

St. Joseph Youth Small Christian Community in Malawi: A Community of Communities and a Model of Youth Leadership

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INTRODUCTION

In this pastoral reflection paper we intend to explain two parts that are related to the practical experience of our researcher that took place in 2004 in his YSCC called St. Joseph under the Parish of St. John Bosco in the Archdiocese of Lilongwe in Malawi. In the first part of the paper the researcher will highlight the three pastoral steps of “See”, “Judge” and “Act” from his personal experience of the YSCC. In the second part he will outline a pastoral reflection process with the aim of establishing how such a YSCC can be a model of youth leadership.

PART I: ST. JOSEPH YOUTH SMALL CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY PRACTICUM

STEP 1: SEE

St. Joseph Youth Small Christian Community was established just a few years after the canonical erection of Don Bosco Parish. Just like most of the SCCs and YSCCs, our Youth Small Christian Community has an average of 30 to 50 youth with its own elected executive that is comprised of: Chairperson, Vice Chairperson, Secretary, Vice Secretary, Treasurer and Vice Treasurer. As a YSCC we met every fortnight usually on Sunday from 2 pm till 5:30 pm or 6 pm especially when we failed to begin on time. For our meetings at least for that one year, we had the following activities: opening and closing prayers, *Bible* sharing (using the *Lectio Divina* method), offertory, Year Planner activity discussions, AOB and any other announcements. We met in the different houses of the youth members, even sometimes in the house of the lapsed members with an aim of encouraging them to come for meetings.

STEP 2: JUDGE

The researcher noticed that the meetings were really Christian meetings since they all began and ended with a prayer and that half of the meeting was taken up by *Bible* sharing. He also observed that the *Bible* sharing was done not as one preaching to others with words like “we should do...,” but was characterized by the personalization of the Word of God with words like “I feel God is calling me to do this...” Unfortunately, the group lacked creativity shown by the using only a few methods of conducting *Bible* sharing. Due to the large number of participants in a single meeting only a few people had the chance to share. There was also quite a number of shy members who did not share due to the large number of people. Then those who monopolized the sharing by long reflections.

STEP 3: ACT

This YSCC needs to readily be given support by its Mother SCC also called St. Joseph if it is to continue to bear much fruit. There is a need for the group to be taught various methods of *Bible* sharing so as to make it more interesting and effective. In the same note concrete lines of action need to come up after beautiful *Bible* sharings. For instance, in a reflection on Jesus feeding the five thousand (*Matthew* 14:13-21), a line of concrete action is to visit the orphans and give them some basic necessities on such and such a date. This avoids pietistic, personal and vague responses such as “Jesus is calling me to share my life with others.”

PART II: ST. JOSEPH YSCC: A COMMUNITY OF COMMUNITIES AND A MODEL OF YOUTH LEADERSHIP

To begin with, a small community is described by many as a social unit of any small size that shares common values and that is situated in a given geographical area (e.g., a village or town). It is a group of people who are connected by durable relations that extend beyond immediate genealogical ties, and who usually define that relationship as important to their social identity and practice.¹ Although communities are usually small, the word "community" is derived from the Old French *comuneté* which comes from the Latin *communitas* (from Latin *communis*, things held in common).² The St. Joseph Youth Small Christian Community, in the very sense of the definition of a community, has managed to fulfill the above criteria that truly indicates that it is first and foremost a community of communities and secondly, a model of youth leadership in a time when role models in youth leadership are scarce.

The YSCC of St. Joseph falls under the umbrella of the Adult St. Joseph SCC that falls under the Parish Center of St. John Bosco Parish as mentioned earlier. The structures of leadership are closely connected in the communion as communities in the following ways as the famous multi-language proverb states *show me your friend and I will tell you who you are*:

First, the structures of leadership are cooperative. The leaders in the YSCC coordinate with their own mother leadership body of the SCC and meet frequently to plan, implement and evaluate activities and programs of the SCC and YSCC in general. One of the common examples in which this is seen is in liturgical animation at the church level. The SCCs are given each at least two Sundays to animate the Sunday Liturgy that includes cleaning of the church premises, singing at weekday masses, reading at both weekday and Sunday mass, giving offertory and ushering during all the scheduled week church events. During such events the youth are part and parcel of such animations and take an active role even with their YSCC choir. This is because they feel part and parcel of the community of communities (SCCs) model and are also entitled to take up such leadership roles.

Second, the YSCC also plays an active part during times of weakness and trials of St. Joseph SCC. The researcher who was a member of this YSCC recalls a time when he had to go with his colleagues to sleep over at a funeral of one of the woman members of the Adult SCC

¹ C.f., JAMES, PAUL. *Globalism, Nationalism, Tribalism: Bringing Theory Back In* —Volume 2 of Towards a Theory of Abstract Community. London: (2006), Sage Publications.

²C.f., "Community" Oxford Dictionaries. May 2014.

who also happened to be a mother of the then secretary of the YSCC. During that night the YSCC members also did some cooking, ushering and singing in unison with their parents who all belonged to the St. Joseph SCC. As the Malawian Proverb says *mako ndi mako akachepa mwendo ndi makobe* which literally means *Your mother is your mother; even when she has a short leg she is still your mother,*” a proverb well lived by the Child St. Joseph YSCC who was with its Mother St. Joseph SCC even to the youth members’ constant visits during the sickness of this very woman, the grave digging and the burial.

Third, the St. Joseph YSCC participated in many activities at parish, zonal and archdiocesan levels in the sense that most of our youth leaders and members were appointed to these far-reaching areas of service. In such tasks they continued to carry the banner and flag of the YSCC and SCC of St. Joseph. Not forgetting the many members who joined various lay apostolic groups at both and parish and zonal levels like the Legio of Mary, Altar Servers Club (in the case the researcher himself), St. Theresa Church dancers, choirs and liturgical committees just to mention a few. Such bold participation flowed from their understanding that the YSCC was a child of the whole church.

The St. Joseph YSCC is a promoter of vocations including marriage. The YSCC has even today managed to provide good examples of alumni who found marriage partners from the group and got lawfully married and even joined the SCC meetings of the same St. Joseph. An example can be given of our chairperson in the same term of 2002 to 2004 who married one of our members in the following year and remained in the same Adult SCC from its YSCC. The other vocational fruits clearly known from the YSCC are the researcher and another member who are now members of the Salesian and Franciscan religious orders respectively and many others who have undertaken various calls.

The YSCC of St. Joseph was also exemplary in leadership by the way it organized itself. As already mentioned in part one, the group had a fairly good model of organization of meetings that was characterized with more than 50% of the meeting spent on spiritual matters. The group esteemed spiritual encounters such as *Bible* sharing, trips to lakes and national parks, work in fields of church members as a way of fundraising and many other activities as already mentioned. It is through such activities that the group up until today has managed to bear good fruit. That has later been radiated by the joy of good and holy vocations as it is said by the Salesian youth ministers that the result of a good youth ministry is holy vocations.”

CONCLUSION

In a nut shell, in both of the parts of this reflection paper we have examined how and why the St. Joseph Youth Small Christian Community is “a community of communities” united by, for and with the Word of God. A youth community that is in the structure of the church and one that participates at all levels of the church. A Youth Small Community that evangelizes by witness in times of joy and sorrow. A community that is essentially united by God and in turn produces fruits of varying vocations that continue to contribute to the mission of the church in a “rotating leadership” with “revolving responsibility.” Really, it is a model worth imitating. As the family is said to be the domestic church, so in the same way can we say that the Youth Small

Christian Communities are part of the domestic church and therefore they should be encouraged and promoted.

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