

Small Christian Communities (SCCs) Promote Family and Marriage Ministry in Zimbabwe

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Part I -- SCC Practicum Write-up

1. See

I had an experience with St. Peter and Paul Small Christian Community in Our Lady of the Wayside Parish, Mount Pleasant, Harare, Zimbabwe on the 19 June, 2016. The gathering was for two hours after mass, starting from 1:30 pm to 3:30 pm. The community was made up of 62 people (22 youth, 15 men, 25 women and no children). As the group gathered, a song was sung and the gathering started with a spontaneous prayer by one of the SCC members. After the prayer the leader welcomed everyone and facilitated introductions to incorporate especially the visitors who had joined that day. After the introductions a special welcoming song *Tinokutambirai Nomufaro Mukuru* ("We Welcome You With Great Joy") was sung to make the visitors feel at home. After the song we all sat down and each shared on how the week has been followed by a brief silence. After five minutes of silence, one of the members read the gospel passage of the following Sunday that was the 12th Sunday in Ordinary Time. The reading was taken from the Gospel of *Luke 9:18-24*: "Who do the crowds say that I am?" The reading was slowly done by different readers three times with a pause of about three minutes in between. After the gospel was read for the second time, there was a longer pause of about five minutes before members stated repeating the words that struck each one of them most. After the third gospel reading the leader invited members to spontaneously share their reflections. What was striking is that all those who shared linked the gospel with their lives and shared their experiences with a great sense of honesty and easiness. The session was followed by spontaneous prayers while others listened. The session ended with a concluding prayer by a volunteer.

2. Judge

St. Peter and Paul Small Christian Community is a well organized, active group made up of mixed ethnic groups who trust each other and are open to share their lives. The group is very generous when it comes to rendering support to the parish. Since this group is made up of mainly the elite there is not much room to accommodate the not so well to do. My main worry about this Small Christian Community was their number. Due to the size of the group and given the two hours of gathering not all the members were able to share their reflections and experiences. At the end of the day only those with confidence got a chance to be heard while those without confidence participated less. For effective participation this group should be sub-divided into smaller groups of 10 each for the *Bible Sharing/Bible Reflection*. This will enable members to engage more intimately than in a bigger group. Another possibility is to have buzz groups of twos or threes reflecting on the Word, then gather to share in the larger group. It was pointed out that many did not turn up for the meeting because of being hungry considering that people would have left their homes early morning for mass and stayed until 3:30 pm. Some reflections were

too long such that only a few were able to share while the rest listened. Decision making for such a group is always long and complicated.

3. Act

After realizing that only a few people get a chance to share their reflections, we suggested that the large group observe the same time for gathering but divide themselves into smaller groups of 10 each to allow everyone to participate. In response to the issue of hunger, the group decided that every Sunday they do "bring and share" so that after the meeting the SCC members would meet and share a meal. This is in accordance to the Shona culture that have a proverb which says *Ukama igasva hunozadziswa nekudya* meaning (*A relationship is incomplete, unless people dine together*). The group also took time after the meeting to evaluate their action plan and decided to visit *L'Arche* (a home for the disabled and vulnerable children). A decision was made that instead of visiting them once in a while, the SCC would assume responsibilities of sending monthly groceries and paying salaries to the two physiotherapists residing at *L'Arche*. My contribution to this SCC up to today is to keep in touch with them, encourage them to continue building relationships with each other and arrange for a separate day where members would discuss finances and practical matters. This is because financial discussions usually end up in disagreements and divert attention from the core of the meeting which is to share the Word of God.

Part II -- SCC Promote Family and Marriage Ministry in Zimbabwe

1. SCC as an Important Support Group for Families

In Africa families face a variety of challenges ranging from the cultural beliefs, religious beliefs and the effects of globalization culture. In traditional African society marriage is not a private affair between husband and wife. It is between families, clans and villages. As a result children who are a fruit of marriage belong to the community, not only to biological parents. Therefore, any elder in the community has a responsibility to correct, discipline or care for somebody else's child without any problem. It is from this understanding that SCCs easily get involved in the family or marriage life of couples as a way of cultivating relationships and giving support. In this regard a SCC can be considered our Christian clan, where spiritual guidance is received in the light of the Gospel and where elders can help repair brokenness in families.¹

According to Joseph Healey the SCC is an important support group for families and promotes a family culture. It is both a place and a path for the pastoral care and evangelization of families and marriages. This praxis of SCCs in Africa is contributing to the development of the theology of the Church as Family of God. The Family of God extends beyond the bonds of blood, ethnicity, ethnic group, culture and race. In this way the SCCs open paths to reconciliation

¹ Paul Bere, "The Word of God as Transformative Power in Reconciling African Christians" in Agbonkhanmeghe E. Orobator (ed.), *Reconciliation, Justice, and Peace: The Second African Synod* (New York, Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2011 and Nairobi: Acton Publishers, 2011).

with extended families that have the tendency to impose on Christian nuclear families their syncretistic ways and customs.²

2. Learning from an African Story

For African Religion marriage involves not only interpersonal relations but also in the final analysis inter-community relations. In marriage the communities share their very existence; in reality they become one people. At a wedding ceremony in Zimbabwe one Shona pastor addressed the bride saying "Rutendo, you should bear in mind... that you are married not only to your husband Paul, but to his family. That means you have to identify with all his relatives, look after them, care for them, go out of your way to make them happy. If you do that you will have no cause for regret. You will notice that old people in the community will visit you, even for a brief moment.... to show their interest in your welfare."³ He repeated the same words to Paul.

