

The Challenges of SCCs and Child Formation in Nigeria

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No child at birth chooses his family, country, religion practices at birth. He/she is born into it and through the socialization process, the child connects with the society.

I. INTRODUCTION

READING: *Matthew 18:2-6*. Reflection for two minutes and brief sharing.

African society is structured largely around the lives of its children. Across the continent, children represent continuity with rituals and contemporary institutions designed to ensure children's survival and prosperity. That is why many philosophers spoke a lot about children:

- "There can be no keener revelation of a society's soul than the way in which it treats its children." Nelson Mandela, Former President of South Africa.
- "It is easier to build strong children than to repair broken men and women." Frederick Douglass, abolitionist and statesman in the USA.
- "Each person in African traditional life lives in or as a part of the family." John Mbiti, Kenya (1975).

African traditional/modern society is built around family especially the extended families. Family is considered a basic cell of the society. All social and cultural practices find their connection with a notion of family, either supporting or distorting it. Family plays a crucial role in Africa. Kitembo asserts that "the family community was the fundamental element of the African, this basic sphere of action, through which he became integrated with the larger, human community... he always acted from within the sphere of the family" (1998).

Two questions:

"Can you recollect your childhood experiences with your family and in the neighborhood (5 to 17 years)?"

"Can you compare your childhood experiences with the experiences of children of nowadays? And why?"

Family can be categorized mainly as either nuclear or extended. Mbiti says that "for African people the family has a much wider circle of members than the word suggests in Europe or North America. In African traditional society, the family includes children, parents, grandparents, uncles, aunts, brothers and sisters who may have their own children

and other immediate relatives” (1969). Such a family would include adopted and fostered children.

The members of the extended family could live together in a traditional compound consisting of several houses, live close to one another or be separated by some distance. In case of geographic separation, they would gather together to make important decisions concerning the family. Usually the members of the wider family would belong exclusively either to a paternal or maternal descent.

An individual existed in connection with a larger group, including his or her wider family. He or she acquired his or her identity from that group. The person depended on that group for one’s physical and social survival. Through various rites of passage, the person progressively became a fuller member of that community and took on a role in ensuring the survival of that group through marriage and procreation. Mbiti says that “in traditional life, the individual does not and cannot exist alone except corporately. He owes his existence to other people... The community must therefore make, create or produce the individual

The extended family was the first religious community to which an individual belonged. It was through grandparents, parents and other members that one learned about religious and spiritual heritage. It was most probably the first place where one heard about God, spirits, ancestors and afterlife.

However, the family structure in Africa has really changed in the past 30 years in Africa especially in Nigeria due to rural to urban migration. Other changes referred to by various authors that affect directly or indirectly the concept of wider family are:

- Westernization of the African society with its stress on individual success, competitiveness and financial gain,
- Modern education that often promotes personal values at the expense of communal Values and modernization of the society with an increased pace of life demanding more time to be dedicated to work,
- The process of globalization that increases the gap between the rich and the poor,
- The process of urbanization that encourages many people to move to cities in search of work and contributes to the phenomenon of slums.
- Eradication of the extended family system.

The changes taking place in the society affect the concept of wider family especially in urban area. African families are increasingly faced with the challenge and pressure emanating from the competition prevailing between traditional and modern family values. The most affected are the children who are suffering from an identity crisis. We must note that children flourish in warm, supportive and stable families especially in the area of their emotional and spiritual development which are interwoven. The important part played by emotions must not be overlooked. Education of a child’s affectivity, not cognitive growth alone, is crucial for healthy moral development, because emotions enable the child to know, love and care about people in ways that enhance full development as moral beings. Through the patience, care and constant love, especially of parents, children develop emotional responses that will affect their judgment and their choices during all their life

II. THE ROLE OF THE CHURCH/SCC IN THE FORMATION OF A CHILD

The Catholic Church through our Baptism is our extended family as a religious community to which an individual belonged. The development of Christian character is coloured and shaped by faith. The child's first teachers of faith in the community of the Church are its parents, grandparents and other members of the family, Small Christian Community (SCC) members, catechists, schoolteachers, godparents, and local clergy who are charged with the task of forming the child in the likeness of Christ. For faith to be meaningful as a way of life, the child must learn what are the genuinely good things in life that must be sought and valued and chosen in order to become a good person and a Christian formed in the likeness of Christ.

Since a SCC is neighbourhood-based and involves various families, life in a Small Christian Community therefore is simply our baptismal brotherhood and sisterhood lived out practically with a few people. Where we share God's word, the Eucharist, prayer, our possessions, our gifts, time, meals and daily life.

The adult members of SCC who themselves are faith-centred persons, teachers and educators form the child's Christian character first by the example of their own Christian lives, which bear witness, as did Jesus in his life and through his parables, exhortations and miracles, to the truth of how one ought to live as a Christian. They do this practically by first being:

- A witness to couples during their marriage ceremony in the church.
- A godparent to children in the communities.
- A good parent worthy of emulation in their neighborhood.

Second, by teaching the child the Gospel/moral stories through the gathering of our children in our SCC centers under the supervision of the adult members that powerfully unpack for the child's imagination and affectivity the living and lived faith of the Church. For faith is itself a story to be told, a story made up of many stories, stories of creation, of redemption, of new life, of love, of patience, of courage, all of which center on Jesus, the eternal Son of God, who was born, suffered, died and was raised for our salvation and whom as Christians we are called to follow.

Third, and an important element in Christian character formation, is involvement in the liturgical and spiritual practices of the church, the mass, prayer, devotions and the works of mercy that are realistic expressions of living and lived faith for individuals and communities.

III. CONCLUSION

The home-based community is directly contrary to the trends of our modern society. The home is usually considered insignificant today. We are an extremely mobile society, constantly changing residences and jobs. We jump from apartment to apartment. We even eat and sleep on the road, picking up "fast foods" at drive-through windows. Home is a layover, a sleeping room. But biblically, home is where the action is, it is the center of community, business, education, social services, entertainment and more. It is the center of life.

Our technology has made it possible to begin an experiment. Our independent life-style is unprecedented in world history — totally experimental. We have no idea how it will turn out. Early indications are frightening. According to our new life-style, home-makers have meaningless lives, and children are seen as a great inconvenience to their parents and a hindrance to living the "good life." There seems to be nothing sacred in life — including sex, love, marriage, family, and community. Talents and skills which have been traditionally valued are now considered unimportant. We are taking an extreme risk in the most basic elements of life. We may be creating a disorder world where our children are depressed, isolated, and the thought of committing suicide is on the rise.

In such an alien environment, the concept of a community may sound and idealistic. Yet it remains the principal center of Christian life, even in the twentieth century world. In South America, Africa, and the Philippines they are called "basic or small communities," in Russia and China "house churches" and in Korea and America "cell groups." The terminology used in official Catholic documents is "church of the home," "domestic church," "communautés de base," and "basic communities."

Are you part of them? Why do you never join? Join a SCC today nearest to your home. In the SCC children are allowed to have their own meetings under the guidance of adults. Allow your children to interact with their peers. Together let us form our children in a proper community-oriented way.

Thank you for this opportunity. May God bless our families and our Small Christian Communities.

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