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We Create the Path by Walking: The Involvement of Small Christian Communities (SCCs) in Peacebuilding in Eastern Africa

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Small Christian Communities (SCCs), a key pastoral priority of the Catholic Bishops in the Association of Episcopal Conferences in Eastern Africa (AMECEA), officially started in major ecclesial meetings in 1973 and 1976. The SCCs in the AMECEA region have been evolving in response to the developments in the region – they “create the path by walking” and are becoming more involved in peacebuilding activities. A recent study on the SCCs finds that there are over 180,000 SCCs in the nine countries of the AMECEA region. An estimated 45,000 SCCs are spread throughout Kenya’s 26 Catholic dioceses. This essay discusses the growth of SCCs from small prayer groups to more developed, multi-faceted groups and looks at the central characteristics of SCCs in Eastern Africa. The essay also discusses what some Kenyan SCCs have done during the 2017 Kenyan Lenten Campaign in preparation for the tense August national elections, and how they have promoted peacebuilding through the Internet.

Introduction

“We create path by walking” is a well-known saying. Also well-known is the development of Small Christian Communities (SCCs), a key pastoral priority of the Catholic Bishops in Association of Episcopal Conferences in Eastern Africa (AMECEA), and that officially started in major ecclesial meetings in 1973 and 1976.¹ The SCCs in the AMECEA region have been evolving in response to the developments in the region – they are creating the path by walking. The involvement of SCCs’ in peacebuilding is growing in Eastern Africa. This new way of being/becoming church and new model of church has continuously and notably made an impact on the Catholic Church’s pastoral mission and social ministry in the nine countries of AMECEA over these many years.

From Small Prayer Group to Genuine Small Christian Community (SCC)

The last 10 years has seen the slow, gradual shift of some SCCs in Eastern Africa from being small prayer groups that are inwardly focused to active small faith communities that are outwardly focused and involved in justice and peace issues. This may be the number one challenge to SCCs in Eastern Africa. Many are still prayer groups (emphasizing especially the rosary and popular devotions) and not concerned with the wider social issues. Many SCCs still shy away from direct justice and peace concerns. The longtime challenge of Ugandan historian/theologian Father John Waliggo (who died in 2008) and Tanzanian theologian Father Laurenti Magesa has encouraged the SCCs in Africa to become more involved in justice and peace issues and social action.

Bishop Christopher Mwoleka, the deceased bishop of Rulenge Diocese, Tanzania who was the founder of SCCs in Tanzania, already saw this pastoral challenge in the 1980s when he identified the pressing need for an effective and inculturated method of *Bible* Reflection in Eastern Africa that goes beyond the small prayer group model. Just as Africa needs an "appropriate technology" for economic development, the Catholic Church in Africa needs an "appropriate methodology or process" for *Bible* Reflection that connects the *Bible* to the real issues of our

daily life and includes personal and communal faith sharing. He called this "finding the African bait" (Healey, 1989).

This is why we emphasize the *Bible*—Daily Life Connections in the weekly *Bible Service* of Small Christian Communities (SCCs) in Eastern Africa. A new language has emerged:

1. Lectionary-based faith sharing, not just related to the Sunday readings, but to the scripture readings throughout the week.
2. The Sunday Scripture Readings especially offer the lens through which SCC members look at their lives and their world. The reading of the Gospel helps members to discover the Good News in their lives.
3. Connect, relate and apply the *Bible* (Gospel) to our daily livesⁱⁱ and experience on both personal and society-wide levels.ⁱⁱⁱ

One important reason for this positive shift is the use of an inductive Pastoral Theological Reflection (PTR) Method/Process/ such as the "Pastoral Spiral"^{iv} in SCCs that helps the members to go deeper and make concrete changes in our lives. This Pastoral Spiral (also known as the Pastoral Circle and the Pastoral Cycle^v) uses the four steps of:

