

Article in the Online Journal *International Journal of African Catholicism (IJAC)*, Volume 2, Number 1 (Winter, 2011)

Promoting Small Christian Communities in Africa¹ through the Internet

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Abstract: Today there are over 90,000 Small Christian Communities (SCCs in short) in the eight AMECEA countries in Eastern Africa. Kenya alone has over 35,000 SCCs. The internet (websites specifically about SCCs in Africa, online journals, online learning sites, search engines like Google, social networking sites like Facebook and YouTube, blogs, email messages, etc.) in this digital age can dramatically expand our knowledge and understanding on two levels. First, the internet can help SCCs in Africa to share their experience with the rest of the world. Through the internet and other forms of the new information technology members of African SCCs can feel part of the World Church. Second, the internet can help people around the world learn about SCCs in Africa. This essay treats the following headings: “Tracking SCCs in Africa,” “History of the Small Christian Communities Global Collaborative Website” (www.smallchristiancommunities.org), “Content of the Africa Section of the SCCs Website,” “Small Christian Communities Facebook Pages and Groups,” “Promoting the Voices of Women, Youth and the Marginated” and “The Future is Now for SCCs in Africa.”

Tracking SCCs in Africa

I live in Nairobi, Kenya in East Africa. When I visit the United States I like to go to Catholic parishes and often I ask if they have Small Christian Communities or Small Church Communities (SCCs in short). During the conversation I usually get the question: “Do you have Small Christian Communities in Africa?” Quietly I answer: “Oh, yes. Today there are over 90,000 Small Christian Communities in the eight [AMECEA](#)² countries in Eastern Africa.³ Kenya alone has over 35,000 SCCs – almost as many as the whole of the United States.” People are usually stunned and respond, “Oh, I had no idea.” This response can be seen in the context that millions of people around the world know very little about [Africa](#) and about the [Catholic Church](#) in Africa. In fact, they often hear only the bad news in Africa (war, poverty, AIDs, corruption). But many good things are happening in Africa. The growth and influence of SCCs is one of these good things.

Hopefully the internet is helping to change this.

We can write books and articles about SCCs in Africa. We can explain their growth and importance at international conferences. We can explain their activities in face to face conversations. We can encourage people to visit SCCs when they come to Africa. But the internet (websites specifically on SCCs in Africa, online journals, online learning sites, search engines like Google, social networking sites like Facebook and YouTube, blogs, email messages, etc.) in this digital age can dramatically expand our knowledge and understanding on two levels. First, the internet can help SCCs in Africa to share their experience with the rest of the world. Through the internet and other forms of the new information technology members of African SCCs can feel part of the World Church. Second, the internet can help people around the world learn about SCCs in Africa.

When it comes to promoting SCCs through the internet a good adage is: “Think outside the box.” Try this example: Enter the words “Small Christian Community” (singular and with quotation marks) in the Google Search Engine (www.google.com) and see how many results (hits) and useful information you can get. I did this on 25 November, 2010 and got 282,000 results that took just 0.24 seconds to come up! For “Small Christian Communities” (plural) I got 89,100 results that took 0.20 seconds. For Small Christian Community Africa (singular without quotation marks): 520,000 results in 0.19 seconds. For Small Christian Communities Africa (plural): 274,000 results in 0.05 seconds. Most websites listed included links to many other websites with similar SCC information and concerns. The chapter "Promoting SCCs via the Internet" in the book *Small Christian Communities Today: Capturing the New Moment* documents 35 SCC websites around the world (Healey, 2005, 177-187). Browsing through these websites can yield many surprises and facilitate new connections.

All these advances and challenges should be understood against the background that Small Christian Communities developed as a result of putting the ecclesiology of the **Second Vatican Council** (1962-65) into practice. Latin America, Africa and Asia (especially the Philippines) all pioneered the development of a SCC Model of Church or a BCC Model of Church. After considerable research and debate, many specialists feel that quite independently of one another these three areas of the Catholic Church in the Global South *simultaneously* experienced the extraordinary growth of SCCs. Thus the African experience did not come from Latin America but developed on its own. In fact, systematic formation of Small Christian Communities became the key pastoral priority in Eastern Africa as far back as 1976.

History of the Small Christian Communities Global Collaborative Website(www.smallchristiancommunities.org)

The 2002 National Convocation of Small Christian Communities in San Antonio, Texas, USA recommended a common website. It was set up as the “Small Christian Communities in North America Collaborative Website.” It was funded by [RENEW International](#) based in Plainfield, New Jersey, USA and designed by Jennifer Lyden who worked with Barb Darling. [RENEW International](#) received the copyright in 2004. A new section “What’s New in SCC Resources” was added in 2005. Administration of the website was set up on a voluntary basis, but never took off. Very few people visited the website and no new features or information were added. The website languished for several years.

