people with HIV/AIDS. SCC members as caregivers, counselors, etc." This can be extended to SCC members reaching out

⁹⁴ The colorful blue *khanga* commemorating the meeting has a map of the AMECEA countries and a drawing of a group of Christians (men, women and children) sitting around a table with a *Bible* in the middle with the words:

AMECEA – *Mzazi wa Jumuiya Ndogo Ndogo. Karibu Tanzania 2002.*
 AMECEA – Parent of Small Christian Communities. Welcome to Tanzania 2002.
 AMECEA Celebrations 40th Welcome to Tanzania 40th

A *khanga* is a rectangle of pure cotton cloth with a border all around it and printed in bold designs and bright colors.

⁹⁵ A variety of SCCs courses and workshops are offered in the major seminaries, theological institutes, universities and houses of formation of both men and women in the AMECEA Region. The most recent example is the Salesian Major Seminary in Nairobi, Kenya that started a required course on SCCs in the combined Second Year/Third of Theology in August, 2011. In an interview with the author on 17 May, 2011 Tanzanian theologian Father Laurenti Magesa emphasized that if SCCs have been a key pastoral priority (not just an option) in the AMECEA Region since 1976 they should have more prominence in the curriculum of seminaries and theological institutes.

to refugees, internally displaced people (IDPs), people traumatized by civil war, violence and tribalism/ethnicity, street children, sick people, bereaved people and other needy people.⁹⁶

The pattern is clear. As AMECEA meetings were held every three years in different countries in Eastern Africa, the importance of SCCs was emphasized again and again. There has been an on-going momentum for continuing this SCC pastoral priority – a kind of march through AMECEA’s 53 year history. Holmes-Siedle’s evaluation of SCCs in the AMECEA Region after 17 years and Colombian Bishop Rodrigo Mejia, SJ, the retired bishop of the Soddo Apostolic Vicariate, Ethiopia’s evaluation after 26 years set the stage for this present evaluation that now officially covers 41 years (1973-2014).

2006: Many events were happening in individual AMECEA countries. To promote the AMECEA Pastoral Priority of SCCs and to focus on on-going spiritual and pastoral formation a "Year of Small Christian Communities (SCCs)" was celebrated in Dar es Salaam Archdiocese, Tanzania in 2006-2007. Later this was extended to a "National Year of Small Christian Communities (SCCs)" for the whole of Tanzania. Some parishes had their own “Year of Small Christian Communities.”

Annual campaigns such as the Kenya Lenten Campaign focused more and more on the involvement of SCCs in justice and peace issues on the local level. Thousands of booklets in both English and Swahili are used in the weekly SCC meetings in Kenya during the five weeks of Lent. The "See," "Judge" and "Act" process draws on the experience of SCCs on justice and peace related themes. The questions and proposed action steps directly involve SCCs.

2008: In 2008 the AMECEA Office in Nairobi conducted a survey on how Catholic Major Seminaries and Institutes of Theology in the nine AMECEA Countries in Eastern Africa are implementing this resolution. The survey was sent to 22 major seminaries and institutes of theology and the AMECEA Office received 17 answers that represent a 78 % return -- well above the normal average for these kinds of surveys.

The survey shows most of the seminaries and institutes in Eastern Africa do not have a specific course on SCCs. But the importance of Small Christian Communities is taught in a variety of courses including Bible, Church History, Ecclesiology and Pastoral Theology. Some courses have individual lectures and talks on SCCs such as "The Role of Small Christian Communities in Promoting Justice and Peace." There are also a variety of workshops and seminars on SCCs. A new development is seen in the context of SCCs being an official pastoral structure in the parish and diocese.⁹⁷ SCCs are treated in some of the new courses such as “Church Management and Administration,” “The Internal Ordering on Parishes (Parish Structures)” “Parish Administration,” “Introduction to Pastoral

⁹⁶ Nigerian theologian Father Agbonkhanmeghe E. Orobator, SJ documents the SCCs' outreach to people with HIV/AIDS and to refugees in Kenya, Tanzania and Uganda. *From Crisis to Kairos: The Mission of the Church in the Time of HIV/AIDS, Refugees and Poverty*, Nairobi, Kenya: Paulines Publications Africa, 2005), pp. 86-179.

⁹⁷ Fritz Lobinger, in commenting on the World Church, and particularly the Global South, states: “The priestless communities of the South have already developed a ministry structure of their own. We just have to build on it.” Letter to the author dated 28 September, 2013.

Communication,”⁹⁸ “Pastoral Ministry and Management,” “Pastoral Planning and Organization” and “Social Media/New Media”⁹⁹ in Pastoral Work and Evangelization.” These are being offered as both Electives, Seminars and Short Courses

The AMECEA Study Conference in Lusaka, Zambia in 2008 was on "Reconciliation through Justice and Peace." It was the 16th AMECEA Plenary Assembly. The role and mission of Small Christian Communities is seen in Action Plan A4: “Revisiting the Small Christian Communities Pastoral Option as a means of responding to the ministry of reconciliation through justice and peace. The theology of the Church Family of God must be further explored in view of enhancing reconciliation and peace building.”

2009: The AMECEA Synod Delegates Workshop in Nairobi in March, 2009 reflected on the responses to the 2006 *Lineamenta* of the Second African Synod. Delegates emphasized the revitalization of Small Christian Communities through: the importance of Bible reflection in SCCs; deeper evangelization for reconciliation, justice and peace through SCCs; fostering reconciliation in the SCCs themselves; and evangelization to family and youth through SCCs.

On 19 March, 2009 in Yaounde, Cameroon Pope Benedict XVI promulgated the *Instrumentum Laboris* (“Working Document”)¹⁰⁰ of the 2009 Second African Synod. While the English text of the *Lineamenta* published in 2006 uses the term "living ecclesial communities," the English text of the *Instrumentum Laboris* published in 2009 uses the more common term “Small Christian Communities” (note the capitals). The French text uses

⁹⁸ The importance of parish-based SCCs was treated in this course at Tangaza University College, Nairobi in 2014 and was part of the exam question: “Imagine a parish setting and discuss how the media may be used more effectively in Pastoral Ministry.”

⁹⁹ “New media” is more generic. “New media” refers to on-demand access to content anytime, anywhere, on any digital device, as well as interactive user feedback, and creative participation. Most technologies described as "new media" are digital, often having characteristics of being manipulated, networkable, dense, compressible, and interactive. Some examples may be the internet, websites, computer multimedia, video games, CD-ROMS, and DVDs. “New media” does not include television programs, feature films, magazines, books, or paper-based publications – unless they contain technologies that enable digital interactivity. “Social media” is the interaction among people in which they create, share or exchange information and ideas in virtual communities and networks. “Social media” technologies take on many different forms including magazines, internet forums, weblogs, social blogs, microblogging, wikis, social networks, podcasts, photographs or pictures, video, rating and social bookmarking. Technologies include blogging, picture-sharing, vlogs, wall-posting, music-sharing, crowdsourcing and voice over IP, to name a few. Social network aggregation can integrate many of the platforms in use. Examples are Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, etc. The boundaries between the different types have become increasingly blurred. In general this book uses the term “social media” because of its link to social networking. See Wikipedia Website, retrieved on 13 April, 2014, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/New_media and http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Social_media

¹⁰⁰ Of the 79 footnotes in the 2006 *Lineamenta* only seven are from specifically African sources. Of the 67 footnotes in the 2009 *Instrumentum Laboris* only nine are from specifically African sources.

“Communautés Ecclésiales Vivantes.”

SCCs are mentioned 12 times in the *Instrumentum Laboris* and twice in the footnotes. This is significantly more than in the *Lineamenta* in which "living ecclesial communities" are mentioned three times in the document and twice in the questionnaire. This increase in the importance given to SCCs is clearly due to the many responses from the Episcopal Conferences in Africa and to other answers to the 32 questions of the original questionnaire.

This conference, workshop and documentation helped to prepare the AMECEA Bishops who attended the Second Africa Synod in 2009. At their 29 September, 2009 preparatory meeting the “Statement from Bishops of AMECEA Who Are Delegates to the Synod of Bishops’ Second Special Assembly for Africa (in Rome in October, 2009)” said under B. Our Serious Pastoral Concerns and Challenges, No. 3: “Centrality of Small Christian Community (SCC): we have experienced that a properly trained and led SCC adds great value to the promotion of reconciliation. This is because deeper biblical reflection and more regular use of the pastoral circle empower our Christians to engage effectively in the social life around them. Here formation in Catholic Social Teaching (CST) at all levels must be a priority.”

