

Small Christian Communities (SCCs) Promote Family Ministry in Eastern Africa

By Joseph G. Healey, MM

Abstract: *The nine 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. In Eastern Africa Small Christian Communities (SCCs) are part of the consultation process and answered 11 of the 39 questions in the poll. Research on the 120,000 SCCs in Eastern Africa reveals that SCCs elect lay ministers/animators/coordinators for specific groups such as couples (married and engaged), youth and children and for specific pastoral ministries such as Catechesis, Justice and Peace, Religious Education, Sacraments and Spiritual/Religious Formation. A SCC is a communion of families. The SCC is an important support group for families and promotes a family culture. The SCC is both a place and a path for pastoral care and evangelization. This praxis of SCCs in Africa is contributing to the development of the theology of the Church as Family of God.*

Introduction:

Today there are over 120,000 Small Christian Communities (SCCs) in the Catholic Church in the nine AMECEA¹ countries in Eastern Africa. Kenya alone has 45,000 SCCs. The AMECEA Study Conference on "Building Small Christian Communities" in Nairobi, Kenya in 1976 emphasized that "systematic formation of Small Christian Communities should be the key pastoral priority in the years to come in Eastern Africa." This is the single most important statement made about SCCs. Since then SCCs as small neighborhood, parish-based communities in urban and rural areas in Eastern Africa have grown into a pastoral model of church that transforms the parish into a communion of communities and an instrument of evangelization.

¹ 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 English-speaking 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.

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This paper reflects on one very important part of SCCs' life and activities: How Small Christian Communities promote family ministry/family life apostolate/family catechesis in Eastern Africa. Reading the contemporary signs of the times SCC members are accompanying the two year process of the World Synod of Bishops to come up with new and creative pastoral strategies regarding family life in a contemporary African context. This includes SCCs' participation in all dimensions of family life and ministry: marriage ministry, youth ministry and the ministry of raising children today's world. This praxis of SCCs in Eastern Africa is contributing to the development of the theology of the Church as Family of God.

World Synod of Bishops on Family and Marriage

The nine 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 synod – officially called the Synod of Bishops III Extraordinary General Assembly – will “define” the “*status quaestionis*” (Latin for “the 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.” These two meetings are closely connected to the World Meeting of Families to take place in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, USA from 22-27 September, 2015.² On the first meeting Pope Francis states:

This important meeting will involve all the People of God – bishops, priests, consecrated men and women, and lay faithful of the particular Churches of the entire world – all of whom are actively participating in preparations for the meeting through practical suggestions and the crucial support of prayer. Such support [and input] on your part, dear families, is especially significant and more necessary than ever ... May we all, then, pray together so that through these events the Church will undertake a true journey of discernment and adopt the necessary pastoral means to help families face their present challenges with the light and strength that comes from the Gospel.³

The Vatican asked national bishops' conferences around the world to conduct a wide-ranging poll of Catholics asking for their opinions on church teachings on family,⁴ marriage,

² The *2015 African Proverbs Calendar* will have the theme “Family, Marriage and Relationships.”

³ “Pope Francis Writes to Families Asking for Their Prayers Ahead of October Synod,” 26 February 2014, *Tablet Website*, retrieved on 1 March, 2014, <http://www.thetablet.co.uk/texts-speeches-homilies/4/296/pope-francis-writes-to-families-asking-for-their-prayers-ahead-of-october-synod>

⁴ A request on our African Proverbs, Sayings and Stories Facebook Page states: “Please contribute an African Proverb or Saying on ‘family’ and ‘marriage’ for our meeting on Saturday, 23 November, 2013. If possible mention the country and language.” There were 75 responses. 45 examples are listed in Appendix No. 21 in Joseph Healey, *Building the Church*

annulments, single-parent families, adoptions, birth control, artificial contraception, abortion, surrogate motherhood (wombs for hire), premarital cohabitation, the culture of non-commitment and the presumption that the marriage bond can be temporary, conditional marriages, common law marriage, mixed or inter-religious marriage, same-sex marriage/unions and divorce.

This survey included Africa-related topics especially connected to African family issues such as (alphabetically):

abusive and violent husbands due to strong temperament, alcohol and drugs,
dowry or bridewealth – sometimes understood as the purchase price of the woman,
customary marriage,⁵
patriarchy in African society,
polygamy,
single mothers,
street children,
tensions with Muslims (related to interreligious dialog),
witchcraft,
youth unemployment.

This poll was part of the 39 questions in the eight-page *Preparatory Document (Lineamenta)* to the synod that is also available online. It has been translated into Amharic, Bemba, Chewa, Ganda, Swahili, Tumbuka and other languages in Eastern Africa.

Cardinal Lorenzo Baldisseri, secretary general of the Vatican's Synod of Bishops, asked the conferences to distribute the poll "immediately as widely as possible to deaneries and parishes so that input from local sources can be received."⁶ This represents a significant shift in thinking in the Vatican. Bishop Marcello Semeraro of Albano Diocese, Italy and secretary of the Council of Cardinals, "dismissed criticism of the decision to circulate a public questionnaire ahead of October's Synod of Bishops on the family. 'The beauty of this

as Family of God: Evaluation of Small Christian Communities in Eastern Africa, that is available as a free Ebook on the Small Christian Communities Global Collaborative Website at: http://www.smallchristiancommunities.org/images/stories/pdf/Build_new.pdf
These proverbs can be classified into the eight categories represented by the discussion topics on page 277 of the Ebook.

⁵ In the African context this is sometimes called traditional marriage. This is a cultural marriage following the traditions and customs of the local African ethnic groups. "Traditional" has many meanings. Worldwide it can refer to the marriage union between a man and a woman.

