

Innovations and new trends in Small Christian Communities (SCCs) in Africa today

By Joseph Healey, M.M.*

Abstract: *Today there are over 90,000 Small Christian Communities (SCCs) in eight countries of Eastern Africa. Kenya alone has over 35,000 SCCs. The past year has seen innovations in the development of SCCs in Africa including Highlights of the SCC Practicum Papers, Case Studies of SCC Involvement in Peacemaking/ Peacebuilding and in the Kenyan Lenten Campaign 2009 and Expanding the SCC Global Collaborative Website. A careful assessment of these experiences can help chart new trends in the future of the Catholic Church in Africa. This can lead to deeper theological reflection especially in the context of evolving a contemporary African Christian Theology than includes African Narrative Theology and the Theology of the Church-Family of God in Africa.*

Introduction

A popular joke in Europe goes like this: “Small Christian Communities (SCCs) are like flying saucers. Everybody is talking about them, but nobody has seen one.” This can’t be said about Africa. We have “seen” many Small Christian Communities in Africa. We have participated in them. We have experienced SCCs as a new model of church in Africa today.

Systematic formation of Small Christian Communities became the key pastoral priority in Eastern Africa in 1976. SCCs developed as a result of putting the ecclesiology of the Second Vatican Council (1962-65) into practice. Latin America, Africa and Asia (especially the Philippines) all pioneered the development of a SCC model of Church or a B (base) CC model of Church. After considerable research and debate, many specialists feel that quite independently of one another these three areas of the Catholic Church in the Global South *simultaneously* experienced the extraordinary growth of SCCs. Thus the African experience did not come from Latin America but developed on its own. There are now over 90,000 SCCs in the eight AMECEA¹ countries. Kenya alone has over 35,000 SCCs.

Bishop Christopher Mwoleka, one of the founders of SCCs in Tanzania, insightfully pointed out, “There is no blueprint for building Small Christian Communities.” If SCCs are a new way of being church from the local level up, a certain searching, experimentation and dying and rising will continue as the grassroots tries to evolve this new inculturated model of church and the seed of a new model of society.

In the article “New learnings in animating a Small Christian Communities (SCCs) model of Church in Africa today” in the June 2008 issue of *African Christian Studies*, the journal of the faculty of theology of the Catholic University of Eastern Africa (CUEA), I documented some of our “New Learnings” based on new experiences of SCCs, especially fresh research on SCCs in Africa as a whole and case studies during the 2008 post election crisis period in Kenya. Now 10 months later we continue to see innovations in the development of SCCs in Africa. In turn, a careful assessment of these experiences can help chart new trends in the future of the Catholic Church in Africa. This leads to deeper

¹AMECEA is an acronym for Association of Member Episcopal Conferences in Eastern Africa. It is a service organization for the National (Catholic) Episcopal Conferences of the eight countries of Eastern Africa, namely Eritrea (1993), Ethiopia (1979), Kenya (1961), Malawi (1961), Sudan (1973), Tanzania (1961), Uganda (1961) and Zambia (1961). Somalia (1995) and Djibouti (2002) are affiliate members.

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theological reflection especially in the context of evolving a contemporary African Christian theology.

Highlights of the SCC practicum papers

Part of the SCC Course on “Small Christian Communities as a New Model of Church in Africa Today” at both Hekima College and Tangaza College in Nairobi, Kenya in February and March, 2009 was a practicum: Instead of a regular class one week, the students (seminarians in religious congregations and one religious sister) participated in a gathering/activity of a SCC in a parish and wrote a short paper on the experience. In a conversation several years ago with the Archbishop Raphael Ndingi Mwana’a Nzeki, he emphasized the importance of seminarians in their pastoral training participating in SCCs and experiencing the daily life of lay people.²

The 24 practicum papers in the two courses described the students’ experiences in four dioceses in Kenya: Nairobi Archdiocese and Bungoma, Murang’a and Ngong Dioceses. Fourteen papers were on bible sharing/bible reflection especially using the Gospel of the following Sunday. The other 10 papers were as follows: three on the Kenyan Lenten Campaign 2009; three on seminars for leaders; one on a meeting to divide a large SCC into three smaller communities; one on a meeting to elect new SCC leaders; one on a pastoral meeting to discuss social outreach that included some reflection on the *Bible.*; one on a business meeting to discuss fundraising that included some reflection on the *Bible.* The papers clearly showed the importance of contextualization and timing with the following examples: Special reflections and activities during the Lenten season; continuing effects of the post-election political crisis in Kenya and the growing pains of the Coalition Government; and how local events and situations take on a life of their own.

Some highlights and findings of the papers and the related discussions are as follows: Overcoming tribalism and negative ethnicity continues to be one of the biggest challenges in having a good mixture of people in the neighborhood small communities in Kenya. Our SCC Class discussions revealed the valuable use of Social Analysis in Step Two “Judge” in the Pastoral Spiral reflection process. Too often SCCs are formed based on members belonging to separate classes of people: tribal affiliation including language, economic status (rich and poor) and education (ranging from highly educated to poorly educated).

SCC members participate in the Eucharistic Liturgy as a community celebration of life (whether the parish/subparish/outstation Sunday Eucharistic Celebration or an occasional Eucharistic Celebration in the SCC itself such as a *Jumuiya* (Swahili, Eastern Africa word for SCC) Mass.³ There are also opportunities for celebrating other sacraments in the small community such as Baptism, Reconciliation and Marriage.⁴

² In an email message dated 20 June, 2008 Brother Bob Moriarty, SM said: “I especially like work with SCCs is being incorporated into the training of seminarians – an exercise in being servant seems to be a good introduction to the ministry.”

