

SMALL CHRISTIAN COMMUNITIES AS A PASTORAL PRIORITY IN EVANGELISATION

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Introduction

I am Rev Fr. Daniel Manzi, a priest of the archdiocese of Mbarara currently serving in Ngarama Zone, soon to be the parish. For clarity's sake in this presentation, we shall refer to it as a Ngarama Parish. The life of this Parish is based on the model of Small Christian Communities as a pastoral priority, as it was exposed to me and two other Priests of this Archdiocese in Nyahururu Diocese in Kenya with the help of His Lordship Joseph Mbatia, ordinary of that Diocese and the Priests of the 3 Parishes where we lived for a month in 2019 and the Christians of those Parishes. I am grateful to His Grace Lambert Beinomugisha, ordinary of this Archdiocese and Late Archbishop Emeritus Paulo K Bakyenga for the Opportunity they gave us to have a one month experience in the dynamics of SCC, of which I am very grateful to share with you in this presentation.

In this presentation, we shall see what a SCC is, how SCC developed, life in SCC, challenges in SCC and some proposals.

Our topic is, **SMALL CHRISTIAN COMMUNITIES AS A PASTORAL PRIORITY IN
EVANGELIZATION**

What is a Small Christian Community? The words small, Christian and community tell us what it is, namely;

A Small a group of people from families in the neighborhood who come together in the most basic and personal unit of the parish. The community gathers in the available homes of its members where through Scripture, prayer and conversation, they discuss their lives in the light of the gospel and share their Christian faith. Within such gatherings there naturally arises a connection of acceptance and support through which the members learn, in a personal manner, the meaning of being Church.

The early Christians met in homes to share the Gospel and “the breaking of the bread. Acts of the apostles 2:42 -47 *“They devoted themselves to the teaching of the apostles and to the communal life to the breaking of the bread and to the prayers. Awe came upon everyone and many wonders and signs were done through the apostles. All who believed were together and had all things in common, they would sell their property and possessions and divide them among all according to each one’s need. They ate their meals with exultation and sincerity of heart praising God and enjoying favor with all the people and every day the lord added to their number those who were being saved”* They were inclusive communities whose members, after the example of Christ, shared their resources and reached out to others in service. They were people of faith who welcomed others seeking to find a spiritual home.

Small Christian Communities today are widely recognized as significant expressions of Christian life emerging in a variety of cultures and contexts throughout the world. They go by many names: base ecclesial communities, Small Christian Communities, house churches in Kabale Diocese they are called Obutaagi (small branches).

How did they develop?

The idea came from the Bishops in November, 1961 the Zaire Episcopal Conference approved a pastoral plan to promote "**Living Ecclesial Communities**" (also called "Living Christian Communities"). These Living Ecclesial Communities were said to be the only way to make the church more "African"(the idea of malturation) and close to the people. So the very first Small Christian Communities (SCCs) in Africa started in DRC in 1961.

Then came the historic Second Vatican

Council (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Second_Vatican_Council) (1962-65). Small Christian Communities developed as a result of putting the communion ecclesiology and teachings of Vatican II into practice. The founding fathers

of AMECEA (<http://www.amecea.org>) (Association of Member Episcopal Conferences in Eastern Africa) and other Episcopal Conferences in Africa had a vision that focused on the communion (*koinonia*) and service (*diakonia*) aspects and developed SCCs as a concrete expression of, and realization of Family Model of Church.

The very beginning of SCCs in Eastern Africa can be traced back to the parishes of the Luo-speaking Parishes in Musoma Diocese in northwestern Tanzania in 1966. This began with research on the social structures and community values of the African Independent Churches among the Luo Ethnic Group. The first terms used were *chama* (meaning "small group") and "small communities of Christians" (forerunner of SCCs In Tanzania in 1969 the concept and praxis of SCCs that were then called "local Church communities" were first articulated as a priority in both rural and later urban parishes.

From 1971-1972 SCC were launched in DRC to meet the crisis of Mubutu's authentically campaign that had suppressed the missionary institutes and associations. In that time cardinal

Joseph noted that ‘‘the Living Ecclesial Communities were slowly becoming the ordinary places of Christian life, with the parish as the communion of the Living Ecclesial Communities.’’ This included emphasizing lay ministries and implementing Vatican II’s theology of laity, ‘‘the People of God.’’ Many Bishops later took on this model in their Dioceses at different times forexample in Mbarara they were introduced in 1976 by Late Bishop John Kakubi.

