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Small Christian Communities (SCCs) Promote Themes of the 2009 Second African Synod

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Abstract: *Today there are over 90,000 Small Christian Communities (SCCs) in the eight AMECEA countries of Eastern Africa. Kenya alone has over 35,000 SCCs. Increasingly SCCs are promoting reconciliation, justice and peace, the three main themes of 2009 Second African Synod. An analysis of the 12 references to SCCs in the “Instrumentum Laboris” (“Working Document”) leads to fresh insights on the theology of the Church-Family of God in Africa.*

SCCs and the 2009 Second African Synod¹

The 2009 Second African Synod will take place in Rome on 4-25 October, 2009 on the theme "The Church in Africa in Service to Reconciliation, Justice and Peace." In the *Lineamenta* ("Guidelines") published in 2006 SCCs are called "living ecclesial communities." The Church as the Family of God Model is a new ecclesial option that focuses on building families and building SCCs that are involved in reconciliation, justice and peace in the Catholic Church and in the wider society. The document included a questionnaire with 32 questions.

The 16th AMECEA Plenary Assembly took place in Lusaka, Zambia from 27 June to 7 July 2008 on the closely related topic "Reconciliation through Justice and Peace." Action Plan A. 4. stated: "Revisiting the Small Christian Communities Pastoral Option as a means of responding to the ministry of reconciliation through justice and peace. The Theology of the Church-Family of God must be further explored in view of enhancing reconciliation and peacebuilding."²

On 19 March, 2009 in Yaounde, Cameroon Pope Benedict XVI promulgated the *Instrumentum Laboris* ("Working Document")³ of the 2009 Second African Synod. While the English text of the *Lineamenta* published in 2006 uses the term "living ecclesial communities," the English text of the *Instrumentum Laboris* published in 2009 uses the more common term "Small Christian Communities" (note the capitals). The French text uses "Communautés Ecclésiales Vivantes."

SCCs are mentioned in 12 times in the *Instrumentum Laboris* and twice in the footnotes. This is significantly more than in the *Lineamenta* in which "living ecclesial communities" are mentioned three times in the document and twice in the questionnaire. This increase in the importance given to SCCs is clearly due to the many responses from the

Episcopal Conferences in Africa and to other answers to the 32 questions of the original questionnaire.

There are also two important footnotes on Small Christian Communities in the document. Footnote No. 2 of the *Instrumentum Laboris* refers to section No. 9 (No. 1 on the list below) and states: “Though names may vary, the reality is the same: Communauté Ecclésiastique Vivante (CEV); Small Christian Community (SCC).” This same footnote of the *Instrumentum Laboris* in the French Edition states: “Les appellations varient mais la réalité est identique: Communauté Ecclésiastique Vivante (CEV); Communauté Chrétienne de Base (CCB).” In the Portuguese Edition it states: “As designações variam mas a realidade é idêntica: Comunidade Eclesial Viva (CEV); Comunidade Cristã de Base (CCB).” Footnote No. 48 of the *Instrumentum Laboris* states: “The method of *Lectio Divina* devised at the Institute of Lumko (South Africa), called *Seven Steps*, has been adopted in a number of countries.” Our research shows that this method of Bible Sharing/Bible Reflection is very popular in Eastern Africa.

In some French-speaking countries of Africa such as the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) the full name “Communautés Ecclésiastiques Vivantes de Base (CEVB)” is sometimes used. However, the word “base” (or “basic” or “base-level”) does not mean the same as in Latin America. They are not equivalent. In the Latin American context “base” is a sociological word referring to poor, oppressed, downtrodden Christians -- ordinary people who are at the base or bottom of society, at the base or bottom of the social pyramid – and is closely linked to the Catholic Church’s “preferential option for the poor.”⁴ In the African context “base” is a geographical word referring to Christians living in the same local neighborhood in both urban and rural areas.

