

We Create the Path by Walking:¹ Youth Small Christian Communities in Eastern Africa

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One hand washes the other hand (Ugandan proverb encouraging teamwork).

What is a Youth Small Christian Community (YSCC)?² A YSCC is a small group of young people that is school based (either university, college or high school) or parish based whose members meet weekly to share both the Gospel of the coming Sunday and their experiences in life.

I: SEE

This paper is presented by four young people on the Interim Eastern Africa Small Christian Communities Training Team under the Association of Member Episcopal Conferences in Eastern Africa (AMECEA).³ The youth are drawn from different universities and parishes and came together in order to animate other youth about the importance of Youth Small Christian Communities (*jumuiya za Vijana* in Swahili). Basically, we conduct workshops in primary schools, high schools, colleges, universities, dioceses and parishes. Through YSCCs, we create an avenue for the youth to meet weekly, share the Gospel of the coming Sunday and relate it to what is going on in their lives. After the reflection on the Gospel, youth share the challenges they are facing in life and then try to find guidance from the Gospel and through advice from one another.

¹ This is a well-known universal saying. The Spanish is *caminante no hay camino* based on the words “make the road by walking it” of the Spanish poet Antonio Machado (1875 – 1939).

² Terminology varies according to the place and context. In general, “young people” is the umbrella word that covers “youth” (often referring to teenagers and those in high school) and “young adults” (after college in their 20s). The Synod of Bishops in Rome in 2018 is treating the lives, attitudes, and concerns of 16 to 29-year-olds around the world. In Swahili, the main language of Eastern Africa. *Vijana* (often translated as “youth”) covers the 16 to 35 age bracket. The English dictionary permits the plural spellings “youth” and “youths.” We prefer “youth.”

³ [AMECEA](#) is a service organization for the National Episcopal Conferences of the nine English-speaking countries of Eastern Africa, namely Eritrea (1993), Ethiopia (1979), Kenya (1961), Malawi (1961), South Sudan (2011), Sudan (1973), Tanzania (1961), Uganda (1961) and Zambia (1961). The Republic of South Sudan became independent on 9 July, 2011, but the two Sudans remain part of one Episcopal Conference. Somalia (1995) and Djibouti (2002) are Affiliate Members. AMECEA is one of the eight Regional Episcopal Conferences of [SECAM](#) (Symposium of Episcopal Conferences of Africa and Madagascar).

In Eastern Africa we are participating in various youth symposiums and meetings at the time when our Holy Father Pope Francis has dedicated these years to youth in preparation for the Synod on Young People on that will take place in Rome in October, 2018. This shows the great love, concern, and care Pope Francis has towards youth who are the majority in our Catholic Church.

We say the majority because most of the Catholic families in Africa have more than two children. We are writing this paper with a lot of enthusiasm, hoping that this Year of Young People will be handled differently from the Year of Families that had many sweet words and many resources used, but relatively little implementation and follow-up.

The saying, *If you're going to talk the talk, you've got to walk the walk*, or *Walk it like you talk it*, are 21st century American alternatives to various traditional sayings that epitomize the notion that *talk is cheap*, for example: *Actions speak louder than words. Practice what you preach. Put your money where your mouth is*. Pope Francis challenges us through the consistency of both his words and his deeds to reach out to the poorest and neediest in whatever ways we understand these words. In particular, he challenges Small Christian Community members and others to reach out to “the marginalized and those on the periphery of society.” As re-igniters of Youth Small Christian Communities (YSCCs), we decided to create the path by walking the walk because we want to reach out to youth and encourage them to meet and share the joy of the Gospel.

