

Small Christian Communities (SCCs) as Gathered and Sent: A Case Study of Two Online SCCs Courses

By Alphonse C. L. Omolo

NOTE: These two courses are part of the Loyola Institute for Ministry (LIM) of Loyola University, New Orleans, Louisiana, USA.

Overview

Perhaps, the best place to start this conversation on the experience gained from the Loyola Institute for Ministry ([LIM](#)) online course on Small Christian Communities (SCCs) is to evoke the foresight of Lee and Cowan that SCCs are *gathered* and *sent*. In their visionary book, *Gathered and Sent: The Mission of Small Church Communities Today*, Lee and Cowan (2003) elucidate that: “Our conviction rooted in both theology and sociology, that a [Small Christian] Community is both gathered and sent. As gathered, it attends to the conversation of its inner life. As sent, it carries on a conversation with the larger world beyond its immediate constituency” (pg. 31).

The SCCs gather in the spirit of mutuality to pray together, relate with one another, share the Word of God, and discern what God is asking of them as individuals and as a group. They gather to support one another in their spiritual and social journeys. Rutechura (2013) reinforces that, mutual sharing of prayer, meal (sustenance), wisdom, and nurturing of the pastoral vision in the light of the Word are the hallmarks of the life of an SCC. According to Paul the Apostle, (in *Romans* 12:5), even though there are so many of us, we make one body of Christ, and we are joined to one another. Lee and Cowan have christened this relationship, the *inner life* of an SCC. This has to do with what happens when the SCCs gather. However, in order to put their faith into action, members of the SCCs must engage with the world of which they are a part. This involves participating in the works of mercy and the works of justice beyond their memberships. Guzmán (2013), Healey (2013), and Omolo (2005) consider these outreach responses as neighborhood lay ministries and a Vatican II theology of the People of God. The members of the SCCs must recognize the fact that their communities and the broader society are the settings in which the life of an SCC happens. While putting their faith into action, they are encouraged to seek far-reaching partnerships (broad-based organizing) in their desire to evangelize the world and attain the common good. This aspect of the SCC we shall call the *public life* of an SCC.

While engaging the students (laywomen, laymen, religious, and priests) in an in-depth appraisal of the *inner* and *public* life of SCCs, the local settings of their own countries, dioceses, parishes, and SCCs become the key premise upon which learning is generated. LIM provides a conducive online opportunity for the students to explore the meaning of all these arguments and their consequences for integral human and faith development.

As a case study of an online learning platform, this paper explores the LIM’s inner life and public life of SCCs courses as a model for championing pathways for setting up and uplifting leadership capabilities in SCCs. This includes the chance to promote SCCs as a vehicle for

evangelizing parishes, their neighborhoods, and beyond. The case study includes the course experience for the academic years 2020, 2021, and 2022. The partnership between LIM and the Association of Member Episcopal Conferences in Eastern Africa ([AMECEA](#)) can be likened to the African proverb that states, “*If you want to go fast, go alone. If you want to go far, go together.*” According to Healey (2022), for any intervention to be long-term and sustaining, the participation of others in a shared vision is the best approach. Gratitude for expansive broad-based networking with several Family Foundations in the United States of America who provided the scholarship for the 29 students who have participated in the course. This case study emphasizes the cooperation, and commitments of the students, the AMECEA, LIM, and the Catholic Family Foundations that have outstandingly contributed to the success of the course. It can be confidently stated that it is now upon the represented Bishops’ Conferences or dioceses to make good use of the knowledge, tools, and skills gained by the students throughout the course.

The history of LIM, the founding of the partnership, the SCCs course contents, the selection and admission of the students, the course experience, and appraisal by the students are well-documented in the sections that follow.

Loyola Institute for Ministry (LIM)

Founded in 1968 as part of the Notre Dame Seminary in New Orleans, then moved to Loyola University in 1978, and following the call to put faith into action, Loyola Institute for Ministry (LIM) started offering online courses in 2000. In 2010, LIM’s degree [courses](#) (Bachelor of Arts in Ministry and Theology, Master of Pastoral Studies (MPS), Master of Religious Education, Certificate in Theology and Ministry, Dual MPS/Master of Business Administration, Dual MPS/Master of Science in Counselling, Dual MPS/Master of Science in Criminology, and Justice,) were fully online. The Small Christian Communities courses are offered under the Masters of Pastoral Studies degree. Thus, LIM offers graduate courses, continuing education, and advanced level certificates to meet the specific needs of its diverse community of students.