AMECEA Consolidated Reports of Member Episcopal Conferences 2008 – 2011 documents how the eight national episcopal conferences of AMECEA implemented the 16th Plenary Assembly resolutions. Kenya published a series of booklets on topics of Christian values for SCCs connected to themes of the 2009 Second African Synod such as conscience, reconciliation and unity. The National Biblical Commission in Zambia is preparing small booklets on prayer and reflections on reconciliation, justice and peace for use in SCCs.

The Second African Synod itself took place in Rome from 4-25 October, 2009 on the theme: "The Church in Africa in Service to Reconciliation, Justice and Peace." No. 22 of the *Message of the Bishops of Africa to the People of God* states: “Here we would like to reiterate the recommendation of *Ecclesia in Africa* about the importance of Small Christian Communities (cf. *EIA*, 89). Beyond prayer, you must also arm yourself with sufficient knowledge of the Christian faith to be able to “give a proof of the hope that you bear” (1 *Peter* 3:15) in the marketplaces of ideas... We strongly recommend the basic sources of Catholic faith: the *Holy Bible*, *The Catechism of the Catholic Church*, and most relevant to the theme of the Synod, *The Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*.” Retired English Bishop Colin Davies, MHM, of Ngong Diocese, Kenya sees these resources as “a very complete list of what would be required of SCCs”¹⁰¹ in their pastoral activities and evangelization.

Small Christian Communities are mentioned seven times in the “Final List of [57] Propositions”¹⁰² including:

¹⁰¹ Colin Davies, *From Pilot to Pastoral Bishop: Memoirs and Reflections of 53 Years of Missionary Life in Kenya*, Nairobi: Paulines Publications Africa, 2014, p. 114.

¹⁰² It is interesting to analyze the changes in the references to SCCs (both the wording and the emphasis) from the *Lineamenta* to the *Instrumentum Laboris* to the “Propositions” to the actual *Apostolic Exhortation*.

Proposition 35 on “Small Christian Communities (SCCs)” states: “The Synod renews its support for the promotion of Small Christian Communities (SCCs) that firmly build up the Church-Family of God in Africa. The SCCs are based on Gospel-sharing, where Christians gather to celebrate the presence of the Lord in their lives and in their midst, through the celebration of the Eucharist, the reading of the Word of God and witnessing to their faith in loving service to each other and their communities. Under the guidance of their pastors and catechists, they seek to deepen their faith and mature in Christian witness, as they live concrete experiences of fatherhood, motherhood, relationships, open fellowship, where each takes care of the other. This Family of God extends beyond the bonds of blood, ethnicity, tribe, culture and race. In this way SCCs open paths to reconciliation with extended families that have the tendency to impose on Christian nuclear families their syncretistic ways and customs.”

Proposition 36 on “The Challenges Posed by the New Religious Movements” states: “Parishes are to promote in their Small Christian Communities a fraternal life of solidarity.”

Proposition 37 on “The Laity” states: “Small Christian Communities are to offer assistance in the formation of the People of God and serve as a place for concretely living out reconciliation, justice and peace.”

Proposition 44 on “Catechists” states: “Permanent catechists or those who act as catechists on occasion are the vital heralds of the Gospel for our Small Christian Communities, where they exercise various roles: leaders of prayer, counselors and mediators. They require a solid formation and material support which is necessary for them effectively to assume their role as spiritual guides. They also need to be encouraged and supported in their zeal for service within these communities, especially their service to reconciliation, justice and peace.”

Proposition 54 on “Concern for Prisoners” states: “Prison pastoral care be organized and supported under the Commission of Justice and Peace, with a desk at the regional, national, diocesan and parish levels, in which Small Christian Communities take part.”

A cornerstone of the AMECEA key pastoral priority of building SCCs is *Bible Sharing/Bible Reflection* that is closely connected to faith sharing and faith reflection. Thousands of Lectionary-based¹⁰³ SCCs in the nine AMECEA countries meet in the middle of the week to reflect on the Gospel of the following Sunday following the three-year lectionary cycle.¹⁰⁴ *Hebrews 4:12* says:

¹⁰³ Some community of Religious Sisters and other groups meet together daily, especially in the evening, to read and reflect on the Scripture Readings of the following day following the daily lectionary cycle.

¹⁰⁴ To many Catholic lay people the expressions “lectionary-based” and “lectionary cycle” are churchy “in” words, even jargon that is difficult to understand. Officially the reader of the *Bible* or Scripture readings at mass or a “Sunday Service without a Priest” is a Lector and he or she reads from a book of *Bible* Readings called the *Lectionary*. We follow a three-year cycle for the Sunday Readings and a two-year cycle for the Daily Readings. The challenge is to communicate this fundamental liturgical plan in simple, user-friendly language. Another expression for Lectionary-based Faith Sharing is Faith Sharing Based on Scripture.

For the Word that God speaks is alive and full of power [making it active, operative, energizing, and effective]; it is sharper than any two-edged sword, penetrating to the dividing line of the breath of life (soul) and [the immortal] spirit, and of joints and marrow [of the deepest parts of our nature], exposing and sifting and analyzing and judging the very thoughts and purposes of the heart.

St. Jerome said, “Ignorance of the Scriptures is ignorance of Christ.”

Our Eastern Africa SCC Training Team continues to do research on the use of the *Bible*. The reports are mixed. Recent research in 2014 is based on a random sample and not specific quantitative research. Some examples: Three religious sisters in Monze, Zambia were interviewed on a Saturday afternoon. None of them had read the Gospel of the following Sunday (the next day) either individually or in a group. A lay woman in St. Matthias Mulumba SCC in Don Bosco Parish, Makuyu, Nairobi Archdiocese said that “reflecting on the Gospel before hearing it proclaimed at Mass enables her to experience the Word of God more deeply and more personally.” A lay woman in Kenya said that she always reads the daily Scripture Reading on her Smart Phone. Members of the online Skype SCC said they individually prepare the Gospel text before their weekly *Bible* Sharing. A Catholic evangelist in Kenya said he wants to read the Gospel of the following Sunday ahead of time, but “never seems to get around to it.” For many conscientious Catholics in Eastern Africa daily *Bible* reading is still not a regular way of life.

American theologian Father Tom Reese, SJ states emphatically: “Lectionary-based Catholics can change the world.” In other words, Catholics who individually, in their families or in their SCCs in the middle of the week seriously reflect on the readings of the following Sunday and their application to our lives can transform themselves and their world. Reese adds:

“The church needs a massive *Bible* education program. The church needs to acknowledge that understanding the *Bible* is more important than memorizing the catechism. If we could get Catholics to read the Sunday Scripture readings each week before they come to Mass, it would be revolutionary.¹⁰⁵ If you do not read and pray the Scriptures, you are not an adult Christian. Catholics who become evangelicals understand this.”¹⁰⁶

¹⁰⁵ Retired American Cardinal Roger Mahony of Los Angeles Archdiocese, describes an imaginary parish in the future in Los Angeles Archdiocese, California, USA:

The readings for the coming Sunday are reflected upon in all groups and meetings in the parish, as well as in the 25 Small Christian Communities scattered throughout the many blocks which make up St. Leo Parish... Scripture study and faith sharing takes place in various groups throughout the parish during the week and strengthens the identity of St. Leo’s as a communion of communities. Thus the people called together by the Word come to celebrate the Eucharist on Sunday having already reflected at length on the readings. They are prepared for the liturgy and more deeply bonded with other members of the community who have likewise been washed in the Word throughout the week.

Magesa explains this challenge in an Eastern Africa context:

The life of SCCs must be rooted in Scripture – in studying it, seriously reflecting on it, internalizing it, and acting upon it. To spend only a few minutes casually reading and commenting on this or that passage of Scripture once a week, as is the custom in many SCCs, is totally inadequate. SCCs are *theological* communities and as such they must be scriptural communities. If “the study of the sacred page is . . . the soul of sacred theology,” as Vatican II tells us in the *Constitution on Divine Revelation (Dei Verbum, DV 23)*, then it must form the center of the life of SCCs as well.