1. Insertion
2. Social/Cultural Analysis
3. Theological Reflection
4. Action/Pastoral Planning

Another version is the five steps of:

1. Experience
2. Social/Cultural Analysis
3. Theological Reflection
4. Pastoral Planning
5. Evaluation.^{vi}

The term "Pastoral Spiral" is preferred because it showed the ongoing nature of the method or process. The method is well known in pastoral theology, social ministry and formation programs. The method's full process has been tested in SCCs in Eastern Africa and found to be too complex to fit the needs of the short time frame of a weekly SCC meeting (one hour to one and a half hours at the most) and the educational background of lay SCC members. But the method has been successfully adapted to the three steps of the well-known "See, Judge and Act" process that has been used regularly in the five weeks of Lent during the annual Kenyan Lenten Campaigns.

The Heart of SCCs in Eastern Africa

As I travel around the world I continue to receive questions such as: What does an SCC in Eastern Africa look like? ^{vii} Exactly how are SCCs a new way of being/becoming church in Eastern Africa today? This can be understood best through concrete, pastoral examples that show that SCCs in the AMECEA Region are not simply a parish program or project, but a way of life. They have a distinct ecclesial, pastoral and social identity. Many members' lives revolve in and around their SCCs as the "Church in the Neighborhood." ^{viii}

The heart, and the first essential part, of Small Christian Communities in Eastern Africa, is the weekly *Bible Sharing/Bible Reflection/Bible—Daily Life Connections*. To take the example of Kenya during the recently completed 2017 Easter and Pentecost Seasons. When SCC members read and reflected on the Gospel of the following Sunday about the centrality of the Risen Christ and the power of the Holy Spirit, they connected this good news to the problems and challenges of our daily reality: the severe drought and famine in Northern Kenya; preparations for the August, 2017 National Elections that one writer calls “messy and unpredictable”; the high price of corn (maize) meal; the ongoing negative effects of our two biggest diseases in Kenya: tribalism (negative ethnicity) and mega-corruption; the even greater plight of our geographical neighbors: the almost genocidal war in South Sudan and the Islamic State influence in Somalia. One person said: “Our challenge and opportunity is to preach the good news in these bad news situations.”

The Bible is the most important part of the weekly meeting of the SCC. There are two methods or processes:

1. From *Bible* to Life.
2. From Life to the *Bible*.

Sometimes the SCC uses a *Bible Sharing/Bible Reflection/Bible—Daily Life Connections* method. The *Bible* passage is read slowly, prayerfully and reflectively. Sometimes the SCC members pass the *Bible* around the circle and each person reads one verse. Then what is so important for African SCCs: the members connect the *Bible* reading to their daily experience.

Sometimes the SCC uses a Daily Life-*Bible* Connections method. The SCC members start with special themes and topics as well as their experiences and events of daily life and then go to the *Bible*. This uses the “See, Judge and Act” process of the Pastoral Spiral/Circle/Cycle. As I have taught in my spring 2017 course on SCCs at Hekima University College, Catholic University of Eastern Africa (CUEA), the spirit and content of the Second Vatican Council mirror what St. John XXIII described as “reading the signs of the times” when he originally called the council. The *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World* (commonly known by the Latin title *Gaudium et Spes*) emphasized this explicit call: “The church has always had the duty of scrutinizing the signs of the times and of interpreting them in the light of the Gospel” (No. 4).

Blessed Paul VI describes the importance of being constantly aware of the changes in society in this striking image: “You must continually stand at the window, open to the world. You are obliged to study the facts, the events, the opinions, the current interests and the thought of the surrounding environment.”

What are the different human problems in Africa that we should reflect on in our SCC meetings in the light of the Gospel? (see St. John Paul II, *The Church in Africa*, No. 89). In the three SCCs we formed in my class, the students identified these problems in Africa (presented in the order that they were mentioned): “Divorce”; “Child marriages”; “Homosexuality”; “Mega-corruption”; “Tribalism/negative ethnicity/nepotism/clannism”; “Abortion”; “Bad governance”; “Child abuse”; “Problems in marriage”;

“Radical Islam”; “Alcohol and drug addiction”; “Stigma of HIV/AIDS”
;“Drought/Hunger/Famine/ Migration”; “Youth moving from the Catholic to the
Pentecostal and Evangelical Churches.”