⁶ Lorenzo Baldisseri in Joshua McElwee, "Vatican Asks for Parish-level Input on Synod Document." *National Catholic Reporter (NCR)*, 31 October, 2013, National Catholic Reporter Website, retrieved 4 November, 2013, <http://ncronline.org/news/vatican/vatican-asks-parish-level-input-synod-document>

moment is that the church feels encouraged to ask questions,' he said. 'The church doesn't just have answers; it also needs to ask questions.'"⁷

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.⁸ SCC members also sent their answers and comments directly to the Synod of Bishops Office in Rome⁹ and through other groups and organizations (like the Focolare Movement).

This is an opportunity to talk about the pastoral needs of people in real situations in Africa. It is hoped that the synod will provide a realistic assessment of family life today and propose concrete pastoral approaches to meeting these challenges. A 19 November, 2013 "Editorial" in the *National Catholic Reporter (NCR)* states: "There is the danger that the media-rich West could dominate the discussion. Care will have to be taken to hear the voices of families in the Global South." Voices of lay people "on the ground" in Africa can make an important contribution.

Analyzing the Reality of Family and Marriage in Eastern Africa Today

Before answering the questions it is helpful to use Step One "See" of the Pastoral Spiral to analyze the reality of family and marriage in Eastern Africa today. "Family and Faith" is the theme of Week Two in the Kenyan Lenten Campaign 2014 booklet *How Can We Be One?...for the Sanctification and Salvation of All People*. In the "Preface" to the booklet Archbishop Zacchaeus Okoth, Chairman of Catholic Justice and Peace Commission, states:

This year Pope Francis has called a special synod on the family. He wants the synod to examine the pastoral challenges experienced by families. The topic for Week 2 is "Family and Faith." The institution of the family is continuously being challenged. In Kenya we have seen proposed laws

⁷ Marcello Semeraro quoted in John Allan, "'Francis Revolution' Rolls On in Both Symbols and Substance," *National Catholic Reporter* Website, retrieved on 30 January, 2014, <http://ncronline.org/news/vatican/francis-revolution-rolls-both-symbols-and-substance>

⁸ 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."

⁹ 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!"

touching on family and marriages presented in parliament that do not take into account both the African and Christian values. In our discussions we must look for ways we can fight this monster that has come to destroy the family. We need to have a unity of purpose for us to address this challenge.”¹⁰

Using the “See,” “Judge” and “Act” method/process, the Situational Analysis Section identifies 10 challenges to the family in Kenya today:

The family today is faced with many challenges that threaten to tear it apart. They include an anti-Christian culture, divorce, busyness, absent parent figure, indiscipline, financial pressures,¹¹ lack of communication, negative media influences, balance of work and family and materialism.¹²

The AMECEA Pastoral Department based in Nairobi, Kenya in November, 2013 also identified 10 challenges or problems under the heading: “Reality of the Problem Being Addressed:

Many families in the AMECEA Region, and indeed around the world face a lot of challenges such as: separation, divorce, cohabitation, polygamy, poor parenting, economic problems, impact of education systems, the distortion of the meaning of marriage, gender violence and other abuses that negatively affect the family.¹³

This research is part of its *Strategic Plan for 2013-2016* that focuses on “The Christian Family Life Campaign for the Protection of the Dignity and Value of Marriage and Family Life.”

A recent 2013 study in Our Lady Queen of Heaven Parish in Karen, Nairobi, Kenya identified the following 12 factors that contribute to the lack of marital commitment: sexual dissatisfaction; violence to children and spouse; absence of love; conflict in roles; family interference; childlessness in marriage; infidelity in marriage; failure to cooperate with each other; personality conflict; problem of mixed marriage; couples from different cultural backgrounds; and challenges of the extended family.¹⁴

¹⁰ Zacchaeus Okoth, Catholic Justice and Peace Commission, *How Can We Be One?...for the Sanctification and Salvation of All People*, Kenya Lenten Campaign, 2014, Nairobi: KCCB Catholic Justice and Peace Commission, 2014, p. 7.

¹¹ One concrete example is the seemingly endless challenge and nagging concern of paying school fees especially in primary and secondary school. This affects many African families across the board.

¹² Catholic Justice and Peace Commission, *How Can We Be One?* p. 19.

¹³ See AMECEA Pastoral Department, “Training and Capacity Building for the Coordinators of National Commissions for Marriage and Family Life in the AMECEA Countries.” Nairobi: Privately Published, 2013.

¹⁴ Solomon Gbaki, *The Pastoral Challenge of Marital Commitment: A Case Study of Our Lady Queen of Heaven Parish in Karen, Nairobi*, Nairobi: Unpublished Long Essay at Don Bosco Utume Salesian Theological College, 2014.

Mrs. Rose Musimba, Kenyan lay woman, the former Chairperson of the Parish Pastoral Council of Holy Trinity Parish, Buruburu I, Nairobi and a member of our Eastern Africa SCCs Training Team, affirms many of these challenges and factors in the following comments on the changes in Kenya society:

There is a lack of commitment to a permanent marriage. If a couple feel their marriage is not working, they just split up. There is more emphasis on conditional marriages. If certain conditions don't work out, the two people separate and go their own way. Even with plenty of marriage counseling, many couples don't focus on the basis issues and easily give up in their marriages. If we remove God from marriage we are done. Without Christian values we are finished.¹⁵

Simon Rurinjah, Kenyan layman, evangelist and a member of our Eastern Africa SCCs Training Team, points out:

Some of the challenges in Kenya threaten to tear up our Catholic families such as divorce caused by financial pressures. If a married woman is earning more than her husband there is often no compromise and the marriage is often in danger and it is hard to maintain peace and unity. The wife is often the first to go to the court and file for a divorce. There is little chance to educate the children. Couples stop praying to God who joined them together. Where there is no justice and peace how can we expect this family to be a Domestic Church Family of God.¹⁶