During the 2007 National Joint Convocation of SCCs in St. Paul, Minnesota, USA, a gathering of international delegates proposed to revive the website and start an “International Section or Page” for international stories. New improvements included establishing a volunteer team for site development and maintenance. Members included people based in Kenya and the United States: Caroline Adams, Jennifer Ehrentraut, Charles Gikera, Joe Healey, Belza Ramos and Xavier Thelakkatt. There was a change of scope from a North American to a global international website after consultation with Terry Richard, Executive Director of [RENEW International](#). A conference call with the web minister of [RENEW International](#) and with Veraciti Hosting Service in September, 2007 resulted in transferring to a new hosting system⁴-- [CNET Global International](#) -- and starting six continental sections: Africa, Asia, Europe, Latin America, North America and Oceania (Thelakkatt, 2010). In 2009 Robert Pelton observed that the website has definitely improved, but the desired cooperation between the major Small Christian Communities organizations [in the United States] has still not been achieved. At the national

level the hierarchy [in the United States] is not as supportive of Small Christian Communities as in other parts in the world (O'Halloran, 2010, 258).

The revised "Small Christian Communities Global Collaborative Website"

(www.smallchristiancommunities.org) includes a map of the world and a drop-down menu with information on SCCs in all six continents. The Welcome Page states:

Welcome!(English).Bienvenue! (French).Bienvenido! (Spanish).Willkommen!(German).Karibuni! (Swahili). Namaste! (Hindi).Hwan-yōng-ham-ni-da! (Korean). Kia Ora! (Maori). Our eight language "Welcome" represents a variety of languages commonly spoken on each of the six continents. With a vision to establish a global networking website for Small Christian Communities (SCCs) worldwide, we intend to share SCCs contact information, events, materials, and news for each of the six continents. The Small Christian Communities Global Collaborative Website is a "work in progress." We are making changes and adding material regularly (SCC Website, 2010).

So far the Africa Page describes SCCs on the African Continent as a whole and in the countries of Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), Kenya, Malawi, South Africa and Tanzania.

What about the use of the website and feedback? The Monthly Report from Google Analytics on our "Small Christian Communities Global Collaborative Website" shows that during the month of October, 2010 there were 520 absolute unique visitors, 729 visits and 2,803 Pageviews from 62 countries/territories. The leading countries in order of visits were United States, Kenya, India, United Kingdom, South Africa, Italy, Philippines, Germany and Ghana (Google, 2010).

Content of the Africa Section of the SCCs Website

Our [research on SCCs in Africa](#) has been posted on the SCCs website. This includes tracking the slow, gradual shift of SCCs in Eastern Africa from being small prayer groups that are inwardly focused to active small faith communities that are outwardly focused on justice and

peace issues. This may be the number one challenge to SCCs in Eastern Africa. Many are still prayer groups and not concerned with the wider social issues. Many SCCs shy away from justice and peace concerns. The challenge of theologians Father John Waliggo from Uganda (who died in 2008) and Father Laurenti Magesa from Tanzania encourages the SCCs in Africa to become more involved in justice and peace and social action.

One major change in Kenya since the post-election violence in January, 2008 is the increasing use of a Pastoral Theological Reflection Process such as the "Pastoral Circle" to help SCCs to reflect on a deeper level. This process uses the well-known "See, Judge and Act" methodology starting from concrete experience. Now more and more SCCs in Africa are using various reflection processes and methodologies to reflect pastorally and theologically on their experiences, often using the tools of social analysis. This includes both identifying the new signs of the times and creatively responding to them.

Recent research⁵ shows that 95% of the SCCs in Kenya are neighborhood groups⁶ connected to parishes (parish-based SCCs are the most common model in Eastern Africa) and 5% are specialized SCCs such as: nurses at Kenyatta Hospital; teachers who live on the compound of the University of Nairobi -- Kenya Science Teachers Campus; Christian Life Communities (CLC); St Joseph SCC of the Deaf in Our Lady of Guadalupe Parish; and "extraterritorial or floating SCCs" composed of Catholics who live outside the geographical boundaries of the parish but want to stay connected so they meet as a SCC before or after the Sunday Mass.

There are other types of specialized SCCs in Eastern Africa such as Catholic professional peer groups (doctors, lawyers) that have formed SCCs and small groups in the Christian Professionals of Tanzania (CPT). Recently it was proposed to start a SCC of Catholic MPs in

Kenya (Members of the Kenya Parliament). This would bridge the gap between the Catholic Church and the government in Kenya.⁷

We are posting under this “Africa Section” on our public SCCs Website more and more content of our course on "Small Christian Communities as a New Model of Church in Africa Today" that is taught every year in the School of Theology at both [Hekima College](#) and [Tangaza College](#) in Nairobi, Kenya including the [best papers of the students](#). Adding more links to other websites on SCCs increases the possibility of people around the world learning about African SCCs.