The SCCs courses prioritize the experience the students bring into the course by giving essential attention to practical theology. This involves comparing daily lived and faith experiences in the light of the Word of God in order to act effectively and faithfully in the Church and world today. Pope Francis, in his Wednesday Audience (Francis, 26 June 2019), explains that “What is extraordinary becomes ordinary, and everyday life becomes the site of the manifestation of living Christ.” The Holy Father reinforces that our communities must be places for experiencing communion, places for encountering God, places for exercising the works of solidarity, and places that are open to the heavenly Jerusalem.

The creation and the commencement of the SCCs course emerged from the LIM’s aspiration to develop and offer courses that respond to the signs of the times and are impactful in tackling the worrying needs of the world today (Loyola University, 2022). Fortunately for LIM, AMECEA (and upon its 2014 – 2024 strategic plan that prioritized training of leaders for SCCs, Chimombo et al., 2018 and Chimombo et al., 2022) was seeking ideas on how to effectively realize this strategic intervention. This case study concerns the two online modules of the Small Christian Communities courses – the *Inner life* and the *Public life* of the SCCs.

The Recruitment of the Students for the LIM SCCs Courses

The provision of the LIM SCCs course follows the decision of the Association of Member Episcopal Conferences in Eastern Africa (AMECEA) to make SCC a pastoral priority during their Plenary Meeting of 1973 in Kenya. Thus, the training and development of SCCs materials were encouraged (Chimombo et al., 2018 and Chimombo et al., 2022). Lee and Cowan (2003) explain that lay men and lay women can gain access to and make good use of essential SCCs materials without becoming theological scholars themselves. It can be emphasized that when SCCs are functional, local neighborhoods and communities, parishes, and dioceses thrive too. The availability of the LIM online SCCs course provided an opportunity to accomplish this vital objective of the AMECEA with minimal financial constraints. Fortunately for these initial pioneering moments, a couple of Catholic Family Foundations in the United States of America provided tuition fees for ten students for each course from 2020 to 2022. Additional students were recruited from the larger student family at LIM and outside the University community.

LIM's well-established distance-education delivery system and its pragmatic "*practical theology*" approach were the most fitting for the diverse categories of students from Africa and the Western world. Lee and Cowan (2003) maintain that practical theology is a theology of praxis. It provides the chance for the students to reflect on their social lives in the light of the Word of God. By so doing, their faith and social well-being is wholistically reinforced.

The students were recruited through the AMECEA Pastoral Department by means of communication to the Bishops' Conferences. Upon the local selection of a pair or more students, the potential candidates were asked to undertake a simple survey (through Google Docs) that helped to understand their capability and SCCs' background before they were given the chance and the link to apply through the LIM application systems. It was from this process that ten students were admitted to the course bearing in mind the representation in terms of their gender, laity, priests, and religious. In the academic period 2020 to 2022, twenty-nine (29) students successfully went through the course. The students were from (Ireland (1), Ethiopia (1), the USA (2), Nigeria (3), Tanzania (3), Uganda (6), and Kenya (13). The 29 students were distributed as follows: sisters (3), laymen (7), laywomen, (8), and priests (11).

Course Content

The LIM course in SCCs explores the *inner* life and the *public* life of the SCCs. Each course takes one complete semester and includes about 15 modules (depending on the designated length of the semester) delivered on a week-by-week basis. The two courses provided the students with the unique chance to integrate theological underpinnings with their lived SCCs experiences on a reflection-praxis-reflection basis. Lee and Cowan (2003) explain this as the engagement of grassroots theological reflection in conversation with the larger church's mission to discourse with God's intention for the world. Orobator (2013) and Rutechura (2013) reinforce that reflection on the Word of God in SCCs provides the premise for discussing common concerns and social action of the local faithful. According to Healey (2022), while citing the ideas of John Dewey (world-renowned American philosopher and educator) we learn from reflecting on experience. Thus, the use of challenging questions and probing deeper is key in discovering boundlessly hidden meanings.

At the end of the course, the students gained the knowledge and skills required to facilitate functional SCCs in their parishes or dioceses. The students came to the realization of how practical theology happens in the gathering and outreach experience of the SCCs (Lee and

Cowan 2003 and Healey 2022). This further confirms practical theology as an appreciated mode of conversation in the SCCs.