Tanzanian Sister Rita Ishengoma, STH, a member of our Eastern Africa SCCs Training Team based in Bukoba, Tanzania, says that one of the challenges of SCCs in Tanzania is involving men in the SCC Meetings:

A family without a father is "wounded." So is a SCC without the presence of men. Men are not against SCCs, but they need to be approached. They will be interested to come when our meetings are timely and serious. Men are like that everywhere.¹⁷

Cohabitation without marriage is increasing worldwide. In Kenya it is described as a *come we stay* (a popular Kenyan saying) arrangement when a man and a woman begin living together. It is especially an urban phenomenon. During a mass wedding of 34 couples at Saints Peter and Paul Catholic Church, Kiambu, Nairobi, Kenya in December 2013 the *National Mirror* reports that "Cardinal John Njue reached out to couples who have not solemnized their unions and are living in *come we stay* arrangements, urging them to take the bold step and embrace the sacrament of

¹⁵ Rose Musimba, cellphone interview with the author, 29 January, 2014.

¹⁶ Simon Rurinjah, conversation with the author, 29 January, 2014.

¹⁷ Rita Ishengoma, "Three Challenges of SCCs in Tanzania," Bukoba: Unpublished Report, 1 page.

marriage.”¹⁸ He challenged parents saying that the dowry should not be a stumbling block for financial reasons, but ought to cement the bonds of love and family. Njue said that dowry cannot be greater than God.

Openness to the possibility of communion for divorced and remarried Catholics is a complex issue. In preparation for the October, 2014 World Synod of Bishops this is the most talked about topic in Europe especially in Germany. It is less discussed in Africa. Univision (February, 2014) conducted a scientific poll of more than 12,000 Catholics in 12 countries representing Africa, Asia, Europe, Latin America and North America. The results represent an interesting snapshot of current opinion within the body of the Catholic Church. There was a question: Do you agree or disagree with Catholic Church policy on divorce that says “An individual who has divorced and remarried outside of the Catholic Church, is living in sin which prevents them from receiving Communion”? The results were as follows:

Europe (France, Italy, Poland and Spain)

Agree: 19%

Disagree: 75%

No answer: 6%

Africa (Democratic Republic of the Congo – DRC and Uganda)

Agree: 75%

Disagree: 19%

No answer: 6%¹⁹

During a SCCs Workshop in Lusaka, Zambia in December, 2013, Bishop Clement Mulenga, STB, of Kabwe Diocese, said that he is very compassionate and empathetic with couples he knows in Zambia who had a bad first marriage, got remarried and have been living together in a happy, stable marriage for 20 years or so – and are faithful Catholics who regularly participate in Sunday Mass. He said the Zambia Bishops are open to finding ways to help these people to be able to receive communion.²⁰

Financial/economic pressures are a challenge that is constantly discussed and prayed about in our SCCs in Eastern Africa. A particular problem is “school fees.” SCCs members, especially in poorer areas, are constantly looking for money to pay the fees and needs of their children in primary schools and high schools. Another issue is the effect of two working (and salaried) parents on the quality of family life. With fulltime jobs they are spending less and less time at home. The education of their children suffers.

¹⁸ Kamau Gitau, “A Long Walk Down the Aisle,” *National Mirror*, 01:14 (January/February, 2014), p. 18.

¹⁹ Univision Global Survey of Roman Catholics, Bendixen and Amadi International Website, retrieved on 9 March, 2014, <http://bendixenandamadi.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/02/ExecutiveSummary.pdf>

²⁰ Clement Mulenga in a conversation with the author in Lusaka, Zambia on 4 December, 2013.

A situational analysis in Eastern Africa identified various abuses in the family as an important concern. The AMECEA Report at the Continental SCCs Workshop in Karen in September, 2012 under the theme “Ways to Implement Reconciliation, Justice and Peace” stated that we need to look at the concrete situations of life in the light of the Gospel (e.g. good governance, democratic space, child abuse and child protection). SCC members have opportunities to participate in awareness building and training workshops. The Spec Training and Consultancy Centre (STCC) in Nairobi is conducting workshops on Child Protection Policies in Nairobi in 2014.

Answers to First Four Questions in the Poll

The first four questions in the poll treated the teaching of the Catholic Church’s post-conciliar magisterium on the family and marriage under the title “The Diffusion of the Teachings on the Family in Sacred Scripture and the Church’s Magisterium.” This is a deductive approach, from the top down. An inductive approach, starting with the reality of family and marriage in the world today, would have been more creative and helpful. The word “diffusion” is one of those Latin-English words that is hard for the ordinary Catholic to understand similar to “dissemination” or “propagation.” Better expressions would be “communication” or “transmission.”

Concerning the Catholic Church’s teaching, in his apostolic exhortation *The Joy of the Gospel*, Pope Francis offers pastors of the Catholic Church guidance on how to interpret traditional teaching concerning marriage and family life. One principle is that “the Church has rules or precepts which may have been quite effective in their time, but no longer have the same usefulness for directing and shaping people’s lives” (No. 43). Another was that “the Eucharist, although it is the fullness of sacramental life, is not a prize for the perfect but a powerful medicine and nourishment for the weak” (No. 47). These words are particularly relevant to two of the most contentious issues raised in present consultation on marriage and family life: contraception and the admission of divorced and remarried Catholics to Holy Communion.

The local churches in African can make a special contribution to these questions. AMECEA emphasizes developing SCCs as a concrete expression and realization of the Church as Family Model of Church that reflects the ecclesiology of communion of Vatican II. The 1994 First African Synod developed the specific ecclesial identity of the Church as Family of God in Africa while the 2009 Second African Synod focused more on the pastoral and mission activities of this Church as Family of God in Africa, namely to work toward reconciliation, justice and peace.