Research indicates that many people find the “Africa Section” through search engines such as Google.

In addition our SCC Course is set up on the Tangaza College Moodle⁸ that is a free, open source e-learning software platform also known as a Course Management System (CMS), Learning Management System (LMS) or a Virtual Learning Environment (VLE). Moodle helps educators create online courses with a focus on interaction and collaborative construction of content. It is a free web application to create effective online learning sites (Tangaza, 2010). This Moodle is located on the Tangaza College Server and needs a password for access.

In our 2010 Course Class 9 on "Promoting SCCs via the Internet" is described as follows:

Opening Prayer related to the theme for 2010 World Communications Sunday on 16 May, 2010 on “The Priest and Pastoral Ministry in a Digital World: New Media at the Service of the Word.” Explanation of the “New Media.” Survey of student involvement in social networking and information websites. Online demonstration of the “Small Christian Communities Global Collaborative Website” and the “Facebook Page” on the SCCs Website. SCCs Poll. SCCs Stories on the African Proverbs, Sayings and Stories Website. Text Messages of Daily Bible readings. Online or Virtual SCCs.

The class assignment was:

1. Reading: Chapter 26 (pages 177-187) on "Promoting SCCs via the Internet" by Joseph Healey in *Small Christian Communities Today: Capturing the New Moment*.
2. Spend one hour on the internet studying the “Small Christian Communities Global Collaborative Website” (Healey, *Syllabus*, 2010, 4-5).

Part of our course in February, March and April, 2009 was a "Practicum." Instead of a regular class one week, the students (seminarians in religious congregations and one religious sister) participated in a gathering/activity of a SCC (or SCCs) in a parish and wrote a short paper on the experience. They used the "see, judge and act" methodology of the Pastoral Circle (Pastoral Spiral). Many students wrote about the SCCs' involvement in the 2009 Kenya Lenten Campaign on the theme "Justice, Reconciliation and Peace" that was also the theme of the 2009 Second African Synod. The best papers were posted on our public SCCs Website. Hillary Michael Awiti, MHM (at that time a seminarian in third year theology and now a priest) wrote about a "Peace-building Seminar for Small Christian Community Leaders in Nairobi, Kenya in March, 2009:"

SEE

On Saturday, 7 March 2009 I attended one of the Peace-building Seminars for the Small Christian Community leaders of Christ the King Catholic Parish in Kibera, Nairobi, Kenya. Kibera is a very populous slum located in Nairobi Archdiocese of Kenya and its inhabitants come from almost all the ethnic groups in Kenya. The residents live from hand to mouth in desperate conditions such as poor infrastructures. Their main concern is to meet their very basic human needs. Due to this diversity and vulnerability it was one of the hot spots of the post-election violence in 2008 with examples of tribalism, negative ethnicity, instability and other problems. Hence the need for such a seminar. This was held in the Parish Hall located opposite the church compound. It lasted from 9.40 a.m. to 1.35 p.m. and was conducted in Swahili.

The facilitators comprised a team of three Mill Hill Missionaries seminarians Philip Odhiambo, Patrick Amarnath and Tony Emeka together with the catechist of the parish, Stephen Njoroge. There were 32 participants: 20 women and 12 men representing the larger ethnic groups in Kenya: Kikuyu, Luo, Kamba, Luyia and Kalenjin. These participants came from SCCs in the five outstations of the parish. The seminar went on as follows:

1. Recapitulation on the previous seminars inputs.
2. Application of the inputs using two role plays on the causes of instability in Kibera slums and problems facing SCCs in the parish.
3. Sharing using the "see, judge and act" methodology in buzz groups.
4. Reporting to the larger group.

Then one of the priests working in the parish came with a religious Sister who made a presentation on the forthcoming International Women's Day on 8 March, 2009. This lasted 45 minutes after which there was lunch and departure.

JUDGE

During the recapitulation process, some participants repeated already mentioned subjects thus becoming monotonous. However, the seminar was well conducted, interactive and many participants volunteered for the role plays. The buzz groups opened up a forum where everyone had an active participatory role in the seminar by sharing their personal views. Issues that came up included accumulating debts with the small scale business people that leads to frosty relationships and failing to turn up for gatherings. The second role play highlighted the harm of gossip among SCC members, infidelity and weak leadership. During the entire seminar, there was no time given to scripture readings or reflection.

