

## **Four African Theologians Assess and Evaluate the Small Christian Communities (SCCs) Model of Church:**

### **Talk at the 2 December, 2022 Virtual Book Launch of the *Handbook of African Catholicism***

By Joseph G. Healey

Independent of my own essay on Small Christian Communities (SCCs) in Africa that is the first essay under “Formation, Education and Communication in this important *Handbook of African Catholicism*, four distinguished African theologians – two women and two men – have assessed and evaluated SCCs in their own essays. It is important that our African theologians continue to give the theological foundations of this new way of being/becoming church in Africa. Sister Josée Ngalula, RSA with roots in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) is the leading theologian of SCCs in Africa. As the only African woman on the International Theological Commission her influence is widespread. Sister Anne Arabome, SSS and Jesuit Father Agbonkhianmeghe E. Orobator, SJ with roots in Nigeria have a strong grasp of theology on the African continent. Our beloved elder Father Laurent Magesa who died earlier in 2022 had roots in Tanzania and provides the final chapter in this handbook.

#### **1. Sister Josée Ngalula: “Small Christian Communities (SCCs): Church As Communion at the Grassroots and in the Neighborhood.”**

The development of Small Christian Communities in Africa has not followed the same trajectory as in Latin America. In Africa their impetus came from pastors (including bishops and parish priests) who wanted to breathe life into African Christianity by organizing a new model of church rooted in a communion of believers at the grassroots, in the everyday life of neighborhoods. Various terms are used for these realities in Africa. In English-speaking African Catholic dioceses, they are referred to as Small Christian Communities (SCCs), Basic Christian Communities

(BCCs), Basic Ecclesial Communities (BECs), and Ecclesial Basic Communities (EBCs). French-speaking dioceses call them Communautés Ecclésiales de Base (CEBs), Communautés Ecclésiales Vivantes (CEVs), and Communautés Ecclésiales Vivantes de Base (CEVBs).

The first African intuitions of the need for these realities appeared in central and eastern Africa. In the Democratic Republic of the Congo, the Bishops' Assemblies of 1961 and 1967 opened the way for them by opting for a Christianity that would be more deeply involved in the everyday life of African Christians that gave birth to "Small Living Communities" in the neighborhoods. During the period of 1966–1969, the Tanzanian bishops opted for and initiated the creation of "Local Church Communities" in order to promote African cultural and social values under the aegis of the church.

After Pope Paul VI's appeal to African Christians to be their own missionaries and to strive for an African Christianity, some bishops in Africa became very creative in devising and promoting pastoral structures that opened new perspectives on Roman Catholic ecclesiology in Africa. Between 1970 and 1980, many archdioceses and dioceses simultaneously put in place pastoral structures that would later become the SCCs including Eldoret in Kenya, Lilongwe in Malawi, Lusaka in Zambia and Kinshasa in the DRC. At the same time, some of the episcopal conferences decided that the SCCs would become the basic pastoral unit for the Roman Catholic Church in their countries. These episcopal conferences (including the Episcopal Conference of the DRC in 1972, the Association of Member Episcopal Conferences in Eastern Africa in 1973, and the Episcopal Conferences of Uganda in 1974, Burkina Faso in 1979, and South Africa in 1978) had come to understand that church life should be based not on parish activities far from everyday life but instead on Small Local Communities where Christians can experience interpersonal relationships in the faith and feel a sense of communal belonging at the grassroots.

Everywhere the SCCs were promoted, the goal was the same: to make effective in Africa the Vatican Council's ecclesiology of communion by rooting Christianity more firmly in the everyday lives of African Christians. The first steps and the ultimate level of success of the SCCs differed from one diocese to another, even in the same country. Their success depended on the ecclesiological convictions of the pertinent bishops and priests, on the training and dynamism of

the laity and on whether there was peace in the country. It generally took many years to change the minds and lifestyles of a laity used to putting the priest and the parish or mission station at the center of their Christian lives. Through the experience of the SCCs, the lay faithful in Africa slowly began to interiorize Vatican II's valorization of the laity and of the need for every member of the laity to become personally engaged with the *Bible*. For all the dioceses that encouraged the SCCs, there was the supplementary work of training lay animators and reorganizing parishes. The new reality also implied the training of seminarians and priests in the new spirit of the SCCs so that they would understand the role of parish priest as the servant and promoter of the responsibilities of the laity.

The SCC experience has been successful in the majority of dioceses where it is present. We have now accumulated 30 to 40 years of living a new model of church characterized by:

- a communion of the faithful in their everyday lives, at the grassroots, in their neighborhoods.
- *Bible* sharing at the grassroots level.
- promotion of lay leadership and the active participation of everyone in the community
- more attention to the evangelization of living culture using the “see–discern–act” method
- a grassroots experience of ecumenism.
- valorization of women in the church.