St. John Paul II’s 1995 Apostolic Exhortation *The Church in Africa* Number 63, under “The Church as God’s Family” states: “It is earnestly to be hoped that theologians in Africa will work out the theology of the Church as Family with all the riches contained in this concept, showing its complementarity with other images of the Church.” In this Church as Family of God Model of Church, along with parish-based SCCs and lectionary-based SCCs, we can talk of family-based SCCs. In Eastern Africa a SCC is a communion of families. SCCs made up of families are Africa’s strength. SCCs are part of the “Communion of Communities Model of Church.”

As African theologians explore more deeply the “Church as Family of God Model of Church,” we see the growing importance of the “Small Christian Community Model of Church” that is closely related to the “Communion of Communities Model of Church” and the “Communitarian Model of Church.” The Communitarian/Participatory/Collaborative/Circular/Inductive/Bottom-up Model can be compared and contrasted to the Hierarchical/Institutional/Pyramid/Deductive/Top-down Model.²¹

How is the recent praxis of SCCs in Africa contributing to the development of the theology of the Church as Family of God? African cultural relationships and communal life are the foundations that provides a developing model of a church based on the African family. Small Christian Communities are affirmed as the fundamental building blocks of the Church as Family of God in Africa. Stated another way, SCCs are the ideal foundational units of building the Church as Family of God.

In the *Final Message of the Bishops of Africa to the People of God* of the First African Synod, Section 28 on “The Church as Family and Small Christian Communities” the bishops state: “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.” Democratic Republic of the Congo theologian Father Bénézet Bujo emphasizes that “the bishops of the African Synod declared that the Church in Africa should make the family model their own and Small Christian Communities have stressed this concept of family.”²² Irish missionary and theologian Father Kieran Flynn, SPS asserts: “It is in being transforming communities [of themselves and others] that SCCs realize their ecclesial identity in the Church as Family Model.”²³

We continue to explore in depth how the praxis and theology of SCCs are an integral part of a relevant and credible African ecclesiology based on the Church as Family of God. This is within the context of the AMECEA priority of developing a theological framework of addressing key issues and challenges of “New Evangelization in Solidarity in the AMECEA Countries.”

SCCs’ Involvement in Family Ministry/Family Life Apostolate

First it is important to understand the African context for marriage, family and raising children. Traditionally marriage in Africa is not just between a man and a woman, but between two families and even two clans. The children belong to the community and not just to the biological parents. Bujo asserts:

²¹ See the section “Small Christian Communities: Ecclesiologies and Models of Church” in Kieran Flynn, *Communities for the Kingdom: A Handbook for Small Christian Community Leaders*, Eldoret: AMECEA Gaba Publications, *Spearhead* Nos. 181-182, 2007, pp. 67-81.

²² Bujo, Bénézet, *Plea for Change of Models of Marriage*, Nairobi: Paulines Publications Africa, 2009, p. 14.

²³ Flynn, *Communities*, p. 99.

For African marriage is not a private affair but embraces the extended families²⁴ of both husband and wife, the living dead and the yet unborn. The Western model of marriage that distinguishes between the civil and the religious has little meaning. Marriage is always religious... There is no marriage without both God and the ancestors.²⁵

Aunts, uncles, grandparents and cousins help in raising the children as seen in many “African Proverbs and Sayings Related to Small Christian Communities (SCCs)” listed on pages 366-367 of the Ebook *Building the Church as Family of God: Evaluation of Small Christian Communities in Eastern Africa* by Joseph Healey. The African value of community is expressed in the conviction of the fundamental African proverb *I am because we are; we are because I am.*²⁶ This has important implications for SCC Members. They accompany the betrothed couple on each stage of their whole marriage journey. Among the Sukuma people in Tanzania sometimes the priest blesses the handing over of the cows (the dowry) from the father of the bridegroom to the father of the bride in a religious ceremony followed by a festive meal. SCC members participate and give support.

Yet some of these values are changing in contemporary Africa especially through urbanization and secularization.

SCCs are involved in family ministry/family life apostolate²⁷ that includes marriage ministry,²⁸ pastoral youth ministry, and a variety of other pastoral ministries and spiritual ministries. Research on the 120,000 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.

²⁴ Tanzanian theologian Father Laurenti Magesa and other African theologians and scholars emphasize that “extended family” originates from a Western sociological conception of family structures. For Africans this wide network of aunts, uncles, grandparents, cousins, etc. is simply “family” or on a wider scale “clan.” Many have pointed out that this wide family network is the Africans’ worst enemy as well as best friend. This family solidarity system (called “the economy of affection”) can help needy members, but the more financially successful members can be constantly preyed upon by their “poor cousins.”

²⁵ Bujo, Bénézet, *Plea for Change of Models of Marriage*, p. 17.

²⁶ See Chapter III on “Marriage and Family Life” in *African Cultural Domains Book 2: Cycle of Family and Interpersonal Relationships*, edited by Michael Kirwen, Nairobi: MIAS Books, 2010.

²⁷ These two expressions are used interchangeably.

²⁸ Marriage ministry is inclusive of marriage counseling that can be very “problem-centered” (couples having marital difficulties) and encouraging/advising young people to get married in a sacramental marriage.

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

The series of six questions in the questionnaire on “The Pastoral Care of the Family in Evangelization” is particularly relevant to SCCs. One question asks: “What pastoral care has the Church provided in supporting couples in formation and couples in crisis situations?”