ACT

Decisions and suggestions were made on how to implement what was discussed in the SCCs themselves. People should be honest about the difficulty with paying debts and not to betray the trust by hiding. Also ask for forgiveness, be responsible, organized, open and reconcile with others. In the second role play infidelity in marriage was emphasized, Leaders of the SCCs were also encouraged to gather information and facts, patiently and sensitively listen to members' views. Having done so, then address the matter "*kijumuiya*" ("in community") that is, involving the other leaders of the SCCs. Gossip causes a lot of ill feelings in the group, raises suspicions, anger, distrust and so needs to be handled carefully. There is a need for a proper reconciliation service after any such events (Awiti, 2009, 1-2)

Stephen Gatito Waweru, MXY wrote a practicum paper in our 2010 course at Hekima College on "The Effects of Tribalism in the Small Christian Communities and Its Efforts in Promoting Reconciliation." He describes a case study in Nairobi, Kenya where a woman member of St. Jude SCC is the representative on the Olympic Sub-parish Truth, Justice and Reconciliation Commission. In turn she is the sub-parish's representative on the Our Lady of Guadalupe Parish Truth, Justice and Reconciliation Commission. One of her tasks is to inform and animate SCC members on the process of the annual [Kenya Lenten Campaign](#) that usually focuses on justice and peace issues, and most recently on promoting reconciliation in Kenya.

This is two-way communications: from the bottom to the top and from the top to the bottom.

Two key insights of the Second African Synod documents are that SCCs members are “agents” of reconciliation and the SCC itself is a “place” of reconciliation.

One of the newest sections on our SCC website is a SCC Poll to encourage participation and interaction. Based on research (surveys, questionnaires, interviews, visits to, and conferences on, SCCs) we have identified 82 important characteristics or features of SCCs around the world: 40 on the dynamics of SCCs and 42 on the activities of SCCs. The poll uses the statement -- “The best part of my Small Christian Community is...” -- followed by five choices that are taken from these 82 important characteristics or features of SCCs. We change the poll every two months.

The most popular choices in the poll give us a good idea of what people involved in SCCs are thinking and feeling especially what is important to them, what are their interests and what are their priorities. One can even discover an underlying spirituality and theology through the choices that they make as well as educate people about the life and ministry of SCCs. The poll started in April, 2009. The winning choices of the first nine polls were:

- “Helps me to live my Christian faith.”
- “Helps me to connect my faith and everyday life.”
- “Helps me to connect the Bible and everyday life.”
- “Spreading the Good News of Jesus Christ.”
- “Community spirit.”
- “Practical action and service.”
- “Spirit of belonging.”
- “Prays together for the needs of others.”
- “Sharing ideas and ways to evangelize.”

SCC members in Africa have also voted for these choices:

- “Reaching out to others.”
- “Bible Sharing/Bible Reflection.”
- “Personal relationships and friendships.”
- “Justice and peace concerns.”

- “Concern for others.”
- “Relationship with a Twin (Sister) SCC.”
- “Spirit of an extended family.”
- “Support in time of need.”
- “Using the SEE, JUDGE and ACT Process.”
- “Promotes reconciliation and peacebuilding.”(SCC Poll, 2010)

Small Christian Communities Facebook Pages and Groups

We started a Facebook Page on our Small Christian Communities Global Collaborative Website (www.facebook.com/pages/Nairobi-Kenya/Small-Christian-Communities/279921983315) in February, 2010. The administrator is John Siyumbu who is a Catholic seminarian from Kenya and presently in his second year of philosophy at the seminary of the Apostles of Jesus in Nairobi, Kenya. It is noteworthy that after China and India Facebook is the third largest “nation” in the world -- 500 million. The overall goal of our Facebook Page is to be interactive and participatory with as much two-way sharing and exchange as possible. This is different from other pages with the same name whose primary purpose is the marketing of products or the one-way communication of information from the moderator/source.⁹

The scripture motto of our Facebook Page is *Matthew* 18:20: “For where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them.” One of the purposes of this social networking page is “to unite all Christians who may want to be members.” Some introductory comments were: “We invite you all to share your experiences as believers, pour forth your encouragement, and keep aflame the Gospel. Post a verse and we'll all share. Just like early Christians used to do in their communities.” “Let us hope that this Facebook Page will help more young people to get involved in Small Christian Communities (SCCs).”

Of the first 417 fans on our SCCs Facebook Page, 79% are in the 18-34 year old age bracket. The majority of fans are from Kenya followed by United States, South Africa, India and

United Kingdom. Concerning feedback, in the week of 22 November, 2010 there were 115 active users, 138 visits to the page and 7 wall posts and comments (SCCs Weekly Facebook Page Update, 2010).

