

Promoting Small Christian Communities in the Lake Zone in Western Tanzania

47 people participated in a Mwanza Metropolitan Workshop on the theme “Small Christian Communities (SCCs) Embrace the Word of God” at the St. Dominic Pastoral Centre in Mwanza, Tanzania from 19 to 22 May, 2014. Participants included representatives from the eight dioceses of the Lake Victoria Zone in northwestern Tanzania (Mwanza Archdiocese and the dioceses of Bukoba, Bunda, Geita, Kayunga, Musoma, Rulenge-Ngara and Shinyanga): one archbishop, one bishop, 11 priests, 5 religious sisters, 21 laymen and 8 laywomen.

The workshop was sponsored by the Pastoral Department of the Tanzania Episcopal Conference (TEC) and the Pastoral Department of Mwanza Archdiocese in conjunction with the Pastoral Department of the Association of Member Episcopal Conferences in Eastern Africa (AMECEA). It is the fourth of a series of SCCs Workshops in the nine AMECEA countries. This SCCs Workshop mainly in Swahili was facilitated by Bishop Method Kilaini, Father Febian Pikiti, Father Joseph Healey, MM, Sister Rita Ishengoma, STH and Father Gallus Marandu, CSSP.

In the spirit of “learning by doing” participants formed five small communities with specific Patron Saint names: St. John XXIII SCC, St. John Paul II SCC (two small communities), St. Method SCC and St. Peter SCC for two separate sessions:

- Lectionary-based faith sharing on the Gospel of the following Sunday, 25 May: Sixth Sunday of Easter (*John* 14: 15-21).
- Using the SEE – JUDGE/INTERPRET – ACT reflection method/process on challenges/problems in the general society in Tanzania (“Bribery” and “Selfishness”) and in the Catholic Church in Tanzania (“Couples Who Cannot Receive Communion Because Their Marriages Have Not Been Sacramentalized,” “Lack of Dialog and Consultation,” “Misuse of Government Privileges on Importation,” “Not Witnessing to the Truth,” “Poor Attendance at SCCs Meetings” and “Youth Not Getting Married in Church”).

Participants also met two times in small groups by diocese for discussion and planning.

The SCCs Workshop identified the following challenges for SCCs to be very effective:

- The positive action and presence of the parish priest and/or his co-workers are motivating to members of SCCs. However, in some parishes this animation is not forthcoming.
- Although men are sympathetic with the SCCs and are ready to make the needed financial contributions, they do not attend the weekly meetings.
- Most of the young men and women do not see the need to attend SCCs.
- In the cities mobility is very high due to transfers and increase of the rent of houses. This disrupts the smooth running of the SCC especially if the leaders are affected.

- Some Small Christian Communities have grown too big and the members are very reluctant to divide. This affects the good functioning of the SCCs.
- Some families have nowhere to welcome the SCC members because they live in one room or the landlord is hostile to such meetings.

Highlights of the workshop included:

- A participatory and interactive style of teaching and learning focusing on evaluation, revitalization and the joy of pastoral ministry and evangelization. This included lively songs on community and unity; *Lectio Divina* style of prayer; SCC-style masses; and learning a new vocabulary in developing SCCs as a new way of being church.
- Presentation and discussion on the historical significance of the Lake Zone. The first African Cardinal, Laurean Rugambwa, came from Bukoba. The first Tanzanian President, Servant of God Julius K. Nyerere, came from Musoma. The very beginning of SCCs in Eastern Africa (and perhaps the whole of English-speaking Africa) can be traced back to the parishes in the Luo-speaking Deanery (especially Nyarombo, Ingri, Masonga and Kowak Parishes) in North Mara in Musoma Diocese in northwestern Tanzania in 1966. During the Seminar Study Year (SSY) in Tanzania in 1969 coordinated by the Bukumbi Pastoral Institute in the then Mwanza Diocese the concept and praxis of SCCs that were then called "local Church communities" were first articulated as a pastoral priority in both rural and later urban parishes. These Tanzanian case studies and examples were first documented in articles in the journal *Service* published by the Bukumbi Pastoral Institute that is now called TAPRI (Tanzanian Pastoral and Research Institute) and is part of St. Augustine University (SAUT) with headquarters in Mwanza. In the early 1970s Tanzanian Bishop Christopher Mwoleka (who died in 2002), the Bishop of Rulenge Diocese in northwestern Tanzania, began to develop his vision and praxis of small communities based on *Bible* Sharing and practical action. He is considered the founder of SCCs in Tanzania.
- Sessions on identifying and analyzing the practical obstacles, difficulties and problems in making SCCs strong and permanent and finding concrete solutions. Some of these challenging issues are connected to money matters (including the dangers of the *michango* church); youth participation; the importance and quality use of the *Bible*; and marriage and family concerns.
- The workshop ended with a social and cultural evening together during which the five youth from Mabatini Parish in Mwanza Archdiocese together with other participants performed a humorous play (skit) on the life and activities of a typical SCC in Tanzania with its strengths and weaknesses.

In his remarks Archbishop Jude Thaddeus Ruwa'ichi, OFM Cap, the Archbishop of Mwanza Archdiocese, emphasized that four priorities in the Catholic Church in Tanzania today come together for "their opportune time" (*wakati mwafaka* in Swahili) that is like a *kairos* moment: The Word of God (*Bible*); the New Evangelization; Small Christian Communities; and the family.

The interesting historical presentation by Bishop Method Kilaini, the Auxiliary Bishop of Bukoba Diocese, provided guidance for the participants to formulate concrete resolutions for the way forward:

1. Small Christian Communities as builders of the church in the neighbourhood.

Through formation workshops for the clergy, religious and laity there is a need to emphasise that SCCs form bonds of neighborhoods of people who know one another and who relate together. As they meet regularly in different houses, the members come to know each other, enter in other peoples' lives and cultivate friendships. They form the Family of God that shares joys and sorrows, riches and worries and learn to help each other in need.

2. Small Christian Communities promote Christian life and ministries.

Participants resolved to encourage SCC members to reflect on the importance of the various SCCs ministries at the grassroots level through catechetical formation, preparation for sacraments, solidarity with others and giving witness to the Gospel of Jesus. In this way, they will be involved in the building the ecclesial community as the Family of God.

3. Small Christian Communities promote collaborative leadership from the grassroots.

It was recommended that for leadership to be more effective, we must start from the grassroots level so that the building of pastoral structures begins from the SCCs. In this way the ideas and opinions initiated in the SCCs are taken up to the parish, diocesan and national levels by their leaders and those ideas coming from the top communicate down to the members in the Small Christian Communities on the grassroots level.

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