³ An “Incultured Small Christian Community (*Jumuiya*) Mass” was celebrated at the Hekima College Jesuit School of Theology, Nairobi, Kenya on 18 March, 2008 (Wednesday of the Third Week of Lent). It included special songs, *Lectio Divina* reading of the scriptures, a shared homily in buzz groups of two people each and sharing an African Sign of Peace from Zimbabwe: Intertwine one’s hands and raise them over one’s head and then bow to the other person saying “Peace” in one’s home language/mother tongue. This sign of reconciliation, unity and agreement originally came from the Shona people and is now understood and used nationally in Zimbabwe. After independence in 1980 this sign was used together by Robert Mugabe a Shona and Joshua Nkomo a Ntabelle. In the past year President Robert Mugabe and Prime Minister Morgan Tsvangirai (both Shona) used it together.

⁴ See the article “Celebrating the Sacrament of Marriage at the Small Christian Community (SCC) Level in Malawi” by Samuel Satiele. Retrieved 16 March, 2009 from the Small Christian Communities Global Collaborative Website: <http://smallchristiancommunities.org/content/view/40/56>

In their sharings and reflections many SCC members make good connections between the Gospel/faith and everyday life. This leads to very specific, down-to-earth “Prayers of the Faithful.” An important part of SCC gatherings of any type are these “General Intercessions.” Ugandan historian and theologian John Waliggo emphasizes that the authentic African spirituality of the local people is reflected in these prayers. The now retired Archbishop Raphael Ndingi Mwana’a Nzeki of Nairobi Archdiocese encourages people to pray in their heart languages that is usually their mother tongue or first language. Prayers for the sick, deceased people (our ancestors in Christ or the living dead) and rain have always been important and frequent and reflect deep African cultural and Christian values. But participating in various SCCs during the last year I have heard other intentions that reflect the “signs of the times” in Kenya. Mothers especially who pray that “our daughters marry the right man” (surely a commentary on the lack of eligible spouses in our increasingly secular and “a-religious” cities such as Nairobi). “May God remove greed from the lives of our political leaders.” “May corruption be rooted out from our institutions and projects.” “May all our ethnic groups live in peace and harmony.”

Since youth do not normally participate in adult SCCs, it is crucial to form specific Youth SCCs.⁵ One “thinking outside the box” solution is to encourage Kenyan youth to use Sheng in their meetings. Sheng, the short form of Swahili and English, is a common language of interaction among youth especially in Kenyan cities. It is a blend of Swahili, English and other local Kenyan languages such as Gikuyu, Luo, Kamba, etc. This will send a message that the Catholic Church is interested in youth and their unique world. Using Sheng can also help overcome tribalism and specific ethnic loyalties.

A serious, ongoing challenge for SCCs is to help many of their members regularize their marriages in a Catholic ceremony.⁶ Some SCCs have a campaign in 2009 to help their members to overcome some of the main stumbling blocks such as to finalize the dowry and to raise money for the expenses of the marriage celebration. Some SCCs are promoting Mass Wedding Ceremonies (joint or multiple marriages at the same time or *ndoa za kwa pamoja* in Swahili) in their parishes to cut down on the overall expenses.

Case studies of SCC involvement in peacemaking/peacebuilding

In January 2008, Kenya plunged into a wave of riots and violence. Much of the unrest was fueled by tribalism and negative ethnicity.⁷ This dramatically affected the thousands of Small Christian Communities (SCCs) too. But some communities and people rose above the crisis. Some SCCs in Kenya became effective local tribunals to mediate tribal and ethnic conflicts.⁸ A three member mediation team of St. Augustine SCC in St. Joseph the Worker Parish Kangemi visited other SCCs to promote the healing of their ethnic tensions and

⁵ A very good example is St. Stephen Youth Small Christian Community in St. Joseph the Worker Parish, Kangemi, Nairobi, Kenya. It meets on Sundays for announcements and planning and then choir practice with the other parish choir and on Thursdays for a variety of activities: Bible Sharing/Bible Reflection; Mass; Adoration of the Blessed Sacrament; sports like football, darts, etc; discussion on various topics; and music, singing and dancing.

⁶ One increasingly hears the expression “Eucharist famine” referring to the many, many Catholics in Africa who cannot receive communion because they are not officially married in the Catholic Church.

⁷ Examples are given in Joseph G. Healey, “New Learnings in Animating a Small Christian Communities (SCCs) Model of Church in Africa Today,” *African Christian Studies* (CUEA), 24:2 (June, 2008), 13-17.

⁸ Jeffry Odell Korgen documents how some of the 20,000 base communities (another name for SCCs) were involved in the reconciliation and healing ministry in Rwanda after the 2004 genocide. See the powerful Rwandan Case Study called “Forgiving the Unforgivable: Peacemaking in Rwanda,” *Solidarity Will Transform the World: Stories of Hope from Catholic Relief Services* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 2007), 97-122.

promote reconciliation and peace. They especially encouraged the SCC members to talk about their problems and feelings.

Powerful witness and testimony stories can be found in the “African Story Database” on the **African Proverbs, Sayings and Stories Website** (www.afriprov.org). This is an online, searchable, user-friendly collection of 570 African stories including folktales, historical fiction pieces, myths, parables, poems, prayers, riddles, song-proverbs and true stories. These African stories cover a wide variety of topics and occasions. The database is made of up stories containing over 140 different themes and sub-themes. After the post December 2007 election crisis and violence here in Kenya there were many inspiring, uplifting and positive witness and testimony stories. It is important to tell our African stories of forgiveness, justice, reconciliation and peacemaking. To be valuable these stories must be real, that is, having a sacrifice/struggle/vulnerability/overcoming adversity and odds "reality edge" to them (*hali halisi* stories as we say in Swahili).

Searching in the [African Story Database](#) by theme and sub-theme one finds 38 stories on Small Christian Communities. And then the following number of stories on related topics: Healing (37); Peace/Peacemaking (36); Reconciliation (14); Forgiveness/Mercy (13); and Justice (13). There are 95 stories with the locale in Kenya.

