

## **Promoting Small Christian Communities in Eastern Africa in the Light of *The Joy of the Gospel***

By Joseph G. Healey, MM

Pope Francis is very popular in Africa and his Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation, *The Joy of the Gospel* has received an enthusiastic response. The Paulines Publication Africa (Daughters of St. Paul) based in Nairobi published the first African English Edition in November, 2013 with a delightful cover photo of the pope embracing a little African girl. The book is No. 24 in “The Pope Speaks Series.” The book is very popular and now is in its Fourth Reprint with a total of 11,000 copies already printed. The exhortation has been translated into French, Swahili and other African languages.

Catholic in the Local Churches in Eastern Africa immediately began using the book in private and public prayer, homilies, talks, recollection days, retreats, workshops, seminars and classes in the constituent colleges connected to the Catholic University of Eastern Africa (CUEA). The pope’s pastoral, practical, down to earth style appeals to many people. The book has been very helpful and inspiring to members of the 120,000 Small Christian Communities (SCCs)<sup>1</sup> in the AMECEA<sup>2</sup> Region.

The AMECEA Pastoral Department states:

The promulgation of the Apostolic Exhortation, *The Joy of the Gospel* (*Evangelii Gaudium*) by Pope Francis, has challenged us to reflect on ways of proclaiming the Word of God joyfully to all. SCCs provide one of the most effective ways of proclaiming the Word of God through *Bible* sharing. This document “Logical Framework” is aimed at strengthening and promoting the AMECEA model of building the Local Church around SCCs. It provides a systematic structure for on-going formation, evaluation and capacity building

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<sup>1</sup>Small Christian Communities (SCCs) is an umbrella term used in this article and is the common expression for this new way of being church in Africa. Even some writers in French prefer the term SCC because it indicates the “scale” of the communities. Different terms are used on the continent of Africa. BCC means Basic Christian Community. BEC means Base or Basic Ecclesial Community. CEB means Communautés Ecclésiales de Base. CEVB means Communautés Ecclésiales Vivantes de Base.

<sup>2</sup>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).

in order to make the SCCs at various levels of the life of the Church to be very effective places for evangelization.<sup>3</sup>

I have tried to apply the Apostolic Exhortation *The Joy of the Gospel* to Eastern African SCCs. At present there are 18 references to the document in *Building the Church as Family of God: Evaluation of Small Christian Communities in Eastern Africa*. This free Digital Book or Ebook is regularly updated online on the Small Christian Communities Global Collaborative Website at:

<http://www.smallchristiancommunities.org/ebooks/47-ebooks-.html>

### **Case Study of a SCCs Workshop<sup>4</sup>**

One of the first workshops on the Apostolic Exhortation took place in Ethiopia. 35 people participated in a National SCCs Workshop on the theme “Promoting Small Communities in Ethiopia in the Light of Pope Francis’ *The Joy of the Gospel*” at the Galilee Centre in Debre Zeit, Ethiopia from 17 to 19 February, 2014. Participants included representatives from ten dioceses and various departments and movements including Pastoral Coordinators and CARITAS: 20 priests, 6 religious sisters, seven laymen and two laywomen.

It focused on key sections of Pope Francis’ *The Joy of the Gospel*. The workshop stressed integral holistic development and joint pastoral planning in the Ethiopian context. This was stressed in an interview with Archbishop Berhaneyesus Demerew Souraphiel, the Archbishop of Addis Ababa, who expressed support for the SCCs in Ethiopia.

The workshop was sponsored by the Pastoral Department of the Ethiopia Catholic Church in conjunction with the Pastoral Department of AMECEA. It is the third of a series of national SCCs Workshops in the nine AMECEA countries. The SCCs Workshop was facilitated by Father Febian Pikiti and Father Joseph Healey, MM.

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<sup>3</sup>“The Logical Strategic Framework for the Revitalization and Strengthening of SCCs as a Way of Being Church as Family in the AMECEA Region (April, 2014 – March, 2017),” Nairobi: AMECEA Secretariat Unpublished Article, 2014, p. 5.

<sup>4</sup>Links to reports on this workshop are as follows:

“ETHIOPIA: 35 People Attend the Workshop on Small Christian Communities,” *AMECEA Online Newsletter*, Issue 037, February 21, 2014, [http://amecea.blogspot.com/2014/02/ethiopia-35-people-attend-workshop-on.html?utm\\_source=AMECEA+Newsletter&utm\\_campaign=29c836c001-AMECEA+Online+Newsletter+6+5+2013&utm\\_medium=email&utm\\_term=0\\_85fa866553-29c836c001-6746297](http://amecea.blogspot.com/2014/02/ethiopia-35-people-attend-workshop-on.html?utm_source=AMECEA+Newsletter&utm_campaign=29c836c001-AMECEA+Online+Newsletter+6+5+2013&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_85fa866553-29c836c001-6746297)

“Promoting Small Communities in Ethiopia in the Light of Pope Francis’ ‘The Joy of the Gospel’” Small Christian Communities Global Collaborative Website, <http://www.smallchristiancommunities.org/africa/ethiopia/273-promoting-small-communities-in-ethiopia-in-the-light-of-pope-francis-qthe-joy-of-the-gospel.html>

Abba Hagos Hayish, CM, Secretary General of the Ethiopian Catholic Bishops Conference, opened the workshop and stressed that the variety of small communities in Ethiopia can help implement the recommendations in *The Church We Want to Be: Elements for a Common Vision of the Pastoral Action of the Catholic Church in Ethiopia* – a Pastoral Letter of the Assembly of Catholic Bishops of Ethiopia.