In the three SCCs, the students reflected on four of these key problems -- “Abortion,”
“Bad Governance,” “Migration” and “Problems in Marriage” – and found
corresponding/parallel passages in the *Bible* that offered light and inspiration. The
students found that using the Goggle “Search Feature” dramatically sped up finding the
Bible passages such as *Hebrews 13*, *Ephesians 5* and *Matthew 19* on “Problems in
Marriage.”

The second essential part of SCCs in Eastern Africa is “action,” a step of the weekly SCCs
meeting described as follows: “Choose a concrete practical action/task^{ix} (ideally a community
response) to be carried out during the next week. Ideally it is connected to/flows from the Gospel
text and is closely related to the pastoral priorities and activities of the parish or local
community. Examples: visiting the sick, visiting members who rarely come to the SCC, helping
needy people, preparing both children and adult for the sacraments, justice and peace actions,
self-reliance, action of solidarity, etc. “

SCCs and Peacebuilding

Over the years SCC members have carried out many peacebuilding actions. One Kenyan
example is what occurred in Tegeti Parish. In 2008 Kenyan layman and evangelist Simon
Rurinjah, a member of our Eastern Africa SCCs Training Team, was invited to the new Parish of
Tegeti (that had been divided from Longisa Parish) in Kericho Diocese, by Father Daniel, the
Parish Priest, to be a mediator in a dispute between the Kalenjin and Kikuyu Ethnic Groups.^x
This dispute involved the Kalenjin people burning the houses and stealing the cattle of the
Kikuyu people during the January-February, 2008 post-election crisis in Kenya. The Kikuyu fled
from the area and then later came back to their homesteads.

In April, 2008 with the elders (both men and women) present there was a week of mediation on
the parish and outstation levels with the families of the two ethnic groups concerned that had
intermarried over the years. On the last day seven SCCs gathered to participate in a forgiveness
and reconciliation ceremony. Prayers were said by members of each ethnic group. As part of the
compensation and restorative justice process, the Kalenjins rebuilt the houses and returned the
cattle of the Kikuyu as a fine for their original wrongdoing.

Nine months later in 2009 there was a special Reconciliation Mass with prayers in both the
Kalenjin and Gikuyu languages. Everyone in the SCCs participated in a communal meal of
reconciliation with both Kalenjin and Kikuyu food served and eaten by the whole community.
Everyone agreed that this violence and wrongdoing should never happen again. Until today
(May, 2017) the peace continues and the local people are forgetting the past disputes.^{xi}

SCCs in the 2017 Kenyan Lenten Campaign^{xii}

Over the years SCCs has become synonymous with the annual Kenya Bishops’ Lenten
Campaign messages and were involved in the Campaign’s preparations for Kenya’s crucial 12th
General Elections on 8 August, 2017. This year’s 2017 Kenya Lenten Campaign message was

based on the theme “Peaceful and Credible Elections: Leaders of Integrity.” The fourth week’s theme was specifically dedicated to “Elections.”

During my SCCs’ course at Tangaza University College, Catholic University of Eastern Africa (CUEA), Nairobi, Kenya we used the three steps of the "See, Judge and “Act” methodology/process in Week 2 (Second Sunday of Lent – 12 March, 2017) on the theme “Youth and Society.” The three SCCs in class followed these steps in the Lenten Campaign booklet:

1. Analyze and discuss the drawing (cartoon) on page 14.
2. Read the story in Step One (“See”): “The Story of Kambi Mawe Village Schools on pages 15-16.
3. Read part of the Situation Analysis in Step Two (“Judge”) on pages 16-17.
4. Read the Gospel (*Matthew 17:1-9*) and scripture commentary.
5. Answer two special questions in Step Three (“Act”): What is the role of the Small Christian Communities and society at large in nurturing and forming our youth in Africa? What platforms do African youth have to express themselves in the society?