The *Inner Life of SCCs* explores SCCs as gathered, that is, best practices within SCCs. Course topics include communication and conversation skills in SCCs, community in church history and as mediating structure, practical theology, the churchhood of SCCs, leadership and consensus-building, lay co-responsibility, and breaking open the Word. The *Public Life of SCCs* examines SCCs as sent out into the world to announce and act on God's love, justice, and mercy. Course topics include mission, Catholic Social Teaching, faith engagement, the socio-cultural context of SCCs, challenges of SCCs, youth and young adults, breaking open the Word, significance and future of SCCs.

Course Delivery Methods

Students are engaged in a weekly discussion centered on thematic questions delivered through the Canvas platform online. To enhance the quality of these weekly student engagements, the students are subdivided into discussion groups with changing student discussion leaders. Each student is tasked to post a designated number of postings and respond to the postings and questions from their course mates and the course instructor. Such postings (of specified lengths) have to be done within a stipulated timeframe so as to allow other students the chance to read through and seek any clarification before the end of the module week.

Adequate digital learning materials are provided for each module i.e., textbooks, theological papers, audios, and videos. The students are engaged in lectionary-based *Bible* sharing through the ZOOM platform on a fortnightly basis. Such *Bible* sharing gatherings are facilitated by the students themselves in a rotational form just as it happens in their own local SCCs. Additionally, and on a fortnightly basis, the students are engaged in a spiritual formation exercise based on the tradition of Ignatian spirituality. This helps the students to develop a life of prayer and an in-depth sense of their calling in the Church. With this, LIM intends to integrate the spiritual growth of the students into their theological education. As such, their relationship with God has a great chance to invigorate their ministries. Students make informal spiritual exercises based on selected themes and *Bible* passages.

Students' internalization and comprehension of the course contents is assessed throughout the course by means of their weekly responses and two essays for each course. The essays are planned for the middle and the end of each semester. On successful performance i.e., on the graded classwork and essays, students are awarded certificates and transcripts detailing their participation and accomplishments. On requests by the student, and when required to do so, the academic transcripts can also be sent directly to any institution of higher education. To continue to the next session, students have to present proof of application of the knowledge they gathered from the initial course in their SCCs, parish, or diocese. This can be an outcome of a workshop, a talk, or training conducted to help set up, promote, and strengthen SCCs in their localities.

Model for Future Online Courses on SCCs

The LIM *Inner Life* and *Public Life* of SCC course is a success story worth replicating as an opportunity and a model to inform future courses on SCCs. The lessons from the Covid-19

Pandemic moments favorably appraise the online/virtual spaces of learning as the future ‘classrooms’ upon which courses, workshops, and conferences on SCCs in the AMECEA countries and the world over can be successfully implemented. The ‘new normal’ in this digital world is online/virtual learning. If well designed and effectively delivered, it is cost-effective in terms of resources required and limited movement of the participants to be in physical or face-to-face learning/meeting locations. In view of this, the Loyola SCCs course is a model that can be utilized by the AMECEA Pastoral Department and the AMECEA institutes of higher learning (i.e., Catholic University of Eastern Africa - [CUEA](#), AMECEA Pastoral Institute – API in Eldoret Kenya, etc.) to facilitate and coordinate online/virtual SCCs courses, training or workshops at all levels in the future.