The AMECEA Study Conference on ‘‘Planning for the Church in Eastern Africa in the 1980s’’ in Nairobi, Kenya in December, 1973 stated: ‘‘We have to insist on building church life and work on Basic Christian Communities in both rural and urban areas. Church life must be based on the communities in which everyday life and work take place: those basic and manageable social groups whose members can experience real inter-personal relationships and feel a sense of communal belonging, both in living and working.’’

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

.What are their benefits?

- ❖ SCCs are places to live Christ's gift of reconciliation and peace. SCC members exchange a sign of Christ's peace with each other and with others in the spirit of solidarity, unity and commitment/responsibility to each other.

- ❖ **Reading and sharing the word of God**

“The Sacred Scriptures:” “Each member of Christ's faithful should grow accustomed to reading the Bible regularly ! An attentive reading of the recent Apostolic Exhortation *Verbum Domini* (http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_ben-xvi_exh_20100930_verbum-domini_en.html) can provide some useful pastoral indications. Care should be taken to initiate the faithful into the ancient and fruitful tradition of *Lectio Divina*. The Word of God can lead to the knowledge of Jesus Christ and bring about conversions which produce reconciliation, since it is able to sift “the thoughts and intentions of the heart” (*Hebrews* 4:12). The Synod Fathers encouraged Christian parish communities, SCCs, families and associations and ecclesial movements to set aside times for sharing the Word of God. In this way, they will increasingly become places where God's word, which builds up the community of Christ's disciples, is read, meditated on and celebrated.

- ❖ Fraternal communion
- ❖ Growth in their Catholic faith due to ongoing faith formation
- ❖ Increased sense of responsibility for their Church
- ❖ Promotion of unity among members of SCCs
- ❖ Increased interpersonal relationships, communication and interaction
- ❖ Increased solidarity in all situations of life such as, helping the sick, the elderly, funerals, parties etc
- ❖ Promotion of Prayer and Bible Study

- ❖ Has helped people to regularize their Sacrament life
- ❖ Conflict resolution
- ❖ Promotion of justice and peace

Relationship of SCCs, Parish and Diocese

- ❖ Small Christian Communities should be part and parcel of Church life in the parish and entire Diocese.
- ❖ They form the basis of the pastoral and administrative service

Composition

- ❖ A small Christian community should be composed of 10-15 families living in the same locality/neighborhood to the extent that one person can stand at a point and call those who may be getting late.

Leadership

- ❖ The leadership structure should be composed of five elected leaders: Chairperson, Vice chairperson, Secretary, Vice secretary and the Treasurer. other ministers each as those for youths, women men etc can be added.

SCCs Meetings

- ❖ All SCCs meet at least once per week on a day and time that is convenient to most of the members.
- ❖ The meetings take place in the homes of members on rotational basis.
- ❖ The SCC meeting takes between forty five (45) minutes and one (1) hour.

- ❖ There is a register of members
- ❖ Roll call of members is done at every meeting

SCC Meetings' Procedure

- ❖ Recitation of the Holy Rosary (Either before or after the procedure meeting)
- ❖ A hymn and an opening prayer
- ❖ Reading of the Word of God (normally the Gospel of the proceeding or previous Sunday)
- ❖ Moment of reflective silence on the proclaimed Word of God.
- ❖ Sharing on how one has been touched by the Scripture
- ❖ Spontaneous Prayers of the faithful based on the shared Word, highlighting particular and universal needs
- ❖ Discussion on matters of the SCC, announcements/Communication from the Parish (if any)
- ❖ Closing Prayer and hymn

SCCs and Liturgy

- ❖ Members of the SCCs should participate in taking readings and assume other responsibilities in the liturgy
- ❖ When there is Mass or a prayer meeting by themselves, preparation is made that involves: choosing leaders to take the rosary, readings and hymns, announcements, giving vote of thanks etc
- ❖ During the Eucharistic Celebrations, some members of the Small Christian Community are selected to lead the prayers of the faithful, that include praying for: the needs of the Church, Public authorities, salvation of the whole world, the needs of families, those

burdened by any kind of difficulties, the sick and the dead especially the departed members of the Small Christian Community.