To add to the story in order to stress my point of reflection, after Paul and Rutendo had enjoyed a 12 year fruitful marriage, both died of HIV/AIDS leaving two girls and a boy. What was once a home of love for the children became a graveyard with no joy or life. Abandoned by blood relations, the eldest daughter assumed all the responsibilities of her parents trying to fend for her siblings. This is becoming a particularly major problem in Africa. Many children lose their parents to HIV/AIDS, and, often, these children are left with no one to take care of them.

3. Lessons from an African Story

Given the fact that the traditional set up where families live together has changed, the SCCs replace that void. They become the Christian family for one another. Many young couples no longer have grandmothers, aunts, grandfathers and uncles who used to play a major role in traditional Africa in shaping families and giving counseling when necessary. It is now the role of the SCC to play this role. SCCs have taken on a new relevance in the light of understanding the Church-as-Family Model in Africa.⁴ With the support of St. Peter and Paul Small Christian Community in Harare, Paul and Rutendo died a peaceful death knowing that their children were taken care of not by their family members but by members of their SCC.

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* teaches that when a family is not capable of taking care of its members, it is the responsibility of other families to provide for their needs. "Religion that is pure and undefiled before God is this: to visit orphans and widows in their affliction and

² Joseph G. Healey, "Small Christian Communities (SCCs) Promote Family and Marriage Ministry in Eastern Africa," Academia.edu Website, retrieved 31 March, 2017, https://www.academia.edu/13028804/Small_Christian_Communities_SCCs_Promote_Family_and_Marriage_Ministry_in_Eastern_Africa

³ Magesa Laurenti, *African Religion: The Moral Traditions of Abundant Life* (Nairobi: Paulines Publications Africa, 1997). 111.

⁴ Flynn Kieran, *Communities for the Kingdom: A Handbook for Small Christian Community Leaders* (Eldoret: Kenya: AMECEA Gaba Publications, 2007). 98.

to keep one unstained from the world.⁵ Small Christian Communities live the Trinitarian life of mutual love, cooperation, participation and reaching out to others in loving service.⁶ They can give expression to their generosity by adopting abandoned children or performing demanding services to others”.⁷

In most African cultures, due to economic hardships, wars, HIV/AIDS pandemic and effects of natural disasters the numbers of child-headed families have increased. Rutendo and Paul faced desertion from their families because of their sickness. Although they faced this crisis, they got spiritual and material support from their SCC. The Small Christian Community did not abandon them, they were constantly on their side, and they encouraged them to remain faithful to God and to trust in him. This gave them hope and enabled them to die a peaceful death knowing that their children were in safe hands after their departure.

For Africans, the extended family system -- with its guarantee that people will always find support because their relations are always prepared to accept burdens -- is a precious inheritance. However, the reality of the present Africa has changed. The concept of family is slowly being compromised. This is the moment for Small Christians Communities in Africa to alert their fellow Christians to those negative influences which oppose and would destroy natural and traditional African values about life, children, family and human solidarity. It is also the moment for SCCs to draw the attention of other Christians to how Christianity recognizes and applauds all the powerful good that dwells in these traditional values, and offers a new key for their protection and perfecting it with the light of the Gospel. In this way Christians not only play the spiritual part in families but takes up important social, material and moral support for its members, thus being a new family -- a new way of being church in Africa -- caring for one another in everything.

In conclusion, I will borrow from Joseph Healey's experience. He pointed out that statistics in Nairobi Archdiocese, Kenya show as many as 60% of the Catholic couples have not sacramentalized their marriages (had their marriages blessed in church). Thus, they cannot receive communion.⁸ The traditional reasons of the high dowry payment and high cost of the wedding itself (including the reception) remain, but other new reasons have strongly emerged.

This is not the reality of Nairobi only. Many African countries experience the same phenomenon. 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. Young Catholics are discouraged by an increase of divorces they see around them. The biggest challenge for SCC is to try giving examples of good marriages to the young, to guide them,

⁵ *The Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 14th reprint. Nairobi: Paulines Publications Africa, 1995. #2208.

⁶ Joseph Healey, *Building the Church as Family of God: Evaluation of Small Christian Communities in Eastern Africa*. Free, online Ebook on the Small Christian Communities Global Collaborative Website. Retrieved 31 March, 2017.

http://www.smallchristiancommunities.org/images/stories/pdf/Build_new.pdf. 241.

⁷ *The Catechism of the Catholic Church*. #2379.

⁸ Joseph Healey, “Beyond Vatican II: Imagining the Catholic Church of Nairobi I” in E. A. Orobator, *The Church We Want: African Catholics Look to Vatican III*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2016 and Nairobi: Acton Publishers, 2011. 200.

and to show them that marriage and family is not only a beautiful thing but Godly too. The example of St. Peter and Paul Small Christian Community in Zimbabwe mentioned above presents what it means to promote marriage ministry in Africa. It is not confined to the married couples, but it extends to the care of children too.

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