

Urban and Rural Models of Small Christian Communities (SCCs) in Eastern Africa

By Joseph G. Healey, MM¹

I. **Introduction**

A background paper for the “International Consultation on Rediscovering Community” at Notre Dame, Indiana in the USA in December, 1991 compiled over 3,500 different names, titles, terms and expressions for Small Christian Communities (SCCs) and Basic Christian Communities (BCCs) worldwide.² The term “Small

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² Joseph Healey, “Evolving A World Church From the Bottom Up: An Analysis and Interpretation of 3,500 Different Names, Titles, Terms, Expressions, Descriptions and Meanings for and about Small Christian Communities/Basic Christian Communities in the World with 11 Case Studies From Six Continents,” Background Paper for the International Consultation on "Rediscovering Community -- International Perspectives," University of Notre Dame, South Bend, Indiana, USA, 8-

Christian Communities”³ is mainly used by the Catholic Church and many varieties of the term “small groups” and “small prayer groups” are used by the other Christian Churches. In Eastern Africa there are two distinct models or paradigms of church expressed through small communities: the Protestant/Pentecostal Model and the Catholic Model. Both models are very creative and are found in both urban and rural areas. Due to the data available this article is mainly about the Catholic experience.

II. Protestant/Pentecostal Model

There are many varieties of small groups, small prayer groups, small communities and church small groups/small group churches in the Christian Churches in Eastern Africa that can be classified as follows:

- *Bible* Study Groups, Café Churches, Fellowship Groups, House Cell Fellowships and House Churches in the Anglican (Episcopalian) Church.
- Home Group Fellowship Small Groups that operate like Fraternal Communities in the Baptist Church.

12 December, 1991, Notre Dame: Photocopied Paper, 33 pages. Sections of this paper were published in Agatha Radoli, (ed.), *How Local is the Local Church? Small Christian Communities and Church in Eastern Africa*, Eldoret: AMECEA Gaba Publications, *Spearhead* 126-128, 1993. pp. 59-103 and the *Newsletter of Latin American/North American Church Concerns (LANACC)*.

³ In Eastern Africa we capitalize the terms “Small Christian Community” (SCC), “Small Christian Communities” (SCCs) and Basic Christian Communities (BCCs) because it is a key pastoral priority in our parishes and dioceses and the official pastoral policy of the Catholic bishops.

- Small Cell Groups in the Mormon Church and Seventh Day Adventist (SDA) Church.
- Cell Churches, Cell Groups, Devotional Groups, Fellowship (called *Ushirika* in Swahili) Groups, Home Cells, Home Churches and Spiritual Growth Groups in the Pentecostal Churches.
- District Groups in the Presbyterian Church.
- Church Homes in the United Church of Christ.

The cornerstone of most of these small groups⁴ or small prayer groups is the *Bible*. Most common is weekly *Bible* Study following an organised reading and study plan. At times there is *Bible* Sharing and *Bible* Reflection. Devotional small groups are increasing. Fellowship is very important especially in the African context including emphasis on community building, singing and socialising together.

The rapid development of Evangelical and Pentecostal Churches in Africa has witnessed the growth of the cell group model. In Nairobi, Kenya they are described as “a cell group of faithful living in the same vicinity.”⁵ They evangelise the world by multiplying new groups. These small groups especially in urban areas often follow the systematic teaching plan of a dynamic pastor or charismatic leader with many printed resources and electronic resources like large video screens in the church.

⁴ A very helpful resource is the Small Groups Website that is a ministry of *Leadership Journal*. It has many Training Tools and Bible Studies. <http://www.smallgroups.com> (accessed 17 February 2015).

⁵ “Small Christian Community – a Cell Group of Faithful Living in the Same Vicinity,” *The Nairobi*, 8-14 August, 2014, p. 4.

III. **Catholic Model**

Today there are over 180,000 Small Christian Communities (SCCs) in the Catholic Church in the nine AMECEA⁶ countries in Eastern Africa. Tanzania has over 60,000 SCCs and Kenya has over 45,000 SCCs. SCCs are a “New Way of Being (Becoming) Church” and a “New Model of Church” in Eastern Africa. These SCCs “are not a movement in the Catholic Church, but the church on the move” to distinguish them from various movements like the Charismatic Movement and the Marian Movement. SCCs are not a programme or project, but a way of life. They are directly integrated into the pastoral structure and leadership of the parish. Three helpful “descriptions” gathered over the years of both urban and rural SCCs in the Catholic Church in Eastern Africa are:

- A SCC is a small neighborhood, parish-based group that is a pastoral model of church that transforms the parish into a communion of communities and an instrument of evangelization.

