

Timeline of Marehemu Archbishop James Odongo's Involvement in AMECEA's Key Pastoral Priority of Small Christian Communities

By Joseph G. Healey, MM

1950s in Rome, Italy. Odongo studied philosophy and theology at Propaganda Fide College in Rome in the 1950s. In an interview he vividly described how his vision of Small Christian Communities (SCCs) began when he was a seminarian and lived at Propaganda Fide College with 350 students from 52 countries. Sometimes they formed smaller groups for prayer and socializing. Odongo experienced the value of small communities composed of people from different countries and languages and the meaning and spirit of community.

16 February, 1965 in Tororo, Uganda. Bishop James Odongo was consecrated (now the word is "ordained") a bishop and became Auxiliary Bishop of Tororo, Uganda.

14 September to 8 December, 1965 in Rome, Italy. Bishop Odongo participated in the Fourth and Last Session of the Second Vatican Council that took place in the Vatican (Rome). At the age of 34 he was among the youngest Council Fathers. In an interview Odongo vividly described where he sat in St. Peter's Basilica following the plan of seniority. On the last working day the bishops approved a total of 11 documents of the 16 official documents. From his seat in St. Peter's Odongo wrote his signature in ink that was then copied electronically and attached to all the documents. All the bishops' signatures are officially in the Vatican Archives. Odongo emphasized that all the bishops signed these documents in the spirit of collegiality and joint ownership. This also made the bishops like him responsible to implement the teaching of the documents when they returned to their home countries and dioceses. Later he wrote: "I returned to Africa with a deep impact on my life eager to share the message of the Second Vatican Council with the People of God in Tororo Diocese."

In sharing his sentiments about the Second Vatican Council, Odongo wished that the spirit of the council would be fully embraced by a majority of Catholics. "Honestly speaking, the spirit of Vatican II has not been lived fully because people have no time to read the documents. As a result, things are happening but people are not conscious that they are part of the documents," he said. "I was ordained a priest during the Vatican I period in 1956, so I lived the theology of Vatican I for priestly formation and ordination and came to Vatican II only in 1962. What I remember best is the whole process of the transition from Vatican I to Vatican II."

Odongo said that when the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* first came out he was asked by Rome as one of the Council Fathers for any amendments. He said, "I had three amendments that I sent back to Rome. When the catechism came out I noticed that they had been inserted into the document that the Catholic Church uses today." He added that the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* is a living document that transmits the life of Vatican Council even to those who never heard of it.

Although the term “Small Christian Communities (SCCs)” is not mentioned specifically in the documents of Vatican II,¹ Small Christian Communities in Eastern Africa developed as a result of putting the communion ecclesiology and teachings of Vatican II into practice. SCCs are the fruit of Vatican II Ecclesiology. Especially important are:

Lumen Gentium (Dogmatic Constitution of the Church of the Church).

Gaudium et Spes (Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World).

Ad Gentes (Decree on the Missionary Activity of the Church).

Decree on the Apostolate of the Lay People.

Small Christian Communities make real the vision of Vatican II that calls on the Catholic Church to be (shine forth as) “a people made one with the unity (brought into unity) from the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit” (No. 4 of *Lumen Gentium, Dogmatic Constitution of the Church of the Church*).

19 August, 1968 in Tororo, Uganda. On 19 August 1968, Odongo was appointed as Bishop Tororo Diocese, Uganda. As a young priest and then bishop, Odongo saw the need to unite the 11 different ethnic groups in the area. A very good pastoral method was to establish neighborhood SCCs. **NOTE:** As an interesting coincidence in August, 1968 I became the first Social Communications Secretary of AMECEA based in Nairobi, Kenya.

December, 1973 in Nairobi, Kenya. The AMECEA Study Conference on “Planning for the Church in Eastern Africa in the 1980s” in Nairobi, Kenya in December, 1973 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 interpersonal relationships and feel a sense of communal belonging, both in living and working.” 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.” Bishop Odongo was elected the first African Chairman of AMECEA, a significant honor.

July, 1976 in Nairobi, Kenya. At the AMECEA Study Conference on “Building Small Christian Communities” 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.” This is the single most important statement made about SCCs.

