



Jumuiya Ndogo Ndogo Small Christian Communities in Tanzania

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A short history

After the Second Vatican Council (1962–1965) doors were opened and the Spirit of God brought a new Pentecost with the introduction of Small Christian Communities in Africa (Swahili: *Jumuiya Ndogo Ndogo*). In Tanzania, the Tanzania Episcopal Conference (TEC) in its 1977 Plenary Session reviewed the feasibility of setting up Small Christian Communities in the country as proposed and agreed upon in AMECEA meetings (Association of Member Episcopal Conferences of Eastern Africa). The bishops emphasized that it would be a matter of top priority for the region's coming years. They, therefore, drew up clear guidelines for implementation and agreed on elements concerning Small Christian Communities in the country. They proposed and established a certain uniform plan without ignoring possible differences resulting from the local environment and circumstances found in the varying and vast dioceses.

The present priorities in deeper evangelization lay emphasis on the development of vibrant Small Christian Communities in every parish and diocese. Right now, many parishes and dioceses can claim to have achieved much since AMECEA declared Small Christian Communities a priority in pastoral work.

Reasons for the priority

There are sound sociological and theological reasons for establishing Small Christian Communities in Tanzania. First, they square with the phenomenon of neighborhood. Frankly speaking, many of the activities of the Small Christian Communities are, in one way or another, an extension or perfection of neighborliness. This is very true of shared prayer, of care for the sick and of concern for issues related to justice and peace and the integrity of creation. In Africa, and thus in Tanzania, neighborhood is the immediate field of activity, the immediate context, of the Small Christian

Community. The Small Christian Community is not expected, in the very first place, to care for community at a higher or more remote level than its own neighborhood. In this way, it is the Church of the neighborhood.

Tanzania, like other African countries, is attempting to live an adapted christology and ecclesiology. It is attempting to live christology and ecclesiology developed and based on a correlation of the Church's tradition and the African culture. As such, the country seeks a christology that draws on African culture, speaking of Jesus as healer, Jesus as ancestor, Jesus as neighbor, Jesus as a suffering servant, in the sense of helping and sharing aspect, as well as Jesus as liberator, in the sense of transformer as far as justice, reconciliation and peace are concerned.

As for ecclesiology, Tanzania seeks one which draws on African culture, meaning one which takes into consideration the centrality of healing ministries, Church as a family of God, in the sense of considering family as an important unit in the African social set up, Church as communion, Church as servant, Church as participation and finally Church as liberation.

Aims of Small Christian Communities

The Small Christian Communities being the present pastoral focus, the dioceses aim at helping the members of these to live the Gospel in the actual context of their lives and to reach out in witness and service in their neighborhood and wider society. This targets at making the parishes and dioceses to be communities of believers centering their life and prayer on Christ and on the Eucharist, being a sign of His actual presence to all in society by compassion and love, showing specific concern for the poor and marginalized, ready to adopt to the changing needs of the people building on their traditions and cultures, and actively witnessing to Christ's love through these Small Christian Communities.

This is to say, it is the ambition of all dioceses to enable the Small Christian Community members to live their Christian commitment. For this, the Small Christian Community can be seen as a communion of believers meeting together and witnessing to the Word of God, trying to check and bridge their differences which may arise in day-to-day social living, economic



status and varied cultural backgrounds. Briefly speaking in the wider African context, it is a community which is living, hence “a way of being”, with a call to help, share and witness to its members in the context of African culture as referred to in the document *Ecclesia in Africa* from the African Synod. In this respect, the Small Christian Communities are again to be the way of living as well as of realizing African christology and ecclesiology. As such the Small Christian Communities aim is to help the parishes and dioceses in creating active participation and sharing.

Present situation

Now, almost throughout Tanzania, the structure of Small Christian Communities has taken root in parish centers, outstations, local village community centers and catechetical centers and religious institutions where celebrations of the Eucharist and the Word of God take place.

In big towns and cities, there is an additional goal. In such settlements, the Church ought to encourage deeper evangelization in these Small Christian Communities and help each member to feel at home in an expansive, understandable and acceptable culture. Mwanza, Mbeya and Dar es Salaam are some of the big urban settlements.

Let us take Dar es Salaam as a special example. This is the biggest city of Tanzania estimated to cover about 162 km² (62.7 sq mi) with a population of around four million. Christian presence can not be challenged – it is a fact – and Dar es Salaam itself is an archdiocese. Within the city center and outskirts there are 50 parishes with numerous outstations and about 2,100 Small Christian Communities. Most Dar es Salaam residents are from rural areas. Thus, mingling of peoples is daily routine. Observers note that the population is increasing by 8 % each year with approximately 850 people immigrating to the city from the rest of the country every day. Consequently, the Small Christian Communities of Dar es Salaam are a special mixture of ethnic groups and languages. In short, most Christians who are from outside Dar es Salaam have different outlooks and backgrounds depending on the situations and environment in which they were brought up. Obviously, mutual acceptance, tolerance and solidarity pose special challenges to all Christians of Dar es Salaam’s Small Christian Communities.

Today most of the Small Christian Communities in Dar es Salaam are pastoral models as in most parts of East African countries. We would like to underline that particular model developed within the parish structures where the parish is a “communion of small communities”. Paradoxically, Small Christian Communities in Dar es Salaam are found in three situations – urban, rural and rural-urban. The common urban model

usually groups people who live together in an apartment house or a row of houses or a worker’s housing project. By the common rural model we refer to a communion of extended families in the same neighborhood or geographical area.