Where does the SCC get sustenance for its growth and flourishing. Looking at the example of Jesus himself, we do come up with some essential requirements: they include listening to the Word of God, reflection on it, prayer, and action. The four conditions form a single movement in the dance of inculturation as evangelization in SCCs. All are necessary for the evangelization of the self (or, in this case, evangelization *ad intra*, within one’s heart to change personal perceptions and attitudes), and that of the neighbor (*ad extra*, or building up communion, the Reign of God on earth).¹⁰⁷

The liturgical book resource, *At Home with the Word*, is an excellent guide to a deeper understanding of the Sunday Scriptures with insights from Scripture scholars and action steps. It has additional questions, prayers, citations for weekday readings, and other resources for Scripture study. Whether this resource is used alone or in a group, it deepens our experience of the liturgy and helps one to feel ever more “at home” with the Word of God. It recommends: “Whether you use the book for quiet meditation or vigorous study it will nourish you all week long to act on God’s Word in the world as you prepare to hear the Scripture proclaimed on Sunday liturgy.” It can be used in families with children, parish households, RCIA, Cursillo, Scripture study groups, adult formation groups and other types of small faith groups.¹⁰⁸

One characteristic of being a lectionary-based Catholic is to choose a particular word or phrase or verse from the daily readings to use as a prayer mantra during the day. Such a particular word or phrase or verse from the Gospel of the following Sunday can nourish and sustain a person or a small group all during the week. Reflecting on SCCs in Africa,

As I Have Done for You: A Pastoral Letter on Ministry, 20 April, 2000, retrieved on the Los Angeles Archdiocese Website on 15 July, 2013, <http://www.la-archdiocese.org/cardinal/Pages/letters.aspx>

¹⁰⁶ Thomas Reese, “The Hidden Exodus: Catholics Becoming Protestants,” *National Catholic Reporter*, 18 April, 2011. National Catholic Reporter Website, retrieved on 5 February, 2012, <http://ncronline.org/news/hidden-exodus-catholics-becoming-protestants>

¹⁰⁷ Laurenti Magesa, “The Joy of Community,” p. 26.

¹⁰⁸ See *At Home with the Word 2013*, Chicago: Liturgy Training Publications, 2013.

O'Halloran states: "Once the members take the *Bible* in their hands, reflect on the Word of God and take responsibility to act upon it, things can never be the same again."¹⁰⁹

2010: The World Synod of Bishops on the "Word of God in the Life and Mission of the Church" took place in Rome in October, 2008. *The Word of the Lord*, Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation of Benedict XVI was published in 2010. No. 73 on "Letting the *Bible* Inspire Pastoral Activity" states:

It is good that pastoral activity also favors the growth of *small communities*, 'formed by families or based in parishes or linked to the different ecclesial movements and new communities' (*Proposition 21*) which can help to promote formation, prayer and knowledge of the *Bible* in accordance with the Church's faith.

No. 85 on "The Word of God, Marriage and the Family" states: "The Synod also recommended the formation of small communities of families, where common prayer and meditation on passages of Scripture can be cultivated." This includes a prayerful, meditative reading of the *Bible* called *Lectio Divina* (also called "Dwelling in the Word") and emphasis on a communal reading of the *Bible*. Again this authoritative voice of the pope and the universal church confirmed the direction that the AMECEA countries are taking in building SCCs that are solidly rooted in the *Bible*.

Already in the *Instrumentum Laboris* of this synod the experience of *Bible Sharing/Bible Reflection* in Africa was recognized and affirmed:

The newness of *Lectio Divina* among the People of God requires an appropriate pedagogy of initiation which leads to a good understanding of what is treated and provides clear teaching on the meaning of each of its steps and their application to life in both faithful and creatively wise manner. Various programs, such as the Seven Steps,¹¹⁰ are already being practiced by many Particular Churches (Local Churches)¹¹¹ on the African continent. This

¹⁰⁹ James O'Halloran, *Living Cells*, p. 207.

¹¹⁰ This refers to the Seven-Step Gospel Sharing of Lumko (South Africa).

¹¹¹ The term Particular Church is enshrined in the documents of Vatican II and the new *Code of Canon Law*. But it is undergoing new meanings in new contexts as explained by Laurenti Magesa:

Perhaps the most important inspiration of Vatican II as far as Africa is concerned has been the need to construct an African Local Church or African Local Churches. The council used the term "Particular Churches" because many in the council, following curial conviction, argued that in the diocese structure we already have Local Churches. But this is not how the idea has been understood and developed in Africa since then. The need for a Local Church is seen in a new, different light.

The term "Particular Church" is seen in Africa to be a juridical-structural term; it identifies the church with the diocese. The notion of "Local

form of *Lectio Divina* receives its name from the seven moments of encounter with the *Bible* (acknowledging the presence of God, reading the text, dwelling on the text, being still, sharing insights, searching together and praying together) in which meditation, prayer and sharing the Word of God are central.¹¹²

In 2010-2011 the AMECEA Office in Nairobi conducted research on an “Evaluation of AMECEA Pastoral Mission of Evangelization in Solidarity 1961-2011.” The questionnaire was straight forward: “In what ways are you involved in promoting unity and solidarity in the parish and diocese, promoting/participation in Small Christian Communities?” The design of the study emphasized that the decision to start AMECEA and its original constitution as well as the establishment of Small Christian Communities were original and foundational initiatives. In the “Executive Summary” Conclusion 3 under “The key priority challenges facing AMECEA dioceses today continue to be” states: “Promotion of Christian families and Small Christian Communities as means of deepening and consolidating the achievements gained in the last 50 years of evangelization.” De Jong put it this way: “A new missionary period has definitely set in, in which Small Christian Communities play a pivotal role in the evangelization and pastoral system.”¹¹³

2011: The Faculty of Theology of the Catholic University of the Congo under the patronage of the National Episcopal Conference of the Congo sponsored the 27th Theological Week of Kinshasa in Kinshasa, DRC from 21 to 25 February, 2011 on the theme “The Experience of Basic Living Ecclesial Communities in the Democratic Republic of the Congo: Theological and Pastoral Perspectives after 50 Years” (“L’expérience des CEVB en RD Congo:

Church,” however, is favored in Africa because it is perceived as going beyond that geographical and juridical circumspection by taking into account theological-pastoral implications. It emphasizes the necessity of culture and inculturation in catechesis, preaching and the celebration of the liturgy. It accepts the reality of the faith at any level: continental, regional, diocesan, parochial, Small Christian Community, and even family levels as contextual.

Laurenti Magesa, “EXPANDING HORIZONS: The Church in Africa Beyond 50 Years of Vatican II,” *Tangaza Journal of Theology and Mission*, 2012/2, p. 33. Tangaza University College Website, retrieved 6 June 2014, <http://www.tangaza.org/theology/Tangaza%20Journal%202012-2.pdf>

This Ebook prefers to use the term Local Church/Local Churches. The Local Churches challenge and enrich each other. The Local Churches in Africa can challenge and enrich the World Church/Global Church/Universal Church.

¹¹² *Instrumentum Laboris* for the Synod of Bishops, XIII Ordinary General Assembly, *The Word of God in the Life and Mission of the Church*, Vatican: Vatican Press, 2008, No. 38.

¹¹³ Albert De Jong, *Father Michael Witte of Kabaa High School Missionary and Educationalist: A Study in Mission Strategy*, Nairobi: Paulines Publications Africa, 2011, p. 222.

Perspectives théologiques et pastorales 50 ans après”). This conference commemorated the 50th Anniversary of "Living Ecclesial Communities" in DRC (1961-2011). As a sign of unity and conscious solidarity with Eastern Africa, in the day devoted to “Other Experiences of CEVB in DRC and Elsewhere,” Msgr. Pius Rutechura, the then Secretary General of AMECEA (and now the Vice Chancellor of CUEA), gave a paper under the heading “Echoes of English-speaking Africa: AMECEA” entitled “The Experience of the AMECEA Region with Small Christian Communities, Pastoral Priority since the 1970s.”

Gulu Archdiocese in Uganda held its Second Archdiocesan Synod on the theme “Called to Build the Church Rooted in Christ’s Love and Truth” from 8-20 May, 2011 with the specific purpose of developing a five-year Pastoral Plan. Decree 10 under “Lay Apostolate (Adults, Youth and Children)” states: “The Parish Priests and Catechists shall immediately ensure that Small Christian Communities are created and strengthened to model the life of Christians.” In his letter to promulgate the Synod Acts Ugandan Archbishop John Baptist Odama called on Christians at all levels from the diocese down to the family and including the SCCs to implement the deliberations “so that we may grow in our faith and own our Church.”

The 17th AMECEA Plenary Assembly in Nairobi, Kenya took place from 27 June to 6 July, 2011. It included a celebration of the successes of SCCs and a reflection on the challenges of SCCs in Eastern Africa especially during the 1973-2011 period. The booklet *AMECEA 50 Years Evangelization in Solidarity: 1961 – 2011* presents a “Timeline” of the history of SCCs in the AMECEA Region. The 40 minute DVD documentary *AMECEA Family of God: Celebrating a Golden Jubilee of Evangelization in Solidarity*¹¹⁴ focuses on the AMECEA Founding Fathers and stresses the importance of SCCs. It is based on interviews with AMECEA bishops and staff and is produced by Ukweli Video Productions in Nairobi, Kenya. In the section on “Recommendations for the Future” Bishop Rodrigo Mejia has these prophetic words. “AMECEA should try as a kind of strategy for the future to reach countries of the periphery such as Ethiopia that has a very particular Local Church ...using the structures of the Local Church.”