Also the word “base” (or “basic” or “base-level”) does not mean the same as “small.” “The 1976 AMECEA Study Conference specifically chose the word ‘small’ rather than ‘basic’ to indicate that the movement was growing on its own [in Eastern Africa] and to avoid certain undertones of the word ‘basic’ which is particularly connected with Latin America where it has a different meaning than Eastern Africa.”⁵ Archbishop Ndingi Mwana’a Nzeki stated that to call the Eastern Africa grassroots communities “small” instead of “basic” “is another indication that the movement in Africa was growing on its own, quite independent of other places (e.g. Latin America). Perhaps we used ‘small’ because that is exactly what we meant. We came to realize that our people live out their commitment in small [neighborhood] communities where they know one another and relate to one another.”⁶

Case Studies of SCC Involvement in Peacemaking/Peacebuilding

The three year period from the publication of the *Lineamenta* in 2006 to the publication of the *Instrumentum Laboris* in 2009 provides an interesting picture of the life and ministry of SCCs in Africa. There are now over 90,000 SCCs in the eight AMECEA⁷ countries. Kenya alone has over 35,000 SCCs.

In January, 2008 Kenya plunged into a wave of riots and violence. Much of the unrest was fueled by tribalism and negative ethnicity.⁸ This dramatically affected the thousands of Small Christian Communities (SCCs) too. But some communities and people rose above the crisis. Some SCCs in Kenya became effective local tribunals to mediate tribal and ethnic conflicts.⁹ A three member mediation team of St. Augustine SCC in St. Joseph the Worker

Parish Kangemi, Nairobi visited other SCCs to promote the healing of their ethnic tensions and promote reconciliation and peace. They especially encouraged the SCC members to talk about their problems and feelings.

On a regular basis there have been Peacebuilding Seminars for the Small Christian Community leaders of Christ the King Catholic Parish in Kibera, Nairobi. For example, on Saturday, 7 March 2009 there were 32 participants from the SCCs -- 20 women and 12 men representing the larger ethnic groups in Kenya such as the Kikuyu, Luo, Kamba, Luyia and Kalenjin. They used two role plays on the causes of instability in Kibera slums and problems facing the SCCs in the parish. Decisions and suggestions were made on how to implement what was discussed in the SCC. People should be honest about the difficulty with paying debts and not to betray the trust by hiding. Also people should ask for forgiveness, be responsible, organised, open and reconcile with others.¹⁰

Powerful witness and testimony stories can be found in the “African Story Database” on the African Proverbs, Sayings and Stories Website (www.afriprov.org). This is an online, searchable, user-friendly collection of 572 African stories including folktales, historical fiction pieces, myths, parables, poems, prayers, riddles, song-proverbs and true stories. These African stories cover a wide variety of topics and occasions. The database is made of up stories containing over 140 different themes and sub-themes. After the post December 2007 election crisis and violence here in Kenya there were many inspiring, uplifting and positive witness and testimony stories. It is important to tell our African stories of justice, forgiveness, reconciliation and peacemaking. To be valuable these stories must be **real**, that is, having a sacrifice/struggle/vulnerability/overcoming adversity and odds "reality edge" to them (*hali halisi* stories as we say in Swahili).

Searching in the “African Story Database” (<http://www.afriprov.org/index.php/africanstories-database.htm>) by theme and sub-theme one finds 38 stories on Small Christian Communities. And then, the following number of stories on related topics: Healing (37); Peace/Peacemaking (36); Reconciliation (14); Forgiveness/Mercy (13); and Justice (13). There are 95 stories with the locale in Kenya.