Some comments on our Facebook Page. “At the end of the [Second African Synod](#) of Bishops held in Rome, the *Message to the People of God* uses the African proverb that goes: *An army of well-organized ants can bring down an elephant*. SCCs are an army of well-organized Christians who can help alleviate evil in society.” “The SCCs can be an avenue for environmental care. ‘Going green’ has been a slogan in many commercials. SCCs can make their neighborhood ‘go green.’” “SCCs should play the role of reminding our government leaders and appeal to them for security of life and alleviating poverty. Life is sacred and must be protected and secured. Let’s stand up and talk without fear about the lack of good order. If we don’t talk, who will talk?” “Today’s challenge: How do we use the [New Media](#)¹⁰ for evangelization especially in Small Christian Communities?” (SCCs Facebook Page, 2010).

We used this SCC Facebook Page to communicate the activities and results of the [National Alliance of Parishes Restructuring into Communities](#) (NAPRC) Conference on Small Christian Communities that took place in Brandon, Florida, USA from 22-24 July, 2010. Father Xavier Thelakkatt’s twice daily updates were very helpful to us living in Africa. The [full report](#) on the conference is posted under “United States” in the North American Section of our SCCs Website.

The SCC Facebook Page is a place where SCC Members can describe their experiences. For example, on 26 July, 2010 Father Hillary Awiti wrote: “Recently in St. Joseph and Mary Parish of Shauri Moyo, Archdiocese of Nairobi, Kenya we held elections of Small Christian Community (SCC) animators and leaders. After that, we held elections of Parish Council members and executive. These events were done alongside workshops and seminars for SCC

leadership. Finally, we had a Recollection Day at Resurrection Gardens for SCC Leaders. They were fruitful exercises and I learned a lot.”

I wrote about my own St. Kizito SCC on 3 August, 2010 as follows:”One of the challenges in the weekly Bible Reflection/Bible Sharing of our St. Kizito Small Christian Community (SCC) in Waruku, Nairobi, Kenya is to get more participation from the women -- both in sharing after the reading of the Gospel and in the “Prayers of the Faithful” (Prayers of Petition). Our Prayer Leader MichaelOrondo proposed that we have a one hour seminar on “More Women Participation in the SCC” from 2 to 3 p.m. before our SCC Mass on Sunday, 15 August, 2010.” This led to other suggestions on our Facebook Page on how to increase the involvement of women in our SCC including the very practical suggestion of [Archbishop Raphael Ndingi Mwana’ a Nzeki](#) (the retired archbishop of Nairobi Archdiocese) to invite the women to offer “Prayers of the Faithful” in their home or “heart” languages/mother tongues, rather than restricting them to Swahili or English(SCCs Facebook Page, 2010).

The SCCs Facebook Page has other features. Presently a Discussion Board section has tenseparate topics:

- Call to Service
- Experience of Communion
- Faith and Works
- Let Holy Peace and Love Prevail, Overcoming Challenges
- Lukewarm SCC Members
- Neighborhood Spirit in the SCCs
- New Way of Being Church
- Reenergizing SCCs
- Women’s Participation in SCCs
- Youth Attendance in SCCs

So far the response has been only average. The challenge is to make these topics interactive and participatory. There are also a Photos Section and an Events Section where information on SCCs Workshops and Seminars is posted.

During the two SCC Courses in Nairobi, Kenya from January to May, 2010 over 20 students joined the SCCs Facebook Page and there were lively exchanges on their practicum experiences, tree planting during the 2010 [Kenya Lenten Campaign](#) and key insights from the students' Course Papers. We discussed the idea of starting a separate Facebook Group (different from a Facebook Page) that would be an "Online or Virtual Small Christian Community" on the internet. We discussed two possibilities. A "Kenya Online SCC" (made up of interested Facebook members living in Kenya) and an "International Online SCC" (made up of interested Facebook members living in Kenya, Tanzania, Uganda and other countries and continents). We also discussed the idea of starting a separate Facebook Group that would set up an "Online or Virtual Twinning/Partnership/Sister Relationship" between two SCCs in Kenya or two SCCs in different countries on the internet (SCCs Facebook Page, 2010). Everyone thought these were good ideas, but no one volunteered to coordinate/moderate these online groups. Then in September, 2010 we started our first Online SCC called [St. Martin de Porres Online Small Christian Community](#) that fits the category of an "International Online SCC." It is a Closed Facebook Group, that is, only the approved 15 members have online access to the specific website address (URL). Members come from Brazil, England, Germany, Kenya, USA and Zambia. The small number allows for maximum small group participation and interaction. The second Online SCC is called St. Augustine Online Small Christian Community. The third Online SCC is called St. Monica Online Small Christian Community. Each Online SCC (equals one Facebook Group) follows the same guidelines as a regular physical SCC. A summary of the plan is as follows:

Promoters of Small Christian Communities (SCCs) within the wider Catholic teaching efforts plan to use the new online resources in promoting evangelization. "This is one of our new insights and we intend to make use of it fully in accordance with Pope Benedict XVI's advice that that Church should make use of

the New Media for evangelization,” says Fr. Joseph Healey, one of the promoters of online opportunities in promoting SCCs globally. The New Media enhance the pastoral work of the Church,” adds Healey, a Maryknoll Missionary priest who has served the Catholic Church in Africa, mainly Kenya, Uganda and Tanzania in the last 42 years. The SCCs team behind the new plan hopes to establish online or Virtual SCCs globally (Njuguna, 2010).

