

**Workshop on “Celebrating the Golden Jubilee Year of Small Christian Communities (SCCs): 50 Years (1973 to 2023) from July, 2023 to July, 2024”  
Lilongwe, Malawi  
21 August, 2023**

**Bishop Patrick Kalilombe and the Lilongwe Diocese, Malawi Mini Synod in 1973-75: One of the Foundations of the AMECEA<sup>1</sup> Small Christian Communities (SCCs) Pastoral Priority Leading Up to the Two “Synod on Synodality” Sessions in 2023 and 2024**

By Joseph G. Healey, MM

Good morning. As I travel around the world I always introduce myself by saying: “I am Joe Healey. I am a member of the St. Isidore of Seville International Online Skype Small Christian Communities. I am a student, a learner.” As we gather here in Malawi to celebrate the Golden Jubilee of SCCs, do we remember our history? I invite you to use your imagination and creativity to go back in time 51 years to follow this specific Timeline:<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>[AMECEA](#) is an acronym for "Association of Member Episcopal Conferences in Eastern Africa." It is a service organization for the [Catholic] 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 Associations/Conferences of [SECAM](#) (Symposium of Episcopal Conferences of Africa and Madagascar).

<sup>2</sup> All this historical material can be found in Joseph Healey, *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 1,452 pages as of 31 August 2023 on the Small Christian Communities Global Collaborative Website: [https://smallchristiancommunities.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/Build\\_new.pdf](https://smallchristiancommunities.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/Build_new.pdf)

This online book is also available as a Print on Demand (POD) paperback in two volumes on Amazon. From the original 163 pages paperback in 2012 10 pages are added every two months to the online version and has now reached 1,452 pages. The book carefully documents developments in the SCC Model of Church including new SCC activities, Case Studies and events. Our evaluation and assessment style is ongoing. The book has elements of an accurate “critical history” and “critical theology” that tries to document and analyze certain priorities and trends over a 60 year period (from the first session of Vatican II in 1962 to the present). We apply the 25 year window that historians use.

**1972:** Malawian Missionary of Africa Bishop Patrick Augustine Kalilombe, MAfr is installed as the Bishop of Lilongwe Diocese, Malawi on 22 May, 1972. He was originally from Dedza Diocese where we celebrated the Golden Jubilee of Small Christian Communities (SCCs) on Saturday.

Already Kalilombe had a vision of a new model of church and was a great visionary of SCCs. He was well aware of the historic [Second Vatican Council](#) (1962-65). 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, chapels and SCCs, that is, nothing “smaller” or “lower” than the parish. The same applies to the revised *1983 Code of Canon Law*. While SCCs are not specifically mentioned in the code, they are indirectly referred to in the section on “Structures” under the “People of God.” The Particular Churches (now called 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.”

One of these ecclesial structures is SCCs. In the SCCs Model of Church in Eastern Africa (the nine AMECEA countries) the SCC is an official, ecclesial, pastoral structure in the parish.<sup>3</sup> The SCCs officially participate in the parish leadership structures. Each SCC (or a group

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<sup>3</sup> Democratic Republic of the Congo theologian Sister Josée Ngalula, RSA, the only African women on the International Theological Commission, has best articulated the importance of the ecclesial pastoral “structure” of Small Christian Communities (SCCs) on the grassroots level in Africa.

In a Webinar on "Synodality in Africa" on 18 November, 2021 Ngalula emphasized the importance of the ecclesial pastoral “structure” of Small Christian Communities (SCCs) on the grassroots level in Africa. We have to use and consolidate this basic structure to help us listen to the People of God especially laymen and lay women. SCCs is an ecclesial model of the Catholic Church in Africa. The new language is spiritual conversation, mutual listening and prayerful discernment. SCCs represent the spirit of synodality and the synodal process.

She further states:

Unfortunately there are still priests and bishops who do not understand the originality of Basic Christian Communities (BCCs) [the other name for SCCs in Africa]. Instead they take them for parish extensions in the villages or for devotional groups, and they take the BCC animators for catechists. This is also due to the fact that in many African faculties of theology, there is no course on BCCs and their ecclesiology. The clergy and the bishops of the new generation have to be empowered theologically and to embrace the theology of BCCs and the important role of the laity.

Ngalula in Marko Moerschbacher, (ed.), *Proceedings of the International Symposium on In the World of Today? The Church on Her Way in Basic Christian Communities*, Tuebingen, Germany, 17-20 January, 2012, posted on the University of Tübingen Website at

of SCCs) has a representative on the Outstation, Subparish or Parish Pastoral Council. Elections start at the level of SCCs and move upwards. This insures that the Parish Pastoral Council leaders are chosen from those lay people who are already leaders in their SCCs – thus true representation from below.

Small Christian Communities developed as a result of putting the communion ecclesiology and teachings of Vatican II into practice.<sup>4</sup> 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 (Light to the Nations), Dogmatic Constitution of the Church*).

The founding fathers<sup>5</sup> of AMECEA had a vision of implementing Vatican II’s ecclesiology of communion in Eastern Africa that focuses on the communion (*koinonia*) and service (*diakonia*) aspects.

Kalilombe understood the cultural importance of *Mphakati/Miphakati* (the Chewa, Malawi word for “small family” or “in the midst of/among the people”– referring to the wider

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<http://www.uni-tuebingen.de/en/faculties/catholic-theology/lehrstuehle/religionspaedagogik/basisgemeinden-symposium/presentationen-der-vortraege.html>, p. 5.