“I Am a Christian First” is Story No. 173 in the database:

After the post December 2007 election crisis and the resulting tribalism-related violence in Kenya in early 2008, a Catholic woman in a St. Paul Chaplaincy Center Prayer Group in Nairobi said: "I am a Christian first, a Kenyan second and a Kikuyu third."⁹

“Pray for Me to Forgive President Mwai Kibaki” is Story No. 327 in the database:

During a meeting of the St. Jude South Small Christian Community (SCC) near the main highway going to Uganda in Yala Parish in Kisumu Archdiocese, Kenya in March, 2008 the members reflected on the Gospel passage from *John* 20:23: "If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained." Speaking from the heart one Luo man emotionally asked the SCC members to pray for him. He said: "Pray for me to forgive President Mwai Kibaki." During the post election crisis period in Kenya he said that every time he saw the Kikuyu president on TV he got upset and angry and so he needed healing. The other SCCs members were deeply touched and prayed feelingly for him. He said that he felt peaceful again.

Developing an African narrative theology

One can describe these two stories and other similar African Stories in SCCs¹⁰ in the context of an emerging African Christian Theology. For a long time we have seen stories as a source of contemporary African Narrative Theology that is a branch of African Inculturation Theology. Now we also see that these stories of Forgiveness/Mercy, Healing, Justice,

⁹ Research in Kenya, Rwanda and Sudan indicates that women are better in peacemaking than men. Men tend to emphasize power and control while women emphasize personal relationships.

¹⁰ Some of these stories were narrated in two talks at the following: Symposium on “THE POWER OF STORY: Reclaiming our African Narratives for Contemporary Formation and Ministry,” Institute of Spirituality and Religious Formation (ISRF), Tangaza College, Nairobi, Kenya on 10 February, 2009 and Formation Meeting of John Paul II Evangelizing Parish Teams, Maryknoll Society House, Nairobi, Kenya on 15 February, 2009.

Peace/Peacemaking and Reconciliation are an authentic part of African Liberation Theology. Storytelling can liberate and free a person. This is part of the theology of telling the story of healing and healing power of telling the story. These African stories

probe deeply into the human heart, the mystery of being, and human beings' relationship with God and each other.... Stories of healing, forgiveness and reconciliation also show that in the telling of the story itself – the narration, the communication, the passing on of the experience – there is a unique healing power. Telling stories frees, reveals, opens up and empowers – both in relation to the narrator and the hearers. There is a grace of naming, a journey of self-understanding and self-discovery and a healing of memories. There is a healing power for the individual who lets out his or her deep feelings and emotions and shares them in a larger support group... In fact, the whole community is strengthened as wounded healers journeying together... Telling stories and sharing stories in community is very important for African people.”¹¹

Powerful books have been published in the last year such as *In the Shadow of Death: My Trauma, My Experience: Voices of Kenyan Women from Post-Election Violence* and *Kwani? Hung'arisha Haswa. Africa's Best Creative Writing* that provide a collective narrative on what Kenya was before and what Kenya became during the epochal first 100 days of 2008. These stories reveal that God is deeply present, although often hidden, in the suffering and pain of the Kenyan people. As the Swahili saying goes, *Mungu yupo pamoja nasi* (freely translated as “God is right here with us”). The suffering Christ walks with, and shares with, his suffering people. This is God's story in our human story.

But also Jesus Christ liberates and gives new life. This is heart of the Gospel story. Christ frees us from fear, prejudices and all kinds of bondage. New life comes through the Risen Christ. The Sukuma people in Tanzania call Jesus Christ “Victor over Death.” He gives us his unique peace. He calls us to be sons and daughters of God. The testimonies and witness stories of people who overcame tribalism and violence in Kenya and other Africa countries portray this transforming Christ shining through our daily lives.

Case study of SCC involvement in the Kenya Lenten Campaign 2009

How can SCCs make a difference in our lives? What newness do the SCCs bring to our ministry? Take the example of the Kenya Lenten Campaign 2009 promoted by the Kenya Episcopal Conference (KEC) Catholic Justice and Peace Commission.¹² The booklet in English and Swahili had the theme “Justice, Reconciliation and Peace”¹³ and covered the five weeks of Lent. The “See, Judge and Act” Process drew on the experience of SCCs on justice and

¹¹ Healey, Joseph and Donald Sybertz, *Towards an African Narrative Theology* (Nairobi: Paulines Publications Africa and Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1996), 324-325.

¹² The annual Kenyan Lenten Campaign is one of the best known and appreciated activities of the Catholic Church in Kenya. The themes of previous years include 2008 (“With a New Heart and a New Spirit”) and 2007 (“Kenya's Good Governance, My Responsibility”).

¹³ This word order is different from the theme of the Second African Synod that is “Reconciliation, Justice and Peace.” It depends on the specific context and circumstances and the local interpretation. In general I feel that this is a process in which justice comes first and then this leads to reconciliation and finally to a more lasting peace. Peter Henriot presents interesting distinctions in “Justice, Peace, Reconciliation and Forgiveness: Theological and Conceptual Underpinnings and Linkages.” Unpublished paper at the AMECEA Synod Delegates Workshop (Nairobi: 2009).

peace-related themes/issues such as “Parental Responsibility in Youth and Formation,” “Constitution, Governance and Rule of Law,” “Environmental Care,” “Food Security and Empowering Farmers” and “Reconciliation.” The proposed action steps directly involved SCCs. A sample question was: “Are you aware of similar families in Small Christian Communities?” (page 9).