- ❖ SCCs have an opportunity to animate Eucharistic celebrations on Sundays and on other occasions at the Parish or at their Outstation. They choose among themselves leaders for different responsibilities who do all necessary rehearsals at the Church, for example, reading at the Ambo, using the microphone, serving at the altar etc
- ❖ Small Christian Communities should have in their possession the following liturgical Items: The Bible, Catholic Prayer Books, Approved Hymn Books, An Altar Cloth with the name of their Patron Saint, A portrait of their Patron Saint inscribed on it, A Crucifix, Candles and Candle Stands. Some have an altar table and Chair for the presider.

Patron Saints

- ❖ Each Small Christian community should have a Patron Saint whose feast is celebrated with devotion. Arrangements are made by the Small Christian Community for a meaningful celebration and there is full participation of all.
- ❖ The order for such a celebration is as follows:
 - Arrival of members
 - Arrival of Priest
 - Welcome remarks by the MC
 - Mass
 - Blessing of the members and the home (including the projects of that family)
 - Status report of the SCC Sacramental life of the families & involvement in associations.
 - Introduction of the leaders of the SCC
 - Reading of the Life History of their Patron Saint

- Speeches
- Cutting the cake
- A word from the Priest
- Lunch
- Vote of thanks

- ❖ The mode of honoring a patron saint may take the form indicated above or a recollection, a picnic, or participating in a spiritual pilgrimage to places such as Tabor Hill, Our Lady Mother of God National Shrine - Subukia among others.

Some challenges observed

- ❖ Poor time management
- ❖ Occasional tensions and conflicts between families (rumors).
- ❖ Absenteeism of some members for the weekly meetings
- ❖ Poor commitment of some members to group causes
- ❖ Income inequalities that cause low self-esteem in some members
- ❖ Low literacy levels
- ❖ The threat of new sects/churches that are mushrooming
- ❖ Some members fear financial contributions and absent or abandon their active membership in SCCs.

Some suggestions and recommendations

- ❖ There is need to encourage men and youth to get more involved in the life and practices of Small Christian Communities
There is need to encourage our Catholics to take up more income generating activities to support their families and their church.

- ❖ More study is needed on how to counteract the possible negative impact of new sects/churches
- ❖ There is need for creating SCCs for the youths.

PROPOSALS IN REGARD TO SMALL CHRISTIAN COMMUNITIES

- ❖ Reorganization of Small Christian Communities to be between 8-15 families. All Catholic Christians of Mbarara Archdiocese, regardless of their socio-economic, political and cultural status and affiliations should be members of the SCCs in the neighborhood; namely, men, women, the youths and the children.
- ❖ Empowering leaders of Small Christian Communities. SCCs should be seen as centers of prayer and worship, and not confused or absorbed into civil or political/administrative structures of the community
- ❖ On-going Formation. On-going formation programs on Small Christian Communities for the Clergy should be organized.
- ❖ All Parishes should organize regular formation programs for catechists and leaders of SCCs
- ❖ All Parishes should develop pastoral programs aimed at promoting on-going formation of Christians. These may include; catechism classes at the level of SCCs, celebration of the Eucharist at the SCC without the intention of mobilizing funds, Celebration of feast days of the Patron Saints of the SCCs, deliberate home to home visitations by priests etc
- ❖ Small Christian Communities as a Course should be taught extensively and emphasized during the catechists' training at St. Kalemba's CTC

- ❖ As future priests, the seminarians should be more exposed to matters pertaining to the small Christian communities during their pastoral activities/ sessions
- ❖ Active participation by all is highly recommended.

WHAT SHOULD BE DONE BY SCC

- ❖ Weekly prayer meetings of Bible sharing
- ❖ Preparing people to get sacraments
- ❖ Visiting and praying for the sick members of SCC
- ❖ Inviting priests to administer the sacrament of anointing the sick
- ❖ Helping in mobilization of resources for the growth of the parish,Diocese
- ❖ Building unity of the SCC, SubParish and Parish
- ❖ Uniting families:The uniting factor is love among all.