¹ SCCs are not specifically mentioned in the documents of the Second Vatican Council, but are clearly implied. The traditional geographical parish is considered the basic juridical unit of the Catholic Church so there is no mention of subparishes, outstations and SCCs (nothing “lower” than the parish). The same applies to the revised *1983 Code of Canon Law*. While SCCs are not specifically mentioned in the revised *1983 Code of Canon Law*, they are indirectly referred to in the section on “Structures” under the “People of God.” The Particular Churches (Local Churches) have the freedom to carry out pastoral work in parishes on the local level following their own structures and activities. This is described as the “ordering of the parish on the most local levels.”

There are now over 190,000 SCCs in Eastern Africa. Over the years the SCCs in the AMECEA Region have had a significant influence on the rest of Africa and around the world. Odongo is considered one of the founding fathers of SCCs in the AMECEA countries and promoted the importance of SCCs everywhere.

Bishop Odongo was reelected the Chairman of AMECEA. **NOTE:** In the AMECEA Office in Nairobi I worked closely with Bishop Odongo when he was chairman of AMECEA between 1973 and 1979.

1980s and 1990s in the USA. The Tororo Diocese Connection: Over the years I became good friends with diocesan priests of Tororo Diocese such as Father John Kauta and Father Joseph O'Doy. During my four years of teaching at the Maryknoll School of Theology in Maryknoll, New York, USA I was the Advisor of many Ugandan priests, some who became bishops. Since I was initiated into the Buffalo Clan of Bishop Joseph Mukwaya and given the Luganda name *Ssentamu* (that means "cooking pot"), I was always invited to participate in Ugandan National Days. Tororo Diocese had a Development Office in the State of Connecticut, USA. Odongo would occasionally come to the USA for what are called "Mission Appeals" -- preaching and fund raising in parishes on weekends. My home diocese is Baltimore Archdiocese in the state of Maryland. Once I visited St. Matthew Parish in Baltimore and the pastor said, "Oh, Bishop Odongo was here last month."

2 January, 1999 in Tororo, Uganda. Odongo became the first Archbishop of Tororo, Uganda.

27 June, 2007 in Tororo, Uganda. Odongo retired and became Archbishop Emeritus of Tororo, Uganda.

4 to 7 May, 2014 in Tororo, Uganda. 44 people participated in a Tororo Metropolitan (Ecclesiastical Province) Workshop on the theme "Building Small Christian Communities for Grassroots Evangelization in Uganda" at the Benedictine Sisters Priory and St. Peter's College in Tororo, Uganda from 4 to 7 May, 2014. Participants included representatives from two dioceses in eastern Uganda (Tororo Archdiocese and Jinja Diocese): one archbishop, 16 priests, 24 laymen (especially catechists) and 3 laywomen. In his opening remarks Archbishop Emmanuel Obbo, the Archbishop of Tororo, emphasized that "the success of SCCs will be the success of the Local Church in Africa." In expanding on SCCs as a new way of being church he said, "SCCs are not a project but a life for our Catholic people."

The workshop evaluated the development of SCCs "on the ground" in Uganda. The historical context was summarized and evaluated. The Catholic Church in Uganda really started SCCs 20 years late. Even though the AMECEA Pastoral Priority started with the 1973 and 1976 Plenaries, in a separate article Emeritus Archbishop James Odongo summarized:

By 1969 the political changes in national governments [in Uganda] made meetings difficult, almost impossible. For almost 23 years gatherings or meetings were virtually banned. The climate was too hostile for any meaningful apostolate...By the beginning of 1993, relative peace was restored in our country. Our Pastoral Council had

its first meeting in almost 20 years. We all complained that the political history of our country had hindered our own pastoral progress for almost those same 20 years.

21 February, 2015 in Tororo, Uganda. Archbishop James Odongo Celebrates His Episcopal Golden Jubilee. AMECEA was represented by the Secretary General Ferdinand Lugonzo and myself. In an exclusive interview with us he shared many stories of his life and interests including anecdotes about AMECEA and SCCs.

8 January, 2016 in Uganda. Following the death of Bishop Colin Davis, Bishop Emeritus of Ngong Diocese, Kenya in England on 8 January 2016, Archbishop Odongo became the last surviving bishop representative of the AMECEA Region at Vatican II that was held between 1962 and 1965. This was an historical moment.

4 December, 2020 in Kampala, Uganda. Archbishop James Odongo dies at the age of 89.

Our dear Marehemu Archbishop Odongo, may you rest in peace and continue to inspire SCC members to continue to grow our SCCs Model of Church in Eastern Africa.

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