Small Christian Community Model of Parish Church

A Case Study of Training Small Christian Communities (SCC) and Parish Leaders in Kisumu Archdiocese, Kenya

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Overview

In their declaration in the 1973 Plenary Assembly in Kenya, the Association of Member Episcopal Conferences in Eastern Africa (<u>AMECEA</u>) Bishops said:

> *"We are convinced that in these countries of Eastern Africa, it is time for the Church to become really 'local'. We believe that in order to achieve this we have to insist on building Church life and work on the Small Communities". (AFER 16/1-2, 1974, p. 4).*

Indeed, in Eastern Africa people live, act, and associate on the level of smaller neighbourhood communities i.e., rural villages, or urban estate communities. These integral community settings provide unlimited options for the Church in Eastern Africa to insert her life and work into the daily occurrences of the People of God. The first goal of the AMECEA Pastoral Strategic Plan 2014 – 2024 was to promote new and deeper evangelization. The experience in the formation and training of SCCs and parish leaders discussed in this case study is anchored on training personnel to run SCCs." This is the first strategy of the number one objective "to revitalize and utilize SCCs as models of evangelization at the grassroots" detailed in the AMECEA Strategic Plan.

Thus, to actualize the strategy to train the lay faithful to effectively manage and facilitate their SCCs, content influenced by the local contexts of the SCCs in the specific parishes in the Archdiocese of Kisumu in Western Kenya was prepared. In the last quarter of 2021 and early 2022, three parishes took part in the training and formation of the SCCs members and parish leaders. NB. *The actual names of the parishes and the clergy involved have been replaced with pseudonyms to ensure the privacy of their specific identities.*

In their research published in the inspiring book *Gathered and Sent*, Lee and Cowan (2003) explain that SCCs leaders deserve focused pastoral formation. And that such leadership pastoral formation is a gift not only to the SCCs but also to the larger parish and diocesan church. Orobator (2013), in his paper "New Way of Becoming Church: Practice, Progress, and Prospects*,*" argues that the future of SCCs must include the interest of the ecclesiastical leadership and their commitment to the formation and empowerment of the lay faithful. Healey (2022), while discussing the AMECEA Study Conference of 1976 in his e-book *Building the Church as Family of God: Evaluation of SCCs in Eastern Africa* emboldens the systematic formation with attention to SCCs materials, tools, skills, and development of SCCs facilitators as a key pastoral priority. See <u>APPENDIX: 27 Online E-Resource Materials on the On-going Formation and Training of Small Christian Community (SCC) Members.</u>

These admissions and expansive personal hands-on experience at the local, national, regional, and international levels in the setting up, promoting, and strengthening of SCCs are the

essential foundation upon which this case study is premised. This involved the assessment of the existing SCCs' pastoral settings in the parishes through meetings with the parish priests and parish lay leadership. This informed the preparation of the training content to address the pastoral challenges identified during the exploratory meetings. The training on SCCs started at the sub-parishes on the basic level but upgraded to the final training for the parish council leaders. There was a total of 12 one-day SCCs training sessions at the sub-parish levels and three one-day training sessions at the parish levels. A total of 450 members and leaders of the SCCs (distributed between the three parishes, women and men, young adults, middle-aged and elderly) participated in the training. Constant follow-up was done through the parish priests and the leaders to determine any value additions or big wins arising from the ongoing training.

Identifying the parishes
Inspired by the strategic plan discussed earlier and the rallying call to promote and facilitate the setting up of SCCs across the AMECEA region, the AMECEA SCCs training team successfully actualized one such training in the Metropolitan Diocese of Kisumu in 2017 attended by 36 young priests. The Parish Priest of the St. Stephen Catholic Parish, upon the excitement from the knowledge gained from this training, was the first to call for the formation and capacity strengthening of his sub-parishes and parish leaders on SCCs. Thus, and following the sentiment of Lee and Cowan (2003), the church will thrive through perpetual renewal in a free decision of faith by the Christians in the midst of a secular world. The Parish Priest of the St. Clare Catholic Parish gathered the SCCs' training idea from one of the parish council leaders. Four years earlier, the lay leader had organized an SCCs training for his sub-parish. Even though the training (which took place in the church hall) was approved by the then-parish priest, he did not personally attend or officially open it. The Parish Priest from St. Aloysius Catholic Parish became aware of the training (in a meet-up with the Parish Priest of St. Clare) while the St. Clare parish training was ongoing and expressed interest in similar training for his parish.

Coincidentally, the Parish Priest of the St. Aloysius Catholic Parish attended a required postgraduate course on SCCs at the Tangaza University College in Nairobi during his pastoral theology studies. Hence, his aspirations toward the effective functioning of SCCs were planted then.