Our team came up with the idea of starting Youth Small Christian Communities when we realized that the majority of people who attend mass and Small Christian Community meetings are adults, mostly women. The big questions at this time are, “Where are the youth?” and, “Why the youth not attending mass and YSCCs?” Happily enough, we received answers through YSCC workshops that we have been conducting in different schools, universities, dioceses and parishes. Examples of the places where we have already conducted YSCCs workshops are the Diocese of Meru; Wamwangi Secondary School, Consolata Shrine Parish and Christ the Teacher Parish, Kenyatta University in Nairobi Archdiocese; and St. Peter’s Parish, Makindu and St. Teresa of Calcutta High School for Girls in Machakos Diocese. Below are our different findings on the challenges in encouraging youth to participate Youth Small Christian Community meetings and mass.

FOUR CASE STUDIES OF YSCCs (describing four different models)⁴

⁴ Based on research material on our Small Christian Communities (SCCs) Global Collaborative Website (www.smallchristiancommunities.org) and our SCCs Facebook Page (<https://www.facebook.com/www.smallchristiancommunities.org>) including the free, online book Joseph Healey, *Building the Church as Family of God: Evaluation of Small Christian Communities in Eastern Africa* (http://www.smallchristiancommunities.org/images/stories/pdf/Build_new.pdf)

1. Report on the Youth Small Christian Communities (YSCCs) at Kenyatta University Christ the Teacher Catholic Parish, Nairobi Archdiocese, Kenya

Kenyatta University is a secular, government university. The Chaplaincy Center is a full parish in Nairobi Archdiocese. Called Christ the Teacher Catholic Parish, it has nine Small Christian Communities in which the students are the main stake holders followed by the Kenyatta University staff. They are an example of school-based or campus-based Youth Small Christian Communities (YSCCs). The chaplain for the past 17 years has been Father Lance Nadeau, a Maryknoll priest.

The nine Youth Small Christian Communities (YSCCs) are:

1. St. Dominic
2. St. Patrick
3. St. Francis
4. St. Catherine of Siena
5. St. Michael
6. St. Augustine
7. Cardinal Otunga
8. St. Perpetual of Felicity
9. St. Ann

All YSCCs meet weekly on Wednesday from 6:45 pm to 8:45 pm inside the University, except St Ann which meets on Thursday. Every new academic year, every YSCC writes a letter to request a hall where they can meet. St. Dominic comprises students who stay outside the campus; St. Patrick and St. Ann comprises students who study at Ruiru Campus which is a branch of Kenyatta University. St. Francis, St. Catherine of Siena, St. Perpetual of Felicity and St. Michael are for students who stay on campus, Cardinal Otunga is for the alumni, and St. Augustine is for the non-students.

A description and photos of the activities of these nine YSCCs are available on the Kenyatta University Christ the Teacher Parish Website, <http://www.kucatholic.or.ke>.

YSCC LEADERSHIP

Each YSCC has the same clear structure:

1. Coordinator
2. Vice Coordinator
3. Parish Pastoral Council (PPC) Representative
4. Treasurer
5. Secretary
6. Publicity Secretary

The larger, general YSCCs (“Mother Communities”) of about 70 to 80 people meet once a week, usually on Wednesday. YSCCs are also divided into smaller groups called “families” of 15 students. The families also meet once in a week on a day of their choice that does not conflict with the general YSCC’s meeting day. An example of a YSCC with multiple families is St. Dominic that has four families: St. Jude, St. Patrick, St. John and St. Maria Goretti. St. Patrick meets on Monday evening, St. John meets on Thursday evening. St. Jude and St. Maria Goretti meet on Sunday evening. The Family SCCs also share and reflect on the gospel of the coming Sunday. In addition, the families engage in more sharing of members’ challenges and problems as young people. Families also meet at different hostels where the students stay.