SCCs throughout Kenya used these themes, scripture readings and questions in their weekly meetings during Lent. Here is a Case Study (my verbatim notes) of one SCC that I participated in:

St. Kizito SCC, Waruku in St. Austin’s Parish, Nairobi, Kenya on Sunday afternoon, 8 March, 2009 from 2 to 4:15 p.m. Walking with Sammy and George. Total of 17 participants: 10 men, 7 women. Mixed ethnic groups. Newly ordained Kenyan Spiritan priest Fredrick Barasa Wafula participated. We used the reflection process of Week Three of Lent in Swahili on the “Environmental Care (Ecology)”-- “Kutunza Mazingira (Kuhifadhi)” of the *Kenya Lenten Campaign 2009* on the overall theme “Justice, Peace and Reconciliation.” The booklet, calendar and poster were distributed to SCC members.¹⁴ We read *Ezekiel 36: 23-25* especially verse 25: “I will pour (sprinkle) clean water on you.” Read twice with silence in between. Also read the Gospel of the 3rd Sunday of Lent (*John 2:13-25*). Read the “Dibaji” (“Preface”) of the booklet from Archbishop Peter Kairo, the Chairperson of the Kenya Catholic Justice and Peace Commission. Good group discussion on the meaning of the drawing on page 38: eight examples of harming or destroying the environment and seven examples of helping or caring for the environment.¹⁵ Then read and discussed the Three Steps in the reflection process of the Pastoral Circle:

SEE: Starting with the practical story of the Taya community was helpful.

JUDGE: Using Question 4 and adding “in our SCC” (“katika Jumuiya Ndogo Ndogo ya Kikristo yetu”).

ACT: Using Questions 1 and 2 and adding “in our SCC” (“katika Jumuiya Ndogo Ndogo ya Kikristo yetu”).

Emphasis on encouraging our SCC members to get involved in cleaning up the garbage and trash in the Waruku informal settlements. **ACTION:** After the 7 a.m. Mass on Sunday, 15 March, 2009 Washington Oduor will lead the first Clean up Team at 10 a.m. and Anastasia Syombua will lead the second Clean up Team at 10:30 a.m. **EVALUATION:** One and one quarters hours spent on Week Three. The Lenten materials are a great help, but the booklet is demanding for ordinary SCC members. SCCs need to be specifically mentioned in the text; they cannot be assumed or presupposed. The sequence on page 40 of the Swahili text in the booklet (Step Two on “Judge” – “Amua”) was hard to follow and the key *Ezekiel* quotation was left out.

¹⁴ These visual materials were very important in the overall campaign. The drawing on the poster highlighted reconciliation and unity and the full year calendar encourages people to live out the campaign throughout the year. Many religious organizations produced creative calendars in 2009 on the theme of “Justice, Reconciliation and Peace.”

¹⁵ A SCC member spotted that the farmers were barefoot (bad) in the top half of the drawing while the farmers were wearing shoes and boots (good) in the bottom half of the drawing. No one else in the various SCCs that I visited had noticed this.

What happened on the action? The good news is that between 10:15 a.m. and noon on Sunday, 15 March (the beginning of Week Three on “Environmental Care”) 12 members of St. Kizito SCC took turns collecting the trash and then burning it in small fires at the main dump in Waruku. We successfully cleaned up the whole area. This relates to two important proverbs on ecology that we have been discussing. First the universal proverb *If each person sweeps in front of his or her own house the whole world will be clean* (based on German and Russian proverbs). Then the Kenyan proverb *Treat the earth well. It was not given you by your parents, but loaned to you by your children.* Throughout this process the lay Christians of St. Kizito SCC experienced that “we are the Church” and that we can take responsibility as a small community.

Our SCC Class discussions on Week Four on “Food Security and Empowering Farmers” revealed the valuable use of Social Analysis. The Kenya Lenten Campaign 2009 booklet describes the Kenya Government and the Food and Agricultural Organization (FAO)’s efforts “to strengthen the capacity of farmers, especially the poor, to maximize food production and reduce poverty and hunger.”¹⁶ But after the post election crisis in 2008 that was deeply connected to tribalism and negative ethnicity, many farmers were displaced from their farm lands. Recent statistics show that the government of Kenya has been slow to resettle these farmers on their productive farms especially in the Rift Valley that is known as the Bread Basket of Kenya (especially known for its food crops of maize and wheat). So food production is down and there is starvation especially in Northern Kenya. The challenge to SCC members during the season of Lent is clear. In his message for Lent 2009, Pope Benedict XVI writes: “At the same time, fasting is an aid to open our eyes to the situation in which so many of our brothers and sisters live.” Fasting creates authentic solidarity with millions of hungry people throughout the world.”

In discussions during the Kenyan Lenten Campaign 2009 some creative ideas emerged. In an ongoing way the campaign tied into other campaigns such as the Hekima College Lenten Campaign 2009 that focused on Zimbabwe and the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) with a threefold goal: First, generate awareness about the plight of Zimbabweans and Congolese. Second, express solidarity with the suffering people of Zimbabwe and DRC and help the recovery and reconstruction effort. Third, raise funds to support the effort of local humanitarian organizations in Zimbabwe and DRC to provide humanitarian assistance. As part of Lenten almsgiving a total of \$2,189 was raised to help the suffering people of Zimbabwe and DRC.

Recent research¹⁷ shows that 95 percent of the SCCs in Kenya are neighborhood groups connected to parishes and five percent are specialized SCCs such as the following: nurses at Kenyatta Hospital; teachers who live on the compound of the Kenya Science Teachers College; Christian Life Communities (CLC); “extraterritorial or floating SCCs” composed of Catholics who live outside the geographical boundaries of the parish but want to stay connected so they meet as a SCC before or after the Sunday Mass.

¹⁶ *Justice, Reconciliation & Peace.* Kenya Lenten Campaign, 2009 (Nairobi: KEC Catholic Justice and Peace Commission, 2009), 21.

¹⁷ This research clearly indicates that the dominant model in Africa is parish-based SCCs. But in other parts of the world such as Europe (especially on the continent such as Italy) parishes are losing their membership and influence and the new movements are emerging as a different style of participation and involvement in the Catholic Church. Many of these new movements have a small group component. For interesting Case Studies see the “Europe” section in Joseph Healey, and Jeanne Hinton (ed.), *Small Christian Communities Today: Capturing the New Moment* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 2005 and Nairobi: Paulines Publications Africa, 2006), 71-95.