At a Training Course on Election Monitoring and Observation held on 20-21 March, 2017 at the Students Leadership Center (Ufungamano House), University of Nairobi, the participants -- 30 diocesan coordinators of the Catholic Justice and Peace Commission (CJPC) --observed that the SCCs were well qualified as peace promoters for the country’s peaceful and credible elections “because SCCs are on the ground and very experienced in grassroots pastoral operations.” The participants believed that SCCs could influence peace promotion during this year’s General Elections, and hoped that SCCs would be involved this time around and preach and promote civic education and peacebuilding.

The two-day Training Course was jointly organized and facilitated by the AMECEA Justice, Peace and Caritas Coordinating Office and the Office of the Catholic Justice and Peace Commission (CJPC) of the Catholic Bishops in Kenya. National Executive Secretary for CJPC, Ms Beatrice Odera, thanked AMECEA for its readiness to share its election monitoring and observation experiences with the Catholic Church in Kenya. “This is sharing of available resources is the Catholic Church at its best,” she stressed. During the course, Antony Mbandi, the AMECEA Justice, Peace and Caritas Coordinator shared with the participants the AMECEA’s election monitoring and observation experiences in Zambia and Malawi. “These two case studies show how active and participatory the Catholic Church was during the general elections in these two AMECEA member countries -- Zambia and Malawi,” he explained, while hoping that the Catholic Church in Kenya would exercise the same peace advocacy role during this country’s pending General Elections.

SCCs Promote Peacebuilding through the Internet

A recent study on the SCCs in the AMECEA Region shows that there are over 180,000 SCCs in the nine countries. An estimated 45,000 SCCs are spread out in the Kenya’s 26 Catholic dioceses with the Machakos Diocese leading the way with over 5,000 SCCs. The SCC pastoral model is a new way of being church today. Social media is an integral part of the SCC’s new way of being church. For example, The Small Christian Communities (SCCs) Global Collaborative Website

(including the SCCs Facebook Page www.smallchristiancommunities.org) includes a free, online Ebook version of Healey's (2012a) print reference book *Building the Church as Family of God: Evaluation of Small Christian Communities in Eastern Africa*, which is regularly revised and updated. Through social media, this and other helpful resources can be accessed by the small and geographically dispersed SCCs. Healey's Ebook includes much material on peace and peacebuilding. A word search reveals that "peace" appears 446 times; peacebuilding, 16 times; peacemaking, 10 times; war, 383 times; violence, 45 times. Chapter 5 of the book is on "How SCCs Promote Reconciliation, Justice and Peace in Eastern Africa."

Some SCC members have commented on the peacebuilding work of SCCs. The SCC Website has an interactive poll with the question : "The best part of my Small Christian Community is: ..." followed by five choices. The poll changes every two months. Here are some of the answers (alphabetically): "Best placed Catholic Church organ to preach and promote peace"; "Elders take responsibility for reconciliation and peace in the community"; "Justice and peace concerns"; "Peacebuilding"; "Promotes reconciliation and peacebuilding."

There is a Sister Website called the "African Proverbs, Sayings and Stories Website" that had an interactive Poll on: "My favorite African Proverb of the Month on peacebuilding is..." followed by six choices. The most votes went to these proverbs: "Where there is a will, there is a way"; "Unity is strength"; "Leave bad things, talk peace" (a Kenyan Sheng/youth slang saying); "Where there is peace, a billhook (sickle) can be used to shave your beard or cut your hair." Youth Small Christian Communities (YSCCs) use various interactive social media such as Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp and online SCCs.