The 28 minute DVD documentary *50 Years of AMECEA* narrates the beginnings of AMECEA and its growth including the development of the pastoral priority of SCCs. It is also based on interviews with AMECEA bishops and staff and is produced by Catholic Media Services in Lusaka, Zambia.

The AMECEA Study Session has four resolutions about SCCs in the context of Resolution No. 1: “Developing a Comprehensive Ten Year Pastoral Plan comprised of recommendations on the various issues and concerns. The plan must include a theological framework of addressing key issues and challenges of ‘New Evangelization in Solidarity in the AMECEA countries:’”

Resolution No. 3: “Enhance Initial and Ongoing Quality Formation of Pastoral Agents at All Levels.” This resolution came from discussion on pastoral concerns or problems that prevent deeper evangelization. This wide-ranging resolution applies to the following pastoral agents who are involved in SCCs:

¹¹⁴ While the DV has been well received, it has been pointed out that all the interviews are with bishops and priests. No lay people, women or youth are interviewed. One wonders how they will feature in a DVD produced in 2061 on the Second 50 Years of AMECEA.

- a. Lay people who are leaders of SCCs (called by many names such as animator or coordinator).
- b. Catechists.¹¹⁵
- c. Religious men and women.
- d. Priests.¹¹⁶
- e. Seminarians.
- f. Youth.

Resolution No. 5: “Evaluating and Revitalizing the AMECEA Pastoral Option of Establishing Small Christian Communities.”¹¹⁷

Resolution No. 17: “Enhancing participation in liturgy, holy sacraments and the Word of God and fight against devil worship and witchcraft diligently and systematically by living and witnessing the Catholic Faith. Building capacities of the faithful to respond to these challenges by utilizing Scripture and values from the Social Teachings of the Church.”

What is new here is to mobilize SCCs in the fight against witchcraft. SCCs in Zambia have been involved in this campaign for many years.

Resolution No. 19. “Revisiting self-reliance and self-sustainability strategies by exploring and sharing opportunities within the region. Developing Catholic value-based investment policies involving lay professionals and Christians right from Small Christian Community levels in ownership and management at appropriate levels.”

There were many references to the AMECEA pastoral priority of SCCs in the talks and discussions. One report stated: “Among the major achievements of the organization is the creation of Small Christian Communities.” Another recommendation emphasized to strengthen SCCs by ensuring priests’ participation. SCCs were stressed as one of the important African Models of Church. The Missio Aachen and Missio Munich delegates from Germany praised the African Church for three special gifts that can help the Catholic Church in Europe: optimism, combined with joy and emotion at liturgical services; SCCs that help solve the situation of the declining numbers of priests and also strengthen the personal witness and knowledge of the faithful; and methods of Bible Reflection. One African delegate stated: “Small Christian Communities (SCC), with their spirit of neighborliness is

¹¹⁵ In the original plan of SCCs catechists were not the leaders of SCCs, but rather the animators just as the priests and religious men and women. Today they can play a big role such as in Machakos Diocese where they receive special training in the Diocesan Catechist School and are significant promoters of the SCCs. Martin Kivuva in a conversation with the author on 3 October, 2013.

¹¹⁶ Recent workshops for priests include these titles: “The Challenge to Kenyan Diocesan Priests to Be Animators in Small Christian Communities (SCCs).” “Priests Animating the Small Christian Communities (SCCs) Model of Church in Kenya Today.” For sisters: “African Sisters as Animators of Small Christian Communities (SCCs) in Eastern Africa.”

¹¹⁷ A good example of follow-up/implementation is the November, 2012 research questionnaire designed by Ugandan diocesan priest Father Benedict Mayindwe of Kiyinda-Mityana Diocese, Uganda on “A Pastoral Approach towards the Reawakening of Small Christian Communities in St. Charles Lwanga Catholic Parish, Lwangiri, Uganda.”

another big achievement for AMECEA. Joining SCCs is no longer voluntary but a mandate of every Catholic in the AMECEA region. Other regions are following in the footsteps of AMECEA on SCCs.”

Pope Benedict XVI promulgated the Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Africa's Commitment (Africae Munus)*¹¹⁸ in Ouidah, Benin in West Africa on 19 November, 2011. Sections related to SCCs are:

Number 92 under “Traditional African Religions:” “The Church lives daily alongside the followers of traditional African religions. With their reference to ancestors and to a form of mediation between man and Immanence, these religions are the cultural and spiritual soil from which most Christian converts spring and with which they continue to have daily contact. It is worth singling out knowledgeable individual converts, who could provide the Church with guidance in gaining a deeper and more accurate knowledge of the traditions, the culture and the [practices] of the traditional religions.”

COMMENTARY: SCC members on the grassroots have a special opportunity to dialog with members of African Religion. Magesa points out: “It remains to be seen, however, whether this important recommendation will be seriously implemented in the African dioceses, parishes and Small Christian Communities.”¹¹⁹

Number 111 under “Priests:” “Build up the Christian communities by your example... Devote yourselves intensely to putting into practice the diocesan pastoral plan for reconciliation, justice and peace, especially through the celebration of the sacraments of Reconciliation and the Eucharist, catechesis, the formation of lay people and on-going dialog with those holding positions of responsibility in society.”

COMMENTARY: The 2011 AMECEA Plenary Assembly emphasized the important role of priests in the formation of lay pastoral agents such as SCC animators and coordinators.

Number 131 under “Lay People:” It can be helpful for you to form associations in order to continue shaping your Christian conscience and supporting one another in the struggle for justice and peace. The Small Christian Communities (SCCs) and the ‘new communities’ are fundamental structures for fanning the flame of your Baptism.”

¹¹⁸ It is a document with 177 numbers and 226 footnotes. There are no footnotes related to specifically African sources such as documents, statements and meetings of national, regional and continental episcopal conferences in Africa. The *literary genre* of recent Papal documents such as the last three Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortations does not use explicit quotations of local (or regional) experiences or theological works. A *Simplified Text of Africa's Commitment* edited by the AMECEA Pastoral Department was published in July, 2012 and translations are being prepared in various local African languages as was done after the publication of the Apostolic Exhortation of the First African Synod in 1995.

¹¹⁹ Laurenti Magesa, “Translating Theology into Pastoral Action, *New People*, No. 137, March-April, 2012, p. 19.

COMMENTARY: In most official documents of the Catholic Church the traditional parish is the basic juridical unit of the Church. It is significant that SCCs are now called fundamental structures. SCCs are the ideal place for shaping Christian consciences.

Number 133 under “The Church as the Presence of Christ:” “The Church is ‘in Christ, a sacrament – a sign and instrument, that is, of communion with God and of the unity of the entire human race.’ As the community of Christ’s disciples, we are able to make visible and share the love of God. Love ‘is the light – and in the end, the only light – that can always illuminate a world grown dim and grant us the courage needed to keep living and working.’ This is clearly seen in the universal Church, in dioceses and parishes, in the SCCs, in movements and associations, and even in the Christian family itself, which is ‘called to be a ‘domestic church’, a place of faith, of prayer and of loving concern for the true and enduring good of each of its members,” a community which lives the sign of peace. Together with the parish, the SCCs and the movements and associations can be helpful places for accepting and living the gift of reconciliation offered by Christ our peace. Each member of the community must become a ‘guardian and host’ to the other: this is the meaning of the sign of peace in the celebration of the Eucharist.”

COMMENTARY: SCCs are places to live Christ’s gift of reconciliation and peace. SCC members exchange a sign of Christ’s peace with each other and with others in the spirit of solidarity, unity and commitment/responsibility to each other. Footnote 186 states that this section draws on *Proposition 35* of the Second African Synod.

Number 150 under “The Sacred Scriptures: “I recommend that the biblical apostolate be promoted in each [Small] Christian community, in the family and in ecclesial movements.”

COMMENTARY: The Biblical Center for Africa and Madagascar, commonly known as BICAM that is located in the SECAM Headquarters in Accra, Ghana and other networks have a unique opportunity to promote the biblical apostolate on the African continent by encouraging national and diocesan organizations, offices and centers and organizing workshops and seminars.