“I Am a Christian First” is Story No. 173 in the database:

After the post December, 2007 election crisis and the resulting tribalism-related violence in Kenya in early 2008, a Catholic woman in a St. Paul Chaplaincy Center Prayer Group in Nairobi said: "I am a Christian first, a Kenyan second and a Kikuyu third."¹¹

“Pray for Me to Forgive President Mwai Kibaki” is Story No. 327 in the database:

During a meeting of the St. Jude South Small Christian Community (SCC) near the main highway going to Uganda in Yala Parish in Kisumu Archdiocese, Kenya in March, 2008 the members reflected on the Gospel passage from *John 20:23*: "If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained." Speaking from the heart one Luo man emotionally asked the SCC members to pray for him. He said: "Pray for me to forgive President Mwai Kibaki." During the post election crisis period in Kenya he said that every time he saw the Kikuyu president on TV he got upset and angry and so he needed healing. The other SCCs

members were deeply touched and prayed feelingly for him. He said that he felt peaceful again.

As we compiled these various stories we discovered that the word order used in the process of peacemaking/peacebuilding is very important, yet varies. The theme of the 2009 Second African Synod is “Reconciliation, Justice and Peace.” The theme of the 2008 AMECEA Plenary Assembly was “Reconciliation through Justice and Peace.” The theme of the 2009 Kenya Lenten Campaign was “Justice, Reconciliation and Peace.” It depends on the specific context and circumstances and the local interpretation. In general I feel that this is an ongoing process in which justice comes first and then this leads to reconciliation and finally to a more lasting peace. This is reflected in name of the Truth, Justice and Reconciliation Commission in Kenya.¹²

12 References to SCCs in the *Instrumentum Laboris*

The 12 references to SCCs in the *Instrumentum Laboris* (“Working Document”) of the 2009 Second African Synod are as follows:

1. Under “From 1994 to 2009: A New Social Context:” “Inspired by Sacred Scripture, Small Christian Communities (SCC) are actively involved in social life.” (No. 9)
2. Under “Ways in which the Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation Has Been Implemented:” “Small Christian Communities are truly places for studying, meditating upon and sharing the Word of God. They are seeking ways of expressing the Christian faith in the typical settings of a traditional African community. For example, celebrating funerals during a Eucharistic liturgy in the house of the deceased, as a reminder of the Christian hope in the resurrection and the family as the living cell of the Church as Family of God, is proving to be of great assistance to the faith.” (No. 19)
3. Under “On the Road to Peace:” “Some roads to peace have been opened by Pastors, by those in the consecrated life, by Small Christian Communities and by the lay faithful, as individuals or members of associations. However, some obstacles still remain.” (No. 63)
4. Under “Active Presence of Christ in Life:” “Christ’s disciples carry out their work in a conscientious manner, which is the basis for their taking charge of parishes to every extent possible and their forming future priests and consecrated persons in the midst of Small Christian Communities.” (No. 76)
5. Under “Power of the Word of God:” “If read and explained in groups or in Small Christian Communities, Sacred Scripture will become the dynamic force to renew and recreate African culture and fashion new men and women ‘to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ’ (*Ephesians* 4:13).” (No. 85)
6. Under “Rites of Reconciliation:” “What has the Church learned [about reconciliation] from the experiences of diocesan synods, days of recollection for the clergy and forums for the lay faithful and Small Christian Communities?” (No. 88)
7. Under “Church: Sacrament of Reconciliation:” “In virtue of the power of the Holy Spirit, some ecclesial communities bear witness to their faith in Christ by having the courage to take initiatives for reconciliation among Small Christian