<sup>4</sup> Filipino laywoman Estela Padilla, a Manila-based theologian who is a consultant to the Basic Ecclesial Communities (BEC) of the Catholic Bishops’ Conference of the Philippines (CBCP) and executive secretary of the FABC's Office for Doctrinal Concerns, is one of the delegates from Asia going to the synod. Padilla says: “The BECs, especially among the poor, carry the voice of faith during daily life struggles. From Asian Churches, I hear the voice of the minority and diversity. These voices influence our practice of communal theologizing at the Office for Theological Concerns in FABC. These experiences have prepared me to participate in the dialogue, communal discernment, and decision-making that will happen at the Synod.” See *Santosh Digal*, 'My Experience with Filipino Basic Ecclesial Communities at the Synod', PIME AsiaNews, retrieved on PIME AsiaNews Website on 27 August, 2023, [ECCLESIA IN ASIA Estela Padilla: 'My Experience with Filipino Basic Ecclesial Communities at the Synod' \(asianews.it\)](http://www.asianews.it)

Padilla has carried out very interesting research on “BECs in Africa, Latin America and Asia and their Reception of Vatican 2.” Similar surveys compare and contrast the Pastoral SCCs Model of Eastern Africa with the Social Action BEC Model of Latin America and the Philippines.

<sup>5</sup> The other main bishop founding father of SCCs in Eastern Africa is Bishop Christopher Mwoleka, the Bishop of Rulenge Diocese, Tanzania. Tanzania was the leading country in Eastern Africa to implement the Second Vatican Council on the local level. 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 priority in both rural and urban parishes.

family but smaller than a clan) and how they could be inculturated into Catholic pastoral practice. He envisioned these neighborhood communities as being responsible for Christian formation and helping to raise children in the Catholic faith. Being a biblical scholar Kalilombe valued reading and reflecting on the *Bible*. So in 1972 after he became a bishop he encouraged these neighborhood Catholic Small Family Communities to regularly reflect on the Gospel. So SCCs were born in Malawi and *Mphakati* became the common name. Kalilombe also hoped these SCCs would become neighborhood Small Eucharistic Communities where the Eucharist would be celebrated on the grassroots level on a regular basis.<sup>6</sup>

**1973:** Bishop Patrick Kalilombe, convoked a Mini-Synod<sup>7</sup> in Lilongwe, Malawi from 24 November, 1973 to 24 August, 1975, a period of 1 and ¾ years. The theme of this first historic synod in Lilongwe was “The Need For Active Participation of the Laity” (“*Mpingo Ndife Tonse*” in Chewa, the national Malawian language). Kalilombe was the first bishop in Eastern Africa to start a diocesan pastoral plan of Small Christian Communities on the grassroots level. This is significant in our SCCs history.

His “Biography” states:

In 1973 he wrote his first Pastoral Letter for Lilongwe Diocese entitled *Christ’s Church in Lilongwe, Today and Tomorrow: Our Diocesan Pastoral Planning Project*. The letter focused on building a self-reliant church. His intention was to build Lilongwe Diocese into a church that is self-ministering, self-supporting and self-propagating. To materialize this vision Bishop Kalilombe

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<sup>6</sup> This has not happened because of the lack of male, celibate Catholic priests in Africa. This is called the Eucharistic Famine and the Eucharistic Hunger and will be discerned at the October 2023 and 2024 Sessions of the Synod on Synodality.

<sup>7</sup> A complete report on this Mini-Synod is found in the CUEA Master’s Thesis by Vincent Fredrick Mwakhwawa: *Improving Participation of the Laity in Small Christian Communities: a Pastoral Challenge in the Archdiocese of Lilongwe, Malawi*. Small Christian Communities Global Collaborative Website retrieved on 8 August, 2023, <https://smallchristiancommunities.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/05/vincent.pdf>

**INTERACTIVE QUESTION:** As part of the Synodal Process I suggest that we have a minute of silence and ask the Holy Spirit what the Holy Spirit is saying to our workshop today. ONE MINUTE OF SILENCE. Now I ask everyone participating in this workshop to celebrate Golden Jubilee of SCCs here in Malawi: How many of you have heard of this important thesis of Father Vincent? How many have read it? How many have used it in your pastoral ministry? We have many wonderful online SCCs resources, but do we know about them? Do we use them? Now share with the person sitting next to you in buzz groups of two people. ONE MINUTE OF SHARING. See the Ebooks Section of the Small Christian Communities (SCCs) Global Collaborative Website <https://www.smallchristiancommunities.org>

called upon all the laity to be actively involved in the whole life and mission of the church. He thought that this would be possible if there could be small communities<sup>8</sup> in various places where ideas of how to improve and develop the church could be suggested and implemented at a higher level. Such small communities were to be called *Miphakati* in Chewa (“Small Christian Communities”). Consequently a Mini-Synod was called where such ideas were to be discussed by the Christians at all levels; diocese, deanery, parish, outstation and Small Christian Communities. The bishop had in mind that if *Miphakati* would be established, discussions would not only be spiritual but also involve the integral life of a human being such as socio-political aspects of life involving human rights, justice and peace, education and health, employment in line with its conditions and public morality.<sup>9</sup>

The Pastoral Letter introduced the Mini-Synod that had five sessions that laid down the “Guidelines” and “Regulations” for the running of the church life and activities at the Small Christian Communities (*Miphakati*) level.

