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The Role of Small Christian Communities (SCCs) in the Implementation of Reconciliation, Justice and Peace in Africa

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In the *Lineamenta* (“Guidelines”) of 2009 Second African Synod that was published in 2006 Small Christian Communities (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 includes a questionnaire with 32 questions.

The 16th AMECEA (Association of Member Episcopal Conferences in Eastern Africa) 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.”

On 19 March, 2009 in Yaounde, Cameroon Pope Benedict XVI promulgated the *Instrumentum Laboris* (“Working Document”) 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.”

SCCs are mentioned in 12 times in the *Instrumentum Laboris* and twice in the footnotes. This is significantly more than in the *Lineamenta* in which "living ecclesial communities" are mentioned three times in the document and twice in the questionnaire. This 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. The AMECEA countries were in the forefront of these answers.

There are also two important footnotes on Small Christian Communities in the document. Footnote No. 2 of the *Instrumentum Laboris* refers to section No. 9 and states: “Though names may vary, the reality is the same: Communauté Ecclésiale 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 recent research shows that this method of Bible Sharing/Bible Reflection is very popular in SCCs in Eastern Africa.

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.” 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 the 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” that is particularly connected with Latin America where it has a different meaning than Eastern Africa. Archbishop Raphael 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.” It is also important to point out that the SCCs in Africa are mainly a pastoral model that is connected to the parish. CEBs or BECs in Latin America are often a social action model that is not as connected to the parish.

A key historical note. The generation of bishops who were ordained bishops in the late 1960s, 1970s and 1980s clearly caught the vision of SCCs and implemented it in their dioceses. One immediately thinks of deceased bishops such as Bishop Christopher Mwoleka of Rulenge Diocese and Archbishop Anthony Mayala of Mwanza Archdiocese in Tanzania and Bishop Joseph Mukwaya of Kiyinda-Mityana Diocese in Uganda. Also retired bishops such as Bishops Patrick Kalilombe of Lilongwe Diocese, Malawi and Archbishop Raphael Ndingi Mwana’a Nzeki of Nairobi Archdiocese in Kenya. They had the huge advantage of the rich discussion, dialogue and learning process of the three AMECEA Plenaries of 1973, 1976 and 1979 to develop a strong foundation of the theology and practice of SCCs. For the generation of bishops who were ordained bishops in the late 1990s and 2000s the experience is different and perhaps less intense. Still there are bishops like Bishop Method Kilaini, the Auxiliary Bishop of Dar es Salaam, Tanzania who gives this powerful personal witness: “I am personally a member and lover of Small Christian Communities. Every week I attend meetings [of my neighbourhood SCC] and participate in all the tasks.”

We can be proud of the achievement of SCCs in the eight AMECEA countries. Some years ago Cardinal Polycarp Pengo, the Archbishop of Dar es Salaam Archdiocese in Tanzania, participated in a SECAM (Symposium of Episcopal Conferences of Africa and Madagascar) Meeting in Rome. He tells the story of a bishop in West Africa who approached him and said that he had heard of the success of the SCCS in Eastern Africa and wanted to learn from our experience.

The AMECEA Study Conference on “Deeper Evangelization in the Third Millennium” took place in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania in July, 2002. Section 7 of the Pastoral Resolutions was on “Building the Church as a Family of God by Continuing to Foster and/or Revitalize the Small Christian Communities.” No. 43 states: “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.” It is clear that in most of the seminaries and institutes the importance of

SCCs is taught in the courses on Ecclesiology, Pastoral Theology and the Bible. Some places have specific courses on SCCs. Some courses have individual lectures and talks on SCCs such as "The Role of Small Christian Communities in Promoting Justice and Peace." There are also a variety of seminars and workshops on SCCs. A new development is the Postgraduate Diploma in Small Christian Communities at the Catholic University of Eastern Africa (CUEA) in Nairobi. This is a nine month programme after the B.A and the first academic programme on SCCs of its kind in Africa. A major breakthrough has also occurred at Tangaza College in Nairobi where the elective course on SCCs in the Pastoral Department has now been made a required course for all students in the School of Theology.

The 12 references to SCCs in the *Instrumentum Laboris* include:

No. 63 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. 90 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. 93 under "Church: Family for All Nations: "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."

The *Instrumentum Laboris* stresses that SCCs are sharers of the Word of God, but should have emphasized more SCCs as proclaimers of the Word of God – active agents in evangelization.

The recent praxis of SCCs in Africa contribute to the development of the theology of the Church-Family of God. SCCs help to 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). Kieran Flynn states: "It is in being transforming communities [of themselves and others] that SCCs realize their identity in the Church as Family Model. These individual [communities of] Church as Family have the task of working to transform society." 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.