I conclude with the challenge of Pope Francis in No. 33 of *The Joy of the Gospel*:

Pastoral ministry in a missionary key seeks to abandon the complacent attitude that says: "We have always done it this way." I invite everyone to be bold and creative in this task of rethinking the goals, structures, style and methods of evangelization in their respective communities. A proposal of goals without an adequate communal search for the means of achieving them will inevitably prove illusory. I encourage everyone to apply the guidelines found in this document generously and courageously, without inhibitions or fear. The important thing is to not walk alone, but to rely on each other as brothers and sisters, and especially under the leadership of the bishops, in a wise and realistic pastoral discernment.^{xiii}

As more SCC members promote peacebuilding in Eastern Africa, we follow the wisdom of the African proverb: *If you want to walk fast---go alone! If you want to walk far--go together!*

Endnotes

ⁱ AMECEA is an acronym for "Association of Member Episcopal Conferences in Eastern Africa." It is a service organization for the 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 Conferences of [SECAM](#) (Symposium of Episcopal Conferences of Africa and Madagascar).

ⁱⁱ From our research many Eastern Africans find it very hard to connect the *Bible* to daily life in concrete, specific ways, that is, to apply the Gospel passage to concrete lived experience and the immediate local reality. We have discovered that this a skill that has to be learned, practiced and developed in training and facilitation workshops, etc. The SCC Training Handbook was developed to fill this need (Cimombo, et al, 2017).

ⁱⁱⁱ Some SCC members receive a weekly email message/Smartphone text message/Facebook message/What'sApp message/podcast with additional reflection material that makes the connections between the readings and events happening in the local community, in the Catholic Church and in the world.

^{iv} See the African examples in Wijsen, et al. (Eds.), 2005.

^v See the video series *Pastoral Cycle Methodology for Social Transformation*. Nairobi: Institute of Social Ministry, Tangaza, 2015.

^{vi} These five steps of the Pastoral Spiral are clearly described in Malawian Montfort Seminarian Peter Makina's Case Study of St. Louis Montfort SCC in Sitima Parish, Zomba Diocese, Malawi. Small Christian Communities Global Collaborative Website, retrieved on 24 June, 2013 at: <http://www.smallchristiancommunities.org/africa/malawi/242-using-the-pastoral-spiral-see-judge-and-act-process-in-sccs-in-africa.html>

^{vii} When a visitor comes to Eastern Africa and asks about our SCCs, I immediately say, "Come and see." That is, invite the visitor to participate in a typical SCC meeting or *Bible Service*. Alternatively, I refer him or her to: A written description of a SCC in an urban area. See the story "Visiting St. Charles Lwanga SCC" in Healey and Hinton (Eds.), 2005. Or to a written description of a SCC in a rural area -- see the story "Theresa's Old, Plastic Armless Crucifix" in Healey, 2013.

^{viii} At the Book Launch of the book *Building the Church as Family of God: Evaluation of Small Christian Communities in Eastern Africa* at CUEA in Nairobi, Kenya on 3 September, 2012, the following question was asked: "How is this new book different from the previous books that you have written on SCCs?" The author gave two answers:

1. SCCs as "a way of life" is highlighted. They are more than just a program or project or activity in a parish.

2. The use of the "See, Judge and Act" method/process has changed many SCCs from being inwardly looking prayer groups to become outwardly looking groups interested in justice and peace concerns. SCCs' active participation in the annual Kenyan Lenten Campaign is a good example of this shift. Using the Pastoral Spiral to decide on new actions is a process of reaching decisions by communal discernment. God actively participates in this process as seen in

the call in *Revelations 2: 7*: "Listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches." The "churches" are not just the ones of 2,000 years ago. SCCs are part of "the churches," such as the Local Churches in Africa and others in our contemporary world today.