Achievements in the dioceses

With the help and influence of Small Christian Communities many Tanzanian dioceses have achieved the following:

- In the meantime more than 10,000 Small Christian Communities have been established.
- Numerous invalid marriages have been rectified or regularized.
- Many broken marriages have been reconciled and reinstated.
- Considerable numbers of lapsed Catholics have been brought back to the sacraments.
- There is an encouraging increase in Sunday attendance and Church communion.
- There is successful mediation in many cases of injustice, quarreling and the like.
- Consolidation of unity has been brought about in prayer and religious instruction.
- There are an ever-increasing number of celebrations of the Eucharist.
- An increase in the celebrations of mass and Christian burial services has taken place.
- There has been an increment in teamwork activities such as meeting of costs of necessary needs of the priests and catechists, construction of churches and parish houses for the priests.



Small Christian Communities and Bible study

Taking into consideration the words of St. Jerome echoed over and over again: "Ignorance of the Bible is ignorance of Christ" Bible-study is taken seriously in the Small Christian Communities and people are encouraged to read and study the Bible and attend Bible seminars.



There is a book prepared by the Tanzania Episcopal Conference called *Najifunza Biblia Takatifu Hatua za Mwanzo* ("Learning the Holy Bible in its Early Stages") intended to help the members of Small Christian Communities to know, understand and appreciate the truth about the origin and the message of the Bible. In the book, readers also find different approaches and methods on meditation on the Word of God, among them the Lumko-method. Apart from using the Bible, as we have already mentioned there are seminars on Bible-sharing or Bible-study in these Small Christian Communities. Such seminars focus on informing the participants about the importance of knowing and being familiar with the contents of the Bible, starting with the number and names of the books therein.

In every diocese, the pastoral council recommends that all meetings in the parish should be opened by a reading from the Bible. This practice has been started and is being promoted everywhere. Bible-study sessions help all attendees to lead the other members in their respective Small Christian Communities in Bible-sharing which has become livelier and very much related to people's situations. What is more, Catholics are finding it more and more natural to carry their Bibles to church for their daily and Sunday liturgies as they can now recognise the readings at mass in their Bibles more easily than before. Again, more and more families are now using their Bibles following a challenge from non-Catholics who laugh at Catholics for leaving their Bibles in the bookshelves. People are encouraged to switch off their television screens and ask for silence in order to read the Bible in their homes just as

when silence is demanded by the head of the family to listen to the news on the radio or watch the news on the television.

Many Small Christian Communities are aiming at making the Word of God become alive and so let it turn into a true lamp at their feet (cf. Ps 119:105). With such eagerness reading the Bible, Bible-sharing and even finding cross-references are becoming easier. The goal to be reached is for the members of families, Small Christian Communities and the parish to evangelize themselves, thus enabling people to live the Gospel in action as the Word takes root in their hearts.

The Bible is an asset and a treasure and ought to be at the disposal of all families in the established Small Christian Communities. It must serve as a unifying tool across national and continental borders. In fact, this need is being answered to a certain extent in Tanzania as more than 250,000 Bible copies have been sold at subsidized prices in the recent years.

Shortcomings

The fact that nowadays a lull can be observed in some dioceses cannot be denied. Though the Small Christian Communities remain the backbone of the Church and a priority in the various dioceses, the first enthusiasm has, to some extent, eroded. Of course, arising problems in Small Christian Communities differ from one place or diocese to another, depending upon the urban or rural population. With people of different religions living together, there are pockets of both religious harmony and disharmony and the social infrastructure has many effects. Most people in a neighborhood are physically near to each other, but they can paradoxically live a very isolated and individualistic way of life.



Lack of Bible-knowledge poses a problem to many of the Small Christian Community members. The way they fail to read and share scriptural readings says all.



More than that, attendance is unbalanced. Recent observation indicates that something like 75 % of the Small Christian Community members are women. Men and the youth are struggling against rapid economic and social changes and challenges. Consequently, they lack time and interest to sit down with God and they seem to trust in themselves more than in God.

Some recommendations for curbing the shortcomings

Recommendations to be carried out through the Small Christian Communities include:

- Help parents to become more aware of and more interested in the importance of Small Christian Communities. They should encourage and motivate their children to participate in Bible-reflection and other relevant prayer groups. With great conviction and interest themselves they should send their children for preparation courses to receive the sacraments and to learn about the Bible.
- Train the youth on how to establish and coordinate Small Christian Communities and instruct them in special seminars and courses.
- Organize special courses and seminars on the sacraments, prayers and Bible-knowledge.
- Encourage men and the youth to participate in the life of the Small Christian Communities.

Despite the shortcomings we can truly state, in general, that in Tanzania, Christian Communities offer a promising future and a better Christian outlook. They are of great support to the parishes and dioceses.

The Year of Small Christian Communities

July 2007 to July 2008 has been declared "The Year of Small Christian Communities" in Tanzania. It is the thirtieth anniversary celebrating the date when they officially started to function (1977). The year has been officially inaugurated by holy masses said in different dioceses, parishes and institutions. To celebrate it, the Small Christian Communities are being motivated to continue functioning, the dead ones are being revived, the slumbering ones are being reawakened and, where none existed before, they are being established.

Conclusion

In conclusion, therefore, we must make Small Christian Communities active, the Small Christian Community meetings must continue combining prayers, scriptural readings, social action and cultural adaptations so as to bring the message of Christ home in the best way understandable and enjoyable by Tanzanians and other Africans. This will facilitate the duty of witnessing Christ among all human beings. With necessary cultu-



ral adaptations, the Small Christian Communities become part of their people, and are typical witnesses to the Christian faith. With serious scriptural sharing and witnessing to the Word of God based on the peoples' culture, by helping each other in all social, economic and spiritual realms for the improvement of the members' lives, not only would active participation increase but also the realization of the visions and aims of our dear Church would be carried out as far as more profound evangelization is concerned. ■