Todd Stratham states:

Already in his first pastoral letter as bishop, Kalilombe called on the laity to take their rightful place in the Catholic Church’s life and mission, advocating for the establishment of small groups (*Miphakati*) of the faithful who could consider together how to improve the Church’s life and ministry, and work together to promote education, health, justice and general well-being in their communities. In this Kalilombe was a leading African advocate of the ecclesiological model of “Small Christian Communities” (SCCs) or “Basic

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<sup>8</sup> There is a important difference between Small Communities, or more specifically Small Christian Communities, and Small Groups. “Small Group” is very popular term in the USA and can also refer to including a whole variety of secular social services, activities and clubs such as aerobics club, book club, bowling club, bridge club, cooking club, discussion group, gardening club, knitting club, etc. that could also be provided by a local Community Center, Senior Citizens Center and Retirement Home. In Eastern Africa we feel that the word “Christian” gives the small community a specific identity and focus and the word “Community” gives the African cultural context and value.

In Eastern Africa we capitalize the terms “Small Christian Community” (SCC) and “Small Christian Communities” (SCCs) because it is a key pastoral priority in our Catholic parishes and dioceses, the official pastoral policy of the Catholic bishops, an ecclesial model of the Catholic Church and an official ecclesial structure of the Catholic Church in Eastern Africa (AMECEA countries).

<sup>9</sup> “Biography of Bishop Patrick Kalilombe, Missionaries of Africa (MAfr),” Episcopal Conference of Malawi Website, retrieved on 22 August, 2023, <https://www.ecmmw.org/new>

Ecclesial Communities” that was an idea widespread in many Majority World Catholic churches in the wake of the Second Vatican Council’s discovery of the “theology of the laity.” As a complement to traditional parish ministry, SCCs sought to be authentic incarnations of the gospel at the local level, whereby the gospel would be inculturated in the social, cultural, and religious life of the people.<sup>10</sup>

The Catholic Church historian Tanzanian Bishop Method Kilaini insightfully points out the SCCs link to the African Bantu philosophy and practice of family and clan (*ubuntu* that has its origin in the Bantu languages of southern Africa such as Zulu) in the two bishop founders of the AMECEA Pastoral Priority of SCCs: Bishop Patrick Kalilombe, MAfr, the Bishop of Lilongwe Diocese in Malawi who died in 2012 and Bishop Christopher Mwoleka, the Bishop of Rulenge Diocese in Tanzania who died in 2002.

Both Kalilombe’s home language and culture of Chewa in Lilongwe, Malawi (and neighboring dioceses) and Mwoleka’s home language and culture of Haya in Bukoba, Tanzania (and neighboring dioceses) reflect the African Bantu cultural values of family and clan upon which the SCCs Model of Church is built. Perhaps this connection to Bantu languages and culture is the key to understanding why in English-speaking Africa SCCs started in the AMECEA Region, the countries in Eastern Africa originally connected to the British Commonwealth/Empire such as Malawi and Tanzania. This “Bantu connection” is very different from some of the languages and cultures of English-speaking West Africa such as in Ghana and Nigeria.<sup>11</sup>

Our historical research is very enlightening. It shows that already in the original five AMECEA countries – Kenya, Malawi, Tanzania, Uganda and Zambia – experiences of SCCs on the grassroots existed in both rural and urban areas before the famous AMECEA Study Conference on “Planning for the Church in Eastern Africa in the 1980s” in Nairobi, Kenya in December, 1973.<sup>12</sup> Case Studies are found in Healey, *Building the Church as Family of God*.

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<sup>10</sup> Todd Stratham, “Kalilombe, Patrick,” *Dictionary of African Christian Bibliography* retrieved on the Dictionary of African Christian Bibliography Website on 4 July, 2023, <https://dacb.org/stories/malawi/kalilombe-patrick> Written from the viewpoint of a Protestant academic, it does not mention Kalilombe’s contribution to AMECEA.

<sup>11</sup> More research needs to be done on English-speaking West Africa.

<sup>12</sup> Bishop (later Archbishop) James Odongo was the chairman of AMECEA between 1973 and 1979 when SCCs were established as the key pastoral priority. See Joseph Healey, “A Journey with Archbishop James Odongo: Celebrating Our Living AMECEA History,” *CANAA Online Newsletter*, 29 January, 2015, retrieved on 31 January, 2015, <http://www.canaafrica.org/index.php/home/16-latestnews/175ugandan-retired-archbishop-to-celebrate-his-episcopal-golde-jubilee>

The AMECEA Bishops were known for being pastoral minded and interested in grassroots evangelization.<sup>13</sup> So they had a pastoral sense and concrete pastoral priorities as they entered this meeting in 1973 to plan for the future.

**1973:** The AMECEA Study Conference in Nairobi, Kenya from 14 – 21 December, 1973 on the theme “Planning for the Church in Eastern Africa in the 1980s”.<sup>14</sup>

This AMECEA 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,<sup>15</sup> 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.”<sup>16</sup>

Kalilombe gave a Keynote Address on “The Theme’s Biblical Background.” It is significant that he, as a Biblical Scholar and teacher (not a Dogmatic or Systematic Theologian),

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and the *AMECEA Online Newsletter*, Issue 078 (January 30, 2015), retrieved on 31 January, 2015, [http://amecea.blogspot.com/2015/01/amecea-journey-with-archbishop-james.html?utm\\_source=AMECEA+Joseph+Newsletter&utm\\_campaign=92ea633749-AMECEA+Online+Newsletter+6+5+2013&utm\\_medium=email&utm\\_term=0\\_85fa866553-92ea633749-6746297](http://amecea.blogspot.com/2015/01/amecea-journey-with-archbishop-james.html?utm_source=AMECEA+Joseph+Newsletter&utm_campaign=92ea633749-AMECEA+Online+Newsletter+6+5+2013&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_85fa866553-92ea633749-6746297)

Also as “Celebrating Our Living AMECEA History” in Emeritus Archbishop of Tororo James Odongo, *50 Episcopal Golden Jubilee 1965-2015 – February 21, 2015*, Kampala, Uganda, 2015.