Assessing parish pastoral challenges for SCCs
The preparation and use of basic questions helped in exploring and evaluating the existing pastoral conditions in the parish in relation to the SCCs. This follows the sentiments of Chimombo et al., (2018) in the AMECEA Training Handbook for SCCs Facilitators *Strengthening the Growth of Small Christian Communities in Africa*. Such questions included but were not limited to:

- How many SCCs are there in the parish, when and how were they established and how are they located?
- How many members do they have, how often and where do they conduct their meetings?
- What do the faithful do during the meetings, what is the length of the meetings, and who facilitates such meetings?
- How are SCCs integrated into the pastoral structure of the parish and how are the SCCs represented on the parish pastoral council?
- Are there any consistent formation or training (for members and leaders) or general activities in the parish concerning the SCCs?

- What do they consider to be the biggest hindrance to the effective functioning and thriving of the SCCs in the parish?

The aim of these and additional explorative questions was to help identify pastoral challenges getting in the way of the setting up, promoting, and effective functioning of the SCCs in the parish. Of great importance is the fact that each parish and parish neighbourhood has its own unique culture and characteristics. And as reinforced by Baranowski (1988) in his book *Creating Small Faith Communities*, it is critical to understand the history of the parish, racial and ethnic groups, and types of neighbourhoods within the parish location. It is upon this exploration that a strategy on how to proceed with the formation and training options and the timing of the next steps for the SCCs and the parish emerged. It is imperative to consider the fact that there can never be a 'one size fits all' approach to training or formation on SCCs due to the individual nature of each parish.

Emerging parish pastoral concerns for SCCs
For obvious reasons, the outcome of these assessments varied from one SCC to the next and from parish to parish. Important to note is the fact that some of the assessed parishes were partly located within mixed urban and rural settings. While some of the sub-parishes were within peri-urban neighbourhoods and some (not many distances away) were in a rural neighbourhood with a homestead-to-homestead setting. As such, the outcome of the SCCs evaluation questions was wide-ranging. A great deal of the items documented below has been discussed in several forums organized to generate views that can help improve the conditions and functioning of SCCs not only in Eastern Africa but also in other countries of the world. These include but are not limited to:

- Scarcity of clarity on what is an SCC and what should happen in them.
- The misrepresentation about the number of members for each SCC, how often and for how long should the SCCs meeting take place.
- The continuously escalating parish and diocesan financial responsibilities that are overburdening the SCCs members.
- The social burdens of the individual and group members of the SCCs and the common socio-cultural impediments.
- The absence of inclusive and representative leadership and the non-use of a common language during the SCCs meetings remains a critical challenge in the SCCs with mixed ethnic and racial communities.
- The unanswered question about the absence of men and youth in the daily life of the SCCs.
- The challenge of leadership, leadership, and facilitation skills gap in the SCCs.
- Inadequate or absence of any training or basic theological formation initiative by the parish for the lay faithful and the SCCs leaders.
- The case of the 'diaspora membership' in the SCCs and the challenge of keeping to the recommended geographical neighbourhood memberships.

These and many other concerns not documented here came up very strongly during the explorative consultations with the parish priests and a representation of the parish pastoral lay council leaders for the three parishes. These questions and concerns remained significant during all the training sessions. Thus, becoming the foundation upon which, the training contents were designed and delivered as detailed below. The consultative sessions were concluded by the preparation of a training calendar for the SCCs leaders at the sub-parish and

parish levels. Important to note is that even though all the leaders of the SCCs were encouraged to attend the training at their sub-parishes, the SCCs members were also welcome to take part if they had the space to do so.

Starting with the local experience
The settings for the training varied from sub-parish to sub-parish. Some of the training took place at the sub-parish prayer houses (centres) or in the house of one of the parish or sub-parish leaders. Lunches were prepared at the training venues and the nearby houses of the SCCs leaders or members. For some of the sub-parishes, a packed lunch or snack sufficed. The training was offered on a *pro bono publico* but the leaders arranged for a token to cover the basic costs of facilitation i.e. video projector, facilitators transport, and other logistics. These arrangements were all made at the local levels by the leaders with the support of the parish priests and parish councils. The training content was based on the outcome of the consultative meeting discussed above and started with the exploration of the experience and understanding of the participants about SCCs. This is inspired by Baranowski's (1988) sentiments that the circumstances in the local SCCs and the wider parish environment must be factored into the plan and design of the lay formation and training blueprint while preparing the contents. Chimombo et al., (2018) reinforce that such training sessions and contents should be based on the concrete experience of the participants while the role of the trainer is to realign them with similar experiences and the existing historical, sociocultural, and theological underpinnings. The training areas at the sub-parishes level included:

