

Cell Churches in Africa

By Joseph G. Healey, MM

A Cell Church is a Christian church structure centering on the regular gathering of cell groups that thrives in many countries in Africa. Cell Church is a strategy for church growth, discipleship and leadership training that impacts communities with the benefits of the Gospel. There are many varieties of *Bible* Study Groups, small prayer groups, and small communities in the Christian Churches in Africa that can be classified under the umbrella term Cell Churches as follows:

- *Bible* Study Groups, Café Churches, Fellowship Groups, House Cell Fellowships and House Churches in the Anglican (Episcopalian) Church.
- Home Group Fellowships Small Groups that operate like Fraternal Communities in the Baptist Church.
- Small Cell Groups in the Mormon Church and Seventh Day Adventist (SDA) Church.
- Cell Churches, Cell Groups, Devotional Groups, Fellowship Groups, Home Cells, Home Churches, House Church, Household Churches and Spiritual Growth Groups in the Pentecostal Churches.
- District Groups and Fellowship Groups in the Presbyterian Church.
- Cells in the Methodist Church.
- Church Homes in the United Church of Christ.
- Basic Christian Communities (BCCs), Basic Ecclesial Communities (BECs), *Bible* Study Groups (BSGs), Christian Life Communities (CLCs), Intentional Eucharistic

Communities (IECs), Neighborhood Gospel Groups (NGGs), Small Christian Communities (SCCs), Small Faith Sharing Communities (SFSCs) and Youth Small Christian Communities (YSCCs) in the Catholic Church.

Importance of the Bible and Fellowship

The cornerstone of most Cell Churches is the *Bible*. Most common is weekly *Bible Study* following an organized reading and study plan. Often there is *Bible Sharing* and *Bible Reflection* following the lectionary cycle of the different liturgical seasons of the Christian Churches. There is a real effort to connect the *Bible* to our everyday life in Africa. Fellowship is very important especially in the African context including emphasis on community building, singing and socializing together.

The Works and Mission Baptist Church in Ivory Coast has 56 local satellite churches in the capital city of Abidjan alone and many more throughout the country. A total of 18,000 cells (14,000 adult cells and about 4,000 children's cells) form the basis of the church. With over 150,000 members worldwide, it has proven to be successful in the context of both African and other cultures, having planted churches in 34% of current African nations as well as in Europe and North America.

In South Africa some 3,000 churches are making the Cell Church transition such as: Lighthouse Christian Centre in Cape Town (600 cells, 7,000 worshippers); Christian Family Church in Johannesburg (690 cells, 6,000 worshippers); Christian Revival Centre in Bloemfontein (500 cells, 5000 worshippers); and Little Falls Christian Centre (400 cells, 4,000 worshippers). The South African cell movement is unique in that hundreds of churches have transitioned together. The senior leaders of large, well established denominations -- with

overwhelming support from all the churches within -- made a complete transitional shift to cell-based church structures.

Case Study of One Type of Cell Church

One type of Cell Church in the Catholic Church in Africa are the over 180,000 Small Christian Communities (SCCs) in the nine English-speaking countries in Eastern Africa (Eritrea, Ethiopia, Kenya, Malawi, South Sudan, Sudan, Tanzania, Uganda and Zambia). A SCC is a small neighborhood (geographical), parish-based group in an urban or rural area that is a pastoral model of church that transforms the Catholic Parish into a communion of communities and an instrument of evangelization. Around 10-15 people meet weekly usually in their homes (but sometimes in a parish, a school or another institution), to reflect on the *Bible* especially the Gospel of the following Sunday, and connect it to their daily lives in Eastern Africa. 99% of the SCC members are laymen and laywomen who are the leaders of their local SCCs. Priests, brothers, sisters and catechists are not the bosses, but animators and facilitators of this new way of being church and new pastoral model of becoming church.

SCCs are a key pastoral priority in the Catholic Church in Eastern Africa. Many pastoral sacramental and social ministries are the responsibility of the SCCs. SCC members emphasize service to the greater community. The small communities have many outreach, evangelization and mission activities.

References and Resources

Healey, Joseph. 2017 *Building the Church as Family of God: Evaluation of Small Christian Communities in Eastern Africa*. Eldoret: AMECEA Gaba Publications – CUEA Press.

The free Online Digital Version:

http://www.smallchristiancommunities.org/images/stories/pdf/Build_new.pdf. Accessed

February 27, 2017.

Small Christian Communities Global Collaborative Website (including the Small Christian

Communities Facebook Page). www.smallchristiancommunities.org. Accessed February

27, 2017.

JOSEPH HEALEY

NOTE: This article will appear as an entry in the *Encyclopedia of Christianity and the Global South* edited by Mark Lamport (Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2018).

Rev. Joseph G. Healey, MM
Maryknoll Society
P.O. Box 43058
00100 Nairobi, Kenya
0723-362-993 (Safaricom, Kenya)
973-216-4997 (AT&T, USA)
Email: JGHealey@aol.com
Skype: joseph-healey