Number 151 under “The Sacred Scriptures:” “Each member of Christ’s faithful should grow accustomed to reading the Bible daily! An attentive reading of the recent Apostolic Exhortation *Verbum Domini* can provide some useful pastoral indications. Care should be taken to initiate the faithful into the ancient and fruitful tradition of *Lectio Divina*.¹²⁰ The Word of God can lead to the knowledge of Jesus Christ and bring about conversions which produce reconciliation, since it is able to sift “the thoughts and intentions of the heart” (*Hebrews 4:12*). The Synod Fathers encouraged Christian parish communities, SCCs, families and associations and ecclesial movements to set aside times for sharing the Word of God. In this way, they will increasingly become places where God’s word, which

¹²⁰ “As we celebrate the Feast of St. Benedict today we are reminded of the importance of *Lectio Divina* (prayerful, meditative reading of the *Bible*) in our SCCs and applying the daily Scripture readings to our everyday lives.” Small Christian Communities Facebook Page, retrieved on 11 July, 2012, <https://www.face-book.com/pages/Small-Christian-Communities/279921983315>.

builds up the community of Christ's disciples, is read, meditated on and celebrated. This word constantly enlivens fraternal communion (cf. *1 Peter* 1:22-25).”

NOTE: Pope Francis emphasizes the importance of the *Bible* in Numbers 174-175 under “Centered on the Word of God” in *The Joy of the Gospel*. “All evangelization is based on the Word of God listened to, meditated upon, lived, celebrated and witnessed to.” He affirms the importance of the practice of *Lectio Divina* in Numbers 152-153 under “Spiritual Reading.”

The AMECEA Pastoral Department states:

The promulgation of the Apostolic Exhortation, *The Joy of the Gospel* (*Evangelii Gaudium*) by Pope Francis, has challenged us to reflect on ways of proclaiming the Word of God joyfully to all. SCCs provide one of the most effective ways of proclaiming the Word of God through *Bible* sharing. This document “Logical Framework” is aimed at strengthening and promoting the AMECEA model of building the Local Church around SCCs. It provides a systematic structure for on-going formation, evaluation and capacity building in order to make the SCCs at various levels of the life of the Church to be very effective places for evangelization.¹²¹

COMMENTARY: This confirms the central place of *Bible* sharing and *Bible* reflection in the life and ministry of SCCs. Lectionary-based faith sharing SCCs can be places of brotherly and sisterly communion that foster reconciliation and deeper sharing.

Number 169 under “Missionaries in the Footsteps of Christ:” In the context of the new evangelization “all Christians are admonished to be reconciled to God. In this way you will become agents of reconciliation within the ecclesial and social communities in which you live and work.”

COMMENTARY: This echoes many synod documents that encourage SCC members to become agents of reconciliation in their own faith communities on the local, grassroots level, in their natural, human communities and in the wider society.¹²²

A related section is No. 14 of the document where the pope states:

The Synod made it possible to discern the principal parameters of mission for an Africa that seeks reconciliation, justice and peace. It falls to the Particular Churches (Local Churches) to translate these parameters into “resolutions and guidelines for action.” For it is “in the Local Churches that the specific features of a detailed pastoral plan can be identified – goals and methods, formation and enrichment of the people involved, the search for the

¹²¹ “The Logical Strategic Framework for the Revitalization and Strengthening of SCCs as a Way of Being Church as Family in the AMECEA Region (April, 2014 – March, 2017),” Nairobi: AMECEA Secretariat, 2014, p. 5.

¹²² Bukina Faso Scripture Scholar Father Paul Bere, SJ helped me very much to interpret the original French text of this Apostolic Exhortation.

necessary resources – which will enable the proclamation of Christ to reach people, mold communities, and have a deep and incisive influence in bringing Gospel values to bear in [African] society and culture.”

COMMENTARY: SCCs are an essential as part of the Local Churches in Africa where concrete pastoral activities that promote reconciliation, justice and peace can be carried out such as molding communities of living faith.

After promulgating the Apostolic Exhortation in Benin, Pope Benedict XVI made this important statement:

I am deeply convinced that Africa is a land of hope. Here are found authentic values which have much to teach our world; they need only to spread and blossom with God's help and the determination of Africans themselves. The Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Africae Munus* can greatly assist in this, for it opens up pastoral horizons and will lead to creative initiatives. I entrust it to the faithful of Africa as a whole, to study carefully and to translate into concrete actions in daily life.¹²³

The SCCs have a special call and challenge to translate the main pastoral goals of the Apostolic Exhortation *Africa's Commitment* into concrete actions in daily life on the local, grassroots level. This vision is seen in Number 10 that “calls for ‘transforming theology into pastoral care, namely into a very concrete pastoral ministry.’” A concrete example is how SCCs can participate in reconciliation on the grassroots as the pope recommends in Number 157:

In order to encourage reconciliation in communities, I heartily recommend, as did the Synod Fathers, that each country celebrate yearly “a day or week of reconciliation, particularly during Advent or Lent”. SECAM will be able to help bring this about and, in accord with the Holy See, promote a continent-wide *Year of Reconciliation* to beg of God special forgiveness for all the evils and injuries mutually inflicted in Africa, and for the reconciliation of persons and groups who have been hurt in the Church and in the whole of society. This would be an extraordinary Jubilee Year “during which the Church in Africa and in the neighboring islands gives thanks with the universal Church and implores the gifts of the Holy Spirit,” especially the gift of reconciliation, justice and peace.

One of the first critiques of *Africa's Commitment* came from American missionary and writer Father Peter Henriot, SJ presently serving in Malawi:

From my own pastoral experience in Africa during the past two decades, I would have expected more discussion of the role of Small Christian Communities (SCCs), and both local and national Justice and Peace Commissions. The SCCs are mentioned in passing in four places and Justice and Peace Commissions only once in relationship to civic education and

¹²³ *Vatican Information Service*, Number 203, 20 November, 2011, Vatican Information Service Website, retrieved on 21 November, 2011, <http://www.visnews-en.blogspot.com>.

electoral process. Yet surely these two bodies are of critical importance to the specific promotion of reconciliation, justice and peace.¹²⁴

My own evaluation is that these four references to SCCs in *Africae Munus* are significant, but do not convey the richness and depth of the seven references to SCCs in the *Propositions* that are cited earlier. The Apostolic Exhortation is “lighter” compared to the meatier, more substantive *Propositions* on SCCs.

2012: A SCCs Workshop on “How Small Christian Communities in Africa Receive and Implement Magisterial Documents with a Special Emphasis on *Africae Munus* and its Themes of Reconciliation, Justice and Peace” took place in Karen, Nairobi, Kenya on 24-30 September, 2012. It was organized by SECAM in collaboration with AMECEA and sponsored by Missio, Aachen, Germany.

It was the first inclusive and comprehensive African continental SCCs Meeting ever held and included 45 participants (priests, religious and laity) from English-speaking, French-speaking and Portuguese speaking Africa. There were 20 delegates from the AMECEA Region, 14 men and six women. Participants formed seven small groups (similar to SCCs) for prayer, *Bible Sharing/Bible* Reflection and discussion: four English-speaking SCCs, two French-speaking SCCs and one Portuguese speaking SCC.

In his opening address Ugandan Archbishop Emmanuel Obbo of Tororo Archdiocese Diocese, Uganda and Vice Chairman of AMECEA, urged the Catholic Church in Africa to prioritize the pastoral program of Small Christian Communities (SCCs). He said that this would assist the Local Church to receive and implement official church documents effectively. He said:

It is therefore not a surprise that two special assemblies for Africa of the Synod of Bishops and their post-Synodal Exhortations, namely: *Ecclesia in Africa* (1995) and *Africae Munus* (2011) challenged SCCs to be in the forefront – SCC members to be agents of reconciliation, justice and peace and the SCCs themselves to be both paths to reconciliation and places of reconciliation.¹²⁵

Bishop Obbo pointed that some of the SCCs were simply prayer groups. “The time has come for SCCs to be elevated to serious *foras* for serious Church discourses such as interpreting and implementing church documents,”¹²⁶ he emphasized. He added that SCCs have been hailed as a new way of being the Church in Africa.

¹²⁴ Peter Henriot, “Steps Forward and Back,” *Tablet*, 3 December 2011, pp. 11-12.