FAMILY LEADERSHIP

Just as with YSCCs, each family community has the same clear structure:

1. Father
2. Mother
3. Secretary
4. Treasurer

PROGRAM OF THE WEEKLY YSCC MEETING

6:45 pm - 7:10 pm	Rosary prayer
7:10 pm - 7:20 pm	Song session
7:20 pm - 7:50 pm	Reading of coming Sunday’s Gospel.
7:50 pm - 8:20 pm	Topic of discussion or a debate
8:20 pm - 8:30 pm	Announcements
8:30 pm - 8:45 pm	Final prayers and departure to our rooms

YSCC ACTIVITIES

The Youth Small Christian Communities conduct various activities throughout the semester that are designed to develop the bond among students and with the wider community. The activities include:

1. Charity Work: YSCCs conduct various charitable activities, such as visiting residents in children’s homes (orphanages), prisoners, the sick in hospitals and the physically challenged including the blind. For example, St. Dominic YSCC members from Kenyatta University washed clothes as part of the charity work they did at the House of Mercy Children's Home in Nairobi, Kenya on Saturday, 15 October, 2016.
2. Mass participation: Every YSCC is given a chance to participate in, and coordinate, the Mass once or twice in a semester through various activities such as, dancing, doing the 1st and 2nd readings, preparing the Prayers of the Faithful and arranging chairs in the church. Through these activities, the YSCCs are fully involved in Catholic Church’s life.
3. Fun Day and end of Semester Bash. YSCCs organize get-togethers that break the

monotony of the daily routine. Once or twice in a semester their members organize fun activities such as a dance, football match or a shared meal. Every YSCC ends the semester with a celebration where they share the challenges they went through and their strengths. They also cook food which they eat together and give awards to their leaders as a form of appreciation.

4. Visiting and Helping fellow YSCC Members. All YSCCs organize visits to friends wherever they have a problem. If a friend is sick, the YSCC chooses some members to go on behalf of the YSCC to visit the sick person. Members make a small financial contribution which is given to that person as a way of empathizing with him or her. Sometimes YSCCs members also organize fundraising to help those members who are unable to pay their school fees or room and board. This applies to many because most of the students come from poor families.

COMMUNICATION

The YSCCs at Kenyatta University use various ways to continue sharing their experiences and the gospel after YSCC and family meetings. The majorities of the youth are very active on social media and, therefore, use social media to share daily readings and personal experiences. Two of the most popular social media platforms the Kenyatta University YSCCs use are Facebook (see the KUCC Youth Small Christian Communities Facebook Page and the Youth Small Christian Communities Facebook Page) and WhatsApp.

FINANCES

The Kenyatta University YSCCs carry out many activities throughout the semester and they all need money. Most of the YSCCs finances come from contributions by students, friends and people of good will who occasionally finances some activities. YSCCs members ensure there is accountability, transparency and openness in handling the group's finances by writing a report to the Parish Pastoral Council after every activity that details how the group spent its finances.

CHALLENGES FACING YSCCs

1. Competing groups: The YSCCs model of church gets confused with other small apostolic groups of the church, for example, the Charismatic Group, Evangelizers of the Word, the dance troop, choir, Legion of Mary and many others. Sometimes people equate these small apostolic groups with YSCCs since they feel comfortable belonging to one of these small groups. They don't see the importance and uniqueness of the YSCCs. Hence the two models sometimes collide.

2. Perception: Some students see YSCCs as a waste of time. They don't set aside time for attending prayer meetings.

3. Poverty: Most students come from poor, humble families, so meeting their daily needs are a challenge. This hinders them from contributing to the activities of the YSCCs.

4. Some YSCCs have higher membership than expected; this becomes a challenge in

sharing the gospel and management. Based on the research data of the Small Christian Communities in Kenyatta University in Nairobi, Kenya, some SCCs have more than 80 members. If YSCC leadership tries to divide the members into smaller groups, some are not ready to move out of the large SCCs because of the strong bond among the members. Managing the size of the YSCC becomes a challenge; to solve this crisis the YSCCs at Kenyatta University have been divided into families which consist of 10-15 members, and the family activities are similar to those of a YSCC.

5. How to answer questions about Catholic Church teachings: For example, their Protestant friends may ask, “Who is mother Mary?” Because Kenyatta University has students of many different denominations, Catholic youth find it difficult to answer the many questions posed to them by members of other denominations.

6. Fund raising Projects: Since most members of YSCCs in Kenyatta University Parish are students, they face a big challenge to raise enough funds for different projects.