<sup>13</sup> A concrete example is when the then Tanzanian Bishop Anthony Mayala made a Pastoral Visitation to Iramba Parish in Musoma, Tanzania where I was pastor. He spent five full days celebrating Mass at the main parish center and the four sub-parishes on consecutive days with three days for Confirmations. He met with the Iramba Parish Pastoral Council and participated in one SCC gathering.

<sup>14</sup> “Guidelines for the Catholic Church in Eastern Africa in the 1980s,” *African Ecclesial Review (AFER)*, Vol. 16, No 1 & 2 (1974).

<sup>15</sup> Ugandan Archbishop John Baptist Odama of Gulu Archdiocese points out that the SCCs pastoral priority and SCCs model of church is founded on African cultural values of community and family. He uses the example of Africans building their houses in a circular or round shape. Then the people sit in a circle inside the house so that everyone can see each other’s faces. Sharing is easier. This promotes community spirit and values. In their weekly gatherings SCC members sit in a circle and share their reflections on the Gospel of the following Sunday. John Baptist Odama, “Talk at the Opening of the SCCs Training the Trainers Workshop For Those Serving in Refugees Ministry,” Lodonga Spiritual Center, Arua, Uganda, 10 August, 2018.

<sup>16</sup> “Guidelines,” pp. 9-10.

gave the foundational keynote speeches at two consecutive AMECEA Plenary Meetings. This emphasizes that the *Bible* is at center of the SCCs Model of Church.

Looking back we see the importance of putting into practice the challenge of Kalilombe. During this 1973 AMECEA Meeting he said that “*every* bishop,<sup>17</sup> priest, brother, and sister (and as a corollary, every Catholic) should participate in a particular SCC – not as a leader, but as an ordinary member.”<sup>18</sup> This reinforces a key priority that ecclesologically all Catholics (priests, religious and lay people) participate in this new way of being/becoming church. Everyone by his or her Baptism is a potential SCC member.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> It is often said that bishops are too busy, that they have no time to be with the local lay people, but consider this: There are 168 hours in a week (7 x 24). Participating in a one and one-half hour weekly meeting of a SCC as an ordinary member (with no leadership role) is only 0.89% (less than 1%) of the week. This is a unique opportunity for a bishop to visit the homes of African families and share their lives from the inside.

Tanzanian Bishop Method Kilaini described his participation as a simple member of a SCC in St. Peter’s Parish in Dar es Salaam Archdiocese, Tanzania: “This makes me feel at home in my home surroundings with my neighbors whom I would have otherwise not known. Through them I feel part of the local community. Each week I attend the meetings and participate in all the tasks.” He shocked some Catholics when he joined his SCC members to sweep the church when it was their responsibility. In Rita Ishengoma, *Akamwani: The Challenges of Bible Sharing in Small Christian Communities*, Dar es Salaam: Old East Africa Ltd, 2009, p. 7. After moving to Bukoba Diocese Kilaini is a member of his local SCC that consists of the priests and sisters living on the bishop’s compound. He says in an email message dated 12 May, 2014: “I love and believe in Small Christian Communities.”

During a Sunday Homily at Holy Cross Parish, Dandora, Nairobi on 16 September, 2018 Bishop John Oballa Owaa of Ngong Diocese, Kenya described his personal membership in St. Augustine SCC. He surprised, even shocked, the congregation when he said that he sweeps the church with his SCC members when it is their turn. He quoted St. Augustine: “For you I am a bishop; but with you I am a Christian. The former is a duty; the latter a grace.”

<sup>18</sup> See South Sudanese Bishop Paride Taban’s “Holy Trinity Peace Village” in Torit Diocese, South Sudan, a communal Christian experiment dedicated to reconciling local peoples across ethnic and religious lines.

<sup>19</sup> There is a significant connection to Pope Francis’ emphasis during the 2021--2024 Synodal Process that by virtue of one’s baptism everyone is a missionary disciple. This is part of the shift from a Clerical Church based on the sacrament of ordination to a People of God Church based on the sacrament of baptism. The increased participation of the laity is necessary and promoted, not because of the shortage of priests, but because of the laity’s rights and responsibilities in ministry in the Catholic Church today through baptism.

**INTERACTIVE QUESTION:** As part of the Synodal Process I suggest that we have a minute of silence and ask the Holy Spirit what the Holy Spirit is saying to our workshop today. ONE MINUTE OF SILENCE. I ask everyone participating in this workshop to celebrate Golden Jubilee of SCCs here in Malawi: Are you a regular member of a SCC that meets weekly either in person, online or hybrid? Now share this information with the person sitting next to you in buzz groups of two people. ONE MINUTE OF SHARING.

At this conference Bishop Raphael Ndingi Mwana a’Nzeki of Nakuru Diocese, Kenya presented a sound-slide show on “Planning for the Church in Eastern Africa in the 1980s.” Two sections were on “Church as Community” and “Biblical Background.” In the script the two slides on Christian Community had this commentary:

Our objective is to develop more Basic Christian Communities. To achieve this in Eastern Africa we have to take into account the existence of many other Christian Churches, other communities, religious organizations. African Independent Churches and [African] traditional religions.<sup>20</sup>

**1974:** World Synod of Bishops Fourth Ordinary General Assembly in Rome in October, 1974 on the theme *On Evangelization in the Modern World*. During the synod itself the seven AMECEA Delegates divided the major themes with Kalilombe being responsible for “Basic Christian Communities.”