The three year period from the publication of the *Lineamenta* in 2006 to the publication of the *Instrumentum Laboris* in 2009 provides an interesting picture of the life and ministry of SCCs in Africa. There are now over 90,000 SCCs in the eight AMECEA countries. Kenya alone has over 35,000 SCCs. There are many examples and case studies of SCCs that are involved in social and mission outreach and in promoting justice, reconciliation, and peace in Africa.

In January, 2008 Kenya plunged into a wave of riots and violence. Much of the unrest was fueled by tribalism and negative ethnicity. 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. A three member mediation team of St. Augustine SCC in St. Joseph the Worker Parish Kangemi, Nairobi visited other SCCs to promote the healing of their ethnic tensions and promote reconciliation and peace. They especially encouraged the SCC members to talk about their problems and feelings.

On a regular basis there have been Peacebuilding Seminars for the Small Christian Community leaders of Christ the King Catholic Parish in Kibera, Nairobi. For example, on Saturday, 7 March 2009 there were 32 participants from the SCCs -- 20 women and 12 men representing the larger ethnic groups in Kenya such as the Kikuyu, Luo, Kamba, Luyia and Kalenjin. They used two role plays on the causes of instability in the Kibera slums and problems facing the SCCs in the parish. Decisions and suggestions were made on how to implement what was discussed in the SCC. People should be honest about the difficulty with paying debts and not to betray trust by hiding. Also people should ask for forgiveness, be responsible, organised, open and reconcile with others.

In Kenya there were many inspiring, uplifting and positive witness and testimony stories. It is important to tell our African stories of justice, forgiveness, 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" on the African Proverbs, Sayings and Stories Website (<http://www.afriprov.org/index.php/africanstories-database.htm>) by theme and sub-theme one finds 38 stories on Small Christian Communities. 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. Two examples:

"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."

"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.

Other examples document the SCCs' failure get involved in the deeper issues of promoting justice, reconciliation, and peace in Africa. A concrete example is the tribalism and negative ethnicity in SCCs in Kenya after the post election violence. One would have hoped that the deeper Gospel values in the SCCs could overcome these ethnic divisions but this was often not the case. When asked about the reason for this discrimination and exclusivism, a catechist in Nairobi said: "The spirituality of the Christians is not deep

enough." In other words, we are challenged to promote a deeper evangelization in the SCCs where the SCC members are not simply catechized but genuinely evangelized on a deeper level.

As we compiled these various stories we discovered that the word order used in the process of peacemaking/peacebuilding is very important, yet varies. The theme of the 2009 Second African Synod is "Reconciliation, Justice and Peace." The theme of the 2008 AMECEA Plenary Assembly was "Reconciliation through Justice and Peace." The theme of the 2009 Kenya Lenten Campaign was "Justice, Reconciliation and Peace." It depends on the specific context and circumstances and the local interpretation. In general I feel that this is an ongoing process in which justice comes first and then this leads to reconciliation and finally to a more lasting peace. This is reflected in the name of the Truth, Justice and Reconciliation Commission in Kenya.

The last five years has seen the slow, gradual shift of SCCs in Eastern Africa from being small prayer groups that are inwardly focused to active small faith communities that are outwardly focused including justice and peace issues. This may be the number one challenge to SCCs in Eastern Africa. Many are still prayer groups and not concerned with the wider social issues. Many SCCs shy away from justice and peace concerns. One important reason for this positive shift is the use of a Pastoral Theological Reflection Process such as the "Pastoral Circle" in SCCs that helps the members to go deeper. This process uses the well known "See, Judge and Act" methodology starting from concrete experience. Now more and more SCCs in Africa are using various reflection processes and methodologies to pastorally and theologically reflect on their experiences, often using the tools of social analysis. This includes both identifying the new signs of the times and creatively responding to them with concrete actions. Two specific examples of the successful use of this "See, Judge and Act" process are the booklet in English and Swahili for the annual Kenya Lenten Campaign produced by the Kenyan Catholic Justice and Peace Commission and the ministry of the Jesuit Centre for Theological Reflection (JCTR) in Lusaka, Zambia.

I conclude with four recommendations:

1. **Promote** the use of the "See, Judge and Act" (Pastoral Circle) process in SCCs to reflect on the deeper issues of reconciliation, justice and peace in Africa leading to concrete action.
2. **Challenge** SCC members on the grassroots to face the disease of tribalism and negative ethnicity in their SCCs.
3. **Encourage** more courses and workshops on SCCs in the normal curriculum of the major seminaries, theological institutes and houses of formation of both men and women that include some kind of planned practical action and social outreach.
4. **Make** Bible Sharing/Bible Reflection leading to concrete action for reconciliation, justice and peace a central part of the life and ministry of SCCs.

See **Resources for the 2009 Second African Synod** (covering "Books and Booklets" and "Links to Websites). Updated: 11 September, 2009.