¹²⁵ “AFRICA: Prioritize SCCs Bishop Urges Church,” *Catholic Information Service for Africa (CISA) Email News Bulletin*. Issue No. 76, Friday, 28 September, 2012. Available in email message dated 28 September, 2012 and online on the CISA Website, retrieved on 12 October, 2012, <http://a4a0g.s18.it/f/rnl.aspx/?fgc=wwsrx.fh=n5dd0=tw25a1cc=008&x=pv&7:8j&x=cc&0f:33idNCLM>

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*

On the “Historical Backgrounds of SCCs” the official workshop report stated:

In groups based on their home regions, the delegates discussed and presented historical backgrounds, structures, challenges, success and level of participation of their SCCs. They all appreciated and acknowledged the uniqueness and particularity of the origins and historical backgrounds of SCCs in all the regions. Similarly various regions have variant SCCs structures that are determined by locations, issues and the particular people. From the presentations, it clearly came out that SCCs structures are also different and they should be determined by the Episcopal Conferences of particular countries.¹²⁷

Recommendations of the workshop were:

- Create a permanent consultative structure for Regional Pastoral Coordinators at the continental level who would help animate SCCs.
- Learn how to integrate SCCs in church movements like the International Young Catholic Students ((IYCS)

One creative idea is to encourage SCCs as Fellowship Groups in the workplace and business establishments. These SCCs can be for Catholics only or can be ecumenical. For example, Catholics in the Bank of Uganda in Lusaka, Zambia have a SCC for prayer, rosary and *Bible* Sharing/*Bible* Reflection that meets weekly during the lunch break.¹²⁸

Davies provides an interesting summary of this 1961 to 2012 period. Along with retired Ugandan Archbishop James Odongo, formerly of Tororo Archdiocese, Uganda and retired Tanzanian Bishop Gervase Nkalanga, formerly of Bukoba Diocese, Tanzania, Davies is one of the three living bishops in the AMECEA Region who participated in the Second Vatican Council in Rome. In a wide ranging interview¹²⁹ he recalled how SCCs are the fruit of Vatican II ecclesiology. The discovery of Small Christian Communities in the AMECEA countries in the 1970s “was a marvelous novelty that has made the church grow.” He singled out the vibrant church at the SCC level as the greatest mark of ecclesial development on the African continent. Davies also participated in the First African Synod in Rome in 1994 and has witnessed how SCCs have developed as an inculturated model of church from the grassroots.

2013: Many opportunities for the African SCCs to take the initiative in implementing the recommendations of the Second African Synod on the local level in the year 2013 and beyond. This implementation includes drawing on all the official documents of

¹²⁷ “Post Workshop Report: Workshop on How Small Christian Communities in Africa Receive and Implement Magisterial Documents,” St. Joseph’s Spiritual Center, Karen, Nairobi, Kenya, 24-30 September, 2012. Supported by Missio, SECAM and AMECEA, Accra and Nairobi: Privately Printed, 2014, p. 7.

¹²⁸ Febian Pikiti in a conversation with the author in Nairobi, Kenya, 18 January, 2013.

¹²⁹ Colin Davies in an interview with the author in Nairobi, Kenya, 24 March, 2012.

the synod including the very specific *Propositions*. This includes working closely with Justice and Peace Commissions on the regional, national and parish levels.¹³⁰

One example is the growing influence of Protestant fundamentalists and Pentecostals¹³¹ especially through aggressive sects that has been discussed during various AMECEA-level Meetings in the past three years. Number 157 of *Africa's Commitment* states:

Various syncretistic movements and sects have sprung up in Africa in recent decades. Sometimes it is hard to discern whether they are of authentically Christian inspiration or whether they are simply the fruit of sudden infatuation with a leader claiming to have exceptional gifts. Their nomenclature and vocabulary easily give rise to confusion, and they can lead people in good faith astray. These many sects take advantage of an incomplete social infrastructure, the erosion of traditional family solidarity and inadequate catechesis in order to exploit people's credulity, and they offer a religious veneer to a variety of heterodox, non-Christian¹³² beliefs. They shatter the peace of couples and families through false prophecies and visions. They even seduce political leaders. The Church's theology and pastoral care must determine the causes of this phenomenon, not only in order to stem the hemorrhage of the faithful from the parishes to the sects, but also in order to lay the foundations of a suitable pastoral response to the attraction that these movements and sects exert. Once again, this points to the need for a profound evangelization of the African soul.

It is hoped that strong SCCs can counter the influence of these sects. Committed SCCs can give an ecclesial identity and communal support system to African Catholics to withstand the attraction of the sects. Scripture based SCCs can give African Catholics the confidence and experience to present a Catholic interpretation of the Bible. Recent research

¹³⁰ One example from Nigeria in West Africa is this report: "23 parishes and over 200 leaders and facilitators were in attendance during yesterday's Lagos Archdiocesan SCC Workshop at Holy Cross Cathedral, Lagos. Issues of justice, forgiveness and reconciliation were examined based on *Africae Munus*. The mid-year evaluation of SCC activities also came up." Nigerian layman Raphael Okusaga in a post on the SCCs Facebook Page dated 8 July, 2012.

¹³¹ The Pentecostal Churches in Africa have gone through various historical stages. Thus the use of terms such as "Classical Pentecostalism" and "Neo-Pentecostalism" (that is dramatically increasing in Eastern Africa today).

¹³² As we move toward more inclusive, ecumenical, neutral and even politically correct language, terms that begin with "non" should to be avoided. "Those who are not Christian" is better than "non-Christian." "Those who are not Catholic" is better than "non-Catholic." Referring to a member of a Protestant denomination like Episcopalian (Anglican), Lutheran or Presbyterian as "A baptized person who is not a Catholic" is better than "A baptized person who is a non-Catholic." Certainly Catholics do not like to be called "non" anything: Non-Muslim. Non-Jewish. We should extend this courtesy to others. Also we should not make the Catholic Church the reference point for describing everyone else. Similar expression such as non-Western should be avoided too.

indicates that SCC members are more pro-active in using the *Bible* and quoting the *Bible* with their Pentecostal and Evangelical counterparts on the local level.¹³³

SCCs continue to be an important part of the “Pastoral Guidelines” of dioceses in Eastern Africa.

The 2013 guidelines of Nairobi Archdiocese, Kenya contain eight chapters. Chapter 2 is on SCCs with sections on “Introduction,” “Description of Terms,” “Composition,” “Function of SCCs Leaders,” “Recommendations,” and “Qualities of Lay Leaders.” It states: “All Christian faithful in the Archdiocese of Nairobi should be members of SCCs.”¹³⁴

Lusaka Archdiocese, Zambia has the overall pastoral theme “Called to Be Family of God” in its Five Year Plan (2012-2016). The Year Three (2014) Goal is: “A Year of Re-commitment to the Service of the Church and Adherence to Her Teachings at All Levels.” Objective 2 is: “Ongoing formation at all levels of the church structure on Catholic doctrine and the role/purpose of SCCs in the mission of the church.”

The Catholic Church in Eastern Africa continues to respond to the contemporary signs of the times. This includes establishing SCCs in Refugee Camps and camps of Internal Displaced People (IDP). Often the SCCs are part of a parish established in the camps.

The first Case Study is Ngara District in Kagera Region that hosted two refugee settlements (mainly refugees of the Hutu Ethnic Group from Burundi) known as Lukole A and B in northwestern Tanzania. Orobator explains:

The Christian community is organized into seven outstations located in different sections of the camp. Together the outstations make up the refugee “parish.” These outstations are further divided into Small Christian Communities. Each community is run by a team of four people (a man, a woman, a boy and a girl). A total of forty refugee catechists collaborate with

¹³³ There is a similar, and even more dramatic, situation in Latin America where the influence of Protestant fundamentalists and Pentecostals including aggressive sects is much greater. *Tablet* reports: “A DEBATE has flared in the Brazilian Church over how to respond to the increasing popularity of Pentecostal churches in the mainly Catholic country, writes Francis McDonagh. At the April [2013] meeting of the bishops’ conference it was suggested that base communities, small church groups in poor communities that try to relate the Gospel to day-to-day problems, might be the best way of countering the drift of Catholics to Pentecostalism.

One of Brazil’s most famous priests, Fr. Marcello Rossi, a successful gospel singer whose masses draw huge congregations, told the newspaper *Folha de São Paulo*: “I think the base communities are important, but these days our people need big spaces. The Protestants are building big centers because that brings people in. If you stay locked up in a base community, you forget about prayer and just do politics.” 4 May, 2013, p. 25.