There are other types of specialized SCCs in East Africa such as Catholic professional peer groups (doctors, lawyers) that have formed SCCs and small groups in the Christian Professionals of Tanzania (CPT). Recently it was proposed to start a SCC of Catholic MPs in Kenya (Members of the Kenya Parliament). This would bridge the gap between the Catholic Church and the government in Kenya.¹⁸ These kinds of small groups exist in various forms in other countries. All these specialized SCCs have unique opportunities to promote “Justice, Reconciliation and Peace.”

Developing the SCC Global Collaborative Website

When it comes to promoting SCCs through the internet a good adage is: “Think outside the box.” Try this example: Enter the words “Small Christian Communities” (using the quotation marks) in the Google Search Engine (www.google.com) and see how many results (hits) and useful information you get. I just tried it and got 30,700 results that took just 0.19 seconds to come up! Most websites listed include links to many other websites with similar SCC concerns. The chapter “Promoting SCCs via the Internet” documents 35 SCC websites around the world.¹⁹ Browsing through these websites can yield many surprises and facilitate new connections.

In the SCC course²⁰ one assignment was: Spend one hour on the internet studying the [Small Christian Communities Global Collaborative website](#). The website has a map of the world and sections on the life and ministry of SCCs in each of the six continents: Africa, Asia, Europe, Latin America, North America and Oceania. The Africa continental section highlights article and case studies on SCCs in Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), Kenya, Malawi, South Africa and Tanzania. Most recently the website used a POLL to encourage participation and interaction. On the First Round the question -- **The best part of my Small Christian Community is...** – was followed by five choices in this order: “Bible Sharing/Bible Reflection.” “Feel at home.” “Helps me to live my Christian faith.” “Reaching out to others.” “Active participation.”

So far the leading vote getter is: “Helps me to live my Christian faith.” Every few months we will change the five choices and have a new vote. Through the POLL we hope to engage more people on our website and to find out what are their interests and priorities. One can even discover an underlying spirituality and theology through the choices that are made as well as educate people to the life and ministry of SCCs. It is also a good way of sharing our African experience of SCCs with the rest of the world. Thus through the internet and

¹⁸ At the AMECEA Plenary Meeting in Nairobi, Kenya 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), 50.

¹⁹ Healey and Hinton, *op. cit.*, 177-187.

²⁰ A Small Christian Communities Seminar took place at Blessed Bakanja AMECEA College (BBAC), Nairobi, Kenya on 13-14 February, 2009. It covered two days and included three sessions, a special SCCs Morning Prayer using *Lectio Divina* (based on Acts 2 and 4 and No. 89 of *The Church in Africa*) and concluded with a Jumuiya Mass (the shared homily was in buzz groups of two each). It presented the AMECEA Pastoral Priority on SCCs both in terms of theology and practice. The 27 seminarians continue well in their four SCCs (St. Matthew, St. Mark, St. Luke and St. John) that meet on Thursdays. These kinds of seminars help to implement the AMECEA Study Conference on “Deeper Evangelization in the Third Millennium” that took place in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania in July, 2002. Resolution No. 43 stated: “We recommend that a programme on the theological and pastoral value of Small Christian Communities be included in the normal curriculum of the Major Seminaries and houses of formation of both men and women.”

other forms of the new information technology members of African SCCs can feel part of the World Church.

Identifying New Trends in SCCs in Africa Today

In analyzing the development of Small Christian Communities on the African continent a very uneven picture emerges. In some place there are many active SCCs. In other place there are no SCCs or only devotional prayer groups. A country by country evaluation is not sufficient. The researcher has to evaluate diocese by diocese, and even parish by parish.²¹ Only then can some new trends emerge.

Some clear indicators of the importance and influence of Small Christian Communities in Africa today are the references to SCCs in various sources. First is the Pastoral Letters of local bishops. A good example is Dar es Salaam Archdiocese in Tanzania where every pastoral letter mentions SCCs. The “Pastoral Letter” on *Jubilei ya Mwaka wa Paulo 2008/2009 – Mwongozo* (‘Jubilee of the Year of St. Paul 2008-2009 – Directions’) included practical suggestions for celebrating the “Year of St. Paul” on the diocesan, deanery, parish, outstation, Small Christian Community (SCC) and family levels.

Second is homilies and speeches of local bishops and other Catholic Church leaders. Cardinal Polycarp Pengo, the Archbishop of Dar es Salaam often calls SCCs *chombo mahususi cha uinjilishaji* (Swahili for “a special vehicle of evangelization”). Auxiliary Bishop David Kamau said that SCCs are “the pillar of the church in Nairobi Archdiocese.”

Third is national, archdiocesan, diocesan and parish Pastoral Plans. After the Synod of Mwanza Archdiocese, Tanzania a booklet was produced in Swahili: *Sinodi ya Kwanza Jimbo Kuu la Mwanza: Sera, Maaazimo na Matamko*. Tabora, Tanzania: Tanganyika Mission Press (TMP), 2002. It contains 105 references to *Jumuiya Ndogo Ndogo za Kikristo* (JNNK), the Swahili expression for SCCs.

Fourth is national, archdiocesan, diocesan and parish newspapers, magazines, newsletters and bulletins such as the printed paper editions. Also the fast growing number of websites contains valuable SCC information. For example, the Exodus Kutoka Network: Catholic Parishes Network in Informal Settlements, Nairobi, Kenya (<http://www.kutokanet.com/content.html>) has a special section called “Small Christian Communities (SCC) Ministry” and detailed information on many SCCs in parishes in Nairobi Archdiocese.

Fifth is “Announcements” at the end of Sunday masses in parishes and outstations. I like to spontaneously visit Catholic Churches on Sunday mornings and listen to the “Announcements.” Often they give a clear picture of the life, activities and priorities in the parish. I have heard up to ten references to SCCs on a single Sunday – announcements ranging from the time and place of meetings of specific SCCs in the parish to the names of the SCCs responsible (*zamu* in Swahili) for the readings, taking the collection and bringing up the offertory of the follow Sunday’s masses to plans for training workshops/seminars of SCC leaders and animators. This many examples show that SCCs in Africa are not just a program or a project, but a way of life and integral to the pastoral life of the parish.