A beautiful Case Study of pastoral care and inculturation is “Celebrating the Sacrament of Marriage at the Small Christian Community (SCC) Level in Malawi” by Malawian Montfort priest Samuel Satiele, SMM. He vividly describes a wedding mass that took place at the house of the bride (matrilineal society) in a SCC in Namitembo Parish, Zomba Diocese, Malawi with this evaluation:

This practice restores the communitarian aspect of the African family which is vital. By registering the marriage at that SCC, involving counselors of that SCC, announcing marriage bands at that SCC and celebrating the sacrament itself at that SCC, the local community is involved. There is greater participation of relatives and this makes them feel part and parcel of the process.²⁹

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. Musimba points out:

The SCC members more easily notice problems among couples. One or two women in the SCC should take the wife apart privately. One or two men in the SCC should take the husband apart privately. Then the SCC members should talk with the couple together to encourage dialog among them. Prayer is important throughout.³⁰

Segment Two of the video *The Church in the Neighborhood: Small Christian Communities* portrays “Services (Ministries) in the SCC” with a focus on the SCCs in St. Joseph the Worker Parish in Nairobi Archdiocese. One very important and necessary service/ministry is “Marriage Animator/Marriage Counselor.” The video points out that “more than half of our Catholic married people have never received the sacrament of marriage” and thus cannot receive the sacrament of the Eucharist. Solutions are discussed in the SCC regarding problems such as high dowry payments, drunkenness, financial irresponsibility and opposition to mixed marriages.³¹

²⁹ The full Case Study is available on the Small Christian Communities Global Collaborative Website at: <http://www.smallchristiancommunities.org/africa/malawi/55-malawi.html>

³⁰ Musimba, *Ibid.*

³¹ Taken from *The Church in the Neighborhood: Small Christian Communities* (with Swahili and Arabic versions). Nairobi: Ukweli Video Productions, 1995. Segment I: “Life and Activities of SCCs.” Segment II: “Services (Ministries) in the SCC.”

Statistics in Nairobi Archdiocese show as many as 60% of Catholic couples have not sacramentalized their marriages. The traditional reasons of the high dowry payment and high cost of the wedding itself (including the reception) remain, but a new reason has strongly emerged. Young Catholics are reluctant to make permanent, lifetime commitments. They prefer living together for a period of time to “test” their relationship. This is related to the *come we stay* arrangement when a man and a woman begin living together before formalizing their marriage. For various reasons a number of Catholic women want children, but not a husband and a permanent, lifetime marriage. More equality in the government marriage laws is raising new tensions and questions.

There are different patterns in Eastern Africa. While traveling in Malawi in December, 2013, I was pleasantly surprised that many people receive communion at the Sunday masses and major feasts. I was told that many young people are getting married in the Catholic Church today.

During a SCCs Class at Tangaza in February, 2014 we had an animated discussion on Catholic marriages in Africa. One seminarian raised a provocative question: “Why do candidates for the priesthood spend eight to 10 years in formation and studies before ordination to the priesthood (a sacrament in the Catholic Church and a **permanent, lifetime commitment**) while couples preparing for marriage (also a sacrament in the Catholic Church and a **permanent, lifetime commitment**) can have as few as three marriage instructions before their wedding in church?” Another asked: “How come? Why is there such a big difference?” A random sample of marriage instructions in Nairobi Archdiocese ranged from a Crash Course of two weeks to five sessions spread over one and a half months to a six month marriage preparation program. Clearly more needs to be done in depth in preparing couples for Catholic Marriage. Better marriage catechesis should be a high priority.

Ethiopia and Eritrea have a traditional devotional small community or association called *Mahber*. It is a devotional group with a long history and significance. It offers important social support in the Ethiopian family system. Some of the activities of *Mahberat* (plural) in Ethiopia are:

- The small community reconciles members who have disputes through special ceremonies. When every member does not drink from the ceremonial pot (cup), the leaders immediately know something is wrong and try to reconcile the disputing parties. Once reconciled, both parties drink together.
- Helping at marriages, anniversaries and funerals. This includes encouraging young people in the association to get married in the Catholic Church, providing the choir at different events and organizing and serving at the related social events.

Thus a serious, ongoing challenge for SCCs is to help many of their members to regularize their marriages in a Catholic ceremony.³² Some SCCs have a campaign to help their

³² One increasingly hears the expression “Eucharistic famine” referring to the many, many Catholics in Africa who cannot receive communion because they are not officially married in the Catholic Church.

members to overcome some of the main stumbling blocks such as finalizing the dowry and raising money for the expenses of the marriage celebration.³³ Our research has gathered case studies of marriages that take place in the home of SCC members and are less expensive than in a Catholic Parish Church. SCCs help couples in arranging Multiple or Group Wedding Ceremonies (many marriages celebrated together at the same time or *ndoa za kwa pamoja* in Swahili) in their outstations and parishes to cut down on the overall expenses. One SCC member pointed out that we Small Christian Communities adult members are supposed to show a good example to others. It is very embarrassing if our children ask for church weddings before their parents get married in church.

Sometimes the SCC sends a small committee to mediate a marriage dispute. A Swahili video segment called *Jumuiya ya Upatanisho – Gekano, Kisii [Kenya]* (“SCC of Reconciliation– Gekano, Kisii [Kenya]”) has a short play about a husband and wife who have a dispute over money. A delegation from the SCC composed of two men and two women visit the couple in their home. They discuss the problem, pray together and resolve the dispute. Then the couple witnesses to their reconciliation in front of the whole SCC.³⁴

The SCCs in Moshi Diocese, Tanzania, have a special charism for mediating family disputes especially tensions and disagreements between husband and wife. Sometimes this is done by the whole local small community. Other times the marriage counselor – a specific pastoral ministry in the SCCs – helps in the reconciliation. As a result of this SCC outreach, many broken and strained marriages have been healed and other conflicts resolved. Following the traditional Chagga Ethnic Group customs, the SCC members use special cultural symbols of reconciliation such as the green *isale* leaf, the *isale* tree (a special reconciliation tree), a white goat and even a baby.