At this October, 1974 World Synod in Rome Tanzanian Bishop James Sangu of Mbeya Diocese, Tanzania (who died in 1998) was a General Relator. He presented the report on the continent of Africa called “Report on the Experiences of the Church in the Work of Evangelization in Africa” that was compiled from the answers to the questions of the *Lineamenta* (the Latin word for “Outlines” – the first document in the process of a gathering such as a synod) from the African National and Regional Episcopal Conferences. In Sangu’s report Section V on “Communication of Experiences of Evangelization” treats the 12 subjects related to evangelization in the second document, the *Instrumentum Laboris* (the Latin word for “Working Document”), but states: “The order of subjects has been changed to state better the priorities and concerns of evangelization in Africa.”<sup>21</sup> After No. 1 (“Interior Life”) and ahead of No. 3 (“Liturgical Renewal”) and No. 4 (“Young Churches”), No. 2 on “Small Communities” stated:

The Church in Africa strongly emphasizes the creation of Small Local Christian Communities (SLCCs). Church life must be based on the communities

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<sup>20</sup> Raphael Ndingi Mwana a’Nzeki, “Planning for the Church in Eastern Africa in the 1980s,” Text of Sound-Slide Show,” Nairobi: AMECEA Office, Privately Printed, 16 December, 1973.

<sup>21</sup> James Sangu, “Report on the Experiences of the Church in the Work of Evangelization in Africa,” Fourth Synod of Bishops on “On Evangelization in the Modern World,” in Raymond Hickey (ed.), *Modern Missionary Documents and Africa*, Dublin: Dominican Publications, 1982, p. 215. Also published in the *AMECEA Documentation Service*.

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.<sup>22</sup> Christian communities at this level will be best suited to develop real intense vitality and become effective witnesses in their natural environment. In such authentic communities it will be easier to develop a sense of community whereby the church can exist in Christ's Body, consisting of many parts (clergy, religious, laity) with many charisms, but making one Body in one Spirit.<sup>23</sup>

African bishops present at this World Synod of Bishops, after examining the specifically African problems related to evangelization, published a famous "Declaration of the Bishops of Africa and Madagascar Present at the Fourth Synod of Bishops on Communion and Co-responsibility in the Church." The section on "Living Christian Communities" stated.

In the spirit of ecclesial communion so clearly proclaimed by Vatican II, the Bishops of Africa and Madagascar emphasize the essential and fundamental role of Living Christian Communities (LCCs): priests, religious and laity united in mind and action with their bishop. It is the clear task of these communities, rooted and integrated as they are in the life of their peoples, to search deeper into the Gospel, to set the priorities of pastoral planning and activity, to take the initiative called for by the mission of the Church, to discern, in a spirit of faith where there can be continuity between culture and Christian life and where cleavage is necessary in all aspects of life that hinder the penetration of the Gospel. Every activity in the process of building up our churches must operate in constant reference to the life of our communities. Starting off from these communities we must bring to our Catholic faith, not only those cultural and artistic experiences which are part of our heritage – real even though as yet modest Africanization – but also a theology which enables us to tackle the challenges arising out of our historical background and the ongoing evolution of our society.

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<sup>22</sup> This sentence is quoted directly from the 1973 AMECEA Plenary Meeting. This priority resulted from Sangu being responsible for the "Africa Continental Report" that was prepared by him and his AMECEA advisors in Dar es Salaam in 1974.

<sup>23</sup> James Sangu, "Report," p. 217.

**1976:** The AMECEA Study Conference in Nairobi, Kenya in July, 1976 on the theme “Building Christian Communities in Eastern Africa”<sup>24 25</sup> The key statement was: "Systematic

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<sup>24</sup> At this meeting in July, 1976 President Jomo Kenyatta made the now famous statement: "The Church is the conscience of society, and today a society needs a conscience. Do not be afraid to speak. If we are wrong and you keep quiet, one day you may have to answer for our mistakes." Quoted in the Kenya Bishops *Pastoral Letter* on “Family and Responsible Parenthood,” 27 April, 1979 and in Rodrigo Mejia (ed.), *The Conscience of Society*, Nairobi: Paulines Publications Africa, 1995, p. 50. At the AMECEA Study Conference in Nairobi, Kenya in June, 2011 President Mwai Kibaki said in a similar way: “I urge all Church leaders to freely speak out their concerns over issues affecting the lives of our people. As spiritual leaders in our society you shoulder the responsibility of pointing the right way forward, correcting us when we go wrong and ensuring that we remain God fearing men and women.” *AMECEA News*, No. 44 (August 2011), p. 6. This section of his speech on 29 June, 2011 is also found in the DVD on *AMECEA Family of God: Celebrating a Golden Jubilee of Evangelization in Solidarity*. Nairobi: Ukweli Video Productions, 2011.

<sup>25</sup> It is interesting to note the similarity in time to Portuguese-speaking Africa. The First National Pastoral Assembly took place in Beira, Mozambique from 8-13 September, 1977 (two years after independence from Portugal) on the theme “The Ministerial Church and the Small Christian Communities.” The importance of ministries/services in SCCs was emphasized. Mozambique diocesan priest Father Bernardo Suate explained:

The main concerns of this First Assembly were: to move from a triumphant church to a simple and poor one; a Church-Family with freely given reciprocal services; a church well in the heart of the people and well inserted in society; a church that adopts the SCCs to allow creativity and responsibility of all the People of God in building the Local Church; and a Ministerial Church where each member takes his or her responsibility in the church understood as a community of servants (from the “Conclusions”).