SCCs in Africa try to respond to “the signs of the times.” A good contemporary example is the celebration of the “Year of St. Paul” from 28 June, 2008 to 29 June, 2009.²² The “Pastoral Letter” of Dar es Salaam Archdiocese referred to above has five reference to

²¹ In Abuja Archdiocese, Nigeria St. Mary’s Parish, Karu (animated by priests of the St. Paul Missionary Society) has active basic communities (often the West African name for SCCs), but other parishes in the archdiocese do not have them.

²² In my SCC Course at Hekima College we tried to model being a SCC so in honor of the “Year of St. Paul” the students chose the name St. Paul Small Christian Community.

SCCs, 13 references to small communities and three references to members of small communities. During this Jubilee Year there are seminars for SCC leaders. The special prayers, litanies and blessings connected to St. Paul are being used in the Prayer Services and Bible Services of the SCCs. From 23 November, 2008 to 29 June 2009 specific chapters of all 13 letters of St Paul are being read and reflected on in the weekly Bible Services in a *Lectio Divina* style. The year will officially end with a special mass in St. Joseph's Cathedral on the Feast of Saints Peter and Paul Apostles on 29 June, 2009. Representatives of the SCCs will participate in this event.

Paulines Publications Africa with headquarters in Nairobi has produced eight posters in its "Reconciliation, Justice and Peace Posters Series" that are designed to illustrate the main social issues with messages from the *African Bible* (St Paul's letters and the Gospels) and from the *Lineamenta* of the 2009 Second African Synod. These posters are particularly relevant in Kenya today during the reconciliation and healing process that is slowly taking place after the political problems in 2008. The poster on "Unity" uses quotations from *Galatians* 3:28: "There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free person, there is not male and female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus" (especially meaningful in the context of overcoming tribalism and negative ethnicity in our SCCs) and No. 79 of the *Lineamenta*: "Unity implies that no group can feel superior to another." This text from *Galatians* can be rewritten in Kenya and in our SCCs today to read: "There is neither Kikuyu nor Luo, there is neither Christian nor Muslim, there is neither rich nor poor, there is neither educated nor uneducated, there is neither city dweller nor rural dweller, there is not male and female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus."

The poster on "Reconciliation" uses *Ephesians* 4:32: "Be kind to one another, compassionate, forgiving one another as God has forgiven you in Christ" and No. 69 of the *Lineamenta*: "It is Christ's blood poured out into our hearts which can reconcile us with one another." The poster on "Forgiveness" uses *Luke* 23:34: "Father, forgive them, they know not what they do" and No. 68 of the *Lineamenta*: "There can be no peace without justice, no justice without forgiveness. These posters are discussed in the SCCs.

In his paper at the 11th Interdisciplinary Theological Session at the Catholic University of Eastern Africa in Nairobi in March, 2009 Paulino Mondo called St. Paul a "Missionary Animator and Father of Small Christian Communities." He asks: "What can we imitate from St. Paul's missionary methodology for the African Church today?"²³ St. Paul shifted his missionary operation centre from synagogues to families making them the true milieus of solidarity (domestic churches). Paul founded the first Small Christian Communities as House Churches that met in private homes (see Chapters 1 and 16 in I *Corinthians*). These communities were self ministering. They were missionary by their very nature. These SCCs were family-based evangelizing communities. This is the "Pauline method of founding Small Christian Communities with the responsibility of evangelizing their regions."²⁴ During this "Year of St. Paul" SCCs in Africa are trying to follow St. Paul's missionary spirit and ministry.

The World Synod of Bishops on the "Word of God in the Life and Mission of the Church" in Rome in October, 2008 gave new impetus to using a *Lectio Divina* style of prayerful reflection on the scriptures in SCCs in Africa. Proposition 21 on "Word of God and Small Communities" stated:

The synod recommends the formation of small ecclesial communities where the Word of God is heard, studied and prayed, also in the form of the rosary as

²³Paulino Mondo, "The Jubilee of St. Paul, the Missionary Animator and Father of Small Christian Communities." Unpublished paper at 11th Interdisciplinary Theological Session at the Catholic University of Eastern Africa (Nairobi: 2009), 1.

²⁴*Ibid*, 6.

biblical meditation (cf. John Paul II, Apostolic Letter Rosarium *Virginis Mariae*). In many countries there are already small communities which can be made up of families living in the parishes or connected to the different ecclesial movements and new communities. They meet regularly around the Word of God, to share among themselves, and receive strength from it. Some only rarely have the possibility to celebrate the Eucharist. They experience the sense of community and encounter the Word of God personally. Through the reading of the Bible they feel themselves loved personally by God. The service of the laity that leads these communities must be appreciated and promoted as they carry out a missionary service to which all the baptized are called.²⁵

Proposition 22 on “Word of God and Prayerful Reading” stated:

All the faithful, including the young, be exhorted to come close to Scripture by means of a “prayerful” and assiduous reading (*DV 25*), in such a way that the dialogue with God becomes a daily reality for the People of God. For this reason, it’s important that...the faithful should be initiated in prayerful reading using the most appropriate method according to the circumstances, categories and culture, in both personal and community settings (*Lectio Divina*, spiritual exercises in daily life, the “Seven Steps” in Africa and elsewhere, diverse methods of prayer, and in ecclesial base communities, etc.).²⁶

The challenge to SCC members is to read the scriptures on a deeper level. This includes more prayerful, reflective reading itself and appreciating the value of silence. For example, there can be a period of quality silence between the first and second readings of the Gospel text of the following Sunday in the weekly Bible Service. This can lead to more quality reflection and action both on the personal and community levels.