7. Generation Gap: Communications problem exist between the youth and their parents; because of the age difference, some parents do not understand what the youth are going through.

8. Politics: This is always a fascinating topic in SCCs, especially when the discussion is connected to current elections in African countries, because of the divergent political views held by the young people.

9. Conflicting cultures: YSCC members belong to different ethnic groups (formerly called “tribes”), so conflicts arise.

WHAT YOUTH WANT TO DISCUSS IN YSCCs

As stated earlier, during both meetings, the members read and reflect on the Gospel of the coming Sunday. Each YSCC has social media platforms on which they share daily readings and announcements.

Based on our experience with these young people, they like discussing certain topics in their meetings. Often these are topics that they fear discussing with their parents or other adults. These topics include:

1. Sexuality: More specifically they like to discuss boy-girl romantic relationships.
2. Job Opportunities: The rate of unemployment among youth is high, hence youth like to debate this issue to find solutions to unemployment.
3. Sports and Use of Leisure Time. Most of the youth spend their free time in game gambling, for example, England Premier League football (soccer), that ends up wasting their time and money.
4. Justice and Peace: Youth discuss many topics related to justice and peace

clustered around politics and what they can do as young people to create justice and peace in their society.

5. Social Media Trends: The youth spend much of their time on social media platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, YouTube and WhatsApp where they gather a lot of information that they, in turn, like to discuss.

6. Popular Music and Fashion.

7. Video Games.

8. Social Networking and Information Technology.

IMPORTANCE OF YSCCs

YSCCs function to support students in faith and day-to-day lives. In particular, YSCCs are important for:

1. Prayer: When people come together during YSCCs, they are able to pray for each other's needs and their own.
2. Spiritual Growth: The Word of God is central in YSCCs, and through discussions on the weekly Gospel reading, members are able to nurture the faith of one another.
3. Togetherness: In YSCCs, members live together as a family, hence enhancing unity.
4. Encouragement: Members of YSCCs console and support each other during hard times, such as bereavement. In addition, members share happy moments in different activities such as Cultural Nights, parties and charitable activities.
5. Financial support: YSCCs help to supplement the finances of needy students. YSCCs at Kenyatta University have a welfare committee headed by the vice chairperson that addresses the financial needs of students, but also their emotional, psychological and sustenance needs.
6. Nurturing and molding proper behavior: YSCCs shape the behavior and morals of students at Kenyatta University, hence the members do not engage in uncouth behavior such as strikes.
7. Learning the Catholic Faith: Through YSCCs, members learn Catholic teachings which deepen their understanding of the Catholic faith. For instance, the Kenyatta University Chaplaincy has an apostolic group called the Evangelizers of the Word that educates the YSCC members on the Catholic faith.
8. Fellowship: YSCCs enable youth to join hands with other youth, walk the same path

and share their dreams.

Activities undertaken by members of YSCCs include:

1. Charity work such as visiting children homes and hospitals including cleaning the compound, washing clothes and giving out food.

2. During SCC meetings, members choose prayer partners.

2. Smaller, family-type groups in the SCCs where students visit each other in their rooms to pray and share their daily problems and challenges.

4. Door to door visits to invite more students to join the YSCCs.

5. Helping new students to get settled on the KU campus, to foster a good spiritual life and to cope with various challenges.

6. Participation in mass on Sundays including liturgical dancing, reading the *Bible*, taking part in the Prayers of the Faithful and arranging the church after mass.

2. Report on the Youth Small Christian Communities in Calcutta Girls High School, Makindu Parish, Machakos Diocese, Kenya

St. Teresa of Calcutta High School for Girls in Makindu Parish in Machakos Diocese, Kenya is a Catholic Boarding School.⁵ It has seven Youth Small Christian Communities in which the students are the main stake holders followed by the staff. It is also an example of school based Youth Small Christian Communities (YSCCs). The Chaplain is Father Mathew Yakan, who is an Apostles of Jesus priest.