⁶ AMECEA is an acronym for "Association of Member Episcopal Conferences in Eastern Africa." It is a service organisation 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).

- A SCC is a small group of around 15 people who meet weekly, usually in their homes, to reflect on the *Bible* especially the Gospel of the following Sunday, and connect it to their daily lives.
- A SCC is a caring, sharing, faith-reflecting, praying and serving community in which ongoing Christian formation and pastoral outreach takes place.

IV. Historical Perspective of the Catholic Model

The very beginning of Small Christian Communities (SCCs) in the Catholic Church in Eastern Africa (and the whole of English-speaking Africa) can be traced back to the joint pastoral and missionary efforts of the American Maryknoll missionaries in three rural parishes in the Luo-speaking Deanery (Nyarombo, Ingri and Kowak Parishes) in North Mara in Musoma Diocese in northwestern Tanzania in 1966. Then these small communities spread to Masonga and Tatwe that are also Luo-speaking parishes.

The Maryknoll missionaries focused on the formation of small natural communities that were neighborhood groups of Luo-speaking people in the rural areas. By 1968 Nyarombo Parish had 28 small communities, Ingri Parish had 22 small communities and Kowak Parish had 25 small communities. As many as 80% of the local Catholics participated in these small communities.

In the late 1960s Dutch Missionary of Africa Father J. Brouwer, MAfr developed the plan of the town parish of Tabora in Tabora Archdiocese, Tanzania that had six wards. Each ward had small groups of Christians that consisted of ten to 12 families. These SCCs met regularly to pray, read the *Bible*, discuss their problems and explore how they could best live their Christian lives.

In 1969 Small Christian Communities started in St. Charles Lwanga Catholic Church, Regiment Parish in an urban area of Lusaka Archdiocese, Zambia. German

Missionary of Africa Father Andreas Edele, MAfr started SCCs in the parish through a three-year visitation of parishioners in their homes.

Thus experiences of SCCs on the grassroots existed in both rural and urban areas before the famous AMECEA Study Conference on “Planning for the [Catholic] Church in Eastern Africa in the 1980s” in Nairobi, Kenya in December, 1973. This conference stated: “We have to insist on building church life and work on Basic Christian Communities in both rural and urban areas. Church life must be based on the communities in which everyday life and work take place: those basic and manageable social groups whose members can experience real inter-personal relationships and feel a sense of communal belonging, both in living and working.”⁷ This pastoral policy was in the context of the statement: “We are convinced that in these countries of Eastern Africa it is time for the Church to become truly local, that is, self-ministering, self-propagating and self-supporting.”⁸

The AMECEA Study Conference on “Building Small Christian Communities” took place in Nairobi, Kenya in July, 1976. The key statement was: “Systematic formation of Small Christian Communities should be the key pastoral priority in the years to come in Eastern Africa.”⁹ This is the single most important statement made about SCCs.

⁷ “Guidelines for the Catholic Church in Eastern Africa in the 1980s.” *African Ecclesial Review (AFER)*, 16, No 1 & 2 (1974): 10.

⁸ “Guidelines for the Catholic Church:” 12.

⁹ AMECEA Study Conference on “Building Small Christian Communities: Conclusions.” *African Ecclesial Review (AFER)*, 18, 5 (October, 1976): 250.

V. Findings in Evaluating SCCs in the Catholic Church in Eastern Africa

Building the Church as Family of God: Evaluation of Small Christian Communities in Eastern Africa by Joseph Healey is a free online Ebook containing 633 pages as of 2 August, 2015 on the Small Christian Communities Global Collaborative Website.¹⁰ This book systematically evaluates SCCs in the Catholic Church in Eastern Africa only. A “Search” shows that the word “urban” is mentioned 71 times and the word “rural” 62 times. Some findings:

- Research on the composition and characteristics of the members of SCCs in Eastern Africa include these factors: age, cultural preferences, economic status (poor/rich), education, employment, ethnicity (one ethnic group/many), gender, geography (urban, urban/rural [called peri-urban in Zambia], rural/urban, rural), living/housing situation, marital status (single/engaged/married), political affiliation, etc. While the overwhelming majority are Catholics, there are some SCC members from other religious denominations. A major challenge is how to integrate creatively these differences.
- Depending on the location Muslims and members of African Religions living in the neighborhood also participate in these SCCs. In the neighborhood SCCs in the villages in rural areas in Eastern Africa Catholic and members of African Religions live side by side and share many aspects of everyday life. In urban areas that are predominantly Muslims tensions sometimes arise, but most people want to live peacefully together.