A follow-up took place at the Second National Pastoral Assembly from 1-11 January, 1992 in Matola, Maputo on “Consolidating the Local Church” especially through formation starting in the SCCs. Suate explains: “The model of the SCCs was once more adopted as well as the one of a Ministerial Church, a church that is communion and family with active participation of each one of its members (from the “Conclusions”).

See Bernardo Suate, email message to the author dated 9 May, 2014.

Mozambique is one of the nine countries in Southern Africa that belongs to Inter-Regional Meeting of the Bishops of Southern Africa (IMBISA) with headquarters in Harare, Zimbabwe. It includes six national episcopal conferences.

formation of Small Christian Communities should be the key pastoral priority in the years to come in Eastern Africa.”<sup>26</sup> **This is the single most important statement made about SCCs.**<sup>27</sup>

Kalilombe gave a Keynote Address on “An Overall View on Building Christian Communities.” He stated that this SCCs decision:

is a basic commitment, a serious shift in pastoral emphasis. It is deliberately intended to modify deeply our pastoral system, policy, and practice... We need to adopt a new system, where the basic units of the church are those smaller communities where the ordinary life of the people takes place. If we want the church to live and function actually as a community, then we must go down to that smaller level at which people live and interact in their daily lives. It is in these smaller communities that the church can express itself in a meaningful Christian communion. Such a basic community would be the only realistic base for the church's existence and effectiveness. Here is where the church can exist in an authentic communion. The wider dimensions of the church are not one community, but a communion of communities. The parish is a communion of basic communities within the parish area.<sup>28</sup>

Thus Kalilombe emphasized that the setting up of Small Christian Communities formed a “decisive turning point”<sup>29</sup> in the pastoral strategy of Eastern Africa. This renewal of pastoral method and structure was a logical consequence of a whole trend in pastoral thinking, planning and experimentation. This renewal understood profoundly the difference between breaking the

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<sup>26</sup> AMECEA Study Conference on "Building Christian Communities," "Conclusions," *African Ecclesial Review (AFER)*, 18, 5 (October, 1976), p. 250. The precise meaning of “**the key pastoral priority...**” is in the context of planning for the Catholic Church in Eastern Africa in the 1980s. Later it became “**a key pastoral priority ...**” in the context of broader and more inclusive pastoral priorities such as formation and training of personnel, marriage and family, religious education, development and social services and specialized apostolates.

<sup>27</sup> In SCCs Courses and Workshops today one or more classes is devoted to: "The AMECEA Key Pastoral Priority of Building Small Christian Communities in Eastern Africa." For example, see: Annotated Syllabus of Two Credit Course “Small Christian Communities as a New Model of Church in Africa Today,” Nairobi: Hekima University College and Tangaza University College, 2013.

<sup>28</sup> Patrick Kalilombe, "An Overall View of Building Christian Communities," 1976 AMECEA Study Conference, pp. 266-67. For a further explanation of this pastoral shift see Patrick Kalilombe, *From Outstation to Small Christian Communities: A Comparison of Two Pastoral Methods in Lilongwe Diocese*, Berkeley: University of California Unpublished Ph. D. Dissertation, 1983. An abridged version appears as *From Outstation to Small Christian Communities*, *Spearhead* Nos. 82-85 (June--October, 1984).

<sup>29</sup> Patrick Kalilombe, *ibid.*, p. 266.

Catholic Church *down* into small communities and building the church *up* out of small communities. There is a pastoral creativity and power in building the church *up* out of SCCs.

The meeting went on to affirm the essential ecclesial character and characteristics of Small Christian Communities by stating: “The [Small] Christian Communities we are trying to build are simply the most local incarnations of the One, Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church.”<sup>30</sup>

The Catholic bishops in Eastern Africa chose this SCC key pastoral priority as the best way to build up the Local Churches to be truly self-ministering (self-governing), self-propagating (self-spreading), and self-supporting (self-reliant and self-sustainable). The three selfs are essential characteristics of SCCs as the base/basic level of the church, and by extension, of the Local Church. This is a real self-actualization of the church. The family, the SCC, the outstation, the subparish, the parish, the deanery and the diocese reflect a “Communion of Communities Model of Church” starting from below, from the grassroots.

During this meeting the word “small”<sup>31</sup> was specifically chosen to avoid certain undertones of the word “basic.” Ndingi stated that to call our grassroots communities “small” instead of “basic” is another indication that the movement in Africa was growing on its own, quite independent of what was happening along the same lines in other places such as Latin America.<sup>32</sup>

**1979:** The AMECEA Study Conference in Zomba, Malawi in August, 1979 on the theme “The Implementation of the AMECEA Bishops’ Pastoral Priority of Building Small Christian Communities: An Evaluation.”<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> “Conclusions,” *ibid.*, p. 250.

<sup>31</sup> Years later Tanzanian priest Pius Rutechura said: “Why do we say **SMALL** Christian Communities? Because *small* is beautiful, *small* is visible, *small* makes you feel like you belong.”