SCCs and the Second African Synod

The Second African Synod 2009 will take place in Rome on 4-25 October, 2009 on the theme “The Church in Africa in Service to Reconciliation, Justice and Peace.” In the *Lineamenta* (“Guidelines”) published in 2006 SCCs are called “living ecclesial communities.” The Church as the Family of God Model is a new ecclesial option that focuses on building families and building SCCs that are involved in reconciliation, justice and peace in the Catholic Church and in the wider society. The document included a questionnaire with 32 questions.

The 16th AMECEA Plenary Assembly took place in Lusaka, Zambia from 27 June to 7 July 2008 on the closely related topic “Reconciliation through Justice and Peace.” Action Plan A. 4. stated: “Revisiting the Small Christian Communities Pastoral Option as a means of responding to the ministry of reconciliation through justice and peace. The Theology of the Church-Family of God must be further explored in view of enhancing reconciliation and peacebuilding.”²⁷

On 19 March, 2009 in Yaounde, Cameroon Pope Benedict XVI promulgated

²⁵Retrieved 16 March, 2009 from the ZENIT Website: <http://www.zenit.org/article-24497?l=english>.

²⁶*Ibid.*

²⁷ *Proceedings of the 16th AMECEA Plenary Assembly on “Reconciliation through Justice and Peace.”* Lusaka, Zambia from 27 June to 7 July, 2008 (Nairobi: Privately printed, 2008), 37.

the *Instrumentum Laboris* (“Working Document”)²⁸ of the 2009 Second African Synod. While the English text of the *Lineamenta* published in 2006 uses the term “living ecclesial communities,” the English text of the *Instrumentum Laboris* published in 2009 uses the more common term “Small Christian Communities” (note the capitals). The French text uses “Communautés Ecclésiales Vivantes.”

In some French-speaking countries of Africa such as the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) the full name “Communautés Ecclésiales Vivantes de Base (CEVB)” is sometimes used. However, the word “base” (or “basic” or “base-level”) does not mean the same as in Latin America. They are not equivalent. In the Latin American context “base” is a sociological word referring to poor, oppressed, downtrodden Christians -- ordinary people who are at the base or bottom of society, at the base or bottom of the social pyramid – and is closely linked to the Catholic Church’s “preferential option for the poor.”²⁹ In the African context “base” is a geographical word referring to Christians living in the same local neighborhood in both urban and rural areas.

Also word “base” (or “basic” or “base-level”) does not mean the same as “small.” “The 1976 AMECEA Study Conference specifically chose the word ‘small’ rather than ‘basic’ to indicate that the movement was growing on its own [in Eastern Africa] and to avoid certain undertones of the word ‘basic’ which is particularly connected with Latin America where it has a different meaning than Eastern Africa.”³⁰ Archbishop Ndingi Mwana’a Nzeki stated that to call the Eastern Africa grassroots communities “small” instead of “basic” “is another indication that the movement in Africa was growing on its own, quite independent of other places (e.g. Latin America). Perhaps we used ‘small’ because that is exactly what we meant. We came to realize that our people live out their commitment in small [neighborhood] communities where they know one another and relate to one another.”³¹

SCCs are mentioned in 12 times in the *Instrumentum Laboris* as follows:

1. Under “From 1994 to 2009: A New Social Context:” “Inspired by Sacred Scripture, Small Christian Communities (SCCs) are actively involved in social life.” (No. 9)
2. Under “Ways in which the Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation Has Been Implemented:” “Small Christian Communities are truly places for studying, meditating upon and sharing the Word of God. They are seeking ways of expressing the Christian faith in the typical settings of a traditional African community. For example, celebrating funerals during a Eucharistic liturgy in the house of the deceased, as a reminder of the Christian hope in the resurrection and the family as the living cell of the Church as Family of God, is proving to be of great assistance to the faith.” (No. 19)
3. Under “On the Road to Peace:” “Some roads to peace have been opened by Pastors, by those in the consecrated life, by Small Christian Communities and by the lay faithful, as individuals or members of associations. However, some obstacles still remain.” (No. 63)

²⁸ Of the 79 footnotes in the 2006 *Lineamenta* only seven are from specifically African sources. Of the 67 footnotes in the 2009 *Instrumentum Laboris* only nine are from specifically African sources.

²⁹ The Base or Basic Christian Community (BCC) becomes a Base or Basic Ecclesial Community (BEC or CEB in Spanish) when it gathers for sacramental life such as celebrating the Eucharist. See the excellent commentaries on Latin American CEBs in Robert S. Pelton, *Aparecida: Quo Vadis?* (Scranton and London: University of Scranton Press, 2008).

³⁰ Healey and Sybertz, *op. cit.*, 138. Further distinctions are made in Joseph G. Healey, M.M., “Basic Christian Communities: Church-Centred or World-Centred?” *Missionalia* (April, 1986), 14-34.

³¹ Raphael Ndingi, “Basic Communities: the African Experience,” in *A New Missionary Era* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1982), 100.