¹³⁴ *Pastoral Guidelines for the Archdiocese of Nairobi 2013*, Nairobi: Archdiocese of Nairobi, 2013, page 17.

the team. According to the chief catechist, Juvenal Niboye, “the SCCs are responsible for the growth and development of the church in the camps”... The SCCs of Lukole regularly identified needier refugees, to whom they offered food and wood for fuel.¹³⁵

A second Case Study is the Rhino Camp in Uganda where the Refugee Christian Community “regularly teamed up to cultivate the farms belonging to refugees who had become incapacitated or were elderly.”¹³⁶

A third Case Study is Lodwar Diocese in northwestern Kenya that opened Holy Cross Parish in Kakuma Refugee Camp. It treats the parish and its pastoral team as any one of the 17 other parishes in the diocese as described as follows:

The 10 major chapels (like outstations) in the parish are divided into 26 Small Christian Communities. This makes pastoral administration, prayer, charitable activities and conflict resolutions easy for the pastors and all commissions involved in the pastoral work in the Camp. Daily services are held in these SCCs... A system has been created whereby needy refugees approach the leaders of the SCCs of the chapels. They are then referred to somebody in the Justice and Peace Commission. A lot of problems can be solved at this level. Others are referred to existing NGOs in the Camp, i.e. Lutheran World Federation, World Vision or the Jesuit Refugee Service. The Catholic faithful are refugees from Sudan, DRC, Burundi, Rwanda, and Somalia.¹³⁷

Another contemporary response is the pastoral concern and care of single Catholic mothers through the SCCs. Their number has increased dramatically especially in big cities such as Nairobi and Dar es Salaam. When these mothers ask for baptism of their infants, some SCCs first choose a responsible wife and mother in the SCC to “accompany” the single mother – to explain her responsibilities in raising a child a Catholic and other formation and education issues. Then the endorsement of the SCC is sent to the parish before the child is accepted for baptism. Many of these single mothers are fervent Catholics. Especially in the economically poor areas of big cities such as Nairobi (slums, shanty towns, informal settlements, etc.) they are the leaders of their SCCs.¹³⁸

¹³⁵ Agbonkhanmeghe Orobator, *From Crisis to Kairos*, pp., 149, 196.

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 196.

¹³⁷ Report of Father Frans Thoolen, SMA, Official of the Pontifical Council for the Pastoral Care of Migrants and Itinerant People, Vatican Website, retrieved on 7 March, 2013, http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/migrants/pom2003_91/rc_pc_migrant_s_pom91_Thoolen.html

¹³⁸ The 17 August, 2013 issue of the *Tablet* has a powerful article by Paul Vallely: “How Life in the Slums Changed the Pope.” “As leader of Argentina’s Jesuits, Jorge Mario Bergoglio was a staunch conservative. Now, as Pope Francis, he has put caring for the poor at the heart of his ministry. Here, in a second extract from a new book, the writer traces Bergoglio’s spiritual transformation.” <http://www.thetablet.co.uk/article/164557>

Magesa provides this overall assessment:

It is in the Eastern African ecclesiastical region (known as AMECEA, acronym for the Association of Member Episcopal Conferences of Eastern Africa), perhaps more than anywhere else in the Catholic world, where, for close to half-century now, there has been a formal, conscious, deliberate, and extensive ecclesial and ecclesiological effort to promote and sustain SCCs as a foundation of evangelization. Which means that, in Africa, SCCs have not only been a theoretical idea but a practical mission of the church; here SCCs have enjoyed not only theological elaboration and endorsement, but concrete pastoral application.

What, therefore, has come from Africa in the form of SCCs is a blessing of the Holy Spirit to and for the church worldwide. The full potential of community called church in its evangelizing or liberating role can only be realizable if evangelization takes place in SCCs. This is where the pragmatic work of justice, reconciliation, and peace can be fashioned, informed by that supreme joy that can be found only in the Gospel, the good news, of Jesus our Ancestor. SCCs are the way of being church.¹³⁹

Pope Francis promulgated *Evangelii Gaudium (The Joy of the Gospel)* in Rome on 26 November, 2013 to close the Year of Faith. This is the Apostolic Exhortation on the meeting of the Synod of Bishops on *The New Evangelization for the Transmission of the Christian Faith* in October, 2012. SCCs are emphasized in relation to the parish in Nos. 29-30 with the key sections in **bold**:

The description of the slums in Buenos Aires is similar to Nairobi and other big African cities: “Regular contact with the poorest of the poor in the Buenos Aires slums played a part. There, Bergoglio learned to see the world differently, said Fr. Augusto Zampini, a diocesan priest from Greater Buenos Aires who has taught at the Colegio Maximo. ‘When you’re working in a shanty town, 90 per cent of your congregation are single or divorced. You have to learn to deal with that Communion for the divorced and remarried is not an issue. Everyone takes Communion’” (page 6).

The Argentinian experience of CEBs has many parallels to Eastern Africa SCCs. “What shines through all this change is that Bergoglio is a pragmatist rather than an ideologue. As provincial in the 1970s, he was severe in his instructions to his Jesuits that they must serve only in parishes and not in Liberation Theology’s smaller, bottom-up base communities, where laymen and women took the place of priests and the poor learned to read and interpret the Bible for themselves. Yet, as archbishop, he reversed this attitude, giving the exact opposite instructions. ‘If you can, rent a garage and find some willing layman, let him go there, do a little catechesis, and even give Communion,’ he told his priests. ‘He was also concerned with getting the laity active,’ said his aide Federico Wals, ‘and letting them take charge.’ He wanted it to become a permanent feature of the Church that its mission should not depend on whoever happened to be in charge at any given time” (page 7).

¹³⁹ Laurenti Magesa, “The Joy of Community,” p. 22.

The parish is not an outdated institution; precisely because it possesses great flexibility, it can assume quite different contours depending on the openness and **missionary creativity of the pastor and the community**. While certainly not the only institution which evangelizes, if it proves capable of self-renewal and constant adaptivity, it continues to be the Church living in the midst of the homes of her sons and daughters. This presumes that it really is in contact with the homes and the lives of its people, and does not become a useless structure out of touch with people or a self-absorbed cluster made up of a chosen few. The parish is the presence of the Church in a given territory, an environment for hearing God's word, for growth in the Christian life, for dialogue, proclamation, charitable outreach, worship and celebration.¹⁴⁰ In all its activities **the parish encourages and trains its members to be evangelizers**. It is a **community of communities**, a sanctuary where the thirsty come to drink in the midst of their journey, and a **center of constant missionary outreach**. We must admit, though, that the call to review and renew our parishes has not yet sufficed to bring them nearer to people, to make them environments of living communion and participation, and to make them **completely mission-oriented**.

Other Church institutions, **basic communities and small communities, movements, and forms of association are a source of enrichment for the Church, raised up by the Spirit for evangelizing different areas and sectors. Frequently they bring a new evangelizing fervor and a new capacity for dialogue with the world** whereby the Church is renewed. But it will prove beneficial for them not to lose contact with the rich reality of the local parish and to participate readily in the overall pastoral activity of the Particular Church.¹⁴¹ This kind of integration will prevent them from concentrating only on part of the Gospel or the Church, or becoming nomads without roots.

Msgr. Hubertus van Megen, the then Charge D'affaires to Malawi, said that is striking that the pope devotes a lot of space in the apostolic exhortation to the important of the parish in pastoral ministry, evangelization and mission.¹⁴² This "community of communities" (or "communion of communities") ecclesiology is fundamental to how SCCs are a new model of church in Eastern Africa today. The parish is indeed a communion of SCCs. It is significant that the pope distinguishes "basic communities" that are best known in Latin American with the more widely used name "small communities." They actively participate in evangelization.

¹⁴⁰ Footnote 27 states that this section draws on *Proposition 26* on "Parishes and Other Ecclesial Realities" under "Pastoral Responses to the Circumstances of Our Day" of the 2011 World Synod of Bishops on "The New Evangelization for the Transmission of the Christian Faith.

¹⁴¹ Footnote 29, *ibi*

¹⁴² Hubertus van Megen in a conversation with the author, Lilongwe, Malawi on 16 December, 2013.

36 people participated in a National Youth SCCs Workshop on the theme “Youth SCCs Embrace the Word of God” at the Salesian Pastoral Centre in Lusaka, Zambia from 2 to 5 December, 2013. Participants included representatives from seven dioceses and three youth movements: 14 young men, nine young women, two Youth Coordinators, five Youth Priest Chaplains, one religious sister, three priest visitors and two priest facilitators. The workshop was sponsored by the Pastoral Department of the Zambia Episcopal Conference (ZEC) and the Zambian National Council for Catholic Youth (ZNCCY) in conjunction with the Pastoral Department of the Association of Member Episcopal Conferences in Eastern Africa (AMECEA).

Archbishop Tarsizio Ziyaye, the Chairman of AMECEA and Archbishop of Lilongwe, Malawi officially opened a three-day National SCCs Workshop on the theme “SCCs Embrace the Word of God” at the Bethany Centre in Lilongwe, Malawi on 17 December, 2013 that ran until 19 December, 2013. The 32 participants included representatives from all eight dioceses and various national Catholic organizations including: one archbishop, 10 priests, one religious sister, 11 laymen and nine laywomen. The workshop was sponsored by the Pastoral Department of the Episcopal Conference of Malawi (ECM) in conjunction with the Pastoral Department of the Association of Member Episcopal Conferences in Eastern Africa (AMECEA).