<sup>32</sup> Raphael Ndingi Mwana a’Nzeki, “Basic Communities: the African Experience” in *A New Missionary Era*, Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1982, p. 100. American lay theologian Jay Carney points out: “It should be noted that AMECEA intentionally adopted the term ‘Small Christian Communities’ in 1976 to distinguish the African movement from its Latin American cousin.” J. J. Carney, “The People Bonded Together by Love: Eucharistic Ecclesiology and Small Christian Communities in Africa,” *Modern Theology* 30: 2, April, 2014, p. 303. Academia Website, retrieved 10 June, 2015, [https://www.academia.edu/8361392/The\\_People\\_Bonded\\_Together\\_by\\_Love\\_Eucharistic\\_Ecclesiology\\_and\\_Small\\_Christian\\_Communities\\_in\\_Africa](https://www.academia.edu/8361392/The_People_Bonded_Together_by_Love_Eucharistic_Ecclesiology_and_Small_Christian_Communities_in_Africa)

<sup>33</sup> Ghanaian Scripture scholar and Missionary of Africa Cardinal Richard Baawobr, MAfr points out: “It might be good to establish five year plans with one or two points to implement during a definite period, with tools and formation in that line. The way you [AMECEA] promoted the Small Christian Communities in the 70s shows that when there is focus and a common drive,

The plenary said:

Small Christian Communities are the means by which the church is brought down to the daily life and concerns of the people to where they actually live. In them the church takes on flesh and blood in life-situations of people. In them people are enabled to recognize the mystery of Christ among them.<sup>34</sup>

The meeting emphasized that SCCs are the neighborhood church that is the embodiment of the One, Holy and Catholic and Apostolic Church and are the best way to renew the church. It said: “Structurally, the Small Christian Community is the most local unit of the Church. The family is the domestic church, but of its very nature it has to reach out to other families, and the Small Christian Community is made up of several family groups. Family catechesis is therefore at the heart of the formation of Small Christian Community.”<sup>35</sup> **So the AMECEA Bishops actually went beyond the theology accepted by the Second Vatican Council.**<sup>36</sup>

Then the delegates clarified exactly what these SCCs were not:

The Small Christian Communities should not be understood as a fringe group, nor a group for a few elite people,<sup>37</sup> nor a group formed for a particular purpose, such as a prayer group, a sodality, a Catholic Action group, a development group, a study group, though these are legitimate and valuable: it is precisely the means by which the one church is present in each locality, touching the *whole life* of its members.<sup>38</sup>

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things move forward.” These five year plans are a key part of ongoing evaluation and assessment. “AMECEA Golden Jubilee Celebration 2011: Congratulatory Message of the Missionaries of Africa,” *AMECEA 50 Years of Evangelization in Solidarity: 1961 -- 2011*. Nairobi: AMECEA Secretariat, 2011, p.112.

<sup>34</sup> AMECEA, “Conclusions of the Study Conference of the AMECEA Plenary 1979,” *African Ecclesial Review (AFER)*, Vol. 21, No. 5 (1979), p. 266.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 268.

<sup>36</sup> Catholic Theology evolves and expands in the context of the Tradition and Magisterium of the Catholic Church. Two African examples since the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965):

1. The theology of the Local Churches (formerly the Particular Churches). See the [Working Document](#) of the “Synod on Synodality” in Rome in October, 2023.
2. The theology of the “Church as the Family of God.” See the [1994 First African Synod](#).

<sup>37</sup> The leading CEB theologian in Latin America, Father José Marins, warns against elitism in SCCs, that is, SCCs members feel they are superior and better than the other Catholics in the parish.

<sup>38</sup> “AMECEA,” p. 267.

One pastoral resolution stated: “SCCs are an effective way of developing the mission dimension of the church at the most local level, and of making people feel that they are really part of the church's evangelizing work.”<sup>39</sup>

**2004:** Bishop Felix Mkhori convoked a Second Diocesan Mini-Synod in Lilongwe, Malawi from 2004 to 2006 on the theme “*The Importance of Collaborative Ministry and Unity*” (“*Tiyende Limodzi*” in Chewa). The resolution on “Church Structures” stated:

The Small Christian Community is paramount. All other groups, organizations and movements are under the Small Christian Community. Leaders of Small Christian Communities must be well trained to know their rights and obligations. Members of the Small Christian Community must be united in mind and activities.<sup>40</sup>

**2013:** “Small Christian Communities<sup>41</sup> Workshop in Malawi” in Lilongwe, Malawi from 16 to 19 December 2013.<sup>42</sup> We can be thankful that the AMECEA Key Pastoral Priority of SCCs has been implemented in different ways in Malawi and in the other AMECEA Countries. In opening this workshop Archbishop Tarcisius Ziyaye of Lilongwe Archdiocese said that “the Small Christian Communities are dear to my heart.” He fondly recalled how he learned about SCCs while serving as a deacon in one of the parishes in Lilongwe Archdiocese.

**2021:** Archbishop George Desmond Tambala convoked the third Archdiocesan Mini Synod<sup>43</sup> in Lilongwe Archdiocese, Malawi from 24 December, 2021 to 9 December, 2023 on the

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<sup>39</sup> “AMECEA,” p. 260.

<sup>40</sup> Felix Mkhori, *My Seven Years in the Diocese of Lilongwe 2001-2007*, Balaka, Malawi: Montfort Media, 2010.

<sup>41</sup> As of 2023 there are 195,000 SCCs in the nine AMECEA Countries. Tanzania leads with 65,000 SCCs followed by Kenya with 45,000 SCCs.

<sup>42</sup> See the 43 page “A Report for the Small Christian Communities Workshop In Malawi,” under “Malawi” under “Africa” on Small Christian Communities Global Collaborative Website, retrieved on 12 August, 2023, [malawi\\_rep.pdf \(smallchristiancommunities.org\)](http://malawi_rep.pdf(smallchristiancommunities.org))

<sup>43</sup> Arnaud Join-Lambert reports on the Catholic dioceses that have celebrated at least three synods since the Second Vatican Council. He proposes holding a symposium specifically on these dioceses in order to assess the potential for transformation of diocesan synods.

theme “Discerning with the Holy Spirit”<sup>44</sup> (*Kusinkhasinkha ndi Mzimu Woyera* in Chewa).<sup>45</sup> A Chewa song was composed on this theme for this Mini Synod.