Another example is [Our Lady of the Round Table\(OLRT\) Cyber Community](#) that is an Online Marianist Lay Community that follows the charism of the Marianist tradition. ORLT began in 2005 and presently consist of nine members (all women) who come from four continents and the following countries: Australia, Canada, France, Ireland, Kenya and the United States. They electronically post their prayers and reflections (including reflections on the Gospel of the Day following the Lectionary Cycle) five days a week. Isabella Moyer, the President of the International Organization of Marianist Lay Communities adds:

Another online community began after our 2009 international meeting in Nairobi, Kenya. The members were all participants at the meeting [all young people], and wanted to continue joining in prayer and faith sharing online. There is another online community based on the west coast of the USA. These are young Marianists who have had to move for school and work and are presently unable to be part of a `regular` community(Moyer, 2010).

We are finding an increasing number of people who are interested in joining an Online SCC for a variety of reasons: their complicated work schedules; they are unable to participate in the ordinary weekly SCCs in their parishes; they travel a great deal; they would like a more variety in the membership of their community; and they would like to focus more on a specific part of a SCC like reflecting on the Gospel in depth. Peter Kyalo, a Catholic layman in Nairobi writes: “It has been difficult for most Catholics especially those working until Saturday to participate actively in their SCCs. For instance I am a member of an SCC that meets on Wednesday and it has been difficult to participate very actively unless I have permission from my employer to be away from work. I think that the introduction of Online SCCs especially on

Facebook is the best thing that technology has facilitated and supported” (Kyalo, 2010). So an Online SCC fits these people’s needs.

At the same time that internet technologies and social networking offer great potential for SCCs, they also offer potential risks. Many young adults, for example, would rather “friend” someone on Facebook than actually engage them in a communal context. Facebook and other social networking can be very superficial and very secular. So there are potential risks and not just the rewards in these information technologies. A SCC member in Africa may feel part of the World Church when surfing the web, but does the virtual world of the internet really reflect reality?

Concerns are legitimately raised about technology. While DSL and wireless services are rapidly expanding in Africa, can Africa’s current Information Technology (IT) infrastructure support widespread internet usage across the continent particularly in rural areas. I am amazed by the rapid technological advances in the last few years. Two examples. First, Kenya, Tanzania and Uganda now have fiber optic cable (laid through the Indian Ocean to the coast of East Africa) that provides very fast internet connectivity and usage. Second, cellphones have become a normal way of life. They are the great equalizer. Towers of the Internet Service Providers (ISPs) are located everywhere even in rural areas. Millions of Africans have leapfrogged the landline generation to now do everything by cellphone. A member of our SCCs Training Team based in Nairobi rarely uses a computer. She accesses our SCCs Website through her cellphone.

A more serious problem and challenge is what type of internet training is required for older SCC members? There is a serious digital divide between the young and the old, the rich and the poor. Most SCC members in East Africa do not have a personal computer and depend on

visiting cyber cafes to get their email and surf the internet. They risk falling further behind. But the cellphone has dramatically changed our way of communicating. When my St. Kizito SCC meets on Sunday afternoon in Nairobi our chairperson will regular call members who are late or unaccounted for.

Promoting the Voices of Women, Youth and the Marginated

To attract more youth and others to SCCs we are challenged to use the [New Media](#) and social networking. *Proposition 56* of the Second African Synod states: “In a globalized world, the improved use and greater availability of the various means of social communication (visual, audio, web and print) are indispensable for the promotion of peace, justice and reconciliation in Africa” (Second African Synod, 2009, 56).

The internet is described as the great equalizer, the great leveler, democracy in action. We are finding ways of promoting more participation of women, youth and the marginated (a cover term for the poor and excluded) through our SCCs Website. One concrete way is that we are developing a [SCCs Stories Database](#) that uses the MySQL (Structured Query Language) online database management software to provide searchable, user-friendly, online access to a collection of SCC stories. These online stories give a voice to women, youth and the marginated in Africa in different ways.