4. Under “Active Presence of Christ in Life:” “Christ’s disciples carry out their work in a conscientious manner, which is the basis for their taking charge of parishes to every extent possible and their forming future priests and consecrated persons in the midst of Small Christian Communities.” (No. 76)
5. Under “Power of the Word of God:” “If read and explained in groups or in Small Christian Communities, Sacred Scripture will become the dynamic force to renew and recreate African culture and fashion new men and women ‘to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ’ (*Ephesians* 4:13).” (No. 85)
6. Under “Rites of Reconciliation:” “What has the Church learned [about reconciliation] from the experiences of diocesan synods, days of recollection for the clergy and forums for the lay faithful and Small Christian Communities?” (No. 88)
7. Under “Church: Sacrament of Reconciliation:” “In virtue of the power of the Holy Spirit, some ecclesial communities bear witness to their faith in Christ by having the courage to take initiatives for reconciliation among Small Christian Communities, separated couples, families in conflict and divided village communities.” (No. 90)
8. Under “Working for a Reconciled Africa:” “In what ways can Church institutions and communities (episcopal conferences, dioceses, parishes, Small Christian Communities) share in this witness [of service]?” (No. 92)
9. Under “Church: Family for All Nations:” “Small Christian Communities incarnate in the Church the support which arises from the joy of belonging to a family. Since the Christian life is human life, by necessity it takes place in the context of a family. Acts of solidarity, an expression of Christian charity, are occurring in exemplary fashion in these communities. In some places, the Word of God is read, shared and lived at this level. The role of lay animators in these communities is particularly important in ensuring a leadership-service which assists members to grow in their faith and become involved in efforts for reconciliation and a more just and peaceful society. Undoubtedly, theological work needs to be done in this ‘area’.” (No. 93)
10. Under “Service to Society: Health, Education and Socio-Economic Development:” “Because of the notable assistance of both *Caritas* and some Small Christian Communities, the poorest are cared for and those with AIDS receive attention.” (No. 96)
11. Under “Agents: The Lay Faithful in the Church:” “Maintain family unity by fostering peace and just relations and by a harmonious rapport with other families in Small Christian Communities.” (No. 118)
12. Under “Formation Programmes:” “Some difficulties can be seen in the diffusion of such programmes [referring to formation programmes that incorporate the Catholic Church’s social teaching] and their follow-up at the grassroots level. Can a way be found in dioceses, parishes and Small Christian Communities to make the implementation of such programmes possible? (No. 130)

There are also two important footnotes on Small Christian Communities in the document. Footnote No. 2 of the document refers to section No. 9 above (No. 1 on the list) and states: “Though names may vary, the reality is the same: Communauté Ecclésiastique Vivante (CEV); Small Christian Community (SCC).” Footnote No. 48 of the *Instrumentum Laboris* states: “The method of *Lectio Divina* devised at the Institute of Lumko (South Africa), called *Seven Steps*, has been adopted in a number of countries.” Our research shows that this method of Bible Sharing/Bible Reflection is very popular in Eastern Africa.

The 12 references to SCCs in *Instrumentum Laboris* and the two footnotes are significantly more than in the *Lineamenta* in which "living ecclesial communities" are mentioned three times in the document and twice in the questionnaire. This dramatic increase in the importance given to SCCs is clearly due to the many responses from the Episcopal Conferences in Africa and to other answers to the 32 questions of the original questionnaire. SCCs have become both important agents and places of reconciliation, justice and peace.

Developing a theology of the Church-Family of God in Africa

In light of these 12 references to SCCs and the major themes of the *Instrumentum Laboris* we ask the question: How is the recent praxis of SCCs in Africa contributing to the development of the theology of the Church-Family of God? This helps to respond to Pope John Paul II's call in *The Church in Africa*: "It is earnestly to be hoped that theologians in Africa will work out the theology of the Church as Family with all the riches contained in this concept, showing its complementarity with other images of the Church."³²

Based on No. 9 (Section No. 93) above Small Christian Communities embody the values of inclusiveness, sharing, unity and solidarity that form the contemporary family of God. Our models are the first "small community (the Trinity -- Father, Son and Holy Spirit) and the first Small Christian Community (the Holy Family -- Jesus, Joseph and Mary).

Along with parish-based SCCs and lectionary-based SCCs, we can talk of family-based SCCs.³³ These include SCCs that incorporate youth and children into the activities of the small community and "Mother SCCs" that have branches of Youth SCCs and Children SCCs. While there is a lot of discussion about the breakdown of the family structure in our contemporary society, some SCCs in Africa are countering this trend by helping couples who cannot receive the Eucharist to regularize their marriages in a Catholic ceremony. Other SCCs have night prayers for families in the neighborhood and a carefully planned program of catechesis for younger members such as teaching the sacraments as a regular part of SCC meetings. African SCCs emphasize personal relationships, family bonds, solidarity, and Christian belonging --sharing together, working together, and celebrating together (including meals and entertainment) in the context of African values and customs. Thus SCCs are a concrete expression of, and realization of, the Church-Family of God Model of Church in Africa.

Pius Rutechura emphasizes that "hopes for the Church in Africa depend on the courage to foster and build SCCs as the ideal foundational units of building the Church-Family of God."³⁴ The SCC is a communion of families. The outstation or subparish is a communion of SCCs. The parish is a communion of outstations or subparishes. If members of the SCCs meet in the middle of the week for Bible Sharing/Bible Reflection using the scripture readings of the following Sunday, then the Sunday Eucharist in the parish or subparish or outstation becomes a "communion of communities" ecclesial experience.

This present article documents many examples and case studies of SCCs that are involved in social and mission outreach and in promoting reconciliation, justice and peace in Africa. No.6 (Section No. 88) above refers to "Rites of Reconciliation" in SCCs and No. 3 (Section No. 63) above states that SCCs open roads to peace. Kieran Flynn states: "It is in being transforming communities [of themselves and others] that SCCs realize their identity in

³² John Paul II. Post Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *The Church in Africa* (Nairobi, Kenya: Paulines Publications Africa, 1995), No. 63.

³³ Described in Simon Rurinjah, "Importance of Small Christian Communities in Our Lives." Unpublished talk in SCCs Classes at Hekima College and Tangaza College (Nairobi: 2009), 1.

³⁴ Pius Rutechura, "From the First to the Second African Synod of Bishops: Hopes and Prospects for the Church in Africa," *Hekima Review*, No. 38, 2008, 14.

the Church as Family Model. These individual [communities of] Church as Family have the task of working to transform society.”³⁵ A key part of this transformation is a deeper evangelization that proclaims that the water of baptism is “thicker” than the blood of tribalism and promotes true communion between different ethnic groups.

As we move into the future let us use the famous Spanish proverb that is often applied to SCCs: *We create the path by walking.*

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³⁵Kieran Flynn, *Communities for the Kingdom: A Handbook for Small Christian Community Leaders* (Eldoret: AMECEA Gaba Publications, Double *Spearhead* Nos. 181-182, 2007), 99.

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