Where the experience of the SCCs has been successful, the parish has become a communion of SCCs, in which lay initiatives and pastoral work are valorized. In addition to the classical catechetical ministry, new ministries and services suited to the needs of the church in Africa have emerged in response to various concrete needs of the community, including leadership of the SCCs, local evangelization in the neighborhood, spiritual care of the sick, the promotion of Christian marriage, counseling, local responsibility for justice and peace, ecumenical relationships, care for the poor, the extraordinary ministry of the Eucharist, the ministry of reconciliation, and the ministry of engaging in dialogue with traditional African leaders.

With the SCCs, the African church has slowly become local -- self-ministering, self-propagating, and self-supporting. Where the SCCs have worked well, bishops and priests have seen in life and not in books that they can rely on a well-trained, generous, and creative lay faithful for pastoral work. Trusting the lay faithful with implementing inculturation in ministry in the Roman Catholic Church in Africa began in the mid-1970s with the introduction by Cardinal Joseph-Albert Malula (the then archbishop of Kinshasa in the DRC) of a lay minister called a parish *mokambi*. The bishop officially appoints the *mokambi*, a true lay minister who is not part of the church hierarchy and entrusts to that person the responsibility of residing in the parish for the purpose of improving parish administration and organizing pastoral activities. The *mokambi* collaborates with a “moderator priest” whose role is to celebrate the sacraments.

The two African synods, held in 1994 and 2009, confirmed the option of the SCCs for the entire Roman Catholic Church in Africa, both as a way of living as church and as a tool for transforming society to conform to values of the kingdom of God. There are, however, at least six remaining challenges facing them.

The **first** challenge concerns whether there is still strong interest in this model of being church. In some African dioceses, SCCs are still not a priority and do not even exist at all. This is generally the result of lack of interest from bishops and priests. In many dioceses, SCCs are working very well, but there is a lack of interest from the wealthier classes and the youth, which happens where there is poor leadership because of a lack of good leadership training.

The **second** challenge is the fidelity of SCCs to their initial impulse. In some places they have been transformed into devotional groups or sodalities, instead of understanding themselves as the church at the grassroots with its foundation in sharing the Word of God and as a phenomenon that transforms believers into witnesses.

The **third** challenge is related to the economic crisis affecting some countries and churches. People who are financially pressed and who work hard all day long to survive may not have time to participate in the activities of SCCs. In addition, some priests have transformed SCCs into fundraising mechanisms for parish activities.

The **fourth** challenge concerns the stability of SCCs. Many African countries are facing violent conflicts that force people to flee from their homes, and many SCCs have seen their activities interfered with or even halted because of this violence. In some places wars have killed people and destroyed villages or parts of cities. On the other hand, camps for refugees or displaced persons have become milieus in which SCCs have been reconstituted or started from scratch. New lay ministries have begun to meet the pastoral needs existing in these camps.

The **fifth** challenge is the presence of thousands of new religious movements in Africa that promise rapid solutions to life's problems if only people pray and accept Jesus Christ as their savior. Many people have been attracted by these movements, causing some Catholics to abandon their SCCs and parishes for what they see as an opportunity to better their economic circumstances through following the prosperity gospel.

Finally, the **sixth** challenge is the persistence of a mentality of clericalism, despite the theology that emanated from the council. Decades after the conclusion of the council, there are still clerics in the Roman Catholic Church who believe themselves superior to the lay faithful. For this reason, they do not have a deep understanding of the theological importance of SCCs; they do not appreciate the new lay ministries; and they keep alive some of the structures of the church that discriminate against women. They live in permanent tension with laity in their parishes, tension that sometimes even erupts in violence.

In response to these challenges, the Roman Catholic Church in Africa is urged not only to support and improve the training of both clerics and lay faithful in theology and leadership, but also to be actively involved in issues of justice and peace and in attempts to ensure that Africans can achieve a minimum level of well-being. These commitments would positively impact the evolution of SCCs in Africa.