Some examples of inspiring stories about women that are presently in the African Stories Database of the African Proverbs, Sayings and Stories Website (www.afriprov.org):

1. “I Am a Christian First” is Story No. 176 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

2. "Theresa's Old Plastic Armless Crucifix" is Story No. 482 in the database:

In animating the Small Christian Communities (SCCs) in Rulenge Diocese, Tanzania we used many ways of emphasizing the importance of the practical action part of the weekly Bible service. One Tuesday afternoon I participated in the Bible reflections at the home of Theresa, one of the most faithful Christians in Bukiro Village. Following the local African custom she prepared a place for us to pray together outdoors. She arranged straw mats in a circle with fresh flowers in a vase in the middle.

But Theresa was embarrassed to put her old plastic crucifix next to the flowers. The crucifix had no arms. It had probably been brought to Tanzania by a missionary many years before and passed around several families. I said to Theresa: "Don't worry, Theresa. This crucifix is fine. I'm sure it has a special meaning for us."

After one of the leaders read the Lenten Gospel there was a period of silence followed by shared reflections. Suddenly it dawned on me what that old, battered, armless crucifix was saying to our group of 15 Christians praying together. Jesus Christ was asking us to be his arms and to reach out to the poor, the needy, the sick, the suffering, the oppressed. The other Christians responded immediately to this reflection. They emphasized the importance of mutual help in the local community. One SCC member quoted one of our favorite Swahili sayings in the outstation: "Words without actions are useless."

During the last part of the Bible service we decided to help Anna, one of our neighbors who had two sick children. We gathered firewood and fetched water for the mother while she stayed at home with her children. Like Jesus we tried to be men and women for others.

3. "We Women Are Equals and Have a Voice" is Story No. 533 in the database:

Research indicates that 75% of the members of Small Christian Communities (SCCs) in Nairobi Archdiocese in Nairobi, Kenya are women. In interviews Catholic women have said: "In the hierarchical, clerical Catholic Church in Kenya we women feel at the bottom. This is reinforced by traditional African customs and traditions. But in the SCCs we feel that we women are equals and have a voice" (African Stories Database, 2010).

Given the importance of youth in the demographics of both the general population

and the Catholic population in Africa, the Second African Synod did not give enough attention to youth in Africa. A single section -- Number 27 -- in *Message of the Bishops of Africa to the People of God*— treats youth after priests, religious, lay faithful, Catholics in public life, families, women and men. It states: “You are not just the future of the Church: you are with us already in big numbers. In many countries of Africa, over 60% of the population is under 25. The ratio in the Church would not be much different.” But the message could have said much more.

Proposition 48 treats youth in a problem-centered way saying that the Synod Fathers “are deeply concerned about the plight of youth.” and proposes various recommendations. Much more could have been said about the great potential of young people in the Catholic Church and in the general society in Africa.

Since youth do not normally participate in adult SCCs in Eastern Africa, it is crucial to form specific Youth SCCs. A very good example is St. Stephen Youth Small Christian Community in St. Joseph the Worker Parish, Kangemi, Nairobi, Kenya. It meets on Sundays for announcements and planning and then choir practice with the other parish choir and on Thursdays for a variety of activities: Bible Sharing/Bible Reflection; Mass; Adoration of the Blessed Sacrament; sports like football, darts, etc.; discussion on various topics; and music, singing and dancing. This Youth SCC emphasizes social outreach. Members of St. Stephen SCC joined other youth in the parish to bring foodstuffs and other gifts to a camp of Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) outside of Nairobi.

Representatives of St. Stephen Youth SCC have presented their experiences in our SCC Class and posted material on our SCCs Website. The SCCs Website has a user friendly Search Feature. As of 2 November, 2010 21 results are found for “Youth” and 28 results are found for “Young People/Young Adults.”

One “thinking outside the box” solution is to encourage Kenyan youth to use [Sheng](#) in their meetings. Sheng, the short form of Swahili and English, is a common language of interaction among youth especially in Kenyan cities. It is a blend of Swahili, English and other local Kenyan languages such as Gikuyu, Luo, Kamba, etc. This will send a message that the Catholic Church is interested in youth and their unique world. Using Sheng can also help overcome tribalism and specific ethnic loyalties.

We all know how much young people love text messaging. Members of SCCs in Kenya can get the Daily Bible readings on their cellphones/mobile phones. You simply SMS (short for “Short Message Service”) or text the word "READING" to 3141. You get the Saint of the Day and the Daily Old Testament, New Testament and Gospel texts. This is especially helpful for SCC members who want to prepare the gospel of the following Sunday in advance. This and other methods of social networking help to get youth more involved.