¹⁰ http://www.smallchristiancommunities.org/images/stories/pdf/Build_new.pdf (accessed 2 August 2015).

- Today some situations in Africa lead to the instability or even the disappearance of SCCs/BCCs. On the one hand, war and political instability force people – especially in rural areas – to leave their home or even the country. On the other hand, the situation of economic instability and poverty force people to spend most of their time searching for the basic necessities of life to survive. Then many Catholics have not enough time to participate in the SCC/BCC activities. SCCs/BCCs require a minimum of peace and stability to really be the “Church in the Neighborhood.”
- *Galatians 3:28* is rewritten in our SCCs in Kenya today to read: “There is neither Kikuyu nor Luo, there is neither Christian nor Muslim, there is neither Catholic nor Protestant, there is neither married or unmarried, there is neither rich nor poor, there is neither educated nor uneducated, there is neither city dweller nor rural dweller, there is neither Kenyan nor foreigner (expatriate), there is not male and female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus.”
- In Eastern Africa we can refer to SCCs as the homestead of God in rural areas and the household of God in urban areas. SCCs are household churches. SCCs are small households of faith.
- SCC Twinning can also take place on the local level, for example, twinning between a SCC in an urban area and a SCC in a rural area of a diocese.
- A special challenge is to respond creatively to the changing sociological patterns in the neighborhoods in urban areas in Ethiopia. A new style of SCCs is needed for Catholics who are scattered and move frequently in cities such as Addis Abba.

Ethiopian Bishop Lesanu-Chrostos Matheos states: “We have a difficulty in setting up SCCs in urban areas -- people are a minority, scattered and not neighbors.”¹¹

- On the growing challenge of how to develop SCCs in urban areas, Tanzanian Bishop Method Kilaini points out:

The challenge of Dar es Salaam Archdiocese is to unite the Catholics from all those diverse origins with different status into one cohesive church. To have these people who are uprooted from their cultural home setting and are in an anonymous milieu keep their personal respect reinforced by mutual support in doing good. To give them a new clan and a new tribe whose cohesion is based on faith, love and care. In other words, to give them an extended family in the city that they left at home in the village.¹²

- Especially in urban areas Africans of different Christian denominations and religious faiths live side by side. In the traditional African spirit of community, unity and hospitality, neighborhood Catholic SCCs are inclusive. Christians of other

¹¹ Lesanu-Chrostos Matheos’ comment during the Second Theological Colloquium on Church, Religion and Society in Africa (TCCRSA II). Theme: “The Church We Want: Theological Voices From Within and Outside the Church at the Service of Ecclesia in Africa.” Hekima College Institute of Peace Studies and International Relations. Nairobi, Kenya, 7 August, 2014.

¹² Method Kilaini. “Small Christian Communities: Sharing the Tanzania Pastoral Experience.” Mwanza: Printed Paper, 2014: 4. The Swahili version is “Jumuiya Ndogo Ndogo za Kikristo (JNNK): Uzoefu wa Kichungaji wa Tanzania.”

http://www.smallchristiancommunities.org/images/stories/pdf/small_christian.pdf

(accessed 2 August 2015).

denominations participate in the following: social activities such as the celebrations of marriages, graduations, year-end parties and national patriotic events; visiting the sick; bereavement; and outreach programmes such as community health care, visiting people with HIV/AIDS, visiting prisoners and self-help campaigns to fix up the neighborhood.

- One can expect that factors such as urbanisation and secularism/secularisation influence the changing styles and patterns of SCCs in Eastern Africa. In some parishes of the city periphery and the housing estates there is a half-developed form of SCCs that is sometimes called a “block system” or “cell system.” The geographical parish area is divided into neighbourhood areas. People of such “blocks” or “cells” meet in one of their homes, pray together, share their experiences, organise neighborly help, report to the parish council. The priests realise they need these blocks for the administration of the parish, but do not develop them further into genuine, full fledged SCCs.
- Italian missionary Father Daniel Moschetti, MCCJ’s insight is that SCCs are a fitting ecclesiology for the cities in Africa:

This leads to a measure of decentralization to neighborhood household groups. This model of being a church-community befits the human situation of the city and slum-dwellers because it creates a network of solidary and mutual trust.¹³

SCC members themselves describe how their small communities offer security and support in the midst of the unrest, crime and violence of Nairobi city life.