On how SCCs can reconcile married couples with problems Rurinjah states: “The couple should remember their vows that they took during their wedding in the church before God and Christians.” He adds: “The married couple should live as people who forgive each other in order to maintain peace in the family. Remember the Kikuyu, Kenya proverb *A home is for a husband and a wife.*”

“Reflection on Adoptive Parent Families” is a catechism lesson in *The Journey of Faith – 5: Together in Jesus’ Family* (Nairobi: Paulines Publications Africa, 2012). It is based on *Matthew* 18:5 and 25:40; *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (CCC) Nos. 2379, 1654; and *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church* (CSDC), No. 218. It tells the touching story of Stephen and Caroline, a childless African couple in a Small Christian Community who adopt the three little children of a young couple who lost their lives in a

³³ Servant of God Cardinal Maurice Michael Otunga liked to give the example of the SCC in Nairobi Archdiocese that donated the bride’s wedding dress to a couple in its small community who had insufficient money for all their needs for their Marriage Ceremony in the Catholic Church.

³⁴ Taken from *Njia Mpya ya Kuishi na Kueneza Injili: Jumuyia Ndogo za Kristo* (Swahili for *A New Way of Living and Proclaiming the Church: Small Christian Communities*). Nairobi: Ukweli Video Productions, 1985.

terrible road accident. The lesson also helps SCCs in the ongoing formation of couples and the deeper understanding of family and marriage.³⁵

Regarding how Christian families transmit the faith in Kenya we started SCCs of the Pontifical Missionary Childhood (PMC). Small groups of children meet on Saturdays or Sundays in their parishes to pray and to reflect on the *Bible*. In Kitale Diocese 15 PMC children belong to St. Francisca SCC in Holy Trinity Parish and 30 PMC children belong to St. Ann SCC in St. Peter Claver Parish. Similar SCCs of PMC children are in Chaani Parish in Mombasa Archdiocese. The PMC SCCs use the Lumko "Seven Steps" Method of *Bible* Sharing/Gospel Sharing. The PMC animators are trained first in this method.

Case Study of an Eastern African SCC

A Case Study of how an African SCC is involved in family ministry and the family apostolate was St. Kizito SCC's weekly gathering to reflect on "Family and Faith," the theme of Week Two in the 2014 Kenyan Lenten Campaign booklet *How Can We Be One?...for the Sanctification and Salvation of All People*. The meeting took place at the Maryknoll Society House near Waruku in St. Austin's Parish in Nairobi, Kenya on 9 March, 2014. I am an ordinary member of this SCC. To show solidarity with SCCs in other Eastern African countries the table in the middle of the circle of SCC members was covered with an African *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. A striking Ethiopian cross was placed on the table. There were 24 participants: 13 women, nine men and two children. All were lay people except four African Franciscan Sisters and one expatriate missionary priest (myself).

The SCC members used the three steps of the "See," "Judge" and "Act" methodology/process for the Second Sunday of Lent, 16 March, 2014 as follows:

1. Analyze and discuss the drawing (cartoon) on page 16-17.
2. Read the story in Step One ("See"): "Mr. and Mrs. Kivu and Their Two Children" on page 18-19.
3. Read the Situational Analysis in Step Two ("Judge") on pages 19-22.
4. Read the Gospel (*Matthew* 17:1-9) and the scripture commentary.
5. Answer question 3 in Step Three ("Act"): "Amidst the challenges facing the family, how is your Small Christian Community helping its members to cope with these challenges?"

A section from the booklet on the importance of African family values was highlighted:

Marriage and family life are important to each and all of us. We all come from families. We all have a mother, father, brothers, sisters, aunts, uncles, cousins, grandparents, nephews, and nieces. Everyone desires a good, warm and loving family where people care for one another. If we don't have these relatives, we

³⁵The full reflection is Appendix 16 in the Ebook -- Joseph Healey, *Building the Church as Family of God: Evaluation of Small Christian Communities in Eastern Africa* -- on the Small Christian Communities Global Collaborative Website at: http://www.smallchristiancommunities.org/images/stories/pdf/Build_new.pdf

feel deprived. A warm and loving family is God's plan for each of us. From the very beginning, when God created our first parents, Adam and Eve, God had a plan for marriage and family life.³⁶

In connecting the theme of family to the Gospel of the Transfiguration, one member said that God has a plan for all humanity, for Jesus as Savior and Redeemer, and for all our African families. Suggestions for action included:

- The family is the first school. As a “communion of families” our SCC is a school too that has a mission to educate.
- Remove the backbiting,³⁷ jealousy and critical feelings among SCC members and their families.
- Prayer is very practical. We should pray more for our family problems and our family needs.
- As part of our Lenten action, visit the *Amani na Wema* ("Peace and Goodness") Children's Home (AIDS orphans) located in the geographical area of St. Kizito SCC in St. Austin's Parish.

The final question in the questionnaire on family and marriage – “What other challenges or proposals related to the topics in the above questions do you consider urgent and useful to treat?” -- is open-ended and offers wide scope to present the Eastern Africa perspective and grassroots experience.

One challenge is how SCCs can reach out to families and married people on the margins and periphery of society. This includes pastoral, missionary and social outreach to young people from broken homes, to single mothers and their children, to migrant families and to homeless families. SCC members have a special opportunity to minister to families and couples in the refugee camps and internally displaced persons (IDP) camps in Eastern Africa. This compassion and care for the poorest and neediest is a special concern of Pope Francis.

African Proverbs and Sayings Related to Family and Marriage

Another approach to this final question is to reflect on African proverbs and sayings related to family and marriage. Pastoral and theological insights emerge. They are used in many SCCs' contexts and situations. A full list is found in Appendix No. 21 of the Ebook -- Joseph Healey, *Building the Church as Family of God: Evaluation of Small Christian Communities in Eastern Africa*.³⁸ Some examples:

³⁶ Catholic Justice and Peace Commission, *How Can We Be One?* p. 20.