## **2. Anne Arabome and Agbonkhanmeghe E. Orobator: "Small Christian Communities: Places of Reconciliation, Justice and Peace."**

In the 1970s the Association of Member Episcopal Conferences in Eastern Africa (AMECEA), which consists of the national episcopal conferences of the nine English-speaking countries of Eastern Africa, adopted Small Christian Communities (SCCs) as a pastoral strategy for advancing the mission of evangelization. In 2002 the AMECEA bishops “renewed their confidence in SCCs and gave to them an indispensable role in the new and deeper evangelization of Africa.” The origin, development and practice of SCCs drew inspiration from the emphasis on the Local Church prevalent in the Second Vatican Council documents. We concur with Albert de Jong’s assessment that “the rediscovery of the Local Church in the ecclesiology of Vatican II exercised a strong influence on the Young Churches of Africa. These Young Churches of Africa were moving out of the missionary period and engaged in finding their own ecclesial identity as Local Churches within the universal Church.” In the understanding of the AMECEA bishops, “SCCs were meant to be cells where the Christian faith would be intensely lived and shared. They were in fact seen as the ecclesiastical extension of the African extended family or clan.” Understood in this sense, SCCs have emerged and flourished as the most concrete and visible manifestation of the church in its local context, especially in Eastern Africa. According to Joseph Healey, whose authority on the theology of SCCs is considerable, there are 190,000 SCCs in the AMECEA countries; in Kenya alone, there are 45,000.

Seen in some places as the “church in the neighborhood,” SCCs embody and fulfill the ecclesiology of the Local Church following Vatican II, in particular the understanding that the “Church of Christ is really present in all legitimately organized groups of the faithful, in so far as they are united to their pastors and are also quite appropriately called Churches in the New Testament” (*Lumen Gentium* §131). The Second African Synod recognized the importance of such communities in shaping “Christian conscience” and advancing “the struggle for justice and peace” (AM §131). One of the propositions of the synod explicitly states that SCCs are “a place for concretely living out reconciliation, justice and peace.” In the wake of the Second African Synod, the ecclesiological import of SCCs can be viewed in a variety of ways. The assessment of theologians is generally positive, especially when SCCs are seen as “today’s new way of being church from the bottom up” and a “church on the move” under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. **Yet the successes of SCCs cannot mask their shortcomings, including the clericalist control**

**often imposed on them, their patriarchal leadership even when the majority of members are women, and the near-total absence of youth participation.”**

### **3. Laurenti Magesa: “African Theological Imagination: Social and Ecclesiastical Structures.”**

The theological importance of the local Christian community in its basic, parish, or diocesan forms, must not be allowed to continue to play second fiddle to that of the church’s leadership, specifically the clergy. The principle of subsidiarity must be upheld. The constitution of the church needs to reemphasize the ecclesiological validity of the Basic Christian Communities, what the *New Testament* characterizes as “household” churches.

For African peoples the human wholeness produced by authentic community and communion, harmony, cooperation, sharing, and participation is not merely something sociological; it is a deep spiritual need. Structures of the future church in Africa must take the need for this wholeness into account more earnestly than before. The ecclesiastical institution of Small or Basic Christian Communities that is emerging all across the continent is trying to address this need. It would seem that church communities that facilitate mutual contact and personal knowledge among the faithful of a given locality are the promise of a desirable African future church.

I conclude with a key point echoed by many African theologians. In the emerging Synodal Church in Africa, Small or Basic Christian Communities as a Pastoral Model of Church are an important official, pastoral, ecclesial structure on the local level.

Rev.  
Maryknoll

Joseph

G.

Healey,

MM  
Society

P.O. Box 43058  
00100 Nairobi, Kenya  
254 0723-362-993 (Safaricom, Kenya)  
+ 1 973-216-4997 (AT&T, USA)  
Email: [JoeHealey@jghealey.com](mailto:JoeHealey@jghealey.com)  
WhatsApp: 1+ 973-216-4997  
Skype: joseph-healey  
Zoom Personal Meeting ID (PMI): 719-876-1799

Nairobi, Kenya  
2 December, 2022

Joseph Healey, “Small Christian Communities in Africa: Histories, Themes, Development and Challenges,” in Stan Ilo, (ed.), *Handbook of African Catholicism*, Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2022.

An essay that treats:

1. Historical Development of Small Christian Communities/Basic Ecclesial Communities in Africa.
2. Themes of Small Christian Communities in Africa.
  - a. Relationships and Community
  - b. Biblical
  - c. Ecclesiastical
  - d. Pastoral
  - e. Contextual
  - f. Synodality
  - g. Mission
3. Development of Small Christian Communities in Africa.
4. Challenges of Small Christian Communities in Africa.



## 5. Bibliography

This SCCs material has been published in different forms online and in different books and journals. This particular version contains material from 25 African countries. Available in different online versions and titles such as:

Small Christian Communities Global Collaborative Website, retrieved on 3 December, 2022,  
[https://smallchristiancommunities.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/scc\\_histories\\_themes.pdf](https://smallchristiancommunities.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/scc_histories_themes.pdf)