- Understanding what an SCC really is and the centrality of the Word of God in SCCs.
- Who are the members of SCCs and how many members should make each SCC?
- Essential characteristics of SCCs – lectionary-based, linked to the parish as communion of communities, neighbourhood outreach, and ongoing training and formation.
- *'Churchhood'* of SCCs – koinonia, diakonia, kerygma and leitourgia.
- Leadership in SCCs – basic skills, characters, election, roles and duties, transition, etc.
- Leadership obligation to the SCCs, parish planning, and strategic direction,
- The leadership posture, teamwork, and the servant leadership model for the SCCs.
- The role of the SCCs, parish leaders, and parish priests in developing leadership skills in SCCs.
- The common leadership challenges in SCCs and their possible solutions. To further emphasize this, Orobator (2013) explains that SCCs are confronted with diverse pastoral and social challenges that ought to be understood in the local cultural, theological, and sociological contexts.
- The steps for the Bible-sharing meetings in the SCCs.

The training areas for the parishes level included:

- Mutual communication and conversation as the root metaphor of the SCCs – i.e., the life of an SCC is built around mutuality and conversation amongst the members and the environment to which they belong. And from the steward's point of view (not owning the SCCs but making it work perfectly for the sake of members and the church – Lee and Cowan, 2003).
- Two basic qualities of SCCs – "Gathered" and "Sent." It is like moving through the world with the "BIBLE" in one hand and "NEWSPAPER/RADIO/TELEVISION /SMARTPHONE," etc. in the other.

- Questions SCCs face – on focus, involvement of members, emotional sharing, behaviour regulation, the obligation to each other, and evaluating members of SCCs (Whitehead and Whitehead, 1992).
- Understanding the parish – presbyterium, lay associations, parish sustainability, etc.
- Catholic Social Teaching, identity, and nature of the Church.
- Parish leadership transition, challenges, and possible solutions.
- Roles of the parish pastoral lay council – training and formation of SCCs, parish planning, and parish strategic direction.
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It is important to emphasize that the design and presentations on these topics must be modelled and grounded on the existing local socio-cultural and spiritual realities.

Training approach

Even though a lot more information had been gathered during the parish explorative meetings, the training sessions were naturally started by exploring the knowledge and understanding of the participants. The questions and answer method were used in plenary, group work, and buzz groups. For example, please share your understanding of an SCC and what happens in them? How do you call an SCC in your local dialect? Please share any characteristics of the members of SCCs that you are aware of. What are the roles of the leaders of SCCs? What leadership challenges have you experienced in your SCCs? This was in line with the guidance of Chimombo et al., 2018 and Healey 2013. These, and additional probing and explorative questions in the plenary steered the learning sessions and participants' engagement during the training.

A very critical requirement for the training to ensure ownership and continuation was the participation of the parish priest in all the sessions of training. This worked very well for all the parishes however, in some instances, the parish priest had to leave for an urgent parish matter and returned immediately after such engagements were concluded.

Considering the ethnic, age, education, and cultural diversities of the participants, the training was conducted in three languages – Luo, Swahili, and English. The plenary and group discussions were organized deliberately to incorporate young adults, middle-aged, and elderly participants. At the parish level training, Google Documents was used to undertake a simple online survey on the questions SCCs face included in the content discussed above. That outcome was instantaneously shared with the participants adding to their learning on the positions of most of the group on the focus of SCC, involvement of members, emotional sharing, behaviour regulations, obligations to each other, and evaluation of members of the SCCs. The sessions ended with questions and answer moments and take-home messages upon which the SCCs leaders can ground the implementation of the lessons learned. The participants had to give their email contacts upon which the facilitator's notes were made available to them in a pdf format. Such notes formed valuable content for the participating leaders when training their own SCCs members. A copy of the steps for the Bible-sharing sessions (developed from the Seven Steps of the LUMKO method) was also availed to the members (in hard and digital copies) to help systematize their weekly SCCs' gatherings. The Seven Steps are found on pages 49-50 of the AMECEA training handbook for SCCs facilitators, Chimombo et al., (2018) *Strengthening the Growth of Small Christian Communities in Africa* that were availed to the participants who wanted to buy them for further readings.

It is important to end the training sessions with a brief evaluation by the participants and a 'sending off ceremony' by the parish priest. Now that the SCC leaders are equipped with basic

skills and tools to facilitate the effective functioning of the SCCs, they are encouraged to go forth and become model animators of SCCs in the parish and beyond.