³⁷ Some years ago SCC members in Tanzania composed an “African Way of the Cross Following Our Local African Situation Especially the Sufferings, Crosses, and Problems of Our Everyday Life.” Women especially, based on their life experiences, composed the 13th Station: "Jesus is Taken Down from the Cross." Theme: “Backbiting, Calumny, Contempt, False Rumors, Gossip, and Insults.”

³⁸ On the Small Christian Communities Global Collaborative Website at: http://www.smallchristiancommunities.org/images/stories/pdf/Build_new.pdf

- **African proverbs and sayings on family life**

Blood is thicker than water (many African languages).

You can only resemble the parents that gave birth to you. For a cow does not give birth to a sheep (Yoruba, Nigeria).

You only have one mother (many African languages).

A child does not laugh at the ugliness of its mother (Uganda)

The person who has not traveled widely thinks his or her mother is the only cook (the best cook) (many African languages).

No matter how skinny, the son always belongs to his father (Galla, Ethiopia)

No matter how useless a person may seem to another, they mean the world to their family (Zulu, South Africa).

Brothers and sisters are like calabashes; even if they knock each other, they don't break (Bunyoro, Uganda).

Brotherhood and sisterhood does not mean physical resemblance but mutual assistance (Africa).

Eating together strengthen brotherhood and sisterhood (Tongo, Ghana).

You must treat the earth well. It was not given to you by your parents. It is loaned to you by your children (Gikuyu, Kenya).

These proverbs and sayings are closely linked to African values of relationships, community and unity. They touch all aspects of human life.

- **African proverbs and sayings on raising children**

The hen with baby chicks doesn't swallow the worm (Sukuma, Tanzania).

When the woman is hungry she says, "Roast something for the children so they might eat" (Akan, Ghana).

A child's fingers are not scalded by a piece of hot yam which its mother puts into its palm (Yoruba, Nigeria).

A child who is not taught by its mother will be taught by the world (Swahili, Eastern and Central Africa).

A stick is straightened while still young (many African languages).

You are the child of a duck; take care of yourself (Sukuma, Tanzania).

If you think education is costly, try ignorance (Swahili, Eastern and Central Africa).

African proverbs and sayings teach many values about raising children. Often the mother has the central role. Traditionally the elders' advice was very important, but this is changing especially in urban Africa.

- **African proverbs and sayings on marriage ministry and marriage counseling**

Marriage is like a peanut/groundnut; you have to crack it to see what is inside (Akan, Ghana).

Marriage is like a book; every page/day is a new lesson (Ewe, Ghana).

The journey of marriage is far, far (Ashante, Ghana).

A single person cannot counsel a married couple (Luo, Kenya and Tanzania)

The hoes of two people cultivating together in a field sometimes clash (hit) against each other (Sukuma, Tanzania).

Hoes that dig together never miss to knock at one another (Swahili, Eastern and Central Africa).

Two calabashes in a basin of water will by all means touch each other but not break each other. (Ewe, Ghana, Togo, Benin and Nigeria).

Marriage is basic to African society, but there are many different traditions and customs depending on the local context and situation.

Concerning the Sukuma proverb above – *The hoes of two people cultivating together in a field sometimes clash (hit) against each other*: The Sukuma Ethnic Group is the largest ethnic group (more than six million people) in Tanzania and lives mainly in rural areas in the northwestern part of the country on or near the southern shores of Lake Victoria – mainly in the Mwanza and Shinyanga Regions. The Sukuma are agricultural-pastoralists whose lives focus on farming (maize, sorghum, cassava, sweet potatoes, cotton, etc.) and herding cows. The hoes of two people weeding together in their fields sometimes clash (hit) against each other as seen in this Sukuma proverb. This proverb is applied to married people living in close proximity. They experience misunderstandings and differences at times. This is part of daily life. The proverb is used during Wedding Masses to encourage the newly married couple to persevere in bad times and difficult situations. When marital problems occur, it is used in marriage counseling.

The Kenya Conference of Catholic Bishops (KCCB) answered the 39 questions in a 25-page document. SCCs are mentioned seven times including these statements: “Strengthen Small Christian Community discussions on the family as a Domestic Church.” “The Catholic Church has provided ministers, support groups and Small Christian Communities to support and journey with couples in crisis situations.” “Small Christian Communities should participate fully in family issues.”

2014-2015 as the “Year of the Family and Marriage”

The closing of the 2012-2013 Year of Faith at the end of November, 2013 opened the door to a new theme for SCCs in Eastern Africa: 2014-2015 as the “Year of the Family and Marriage.” This is part of SCCs’ active participation in preparing for the two World Synod of Bishops Meetings in Rome. Many dioceses have officially declared 2014 as the “Year of the Family” such as Johannesburg Archdiocese, South Africa; Machakos Diocese, Kenya; Mwanza Archdiocese, Tanzania; Nairobi Archdiocese, Kenya; Ngong Diocese, Kenya; and Shinyanga Diocese, Tanzania. Various Catholic institutions have declared 2014 as the “Year of the Family.” In its information posters the Catholic University of Eastern Africa (CUEA) in Nairobi includes the saying *A family that prays together stays together.*

The theme of the Paulines Publications Africa 2014 Calendar is “Family Calendar with Pope Francis.” Machakos Diocese in Kenya has over 5,000 SCCs. The theme of its 2014 Diocesan Calendar is: “Called to Emulate the Holy Family.” The Paulines have a wide range of pamphlets, booklets and books on family life including the “Family Today Series” and the “Joy of Living Series.” These are easily affordable

and can be a regular part of SCC meetings and individual family meetings and discussions.