The seven Youth Small Christian Communities (YSCCs) are:

1. St. Michael
2. St. Paul
3. St. Martins
4. St. Angelus
5. St. Augustine
6. St. Teresa
7. St. Jude

All YSCCs meet weekly on Sunday afternoon from 2:50 to 4:00 pm on the school compound especially in the different halls and classrooms.

⁵ Tanzanian Bishop Method Kilaini, the Auxiliary Bishop of Bukoba Diocese, Tanzania, emphasizes that every Catholic Boarding School in Eastern Africa should have a systematic plan of SCCs.

YSCC LEADERSHIP HIERACHY

Each YSCC has the same clear structure:

1. Coordinator
2. Vice Coordinator
3. Secretary

PROGRAM OF THE WEEKLY YSCCs

3:00 pm - 3:10 pm	Opening prayer and sharing of the past week's experiences.
3:10 pm - 3:40 pm	Reading the Gospel for the coming Sunday
3:40 pm - 4:00 pm	Topic of discussion, final prayers and departure

TOPICS THE HIGH SCHOOL GIRLS LIKE TO DISCUSS

The students discuss a variety of topics which include:

1. Sexuality: More specifically, they discuss their boy-girl romantic relationships.
2. Peer pressure.
3. Life after school.
4. Social media and its impact.
5. Unfaithfulness in many families
6. Single-parent families.

3. Report of the Meru Diocese, Kenya YSCC Workshop Findings

During a SCCs Workshop on "Formation and Training of Small Christian Communities (SCCs) Leaders" in Meru Diocese, Kenya in November, 2016 30 young people met by themselves and concluded:

1. Youth fear the adults, and as a result do not want to attend the same Small Christian Communities as the adults.

2. Youth get bored because the activities taking place in the Small Christian Communities are not entertaining.

3. A majority of young people don't know how to pray and what the importance of SCCs is in this regard.

4. Behaviors of adult Christians discourage young people. For example, if parents do not go to church and attend Small Christian Communities, their children will definitely follow what their parents are doing.

5. Youth are not exposed to meeting many people, and this makes them avoid attending Small Christian Communities where they have to interact with different people.

6. Youth see SCC as an activity for adults, especially women, because in most SCCs women are the majority. The youth are reluctant to attend these female-dominated groups.

4. Report on the Youth YSCCs in Holy Cross Catholic Parish Dandora, Nairobi Archdiocese, Kenya⁶

Dandora Parish has 59 SCCs including six active Youth Small Christian Communities. These are the best parish based Youth Small Christian Communities in Kenya. The six Youth Small Christian Communities include:

1. St. Kizito (Region 1)
2. St. Gonzaga Gonza (Region 2)
3. St. Marcelino (Region 4B)
4. St. Perpetual (Region 4A)
5. St. Achille Kiwanuka (Region 3)
6. St. Sylvester (Region 5)

Initially there were three Youth Small Christian Communities namely:

1. St. Banabakintu
2. St. Buzabalwayo
3. St. Bazzekuketa

St. Banabakintu was the first Youth Small Christian Community that began in 1995. Later it became large and was subdivided into St. Kizito and St. Gonzaga Gonza in 1998 and 1999 respectively. Thereafter, St. Buzabalwayo and St. Bazzekuketa were also formed in 1999. St. Buzabalwayo was subdivided into St. Achille Kiwanuka and St. Sylvester, while St. Bazzekuketa was subdivided into St. Marcelino and St. Perpetual.

LEADERSHIP STRUCTURE

All six YSCCs have an average membership of 30 people. They meet weekly, but once a month with their parents to deliberate and plan for the coming months activities. The leadership structure of the YSCCs in Dandora Parish is as follows:

1. Coordinator

⁶ Based on the following research material: Youth of Dandora Parish, “An Overview Structure of Holy Cross Parish Dandora Youth Ministry in Nairobi Archdiocese Including a Case Study of St. Perpetua SCC,” Nairobi: Unpublished Report, 2015. [Holy Cross Youth Dandora Facebook Page, https://www.facebook.com/groups/113631995367088](https://www.facebook.com/groups/113631995367088)

2. Vice- Coordinator
3. Secretary
4. Vice/Organizing
5. Treasurer.

NOTE: All YSCCs form the parish youth group and it meets every Sunday at 3:00 pm.