- Communities, separated couples, families in conflict and divided village communities.” (No. 90)
8. Under “Working for a Reconciled Africa:” “In what ways can Church institutions and communities (episcopal conferences, dioceses, parishes, Small Christian Communities) share in this witness [of service]? (No. 92)
 9. Under “Church: Family for All Nations:” “Small Christian Communities incarnate in the Church the support which arises from the joy of belonging to a family. Since the Christian life is human life, by necessity it takes place in the context of a family. Acts of solidarity, an expression of Christian charity, are occurring in exemplary fashion in these communities. In some places, the Word of God is read, shared and lived at this level. The role of lay animators in these communities is particularly important in ensuring a leadership-service which assists members to grow in their faith and become involved in efforts for reconciliation and a more just and peaceful society. Undoubtedly, theological work needs to be done in this ‘area’.” (No. 93)
 10. Under “Service to Society: Health, Education and Socio-Economic Development:” “Because of the notable assistance of both Caritas and some Small Christian Communities, the poorest are cared for and those with AIDS receive attention.” (No. 96)
 11. Under “Agents: The Lay Faithful in the Church:” “Maintain family unity by fostering peace and just relations and by a harmonious rapport with other families in Small Christian Communities.” (No. 118)
 12. Under “Formation Programmes:” “Some difficulties can be seen in the diffusion of such programmes [referring to formation programmes that incorporate the Catholic Church’s social teaching] and their follow-up at the grassroots level. Can a way be found in dioceses, parishes and Small Christian Communities to make the implementation of such programmes possible? (No. 130)

Developing the Theology of the Church-Family of God in Africa Based on the Experiences of SCCs

In light of these 12 references to SCCs and the major themes of the *Instrumentum Laboris* we ask the question: How is the recent praxis of SCCs in Africa contributing to the development of the theology of the Church-Family of God? This helps to respond to Pope John Paul II’s call in *The Church in Africa*: “It is earnestly to be hoped that theologians in Africa will work out the theology of the Church as Family with all the riches contained in this concept, showing its complementarity with other images of the Church.”¹³

First we need to provide an important context for the different theologies and images of the church. Systematic formation of Small Christian Communities became the key pastoral priority in Eastern Africa in 1976. Small Christian Communities (SCCs) developed as a result of putting the ecclesiology of the Second Vatican Council (1962-65) into practice. Historian John Baur emphasises that SCCs derive from Vatican II’s ecclesiology of the Church as People of God, but are very much a work in process. “It implies that all the faithful fulfill their vocation and mission in the Church, implying a change from the priest-based apostolate to a people based-apostolate which demands that the priest assumes the role of a community-minded inspirational minister.”¹⁴ African theologian Laurence Magesa points out: “If the pastoral implications of this shift have not been practically fully “digested” in many dioceses in East Africa, as anyone with some ministerial experience in the region will

know, there has not been any shortage of theological reflection on this rediscovered ecclesiology of the early church”¹⁵ (see the extensive literature cited in various “Endnotes” in this article).

Magesa goes on to state:

The best contribution of the ecclesiology of SCCs in East Africa has been to provide a clear theological elaboration of the threefold theological characteristic of these entities. Like any baptized person, each SCC in its members is priestly, prophetic and kingly. As priestly, its life must be based on faith and unceasing prayer to God. As prophetic, it must become an advocate of justice and reconciliation in society. As kingly, it must gather within itself, without undue discrimination, all those who seek refuge in its fold.¹⁶

Baur presents the challenge of this prophetic role in describing the third phase in the growth of SCCs that calls for “public witness to justice and peace, and ecumenical cooperation in development.”¹⁷

Now let us examine more closely the references to SCCs in the *Instrumentum Laboris*. Based on No. 9 (Section No. 93) above, Small Christian Communities embody the values of inclusiveness, sharing, unity and solidarity that form the contemporary family of God. Our models are the first “small community (the Trinity -- Father, Son and Holy Spirit) and the first Small Christian Community (the Holy Family – Jesus, Joseph and Mary).

Along with parish-based SCCs and lectionary-based SCCs, we can talk of family-based SCCs.¹⁸ These include SCCs that incorporate youth and children into the activities of the small community and” Mother SCCs” that have branches of Youth SCCs and Children SCCs. While there is a lot of discussion about the breakdown of the family structure in our contemporary society, some SCCs in Africa are countering this trend by helping couples who cannot receive the Eucharist to regularize their marriages in a Catholic ceremony. Other SCCs have night prayers for families in the neighborhood and a carefully planned program of catechesis for younger members such as teaching the sacraments as a regular part of SCC meetings. African SCCs emphasize personal relationships, family bonds, solidarity, and Christian belonging --sharing together, working together, and celebrating together (including meals and entertainment) in the context of African values and customs. Thus SCCs are a concrete expression of, and realization of, the Church-Family of God Model of Church in Africa.