These were the first and second in a series of national and metropolitan SCCs Workshops in the nine AMECEA countries.

2014: 35 people participated in a National SCCs Workshop on the theme “Promoting Small Communities in Ethiopia in the Light of Pope Francis’ *The Joy of the Gospel* at the Galilee Centre in Debre Zeit, Ethiopia from 17 to 19 February, 2014. Participants included representatives from ten dioceses and various departments and movements including Pastoral Coordinators and CARITAS: 20 priests, 6 religious sisters, seven laymen and two laywomen. It focused on Pope Francis’ Apostolic Exhortation *The Joy of the Gospel*. The workshop stressed integral holistic development and joint pastoral planning in the Ethiopian context. This was stressed in an interview with Archbishop Berhaneyesus Demerew Souraphiel, the Archbishop of Addis Ababa, who expressed support for the SCCs in Ethiopia. The workshop was sponsored by the Pastoral Department of the Ethiopia Catholic Church in conjunction with the Pastoral Department of the Association of Member Episcopal Conferences in Eastern Africa (AMECEA).

47 people participated in a Mwanza Metropolitan Workshop on the theme “Small Christian Communities (SCCs) Embrace the Word of God” at the St. Dominic Pastoral Centre in Mwanza, Tanzania from 19 to 22 May, 2014. Participants included representatives from the eight dioceses of the Lake Victoria Zone in northwestern Tanzania (Mwanza Archdiocese and the dioceses of Bukoba, Bunda, Geita, Kayunga, Musoma, Rulenge-Ngara and Shinyanga): one archbishop, one bishop, 11 priests, 5 religious sisters, 21 laymen and 8 laywomen. The workshop was sponsored by the Pastoral Department of the Tanzania Episcopal Conference (TEC) and the Pastoral Department of Mwanza Archdiocese in conjunction with the Pastoral Department of the Association of Member Episcopal Conferences in Eastern Africa (AMECEA).

These were the third and fourth in a series of national and metropolitan SCCs Workshops in the nine AMECEA countries

The Episcopal Conference of Malawi (ECM) is preparing for the AMECEA 18th Plenary Assembly on the theme “New Evangelization through True Conversion and Witnessing to Christian Faith” to take place in Lilongwe, Malawi from 16 to 26 July, 2014. In terms of fund raising, Malawian ECM Secretary General Father George Buleya explained that all are involved from diocesan level, to the parish level, to Small Christian Community level down to the family level and so far, a lot of enthusiasm has been shown. “Our Christians are highly involved; they feel the ownership of the event and are willing to support it the best they can.”¹⁴³ During a meeting of 31 SCCs leaders (18 woman and 11 men) in Kachebere Parish on 12 December, 2013 I experienced this enthusiasm myself. These simple farmers and housewives in a rural parish were well aware of the coming AMECEA Meeting. They explained that each Catholic contributes 50 Malawian Kwacha to his or her SCC treasurer. This money is forwarded to the Parish Finance Committee and then to the Lilongwe Archdiocese Account for the preparations of the meeting.

One of the topics of reflection during the study session of the AMECEA Plenary will be: “New Evangelization as an Opportunity to Work towards True Conversion and Witness to Christian Faith (Emphasis on the Role of Family Life and Small Christian Communities).”

In preparation for the plenary the AMECEA Pastoral Department prepared “The Logical Strategic Framework for the Revitalization and Strengthening of SCCs as a Way of Being Church as Family in the AMECEA Region” (April, 2014 – March, 2017). It provides a kind of road map for the implementation of this important area of pastoral priority as enshrined in the Ten-Year AMECEA Strategic Plan (2014 – 2024). It emphasizes four main activities:

1. Promoting SCCs Formation Teams.
2. Promoting Youth SCCs (Parish/Learning Institutions)
3. Promoting Resource Material for Sharing in SCCs.
4. Promoting SCCs and Faith Sharing Interactions using the Electronic Media.¹⁴⁴

The AMECEA Countries are preparing for the III Extraordinary World Synod of Bishops on “The Pastoral Challenges of the Family in the Context of Evangelization,” to take place in Rome from 5-19 October, 2014. This October, 2014 III Extraordinary World Synod of Bishops will “define” the “*status quaestionis*” (Latin for “state of the question”) of the topic of the family and marriage. Then the next synod – officially called the Synod of Bishops XIV Ordinary General Assembly -- to take place in Rome in October, 2015 -- will “seek working guidelines in the pastoral care of the person and the family.” This preparation connects with many AMECEA dioceses that are celebrating 2014 as “The Year of the Family.”

¹⁴³ George Buleya in “MALAWI: ECM is Set for the 18th AMECEA Plenary Assembly,” *AMECEA Latest News*, 25 October, 2013, AMECEA Website, retrieved on 27 October, 2013 http://amecea.blogspot.com/2013/10/malawi-ecm-is-set-for-18thamecea.html?utm_source=feedburner&utm_medium=feed&utm_campaign=Feed%3A+AmecceNews+%28AMECEA+NEWS+BLOG%29

¹⁴⁴ “The Logical Strategic Framework for the Revitalization and Strengthening of SCCs as a Way of Being Church as Family in the AMECEA Region (April, 2014 – March, 2017),” Nairobi: AMECEA Secretariat, Unpublished Article, 2014, pp. 2-4.

In Eastern Africa Small Christian Communities (SCCs) were part of this consultation process especially through their parishes and national bishops' conferences. SCC members in Eastern Africa contributed answers to the poll questions whose results were coordinated by the Pastoral Departments of the national bishops' conferences in the AMECEA Region.¹⁴⁵ SCC members also sent their answers and comments directly to the Synod of Bishops Office in Rome¹⁴⁶ and through other groups and organizations (like the Focolare Movement). Overall, however, the grassroots consultation was not widespread in Eastern Africa.

SCCs are involved in family ministry/family life apostolate¹⁴⁷ that includes marriage ministry,¹⁴⁸ pastoral youth ministry, and a variety of other pastoral ministries and spiritual ministries. Research on the 160,000 SCCs in Eastern Africa reveals two approaches that work together. Family ministry is carried out in the SCCs that have an ecclesial identity in themselves. Parish-based SCCs elect lay ministers/animators/coordinators for:

1. Specific groups: Couples (married and engaged), Youth and Children.
2. Specific pastoral ministries: Catechesis, Justice and Peace, Religious Education, Sacraments and Spiritual/Religious Formation.

Thus SCCs in Eastern Africa choose one of its lay members (usually a married person) to be responsible for marriage ministry. This leader both advises young people to sacramentalize their marriages in church and counsels couples who are having marital difficulties. By also celebrating marriages in the homes of SCC members many more people in the neighborhood participate. This includes friends and neighbors who are not Catholics and Muslims. SCCs have a special way of being inclusive that could not happen at the parish church.

SCC members also actively participate in family ministry and marriage ministry on the outstation, sub-parish and parish levels.

¹⁴⁵ The AMECEA Pastoral Department will synthesize the answers from the nine AMECEA countries for joint discussion and further planning at the AMECEA Plenary Assembly in Lilongwe, Malawi in July, 2014. One topic is "New evangelization as an opportunity to work towards true conversion and witnessing to Christian faith, with emphasis on the role of Family Life and Small Christian Communities."

¹⁴⁶ It is gratifying that our report "Small Christian Communities (SCCs) Promote Family Ministry/Family Life Apostolate in Eastern Africa" was received by the Synod of Bishops Office in the Vatican with this answer: "Thank you for your e-mail and the attached file which we have printed out and delivered to those who are analyzing and summarizing the responses and observations to the questions in the Preparatory Document. Please convey our appreciation for the work, effort and concern involved!"

¹⁴⁷ These two expressions are used interchangeably.

¹⁴⁸ Marriage ministry is inclusive of marriage counseling that can be very "problem-centered" (couples having marital difficulties) and encouraging/advising/helping young couples to get married in a sacramental marriage.

2015: This process flows into the World Meeting of Families on the theme “Love is Our Mission: The Family Fully Alive” to take place in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, USA from 22-27 September, 2015. Delegates from the AMECEA Region will be participating in this meeting. Hopefully Eastern African SCCs can be involved in this whole ongoing process. More information and examples can be found in Chapter 12 on “SCCs Promote Family Ministry in Eastern Africa” in the free online Ebook [Building the Church as Family of God: Evaluation of Small Christian Communities in Eastern Africa](#) on the Small Christian Communities Global Collaborative Website and “Facebook Page” (www.smallchristiancommunities.org)