Lessons Learned

1. Coordination of the recruitment of the candidates for admission to the LIM inner and public life of SCCs courses at the bishop’s conferences level is essential. It is important to ensure a balanced allocation of students across the conferences.
2. Some of the students nominated by the dioceses (conferences) were already too busy with their pastoral duties or ministries that it became a great challenge for them to allocate the 6 to 9 hours (required) per week for the course.
3. Some of the selected and admitted students had limited-lived experiences on SCCs. As such, they encountered significant difficulties in writing essays that prioritized the analysis of actual conditions in SCCs and their surrounding neighborhoods.
4. The students with limited SCCs lived-in experience especially from Eastern Africa easily confused the term Small Groups (commonly used in the USA in references to SCCs – Lee and Cowan 2003, Healey 2022, etc.) to mean any other small groups in their parishes including clubs, sodalities, and associations founded in their parishes with no SCCs character at all.
5. Internet limitations and instability in some of the locations in Eastern and West Africa negatively impacted the chances for the students to access study materials and deliver their course assignments in time.
6. Severe weather i.e., the frequent occurrences of storms and hurricanes (i.e., Delta, Laura, Zeta, Ida, etc.) disrupted the learning and participation of the students living in New Orleans and the wider State of Louisiana.
7. Lay students added great value to the learning by bringing in their actual and daily lived experiences in SCCs and the social conditions of their neighborhoods.
8. Working with students from diverse socio-cultural backgrounds (i.e., Eastern Africa, West Africa, United States of America, and Europe) widened the learning contexts considering the wide-ranging knowledge and lived-in experience on SCCs they brought into the course.
9. The virtual ZOOM face-to-face sessions (i.e., the fortnightly *Bible* sharing meetings) helped in cementing group dynamics, and students’ relationships in addition to inspiring their commitment and performance in the course.
10. To achieve an in-depth understanding of what SCC really is and what should happen in them, the students should complete the two courses (the *Inner Life* and the *Public Life* of SCCs) as designed by LIM.

Moving Forward

The inner and public life of SCCs is centred on concrete experience in SCCs. As such, a critical requirement for the students attending this course is a lived experience of SCCs and not a hypothetical knowledge or counterfactual reasoning about SCCs. Local (conference, dioceses, etc.) student selection mechanisms and processes need to take this into account. In addition, such selection of students needs to consider an equitable balance between the gender, religious, lay, and priests. The participation of the students from the USA and Europe makes the course a unique multicultural experience. A deliberate strategy is encouraged to attract such students to join the course.

A concerted effort is required while working on the funding so that the attendance of the students in the two courses (*Inner and Public Life of SCCs*) is assured upon their admission. In order to ensure an impactful outcome from the course, the AMECEA and other regions can set up a network of alumni students who can remain, ambassadors of the SCCs, AMECEA, and LIM in their regions and localities. Such networks and groupings can be operationalized through a clearly crafted coordination via any chosen social media (Skype, ZOOM, Google Meet, WhatsApp, etc.) platform.

Individually, the conferences should make adequate use of the graduates from the SCCs course whether lay, religious, or priests to help in the setting up and promotion of SCCs across their local parishes and dioceses. Such individuals can also form the national, diocesan, or parish teams of SCCs facilitators/trainers. It should be encouraged that each parish commits to establishing a team of SCCs facilitators/trainers to continuously build the capacity of the faithful and leaders of the SCCs from time to time. Such commitment should be accompanied by clear action plans and budgetary allocations to ensure their fulfillment. As discussed earlier, the formation and training of SCCs is one of the key priorities of the AMECEA Bishops in their 2014 – 2024 strategic plan. Thus, these online SCCs courses provide an ideal chance to put together a group of trainers to help implement this strategic commitment at different levels of the Catholic Church in Eastern Africa.

Conclusion

By means of aggressive inoculations, many nations have made great paces in mitigating the ‘fangs’ of the Covid-19 Pandemic. However, it will take more than the dynamic effort of a single nation or the cooperation of a single region to bring the world into full restoration from the Covid-19 Pandemic. The online learning platforms continue to provide valuable openings to impart and gain knowledge without, or with reduced movement to any physical location. The LIM courses (Inner and Public Life) on SCCs remain a cut above the edge in the reading and responding to the signs of the times. In the course evaluation, the students agreed in unanimity that the stated course objectives in the syllabus were effectively met, the course delivery methods stimulated critical, analytical, creative, and independent thinking among the students and the provided learning materials were adequate and beneficial.

When asked their views about the strength of the course, the students responded that it was an eye-opener into the emerging realities of SCCs. It brought out in the open plenty of limitations of awareness on what SCCs really are and what their roles and purpose should be. The course has also simplified what the leaders and members of the SCCs need to do to remain functional and relevant to the calling of synodality and subsidiarity as explained by Pope Francis (Healey 2022). The reflection-praxis-reflection approach provided the students with the premise for reflecting on the pastoral ministries they are engaged in and drawing new strategies for pastoral

care. The skills gained will be valuable in reflecting on and improving pastoral conditions in their parishes and dioceses. The students concluded that the course has provided them with new knowledge about SCCs, given them the tools and practical skills to facilitate effective functional SCCs, and nurtured in them the desire to promote the setting up and the development of SCCs in their local parishes and dioceses. Even though there was a fortnightly ZOOM video gathering for *Bible* sharing, some of the students cited the inability to have an in-person interaction with their instructor and course mates as the one thing they missed in the course. Internet connection challenges (especially for students based in rural or mountain locations) was also mentioned as another weak point, especially during the ZOOM video meetings.

