

Absence of Youth and Men in Small Christian Communities (SCCs) in Eastern Africa

Contents

SCC Practicum Write-Up.....	1
See.....	1
Judge	1
Act.....	1
Absence of Youth and Men in Small Christian Communities (SCCs) in Eastern Africa and Recommendations	2
Age and Logical Mindedness	3
Roles and Friendship.....	3
Economic Changes and Unemployment	3
Schooling.....	4
Separation and Sacrifice.....	4
Failure of the Pastoral Agents	4
Bible Studies and Sharing	4
Good Parenthood	4
Some Recommendations for Solving the Problems	4
Creative Bible Sharing	4
Creating SCC Awareness	4
Separate Youth SCC Groups.....	4
Importance of the Sacraments	5
Harmony of Humankind and SCCs	5
Conclusion.....	5
Bibliography	5

1. SCC Practicum Write-Up

SEE

This report is based on my visit, participation and observations in the *Bible* service and meeting of St. Vincent de Paul Small Christian Community (SCC) at an informal settlement in the Presidential Escort Staff Quarters, High Ridge, in St Francis Xavier's Parish, Parklands, Nairobi Archdiocese, Nairobi, Kenya on Wednesday evening, 12 March, 2014 from 7 pm to 8 pm. The language was partly in English and partly in Kiswahili. The meeting was held at Nicholas Muthama's residence, one of the members for three years. There were a total of 18 members present, 10 women, 5 men and 3 children. It is a mixed ethnic group. The meeting began with a praise and worship. Five members gave prayer intentions and prayers of the faithful as per the intentions. The gospel of the following Sunday, 16 March 2014 and Second Sunday of Lent, *Matthew 17:1-9* was read. It was the gospel of the Transfiguration of Jesus. Six people gave *Bible* reflections and sharing (two men and four women); Seven *Bible* verses were cited. There was enough time for each person to share his/her reflections on the *Bible* and the meaning of Lent in the 2014 Kenya Lenten Campaign and discussions on various issues such as absence of members, lateness and financial contributions. There was the weekly contribution (sadaka), announcements and closing prayer.

JUDGE

There was quite a long silence between the scripture reading and the sharing, but one woman was talking for too long touching different issues that were not connected to the scripture. It is a very active and motivated SCC, but the discussions on various financial collections took a long time, and some problems were pointed out concerning some finances, for example, the need of money to carry out some projects. It was pointed out that those who still have some materials from the 2014 Lenten Campaign should pass them round. They were a happy people and seemed to have good relationship with each other. I was asked to introduce myself and say a few words and I did with great joy. I encouraged the meeting and told them how I so much appreciated everything I saw, and that I was a student on assignment. I asked them a few question to enrich myself with knowledge of SCC. The meeting went smoothly and there was tea for everyone at the end.

ACT

They decided to visit some of the members who stopped attending meeting with no reasons and as well one of the sick members, Mrs. Veronica, on Saturday, 16 March, 2014 and to offer some help. There was another gathering of the leaders after the meeting discussing on some absent members and some financial problems and what to give to those, who are in need, especially Mrs. Veronica. In the past the group used to celebrate the mass once a month, but of late they have not been able to do that since the parish priest is not available.¹ So, the main challenge is to have the priest visiting them more often. Another challenge is that of absenteeism. Not all members attend meetings regularly. The reasons are mainly due to work. Some have stopped attending meetings after baptism or that of their children. It appears therefore that they only attend the meetings so as to be allowed for

¹ Cf. N. MUTHAMA, St. Vincent de Paul Small Christian Community, 12/3/14.

baptism or when there are celebrations.² Some members have also left the group completely without any serious reasons given.

Between May and August 2013, during my holidays in Tanzania, I had the experience of attending meetings with Ss. Peter and Paul SCC, at the Presentation of the Blessed Virgin Mary Parish, Karanga, Moshi Diocese, Moshi, Tanzania. The *Jumuiya* has a common maxim that points to a goal, “*roho moja, moyo moja katika Kristo*” that I vividly remember despite my poor Kiswahili. The maxim means, “one heart, one soul in Christ.” This is a typical *modus operandi* of what *Jumuiya* is. Hence the *Jumuiyas* have a strong meaning and influence in Tanzania and membership is highly honoured. For instance, it is interesting to see both Catholics and non-Catholics, including Muslims requesting for house blessings from the priest. This is an indication that the *Jumuiyas* pass a spiritual message, which is welcomed by members of other faiths as well.