In 2014 the monthly "*Mwaki*" (Kikuyu for "SCC") Radio Program on CORO FM in Nairobi is focusing on "SCCs Promote the Pastoral Care of Family and Marriage."³⁹ This theme is also being used in a Swahili program (called *Jumuiya Ndogo Ndogo, Oyee!*) and an English program on Kenya Broadcasting Corporation (KBC).

"Family Catechism" and "Family Catechesis" are two themes in Week Two on "Family and Faith" in the Kenyan Lenten Campaign 2014 booklet.⁴⁰ In **bold** print the booklet states: "**Since parents have given children their life, they are bound by the most serious obligation to educate their offspring and therefore, must be recognized as the primary and principal educators.**"⁴¹ Small Christian Community are helping its members. Education of children starts in the family, in the home. A SCC is a communion of families. The SCC is an important support group for families – for the parents and the children alike. The SCC is also a place for religious education, pastoral care and evangelization. SCCs can promote a family culture.

"The Pastoral Challenges to the Family in the Context of Evangelization," is the theme of the Formation Meetings in 2014 of the Blessed John Paul II Parish Evangelizing Teams in Nairobi, Kenya. The theme on Sunday, 16 February, 2014 was: "Using the Small Christian Communities (SCCs) Method of "See," "Judge" and "Act" to Reflect on Key Pastoral Problems Related to Family and Marriage in Kenya Today." After wide consultation on the real issues in family and marriage in Kenya today (*hali halisi* in Swahili), the participants divided into SCCs to reflect on some of the following topics:

- *Helping young couples/couples with children to get married in a Catholic Church.*

³⁹ The monthly themes are as follows:

MARCH	- helping young couples to solemnize their marriage in the church
APRIL	- helping marriages with problems
MAY	- issue of divorce
JUNE	- religious education for your children
JULY	- tackling various addictions
AUGUST	- single motherhood
SEPTEMBER	- building the family culture
OCTOBER	- celebrating marriages in church
NOVEMBER	- stock taking of what we have done since March

⁴⁰ Nairobi Archdiocese has conducted "Training of Trainers" (TOTs) Workshops to train people from every deanery (both clergy and lay) on the theme and weekly topics in the booklet. In this way both the process and content get down to the SCC members on the local level. Research over many years clearly shows that SCC leaders and animators need regular training in the use and application of the booklets especially the process/methodology of starting from life experience (a story in Step One -- "See").

⁴¹ Catholic Justice and Peace Commission, *How Can We Be One?* p. 21.

- *Counseling couples with marriage problems.*
- *Divorce caused by financial pressures.*
- *Advising single mothers on raising their children.*
- *Increasing number of abortions.*
- *Helping children and young people who have addictions including alcoholism, drugs, excessive attachment to electronic devices/gadgets (computer games, internet surfing, online music, social media), gambling and pornography.*
- *Religious education for your children.*
- *Jobs for Youth/Problem of Youth Unemployment⁴²*

After discussing the meaning of the topic, SCC members looked up *Bible* passages on the topic and then discussed the practical solutions and actions to be taken. Some of the influences and factors involved in these problems and challenges included (alphabetically):

- bad local environment
- careless use of money
- curiosity
- effects of poverty
- financial pressures
- generational gap
- lack of communications
- lack of honesty and trust
- losing job
- no children
- no prayer life in the family
- parental neglect
- partner has other relationships
- selfishness
- stress

Under solutions it was recommended that the SCC can be a support system and “home” for its members especially in African cities. Regular prayer in the SCCs is very important including teaching the children how to pray. SCC members can work with professional counselors and groups such as 12 Step Groups (Al-Anon, Alcoholic Anonymous, etc.), Family Life Ministries, Marriage Encounter, etc.

One of the best ways of celebrating the “2014-2015 Year of the Family and Marriage” is to emphasize these priorities in the annual “Days” and “Events” of the SCCs and the parishes. An example is St. Jude Catholic Church, Doonholm, Nairobi,

⁴² This is a problem that affects the social, economic and pastoral life of families throughout Africa. High unemployment of youth affects the stability of families and marriages.

Kenya. Its Family Day is celebrated every year on 28 October, the Feast Day of St. Jude Thaddeus. SCCs participate in the liturgy such as bringing up the Offertory Gifts. After the homily marriages are solemnized in the context of family values. One important mantra is “The SCC is a Communion of Families.”

Conclusion: The Way Forward

Pope Francis said: “We are on the way towards a deeper matrimonial pastoral care.”⁴³ He seems to favor a more pastoral approach to the equally perplexing question of “invalid” marriages — couples who do not get married in church in the first place and couples who remarry outside the church without getting an annulment.

During this “2014-2015 Year of the Family and Marriage” SCC members in Eastern Africa can help young people to have a sacramental marriage in church and help to reconcile couples who are having difficulties in their marriages. Parish-based SCCs have many opportunities to promote family ministry, family life apostolate, family catechesis and family values in their parishes and other places in Eastern Africa. This contributes to the ongoing development of the identity and pastoral mission of the Church as Family of God in Africa.

⁴³ Francis, *Vatican Information Service*, 31 July, p. 20.

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Internet Resources

African Proverbs, Sayings and Stories Website (including the “African Stories Database” and “Facebook Page”)

<http://www.afriprov.org>

AMECEA Website (including the *AMECEA Online Newsletter*)

<http://www.amecea.org>

Catholic Justice and Peace Commission (CJPC) Website-- Kenya

<http://www.cjpckkenya.org>

Small Christian Communities Global Collaborative Website and “Facebook Page”

www.smallchristiancommunities.org

Vatican Website

www.vatican.va

NOTE: This article was published in the May, 2014 (No. 50) issue of *Hekima Review*, the Journal of Hekima College. Hekima Review Website, retrieved on 9 August, 2014,

<http://hekima.ac.ke/hekimareview>