“The Archdiocese of Lilongwe invites all people to walk together All Catholics are invited to listen with an open heart and mind, to share their life experiences and to give space to the voices of those who are often marginalized or excluded. Just as the first assembly in Jerusalem healed the tensions between the members of the first Christian community, a synod like this should essentially be a process of healing, both from the wounds we have suffered within the church and from those experienced in other areas of our lives and relationships”.

Tambala stated: “We want to take advantage of the Synod on Synodality that is happening globally so that we can as well isolate some issues that are very relevant for our Local Church and find possible solutions which will give a better direction to our archdiocese.” In the spirit of the *Acts of the Apostles* he said: “It is only when we do things together that we can say we and the Holy Spirit have decided” (see the experience of the Council of Jerusalem in the *Acts of the Apostles*).

Tambala gave this update:

Our Archdiocese of Lilongwe has had three synods already since Vatican II. Last year we launched the third synod that has involved all the faithful, priests and religious as well as non Catholics. We are grateful to God for the very rich reflections that we have so far received from all corners of the archdiocese. The

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6: San Carlo de Ancud (Chile); Larantuka (Indonesia)

5: Masaka (Uganda); Arua (Uganda)

4: Evry (France); Wellington (New Zealand); Papeete (French Polynesia)

3: Kumasi (Ghana); Poitiers (France); Milano (Italy); Poznan (Poland); Quilmes (Argentina); Talca (Chile); Santiago de Chile (Chile); Bridgeport (USA); Johannesburg (South Africa); Cotonou (Benin); Yaounde (Cameroon); Antsirana (Madagascar); Lilongwe (Malawi); Enugu (Nigeria); Makurdi (Nigeria); Mbarara (Uganda); Denpasar (Indonesia); Ruteng (Indonesia)

Arnaud Join-Lambert email message to the author, 23 August, 2023.

See also Arnaud Join-Lambert, “Synodes Diocésains, ‘Parasynodes’ et Conciles Particuliers dans Église Catholique Depuis le Concile Vatican II: Liste, Bibliographie, Ressources,” Louvain: Université Catholique de Louvain, 8e édition mise à jour (11.02.2021). 99 pages. The document presents a list of more than 1000 diocesan synods celebrated since 1965. Included are "parasynods" as a significant form of synodality.

<sup>44</sup> When I was told there are 26 participants at the Workshop I joked and said, "With respect I think there are 27 participants. The 27th participant is the Holy Spirit." I said that I hoped the organizers saved a chair in the conference room for the Holy Spirit.

<sup>45</sup>See the website of Lilongwe Archdiocese [HOME - Archdiocese of Lilongwe \(lilongwearchdiocese.org\)](http://lilongwearchdiocese.org)

“praxis” of reflection for the whole synod is the SMALL CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY. That is where most of the discussions are happening. We have had two phases and we are in the second phase focusing on Liturgy and Participation in the Social Arena. In this phase we will be reflecting on what the Catholic Church is engaged in (education, health, social action and development and related witness). We will of course not forget to reflect on the environment and mission and of course on ecumenism and interreligious dialogue. It is a very busy but extremely fruitful time. We cannot but thank Bishop Patrick Kalilombe who led this spirit incarnated in the Small Christian Communities. We will be concluding this synod in December this year 2023.<sup>46</sup>

Malawi priest Father Vincent Mwakhwawa, President of the Synodal Assembly, outlined the issues the synod will address: "The first consultations will deal with general pastoral issues, the second consultations will focus on the liturgy and the final consultations will focus on finance, investment, administration and Social Development". One of the main pastoral issues is the importance of Small Christian Communities (called *Mphakati/Miphakati* in Chewa). To emphasize this pastoral priority the following book has been published in both Chewa and Tumbuka by the Likuni Press in Lilongwe.

Emmanuel Chimombo, Joseph G. Healey, Rita Ishengoma, Rose Musimba, Febian P. Mulenga and Alphonse C. L. Omolo, (eds.), *Strengthening the Growth of Small Christian Communities in Africa -- A Training Handbook for Facilitators*, Nairobi: AMECEA Pastoral Department and Nairobi: Paulines Publications Africa, 2017. Second Revised Edition, 2018.  
**SHOW HANDBOOKS**

For those of you in Swahili speaking countries this handbook has been translated into Swahili.

**2023:** 4-29 October, 2023: First Session on “Synod on Synodality” in Rome. The [Working Document \(\*Instrumentum Laboris\*\)](#) is on the theme “Communion, Participation and Mission.” Since the beginning of the Synodal Process Pope Francis has emphasized that pastoral synods should take place on the diocesan and national levels throughout the world. We hope that in his interventions and conversations in Rome Archbishop George Desmond Tambala, the delegate from Malawi, will mention the history of these three synods in Lilongwe Archdiocese since Vatican II and the importance of Small Christian Communities as a key pastoral priority.

**2024:** October, 2024: Second Session on “Synod on Synodality” in Rome. It is likely that this session will recommend and vote on concrete pastoral solutions to the challenges of synodality such as make Parish Pastoral Councils and Diocesan Pastoral Councils mandatory/obligatory. We hope the importance of SCCs will be emphasized.

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<sup>46</sup> Tambala, email message to the author, 23 August, 2023.

Rev. Joseph G. Healey, MM  
P.O. Box 574  
New Vernon, New Jersey 07976-0574  
USA  
+ 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