Pius Rutechura emphasizes that “hopes for the Church in Africa depend on the courage to foster and build SCCs as the ideal foundational units of building the Church-Family of God.”¹⁹ The SCC is a communion of families. The outstation or subparish is a communion of SCCs. The parish is a communion of outstations or subparishes. If members of the SCCs meet in the middle of the week for Bible Sharing/Bible Reflection using the scripture readings of the following Sunday, then the Sunday Eucharist in the parish or subparish or outstation becomes a “communion of communities” ecclesial experience.

There are many examples and case studies of SCCs that are involved in social and mission outreach and in promoting justice, reconciliation, and peace in Africa. No.6 (Section No. 88) above refers to “Rites of Reconciliation” in SCCs and No. 3 (Section No. 63) above states that SCCs open roads to peace. Kieran Flynn states: “It is in being transforming

communities [of themselves and others] that SCCs realize their identity in the Church as Family Model. These individual [communities of] Church as Family have the task of working to transform society.”²⁰ A key part of this transformation is a deeper evangelization that proclaims that the water of baptism is “thicker” than the blood of tribalism and promotes true communion between different ethnic groups.

No. 12 (Section 130) above emphasizes formation programmes that incorporate the Catholic Church’s social teaching. In commenting on how the 1994 First African Synod stressed the formation of genuine SCCs David Kyeyune states:

Liturgy therefore activates their [the SCC members] Trinitarian and ecclesial relationship, talents and services of the kingdom. The purpose is to enable a Small Christian Community become an ecclesial community of the Trinity through self-evangelisation. It should then be empowered to carry out a mission of liberation in all the dimensions of human life.²¹

As we move into the future let us use the famous Spanish proverb that is often applied to SCCs: *We create the path by walking.*

Endnotes

¹ *Instrumentum Laboris* (“Working Paper”) for Synod of Bishops Second Special Assembly for Africa. *The Church in Africa in Service to Reconciliation, Justice and Peace* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2009 and Nairobi: Paulines Publications Africa, 2009). Retrieved 20 March, 2009 from the Vatican Website: http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/synod/documents/rc_synod_doc_20090319_instrlabor-africa_en.html. The “Dedication” of Rodrigo Mejia, *We are the Church: Sharing in Small Christian Communities* (Nairobi: Paulines Publications Africa, 2009) states: “A modest contribution for the Second Assembly of the Synod of Bishops of Africa.”

² *Proceedings of the 16th AMECEA Plenary Assembly on “Reconciliation through Justice and Peace.* Lusaka, Zambia from 27 June to 7 July, 2008 (Nairobi: Privately printed, 2008), 37.

³ Of the 79 footnotes in the 2006 *Lineamenta* only seven are from specifically African sources. Of the 67 footnotes in the 2009 *Instrumentum Laboris* only nine are from specifically African sources.

⁴ The Base or Basic Christian Community (BCC) becomes a Base or Basic Ecclesial Community (BEC or CEB in Spanish) when it gathers for sacramental life such as celebrating the Eucharist. See the excellent commentaries on Latin American CEBs in Robert S. Pelton, *Aparecida: Quo Vadis?* (Scranton and London: University of Scranton Press, 2008) and in Joseph Healey and Jeanne Hinton (ed.), *Small Christian Communities Today: Capturing the New Moment* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 2005 and Nairobi: Paulines Publications Africa, 2006).

⁵ Joseph Healey and Donald Sybertz, *Towards an African Narrative Theology* (Nairobi: Paulines Publications Africa and Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1996), 138. Further distinctions are made in Joseph G. Healey, M.M., “Basic Christian Communities: Church-Centred or World-Centred?” *Missionalia* (April, 1986), 14-34.