Follow up

Lee and Cowan (2003), Healey (2012 and 2022), Healey (2017), and Chimombo et al., (2018), reinforce that, decisions on the implementation strategies for the learning outcome must include ideas on follow-up mechanisms. It is important to emphasize that planning for moments for reflection concerning any change that has occurred due to the actualization of the training, must be a critical part of the training at all levels of leadership. Such implementation strategies and evaluation mechanisms must equally underscore both the sociological and theological health of the concerned SCCs. Lee and Cowan (2003) argue that we must keep the disciplined rhythm of "reflection-action-reflection" to enhance our understanding of the world and the Word of God since a poorly understood world is as disastrous as a poorly understood Word of God.

While the dates for the in-person follow-up sessions are being explored, from telephone conversations, informal meetups, and visits with the parish priests and a few leaders, there are positive indications that the SCCs leaders are experiencing a great deal of motivation in implementing the training outcomes. For example, the use of systematic steps in conducting the Bible sharing sessions, prioritizing the Word of God in the SCCs meetings, keeping the meeting of the SCCs to one hour, and giving each member the chance to share how the Word of God is appealing to them and consistent plan for outreach to the needy in their neighbourhoods and beyond, etc.

Important points to emphasize during the follow-up are mainly:

- What has changed since the initial sub-parish and parish-level training?
- What additional training and formation areas are required and at what level?
- What next steps are required to strengthen and promote SCCs in the parish?

Lessons learned

This training occasioned a treasure-trove of lessons at different levels that are critical for visioning the setting up, promotion, and strengthening of SCCs now and in the future. A few of the emerging ideas are detailed below:

1. There is minimal understanding of what SCCs really are, membership limits and diversity, and what Christians should do in them.
2. The importance of sharing the daily life experiences during the SCCs meetings and the centrality of the Word of God in SCCs is still not well understood by the Catholic faithful.
3. Financial overburdens (i.e., solidarity fund, social support amongst faithful, etc.) upon the SCCs (especially within humble neighbourhoods) remain a hindrance to the promotion of SCCs in parishes without creative options.
4. The "sent" character of the SCCs (especially beyond the membership) is less understood by the members of the SCCs. A great deal of these SCCs are likely to be considered more or less of a self-support group rather than SCCs.
5. Active participation of the parish priests is key in any training of the lay faithful that seeks to shape and promote the functioning of the SCCs.
6. Inadequate leadership skills in the functioning of the SCCs remain a key impediment to the thriving of the SCCs in parishes.

7. Basic theological formation and training on group dynamics remain a missing lens for the SCCs members to read the signs of the times and exploit the opportunities available around them.
8. Any training or formation that seeks to improve the functioning of the SCCs in parishes must consider the local context in the planning and designing of content.

Conclusions

To claim authentically the title "SCC" is to integrate the *inner* (gathered) and *public* (sent) dimensions of SCCs. It is like moving through the world with the *"Bible"* in one hand and the *"Newspaper/Radio/Television/Smartphone,"* etc. in the other. Being in an SCC demands a high level of relationship and task orientation. Consequently, SCCs must provide a strong sense of belonging to members as well as be able to address questions of justice and mercy. Members of the SCCs must explore and realize their own power to change their living conditions by popularising action-oriented Bible reflections (Omolo 2005). In addition, mutuality and conversation should remain at the heart of the inner life and the public life of the SCCs. This can then awaken the question, of how can groups of Catholic faithful organize around a common good. And with this occurrence, a safe and favourable environment is created not only for the membership of the SCCs but also for their neighbourhood communities, and beyond.

The keenness to this SCCs training assignment on the part of the facilitator, the parish priest, and the parish lay leaders cannot be emphasized well enough. It must be a compelling desire on the part of the parish priest and the parish lay leaders to realize functioning SCCs in their parish. It is only such enthralling aspirations that can navigate the actualization of the planning and implementation of the training outcomes at the SCCs and the parish levels. The opportunity, warmth, and support that was availed by the parish priests and the parish lay leaders of the three parishes involved in the training cannot be taken for granted. The incomparable obligation and interest in realizing efficacious SCCs cannot go without recognition and earnest appreciation.

This was intensive one-day training for each sub-parish and at the parish levels. Over and above, is a recommended training for a parish team of facilitators for select members and leaders of the SCCs for not less than three days. These individuals must be selected from leaders and members of the SCCs who have shown great commitment to the setting up and promotion of SCCs, individuals who are inherently facilitators. These teams of trainers can ensure the continuation of training and formation at the SCCs and at the parish levels. Similarly, a team of SCCs trainers can be trained at the diocesan, national, and regional bishop's conference levels. Such teams of SCCs facilitators must be inclusive and should receive continuous capacity-building and refresher training.

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