

“The Synod’s Final Session: How Did We Get Here, and What Can We Hope For?”  
Zoom Webinar Sponsored by FADICA (Foundations and Donors Interested in Catholic  
Activities)

Tuesday, 1 October, 2024

## **The Synodal Journey from the Experience of the Global South**

Talk by Joseph G. Healey, MM

Good afternoon from New Jersey. In the African tradition greetings are very important. So I would like to greet my old and new FADICA friends. I have joined my brother Tom Healey and my sister-in-law Meg Healey at various FADICA events. I warmly remember the FADICA Retreat at Yale University in New Haven, Connecticut in November, 2012. It was led by the spiritual writer and speaker Father Ron Rolheiser, OMI. On that retreat I met Alexia Kelley for the first time.

I served in Eastern Africa for 54 years (1968 to 2022). I served in different capacities with AMECEA, the Association of Member Episcopal Conferences in Eastern Africa, with headquarters in Nairobi, Kenya. Over the years many Catholic Family Foundations that are part of FADICA have helped in various AMECEA related projects. These include Small Christian Communities, Child Safeguarding and a Formation Program for African Women Religious. Thank you, FADICA.

A recent ministry of mine has been teaching a course on [Small Christian Communities](#) (SCCs) at the Tangaza Catholic University in Nairobi, Kenya. You know Small Christian Communities better as Small *Bible* Study Groups, Small Faith Sharing Groups and Small Prayer Groups. At our first class the students, all in their 20s, started calling me *Mzee* (that’s the Swahili word for “elder”) as a title of respect. You remember that *Mzee* was one of the names of the elder lion in *The Lion King*. But I said, “No. No. Not yet. Not yet. Please give me another name.” So the next day they started calling me “a youth from a long time ago.” I like that much better.

My specific topic today is “The Synodal Journey from the Experience of the Global South.” The Global South is the countries of Latin America, Africa and Asia/Oceania. Here is the Front Page of our [Small Christian Communities Global Collaborative Website](#) that has a world map. Another expression is the Southern Hemisphere.



My starting point is where Kristin Colberg’s excellent talk ended. This is the striking photo of the voting delegates sitting at round tables at the First Session of the Synod in the Vatican in October, 2023.<sup>1</sup> This symbolizes synodality that means “walking together.” Everyone was equal around the table – bishops, priests, sisters, brothers, laywomen and laymen. There was a mixture of delegates from different countries and backgrounds. For some bishops this was the first time they had sat next to a lay person as an equal. Each person got three minutes to speak in the “Conversation in the Spirit” process. One Kenyan Bishop said he liked best the silent periods that are an essential part of the process.

Tomorrow, Wednesday, 2 October, 2024, the Second Session will begin in Rome. After the Opening Mass in the morning, at 4 pm Rome time the voting delegates will gather in the Paul VI Hall for the Opening Speeches. The schedule provides for a rotation among plenary sessions and exchanges within 36 smaller working groups, organized into round tables by language: English, Italian, French, Spanish and Portuguese. The delegates will discuss and discern new lay ecclesial ministries in the Catholic Church such as the Ministry of Preaching/Lay Eucharistic Preaching; the Ministry of Accompanying Young Married Couples; and the Ministry of Coordinating a Small Church Community/Animator of a Small Christian Community.