The 29 students (detailed above) who have gone through this course remain a critical resource in the setting up and the promotion of SCCs in the AMECEA and the Symposium of Episcopal Conferences of Africa and Madagascar (SECAM) regions. They can be part of a network of pioneer SCCs facilitators and training teams in their regions.

The overall gap in this course is a sustainable funding strategy and strategic coordination to ensure a continuous flow of groups of students attending the course and linking their learning to their concrete local SCCs situations.

References

Chimombo, Emmanuel, Healey, J. G., Ishengoma, R., Mulenga, P. F., Musimba, R. and Omolo, L. C. A. (2018) *Strengthening the Growth of Small Christian Communities in Africa: A Training Handbook for Facilitators*: Paulines Publications Africa: Nairobi.

Chimombo, Emmanuel, Healey, J. G., Ishengoma, R., Mulenga, P. F., Musimba, R. and Omolo, L. C. A. (2022) *Kuimarisha Ukuaji wa Jumuiya Ndogo Ndogo za Kikristo Katika Afrika: Kitabu Cha Kufundishia Kwa Wawezeshaji: Chapisho la Kiswahili*: Paulines Publications Africa: Nairobi.

Francis (2019) General Audience: [papa-francesco_20190626_udienza-generale.pdf](https://www.vatican.va/holy_father/francesco/audiences-2019/20190626-udienza-generale.pdf) ([vatican.va](https://www.vatican.va)).

Guzmán, R. P. (2013) *Ecclesial Base Communities: A Look-Back and a Look Forward*: In Klaus, K., and Klaus, V. (eds) *Small Christian Communities: Fresh Stimulus for a Forward-looking Church: One World Theology, Volume 2*: Claretian Publications: Freiburg.

Healey, J. (2013) *Historical Development of the Small Christian Communities/Basic Ecclesial Communities in Africa*: In Klaus, K., and Klaus, V. (eds) *Small Christian Communities: Fresh Stimulus for a Forward-looking Church: One World Theology, Volume 2*: Claretian Publications: Freiburg.

Healey, J. G. (2012 and 2022) *Building the Church as Family of God: Evaluation of Small Christian Communities in Eastern Africa*, Eldoret: AMECEA Gaba Publications – CUEA Press Double Spearhead Nos. 199-200 (Print Version 2012 and 1st Reprint 2014). 163 pages. The Online Digital Version, regularly revised and updated from the 2012 print version, is available as a free, online Ebook containing 1,316 pages as of 7 July 2022 on the Small Christian Communities Global Collaborative Website:

<https://smallchristiancommunities.org/building-the-church-as-family-of-god-evaluation-of-small-christian-communities-in-eastern-africa-2/>

Lee, J. B. and Cowan, A. M. (2003) *Gathered and Sent: The Mission of Small Church Communities Today*: Paulist Press: New York.

Omolo, C. L. A. (2005) “Small Christian Communities Light Up Neighborhoods in Kisumu” in Joseph G. Healey and Jeanne Hinton (eds) *Small Christian Communities Today: Capturing the New Moment*: Orbis Books: New York.

Orobator, E, A. (2013) *Small Christian Communities as a New Way of Becoming Church: Practice, Progress, and Prospects*: Marquette University, Department of Theology: e-publication: https://epublications.marquette.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1509&context=theo_fac

Rutechura, P. (2013) *The Pastoral Vision of Basic Christian Communities / Ecclesial Communities*: In Klaus, K., and Klaus, V. (eds) *Small Christian Communities: Fresh Stimulus for a Forward-looking Church: One World Theology, Volume 2*: Claretian Publications: Freiburg.

Alphonse C. L. Omolo (Ph.D.)
 Adjunct Lecturer, Loyola Institute for Ministry,
 Loyola University, New Orleans, USA
 Consultant and Member of AMECEA SCCs Training Team
alphonceomolo@gmail.com
 Published: July 2022