I also had the chance to interview Mr. Lawrence Carlos Mwangi, in-charge of liturgy, a member of St. Augustine’s Small Christian Community, St. Bakhita’s Catholic Church in Mukuru area of Embakasi, Nairobi Archdiocese, Nairobi, Kenya on Sunday, 16 March, 2014, and the experience was similar, a strong bond among members.

2. Absence of Youth and Men in Small Christian Communities (SCCs) and Recommendations

The Small Christian Communities (SCCs) are a stronghold in the Catholic Church, particularly in the African Church. The Small Christian Communities (or *Jumuiya*, as they are known in Kenya and Tanzania), developed particularly in Eastern Africa, in the “Association of Member Episcopal Conferences in Eastern Africa” (AMECEA) countries as a result of putting the ecclesiology of the Second Vatican Council (1962-65) into practice.³ The *Jumuiyas* in this way form the beacons of the local Church specially in Eastern Africa where it has taken strong roots. This is so because they are the church at its lowest level and they are small groups, where individuals from a particular locality come together, know each other, grow together in faith and transfer the experience to the higher level that makes the Church.⁴ John Cardinal Njue on AMECEA Family of God, on the 17th AMECEA Plenary Assembly said that we have come from far and are still far. So much has been done and so much is sown, let us ask ourselves how far we are... we have sown the seeds and seeds grows, but if we do not water them, they will wither and die. And President Kibaki emphasized that the Catholic Church should correct and speak the truth with power, reminding the Church of her role as the agent of unity and love, a family.⁵ On the identity of the SCCs in Africa, Polycarp Cardinal Pengo of Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, points out that AMECEA is established as a response of love, encouraging us to always remember the words of our Lord, “I am always with you.”⁶

Bishop Patrick Kalilombe at the AMECEA Study Conference on “Planning for the Church in Eastern Africa in the 1980s,” during the AMECEA Meeting in Nairobi far back in

² Cf. M. S. RURINJA, “*The Importance of Lay People in SCCs*,” 14 February 2014.

³ Cf. J. HEALEY, *Timeline in the History and Development of Small Christian Communities (SCCs) in Africa Especially Eastern Africa*, 1/04/14.

⁴ Cf. J. HEALEY, *Introduction to the SCC*, 10/1/14.

⁵ Cf. J. HEALEY, DVD on *The Church in the Neighbourhood: Small Christian Communities*, 17/1/14.

⁶ Cf. J. HEALEY, DVD on *AMECEA Family of God*.

1973, said that every bishop, priest, seminarian, brother, and sister should participate in a particular SCC, not as a leader but as a regular and ordinary member.⁷ Though the SCCs remain a backbone of the Church, it is a concern that men and youth lack interest in attending the meetings. The problem, according to Mwalimu Simon Rurinja, is that the majority of members are women. In most cases, men represent a percentage that rarely goes beyond 10%. Worse still, there are no young people, except children, who go with their mothers. 99% of members are lay people, priests and religious are few, thus, Mwalimu Simon Rurinja emphasizes that we need new methods and new creativity.⁸

Age and Logical Mindedness: The absence of men in SCCs could be traced back to say that men are just less religious than women are and that the SCCs have not provided much satisfaction to men. But this could also be as the result of a self-conceived idea that men are less easily persuaded, more logically minded and therefore less easily convinced. Perhaps the best explanation for this phenomenon is that men have often thought SCC demands the submission of masculinity or that the SCCs are for the weak. A false view of humility may also contribute to the sense that real manhood is incompatible with SCC services.

On the other hand, the young people are energetic, adventurous, want to be autonomous and could be rebellious. Their quest for independence, exposure to social media and technological advancements form the young ideology to think that adults have nothing to offer them. They feel drawn by modernity and scientific explorations, enjoyment of life and the feeling that, "I still have more time to live."⁹ They feel that their views are not welcomed and so sharing ideas with elders and adults puts the youth off to the alien world and obliges them to speak a language that is not theirs.

Roles and Friendship: The roles assigned to men in the SCCs may have big influence. Most men and youth may have the feeling that their identity may lose its importance and would perhaps stay away in order to be true to their traditional feelings. African culture is specific to certain roles, which are meant for men and youth, and when these are watered down to passionate feelings and emotional ecstasies, most men find it difficult to identify with.