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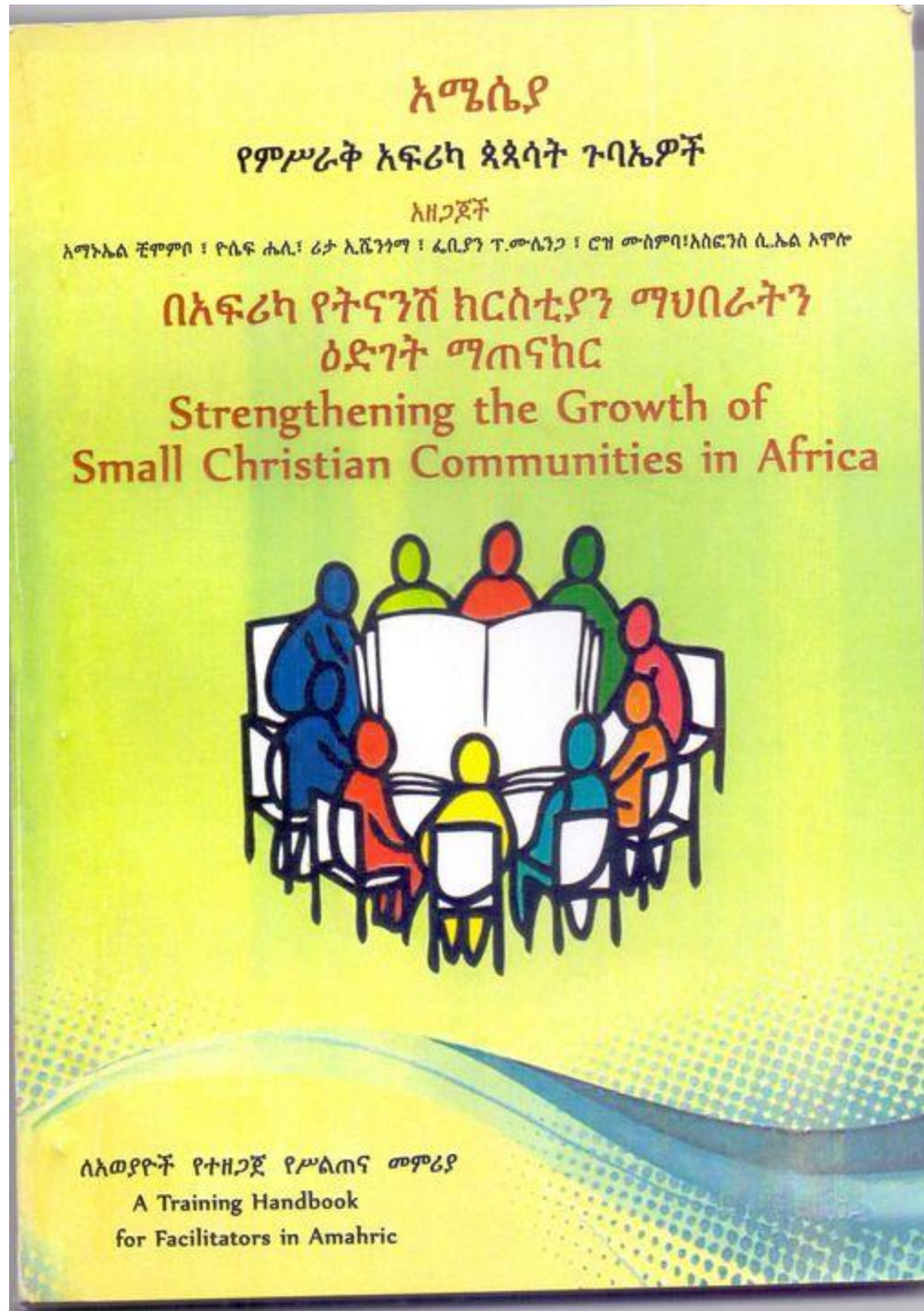
<sup>1</sup>A wonderful online resource for news on the Synod is the Vatican News Website: [News from the Vatican - News about the Church - Vatican News](https://www.vaticannews.va/en/news.html). Also valuable is the Synod Website: <https://www.synod.va/en.html>

As you know the United States Bishops have their Fall Plenary Meeting in Baltimore, Maryland in November. Some years ago they voted to sit in rows like in a classroom. This past November, 2023 they voted to sit at round tables. A big change.

The round tables remind me of our Small Christian Communities (SCCs) in Eastern Africa. We have 195,000 SCCs in the nine countries in the AMECEA Region: Eritrea, Ethiopia, Kenya, Malawi, South Sudan, Sudan, Tanzania, Uganda and Zambia. By the way, you may be surprised that there are 54 countries in Africa. These SCCs are called “the Church in the Neighborhood.” During the middle of the week SCC members meet in their homes for “Lectionary Based Faith Sharing.” They sit around in a circle and read and reflect on the *Gospel* of the following Sunday and apply it to their daily lives.

There is a story from Kenya called “We Women Are Equals and Have a Voice.”

In interviews Catholic women in Our Lady of Guadalupe Parish in Nairobi, Kenya and other places have said: “In the hierarchical, clerical Catholic Church in Kenya we women feel at the bottom. We are second class. This is reinforced by our traditional African customs and traditions where we women are second class. But in our SCCs in our homes as we sit around in a circle and read and reflect on the Gospel of the following Sunday, we feel that we women are equals and have a voice.”





In Eastern Africa SCCs are not a project or program in the parish. They are a way of life, a way of being/becoming church. It is significant that in four days on Saturday, 5 October, 2024 we will have the closing of the Golden Jubilee (1973-2023) of Small Christian Communities in Eastern Africa. The AMECEA Bishops stated that SCCs are a key pastoral priority in the region.