There are many varieties of the "See, Judge and Act" method/process that is connected to the methodology of pastoral reflection and the Pastoral Spiral of reflection as pioneered by the Young Christian Workers (YCW), the Young Christian Students (YCS) and the Christian Family Movement (CFM). The Salesians Religious Congregation in Africa call this "Community Discernment" that is carried out in three steps: "Listening," "Interpreting" and "Way Forward." "Interpreting" (or "discerning" or "analysing" or "evaluating") is preferred by some because the English word "judge" is associated with the word "judgement" and "judgemental."

Catholic Charities USA explains how ministry responds through the theological methodology of "seeing, judging and acting": in other words, considering the social context of the particular historical moment, discerning the meaning with the guidance offers by Catholic Church teaching and deciding on the appropriate response.

The Holy Cross Sisters, an international congregation of religious sisters, who serve in Fort Diocese, Uganda call the process ERCA: Experience, Reflection, Choice and Action. Another terminology is: "inform," "form" and "transform."

^{ix} Sometimes the SCC members feel overwhelmed by the needs of their families and neighbors and have trouble choosing a specific practical action especially the "who" and the "when." The universal adage *one day at a time* comes in handy. I remember the story of a Kenyan man who coordinated the Street Children Project in Nairobi, Kenya. On any day 50 or 60 street children could be lined up to get assistance at his outdoor "station" in Westlands. They would ask for money, food, clothes, a school, a job and so forth. As they milled around his desk in a very noisy, even chaotic, atmosphere the man was asked, "How do you manage with all these children and all these requests at the same time?" "It's simple," he answered. "One child at a time."

Many mantras have been created from this universal adage and idea such as: "Climate action, one bite at a time." "One by one." "One at a time." "One thing at a time." "One step at a time." "One thoughtful step at a time." "One day at a time," "One home at a time." "Changing lives -- one child at a time." "One kid at a time." "One piece at a time." "One flipper at a time." "One paddle at a time." "One bite at a time." "Cut one branch of a tree at a time." "Fight poverty one family at a time." "Eradicate poverty one family at a time." "Rebuilding the church one parish at a time." "Rebuilding one's life one movement at a time."

This relates to the African Riddle: *How do you eat an elephant?* ANSWER: *One bite at a time.* This includes chewing slowing and digesting well. Meaning: do or tackle one thing at a time. And do it thoroughly and well. Then move on to something else. This is a "slow, but sure" approach and a different mentality than multi-tasking. To show the popularity of this riddle 14,879 people were reached, 416 people clicked "like," 191 people clicked "Share" and 26 people posted comments as of 11 September, 2015 on our African Proverbs, Sayings and Stories Website Facebook Page (<https://www.facebook.com/afriprov>).

The sayings *if you're going to talk the talk, you've got to walk the walk*, or *walk it like you talk it* are 20th and 21st century American alternatives to various old sayings which epitomize the notion that “talk is cheap,” for example, *actions speak louder than words*, *practice what you preach* and *put your money where your mouth is*. Pope Francis challenges us by the consistency of both his words and his deeds to reach out to the poorest and neediest in whatever ways we understand the meaning of these words. In particular, he challenges SCC members and others to reach out to “the marginated and those on the periphery of society.”

^x Our Eastern Africa SCCs Training Team is exploring the possibility of a Reconciliation and Peace Workshop in the SCCs of the Samburu and Turkana Ethnic Groups in Baragoi Parish, Maralal Diocese, Kenya.

^{xi} Based on Simon Rurinjah’s conversations with the author in Nairobi, Kenya on 23 February, 2012 and 24 August, 2012 in Healey, 2012b.

^{xii} Based on Njuguna, 2017.

^{xiii} Laurenti Magesa insightfully commented:

John Paul II’s papacy and the nearly eight years of his successor Benedict XVI (2005-2013) saw some practical retrenchment from the theological vision of Vatican II, something which, after Benedict’s surprise resignation on 28 February, 2013, Pope Francis his successor, has been trying to undo since his election on 13 March, 2013.

Magesa quoted in Mugambi, J., & Magoti, E. (Eds.), 2014, p.9.

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