We often use the word empowerment in the wrong way as in: “We need to empower the poor.” This implies that the “We” are the rich or better educated -- the givers and senders in the communications process. The poor are the less educated – the receivers in the communications process. One expatriate missionary in Kenya has insightfully pointed out that the expression “we can be the voice of the voiceless” (when the “we” are members of the Christian Churches or faith-based organizations [FBOs] or Non-Governmental Organizations [NGOs]) is often used in the wrong way too. The so-called voiceless (the marginalized, the poor, the excluded, the disfranchised, the people on the “edge”) already have a voice. Many are articulate. Many have a lot to say. But they lack the communications media to express themselves. The internet offers a unique opportunity for them to communicate and to express themselves. Grassroots people can participate in the fast growing number of websites that contain valuable SCC information. For

example, the Exodus Kutoka Network: Catholic Parishes Network in Informal Settlements, Nairobi, Kenya (www.kutokanet.com/content.html) has a special section called “Small Christian Communities (SCC) Ministry” and detailed information on many SCCs in parishes in Nairobi Archdiocese. The website also has information about pertinent radio programs on [Radio Waumini](#) and Radio Umoja.¹²

The Future is Now for SCCs in Africa

When it comes to the evolving information technology in this digital age we can adapt the popular saying to read: *the future is now for SCCs in Africa*. The SCCs Facebook Pages and Groups, Online or Virtual SCCs, online journals, SCC Courses on online learning sites, blogs, email messages, text messages on cellphones and new SCC Websites offer many opportunities for SCCs to grow and expand in Africa. Let us continue to use our creativity and imagination to encourage SCC members to actively enter into the world of the [New Media](#) in this digital age. Let us think outside the box. “To see beyond your nose” as the expression goes of Kenyan youth today. The challenge is to use the New Media or Social Media not superficially as casual online social networking, but genuinely at the service of the Word of God and proclaiming the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

NOTES

¹While most of the examples cited are from Eastern Africa, and more specifically from Kenya, I use Africa in the title because of the nature of the internet that links everyone together on the whole African continent.

²AMECEA is an acronym for "Association of Member Episcopal Conferences in Eastern Africa." 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.

³The typical Eastern African pastoral model of SCC is a parish-based, small neighbourhood faith sharing group of 15 to 20 people who meet every week in one of their homes. Ideally this is a lectionary based and family based gathering/meeting. Normally it is a Bible Service that reflects on the gospel of the following Sunday. Occasionally there is a pastoral/business meeting. SCCs are not just a program or a project, but a way of life. While this essay focuses on Eastern Africa, SCCs are important in many parts of Africa. For example, South Africa has the Lumko Institute's influential program of forming SCC leaders that is known throughout the world.

⁴The website host provides the size (storage space) of our SCCs Website that is presently five Gigabytes. This is totally separate from the Internet Service Provider (ISP) that provides the internet connectivity (that determines the speed that a person connects to our website).

⁵This research clearly indicates that the dominant model in Eastern Africa is pastoral, parish-based SCCs where SCCs are an integral part of the pastoral life, activities and structures of the outstation and parish starting from below, from the grassroots. But in other parts of the world such as Europe (examples are France and Italy) parishes are losing their membership and

influence and the new movements are emerging as a different style of participation and involvement in the Catholic Church. Many of these new movements have a small group component. For interesting Case Studies see the “Europe” section in *Small Christian Communities Today: Capturing the New Moment*, ed. Joseph Healey and Jeanne Hinton, (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 2005 and Nairobi: Paulines Publications Africa, 2006), 71-95. The “Latin America” section describes the distinctive Basic Ecclesial Communities (BECs) model of church. The “North America” section describes the use of the term Small Church Communities in the USA.

⁶Especially in rural areas SCCs are composed of members of extended families living in the same geographical location.

⁷At the AMECEA Plenary Meeting in Nairobi, Kenya in July, 1976 President Jomo Kenyatta made the now famous statement: "The Church is the conscience of society, and today a society needs a conscience. Do not be afraid to speak. If we are wrong and you keep quiet, one day you may have to answer for our mistakes." Quoted in the Kenya Bishops *Pastoral Letter* on “Family and Responsible Parenthood,” 27 April, 1979 and in *The Conscience of Society*, ed. Rodrigo Mejia (Nairobi: Paulines Publications Africa, 1995), 50.

⁸Moodle is the abbreviation for Modular Object-Oriented Dynamic Learning Environment.

⁹Compare our 417 fans and the several times weekly posts with these other “pages” followed by their “People Like This” or “Friends Like This” number of fans as of 25 November, 2010:

Small Christian Community (Hartford, Connecticut, USA): 90

Small Christian Community Connection (USA): 40

Another example is Dow (Diocese of Westminster) Smallgroups (England) that also has a blog called [a threefold cord is not easily broken](#): Faith-sharing in the Diocese of Westminster – building fellowship, forming faith.

¹⁰Many practical examples are described in the online article “Presentation/Demonstration on “The New Media: New Mode of Youth Evangelization.”

¹¹Research 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.

¹²Audio streaming allows radio programs to be broadcast on internet websites.

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