It might surprise many people that this term/expression -- Small Christian Communities -- is clearly implied but **NOT** actually stated in the documents of the historic [Second Vatican Council](#) (1962-65) and the revised *1983 Code of Canon Law*.<sup>2</sup> The traditional geographical parish<sup>3</sup> is considered the basic juridical unit of the Catholic Church so there is no mention of Subparishes, Outstations/Mission Chapels/Sub-stations and SCCs, that is, nothing “smaller” or “lower” than the parish. 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 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 structures is SCCs. In the SCCs Model of Church in Eastern Africa the SCC is an official pastoral, ecclesial structure in the parish. The SCCs officially participate in the parish leadership structures. Each SCC (or a group of SCCs) has a representative on the Outstation/Mission Chapel/Sub-station, 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.



Finally, after many years of silence, during the 2021-2024 Synodal Process Small Christian Communities are being mentioned in official Vatican Documents. For example:

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<sup>2</sup> It is certain that recommendations from the Synod will lead to revising and updating parts of the *Code of Canon Law*.

<sup>3</sup>This shows the European influence on documents of the Catholic Church with little reference to the Global South. There is very little reference to the grassroots experience of Africa: rural parishes and the catechist as the backbone of evangelization.

*How To Be a Missionary Synodal Church*, “Instrumentum Laboris” (“Working Document”) for the Second Session (October, 2024), XVI ORDINARY GENERAL ASSEMBLY OF THE SYNOD OF BISHOPS, Rome, Italy

<https://www.synod.va/content/dam/synod/assembly2024/il/ENG-INSTRUMENTUM-LABORIS-A4.pdf>

No. 7. “Synodality works through the [local] community listening to the Word of God.”

No. 29. “Men and women who exercise the ministry of coordinating a Small Church Community.”

No. 89. “The contributions submitted by the Episcopal Conferences speak of Parishes, Base Christian Communities and Small Christian Communities as contexts of communion and participation in mission... The parish is understood as a community of communities in the service of missionary creativity.”

No. 94. “Creating networks of Pastoral Councils at the level of Base Christian Communities, Small Christian Communities, Parishes and Deaneries right up to the Diocesan Pastoral Council.

For Africans synodality is a way of life. It is part of their DNA. A Tanzanian religious sister told me: “We already have the Synodal Process in Africa through our African community values and our SCCs. It is easy. It is a piece of cake.”

Now I would like to present a brief historical overview. After the Second Vatican Council German Jesuit theologian Father Karl Rahner made this prophetic statement:

The Catholic Church must be inculturated throughout the world if it is to be a World Church... This, then, is the issue: either the church sees and recognizes these essential differences of other cultures for which she should become a World Church and with a Pauline boldness draws the necessary consequences from this recognition, or she remains a Western Church and so in the final analysis betrays the meaning of Vatican II.<sup>4</sup>

The last 60 years have witnessed a slow but steady shift in the Catholic Church. It is clear from the available data that the center of gravity of Christianity is shifting dramatically from north to south, that is, from Europe and North America to Africa, Asia/Oceania and Latin America. The American journalist John Allen remarked: “If I were asked to offer a history of Roman Catholicism in the late twentieth century and early twenty-first century in one sentence, I would reply: “The center of gravity shifted from North to South.” A commentator on the present synod in Rome said yesterday: “This global gathering comes, too, when we have all seen the contrast between the [vibrant church of the Global South](#) and the [tired church of the West](#).” Another look at our [world map](#) is helpful. Here is the Universal Catholic Church with most of the energy coming from the Global South.

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<sup>4</sup> Karl Rahner, "Towards a Fundamental Theological Interpretation of Vatican II," *Theological Studies*, 40, 4 (December, 1979), pp. 718, 724.

I end with a comment for you 38 FADICA members who are going to Rome. You will arrive on 10 November just two weeks after the closing of the Second Session. The final recommendations will be given to Pope Francis who will probably write an *Apostolic Exhortation*. The pope has said that the Synodal Process will continue. The Study Groups will meet until June, 2025. Pope Francis has also said that the Synodal Process will flow into the Jubilee Year in 2025 that is on the theme “Hope.”

As we continue to walk together with the help of the Holy Spirit and apply the results of the Synod in the Local Churches around the world we live out the Spanish proverb: *We create the path by walking.*

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