⁶ Raphael Ndingi, “Basic Communities: the African Experience,” in *A New Missionary Era* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1982), 100.

⁷ AMECEA is an acronym for “Association of Member Episcopal Conferences in Eastern.” It is a service organization for the National Episcopal Conferences of the eight countries of Eastern Africa, namely Eritrea (1993), Ethiopia (1979), Kenya (1961), Malawi (1961), Sudan (1973), Tanzania (1961), Uganda (1961) and Zambia (1961). Somalia (1995) and Djibouti (2002) are Affiliate Members.

⁸ Examples are given in Joseph G. Healey, “New Learnings in Animating a Small Christian Communities (SCCs) Model of Church in Africa Today,” *African Christian Studies* (CUEA), 24:2 (June, 2008), 7-37 and in Joseph Healey, “Innovations and New Trends in Small Christian Communities (SCCs) in Africa Today,” *Hekima Review*, 40 (May, 2009), 85-100.

⁹ Jeffrey Odell Korgen documents how some of the 20,000 base communities (another name for SCCs) were involved in the reconciliation and healing ministry in Rwanda after the 2004 genocide. See the powerful Rwandan Case Study called "Forgiving the Unforgivable: Peacemaking in Rwanda," *Solidarity Will Transform the World: Stories of Hope from Catholic Relief Services* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 2007), 97-122.

¹⁰For a fuller description see "Peace-building Seminar for Small Christian Community Leaders in Nairobi, Kenya in March, 2009" by Hillary Michael Awiti. Retrieved 12 May, 2009 from the Small Christian Communities Global Collaborative Website: <http://www.smallchristiancommunities.org/africa/kenya/87-peace-building-seminar-for-small-christian-community-leaders-in-nairobi-kenya-in-march-2009.html>

¹¹ Research in Kenya, Rwanda and Sudan indicates that women are better in peacemaking than men. Men tend to emphasize power and control while women emphasize personal relationships.

¹²Peter Henriot presents interesting distinctions in "Justice, Peace, Reconciliation and Forgiveness: Theological and Conceptual Underpinnings and Linkages." Unpublished paper at the AMECEA Synod Delegates Workshop (Nairobi: 2009).

¹³ John Paul II. Post Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *The Church in Africa* (Nairobi, Kenya: Paulines Publications Africa, 1995), No. 63.

¹⁴John Baur, *2000 Years of Christianity in Africa* (Nairobi, Kenya: Paulines Publications Africa, 1994), 319-320.

¹⁵Laurenti Magesa, "A Panoramic View of 25 Years of African Theology in East Africa: Foundations, Developments and Prospects," *Hekima Review*, 40 (May, 2009), 24.

¹⁶Ibid.

¹⁷John Baur, *2000 Years of Christianity in Africa* (Nairobi, Kenya: Paulines Publications Africa, Second Edition, 2009), 391.

¹⁸Described in Simon Rurinjah, "Importance of Small Christian Communities in Our Lives." Unpublished talk in SCCs Classes at Hekima College and Tangaza College (Nairobi: 2009), 1.

¹⁹Pius Rutechura, "From the First to the Second African Synod of Bishops: Hopes and Prospects for the Church in Africa," *Hekima Review*, 38 (May, 2008), 14.

²⁰Kieran Flynn, *Communities for the Kingdom: A Handbook for Small Christian Community Leaders* (Eldoret: AMECEA Gaba Publications, Double *Spearhead* Nos. 181-182, 2007), 99.

²¹David Kyeyune, "The Small Christian Community in the Church-As-Family" in *The Model of Church as Family: Meeting the African Challenge*. Fourth Interdisciplinary Theological Session at the Catholic University of Eastern Africa (Nairobi: CUEA Publications, 1999), 59.

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