Another most important aspect of this is comradeship and friendship. By friendship, I mean the sense that involves challenges and fosters responsibility. Most SCC meetings seem to have lost this masculine sense of a struggle against the forces within oneself and this is mainly because men and women have different characteristics in our cultures which affects the way SCCs operate.

Economic Changes and Unemployment: Men and youth are struggling against rapid economic and social changes and challenges, especially in relation to employment. Because of unemployment and unstable economic balance, men and most young people lack time and interest to sit down for a long time. Pope Francis rightly pointed out to the Salesian General Chapter in Rome in 2014 that in working with young people we come across the world of

⁷⁷ Cf. J. HEALEY, *Timeline in the History and Development of Small Christian Communities (SCCs) in Africa*, 1/04/14.

⁸ Cf. M. S. RURINJA, "The Importance of Lay People in SCCs," 14 February 2014.

⁹ Cf. J. NUGU, *Lack of Youth in Small Christian Communities (SCCs) in Africa: Causes and the Way Forward*, 1/4/14.

youth exclusion and it is tremendous to think of 75 million young people without work, with so many negative consequences.¹⁰

Schooling: Many of the young people are still in school; thus it is not easy to join SCC meetings. They have more responsibility after school to study and do some homework. While the men feel the responsibility of providing for their children as fathers, the mothers assume less responsibility, and take care of the home and the children and find more time to attend SCCs.

Separation and Sacrifice: At a certain point in a youth life, he/she goes through a separation period and turns to other models for life characterized by peer pressure and crises in the life of the young person. The situation when applied to men will result in the neglect of those things that are not convenient.

Failure of the Pastoral Agents: Most of our pastoral agents seem not to have interest in promoting responsibility for men and the young people to grow in enthusiasm for SCCs.

Bible Studies and Sharing: Our men and youth are bored by long biblical texts and sharing as compared to women. Perhaps the methodology of *Bible* sharing should change and more creativity applied. e.g., our kids learn *Bible* stories in the church and facts in schools, which are reinforced by popular culture that *Bible* sharing needs to address by comparison.

Good Parenthood: If youth don't see their fathers or parents in SCC, they say, why should we go. If their parents are not married in the church, they ask questions on the need of SCC?¹¹

3. Some Recommendations for Solving the Problems

Creative Bible Sharing: Acting out the reading, in a drama form, i.e. having different people take part in playing the parts of different characters or organising a *Bible* quiz. This will involve both men and youth in reflecting and taking active part in *Bible* sharing. In other words, trying to develop a creative and different way of reflecting on the *Bible* (reflecting on immediate human problems in Kenya like abortion or cohabitation in the light of the *Bible*).

Creating SCC Awareness: Encourage men and youth to participate in the life of SCCs and help parents to become more aware of the importance of SCCs. They should encourage and motivate their children to participate in *Bible* reflection and other relevant prayer groups.

Separate Youth SCC Groups: Form SCCs for youth that are separate from adults and train them on how to establish and coordinate meetings. This may be either from the parish or within an existing SCC. However, care should be taken not to confuse the SCC with other youth gatherings.¹²

¹⁰ Cf. POPE FRANCIS to the Salesian General Chapter in Rome, 4/4/14.

¹¹ R. MUSIMBA, *The Missionary Life and Outreach of SCCs in Africa and the World*, 11 April 2014.

¹² S. O. Muza, Class Sharing on Youth SCC group in Regina Ceali Catholic Church, Keren, Nairobi, 4/4/14.

Importance of the Sacraments: Through education on the importance of the sacraments, specially on the Eucharistic celebration, both youth and men would be attracted to the SCCs and thus, would understand its importance. Finally, help parents to get married in the church.

Humankind and SCCs: The priests should reconcile the view that SCCs and humankind are compatible. This will enable both men and youth to realize the thesis of the gospel, that self-reliance does not make the ultimate person and that our culture's embrace of responsibility will contribute to the sense that real manhood and youthfulness is harmonious with SCC services.

4. Conclusion

Establishing SCCs is one of the most fruitful and best approaches of the Church's evangelical mission. One of the most challenging questions facing the SCCs today is why there is lack of interest in men and young people in SCCs attendance and we tried to provide basic answers. However, these answers in my understanding would determine the fate of the SCCs. Thus, despite the challenges, the SCCs remain the beacon of the local Church. Therefore, the traditional experience of SCCs remain a relevant encounter with one's faith expression as we head for a time when the sustainability of SCCs depends on our attention in focusing on new faith prospects through the provision of an engaging and relevant encounter with the faith.

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