- An interesting example of SCCs responding to the contemporary signs of the times is the changes in the languages used in SCC Bible services and meetings due to

¹³ Daniel Moschetti. *Urban Ministry in Africa: Need for New Models*. Eldoret:

AMECEA Gaba Publications, *Spearhead* Nos. 145-147, 1997: 64.

population shifts in urban areas in Africa. Kenyan Consolata seminarian Walter Kisikwa Ingosi, IMC narrates an important Case Study involving a critical incident when two non-Gikuyu speaking families moved into an all Gikuyu speaking area of St. John the Baptist Parish in Nairobi Archdiocese. He explains how after much discussion in their meetings the St. Maria Goretti SCC members “were willing to solve it [the language issue] once and for all by allowing all their meetings to be done in Kiswahili. They acknowledged what had taken place and asked forgiveness from the two families. This was a very important decision that brought everyone home. They were able to decide themselves and join together in a way that will unite them together.”¹⁴

- There is a lot of discussion about the breakdown of the family structure in our contemporary society in Africa (and more so in western society). There are large numbers of single parent homes in urban centers like Nairobi. The husband/father is often a “missing person.”¹⁵ In the absence of men in the slums and informal settlements of many Nairobi parishes, single mothers are elected the leaders of their SCCs.
- Truly the Small Christian Communities are an important “answer” to the many questions on the New Evangelisation. We have seen it in the busy urban Kariobangi Parish in Nairobi. The very active and well organised 72 SCCs help over 75,000 Catholics in the parish. Small Christian Community was the success story for the methodology of St. Paul and our contemporary experience in Eastern Africa shows

¹⁴ Walter Ingosi. “A Challenge of Using Different Languages in a SCC.” Nairobi: Unpublished Paper, 2013: 4.

¹⁵ Healey, *Building the Church as Family of God*: 201.

we have to revive it again all over the world if we want to remain a vibrant and witnessing Church today.

Key factors in the growth of SCCs in both urban and rural areas in Eastern Africa include: Moving from inwardly looking prayer groups to authentic SCCs that are outwardly looking and mission-minded. Eastern Africa SCCs that are a pastoral, parish-based model. The importance of *Bible* Sharing/*Bible* Reflection and practical action in the life and ministry of SCCs. The active involvement and participation of lay people in this new model of church that emerges from the grassroots up. Using the Pastoral Spiral (“See,” “Judge” and “Act”) as a new paradigm for promoting justice and peace in Africa today.

Eastern Africa SCCs have develop a more inculturated model that is deeply involved in evangelisation. A key challenge is the question: “What are the different human problems in Africa that we should reflect on in our SCC meetings in the light of the Gospel?” based on St. John Paul II’s Apostolic Exhortation *The Church in Africa*, No. 89. As a new model of church, SCCs emphasise deeper biblical reflection and more regular use of the Pastoral Spiral to influence more effectively the pastoral and social life around them. As facilitators of reconciliation, justice, and peace, SCC members can be very important in the transformation of the Catholic Church in Africa and in the transformation of the religious, social, economic, political and cultural life of African society.

VI. New Directions of SCCs in Eastern Africa

An ongoing challenge of SCCs is to constantly read the signs of the times and to respond creatively to the religious, social, economic, political and cultural shifts and trends in Eastern Africa. This means strengthening the “Lights” (more emphasis

on justice and peace concerns) and correcting the “Shadows” (too many SCCs have become fund raising projects).

The vitality and growth of SCCs is seen in their new expressions. For example, in the last five years Youth Small Christian Communities (YSCCs) have developed especially in urban areas in Eastern Africa with two main types: Parish-based and school-based/campus-based (such as university students in dormitories/residence halls/hostels). Due to African cultural traditions African youth normally do not speak in public in front of adults so youth do not usually actively participate in adult SCCs in Eastern Africa. Thus it is crucial to form specific Youth SCCs that give young people a specific identity, voice and role and to encourage them to plan their own discussions, reflections and activities.

In the light of important meetings and events on family and marriage in the next few years a new challenge is how Small Christian Communities can promote Christian values in our families and marriages in Eastern Africa.

As we move into the future we continue to create the path by walking. The way forward is open-ended and exciting for the growth of SCCs. New priorities will emerge. With the help of the Holy Spirit may the Christian Churches in Eastern Africa respond boldly and creatively.

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