PROGRAM OF THE YSCCs

3:00pm – 3:30pm	Opening prayers/praying the rosary
3:30pm – 3:40pm	Praise and worship
3:40pm – 4:15pm	Reading and sharing of the coming Sunday's Gospel
4:15pm – 4:30pm	Prayer partners
4:30pm – 5:00pm	Bonding session/day's topic discussion
5:00pm – 5:15pm	Closing prayers

BENEFITS OF PARISH BASED YOUTH YSCCs

1. Promoting cohesion and peace amongst the youth through dialogue whenever the youth have differences with one another.
2. Encouraging team work in the parish through various joint youth activities.
3. Nurturing talents through inter Youth Small Christian Communities sports and games.
4. Encouraging good moral values and lifestyle among the youth through various seminars.
5. Youth teaching one another on how to pray and the importance of Youth Small Christian Communities.

CHALLENGES

Several key challenges exist for parish based YSCCs including:

1. Lack of proper programs that can assist the youth with securing some income for their personal upkeep.
2. An increasing rate of early pregnancies among the young girls.
3. A lack of commitment among some leaders to provide good leadership in YSCCs.
4. Rampant tribalism in YSCCs.
5. Political intolerance, especially during elections.
6. A lack of attendance at YSCCs by many youth.

EMERGING TRENDS IN THE PARISH BASED YOUTH SCCs

Several key trends are present in parish based YSCCs, including the following:

1. Social media has made it easier to reach members who might be away, but are still part of the YSCCs.

2. Many parishes are now realizing the importance of having YSCCs for the youth unlike in the past where youth were mixing with their parents in adult SCCs.

3. Through the YSCCs, many youth are discovering their vocations in life. This includes vocations to the priesthood and religious life.

II: JUDGE

Based on the above four case studies, it's very clear that Youth Small Christian Communities are and will be vital in our Catholic Church in Eastern Africa. We ask our pope, bishops, priests and the lay people to support the youth in their quest to form YSCCs.

IMPORTANCE OF YOUTH SMALL CHRISTIAN COMMUNITIES

YSCCs serve a number of important functions in the lives of members that include:

1. Helping young Catholics feel that they are the church and more responsible for the church life and decision making.
2. Encouraging stronger interpersonal relationships, acceptance of the Word of God, and review of one's life and reflection upon our reality in light of the Gospel.
3. Serving as agents of evangelization.
4. Promoting the use of the *Bible* among the youth, because many YSCCs are lectionary based meaning that in their weekly meetings they use the Gospel of the coming Sunday.
5. Opening an avenue for youth to pray and listen to God.
6. Offering a safe place where youth can meet and share their needs, experiences and life issues such as sex (romantic relationships), media use, gambling and unemployment.
7. Encouraging members to be responsible and also to take on responsibilities.
8. Acting as agents of reconciliation through the YSCC itself being both a path and a place of reconciliation.

III. ACT

The voices of YSCCs in Kenya are important in preparing for the Synod of Bishops General Assembly on "Young People, Faith and Vocational Discernment" in Rome in October, 2118. Some Kenyan young people have filled out and returned the Online Questionnaire to the Vatican. Other actions:

1. Start a nationwide campaign in all Catholic parishes to spearhead the forming of YSSCs.
2. Conduct YSSC workshops at different parishes, dioceses and schools.
3. Making YSSCs more appealing by having programs that will also benefit the members socially, economically, and psychologically.
4. Use the social media to connect young people and develop YSSCs Networking.

CONTRIBUTORS

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NOTE: This is a chapter in Kevin Ahern and Christopher Derige Malano, (eds.), *God's Quad: Small Faith Communities on Campus and Beyond* Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2018.