In the spirit of “learning by doing” participants formed three Small Communities with specific Ethiopia-related Patron names: St. Michael (two small communities) and Blessed Gebremichael, CM for three separate sessions in Amharic, the national language. On one day Evening Prayers reflected on No. 5 in *The Joy of the Gospel*: Gospel passages on joy and rejoicing. The workshop used the SEE – JUDGE – ACT reflection method/process on nine challenges in the Catholic Church and general society in Ethiopia including: “Poverty;” “Unemployment;” “Migration of young people both from Ethiopia and from the Catholic Church;” “Ongoing Formation;” “Church and Small Communities;” “Inter-religious and Ecumenical Dialog;” and “Marriage and Family Life.” There was lectionary-based faith sharing on the Gospel of the following Sunday: Feast of Our Lady of Mercy (*Luke 1: 39-56*).

Highlights of the SCCs Workshop were included a participatory and interactive style of teaching and learning focusing on evaluation, revitalization and the joy of evangelization and pastoral ministry; creating a Slogan and Song on the theme “The Joy of the Gospel is My Strength;” and an African-based DVD, *The Church in the Neighborhood: Small Christian Communities* that included Segment I on “Life and Activities of SCCs” and Segment II on “Services (Ministries) in the SCC.”

Recommendations for action in Ethiopia included:

- Train selected pastoral agents on *The Joy of the Gospel*.
- Plan and schedule Training of Trainers (TOT) Workshops on *The Joy of the Gospel* on the diocesan and parish levels.
- Translate *The Joy of the Gospel* into the local languages.
- Make a summary of the document and disseminate to communities and parishes.
- Create fora for discussion, reflection and sharing at various levels.
- Establish Small Christian Communities (SCCs) and evaluate and revitalize the *Mahber* (the traditional devotional small community or association) in the dioceses and parishes.

### **Key Passages in *The Joy of the Gospel***

During my SCCs Courses at both Tangaza University College and Don Bosco Utume Salesian Theological College in Nairobi, Kenya I used key passages from Pope Francis’ *The Joy of the Gospel*. Several classes began with No. 33 where Pope Francis explains the challenge of the New Evangelization very well:

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.

We discussed, reflected on and prayed over the meaning and concrete application of each sentence of this important statement especially how our African SCCs can be “bold and creative.”

The most important statement on SCCs is in relation to the parish in Numbers 28-29 with the key sections in **bold**:

The parish is not an outdated institution; precisely because it possesses great flexibility, it can assume quite different contours depending on the openness and **missionary creativity of the pastor and the community**. While certainly not the only institution which evangelizes, if it proves capable of self-renewal and constant adaptivity, it continues to be the Church living in the midst of the homes of her sons and daughters. This presumes that it really is in contact with the homes and the lives of its people, and does not become a useless structure out of touch with people or a self-absorbed cluster made up of a chosen few. The parish is the presence of the Church in a given territory, an environment for hearing God’s word, for growth in the Christian life, for dialogue, proclamation, charitable outreach, worship and celebration.<sup>5</sup> In all its activities **the parish encourages and trains its members to be evangelizers**. It is a **community of communities**, a sanctuary where the thirsty come to drink in the midst of their journey, and a **center of constant missionary outreach**. We must admit, though, that the call to review and renew our parishes has not yet sufficed to bring them nearer to people, to make them environments of living communion and participation, and to make them **completely mission-oriented**.

Other Church institutions, **basic communities and small communities, movements, and forms of association are a source of enrichment for the Church, raised up by the Spirit forevangelizing different areas and sectors**. Frequently **they bring a new evangelizing fervor and a new capacity for dialogue with the world** whereby the Church is renewed. But it will prove beneficial for them not to lose contact with the rich reality of the local parish and to participate readily in the overall pastoral activity of the particular Church.<sup>6</sup> This kind of integration will prevent them from concentrating only on part of the Gospel or the Church, or becoming nomads without roots.

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<sup>5</sup> Footnote 27 states that this section draws on *Proposition 26* on “Parishes and Other Ecclesial Realities” under “Pastoral Responses to the Circumstances of Our Day” of the 2012 World Synod of Bishops on “The New Evangelization for the Transmission of the Christian Faith.

<sup>6</sup>Footnote 29, *ibid*.

Msgr. Hubertus van Megen, the Vatican Charge D'affaires to Malawi, said that is striking that the pope devotes a lot of space in the apostolic exhortation to the importance of the parish in pastoral ministry, evangelization and mission.<sup>7</sup> This "community of communities" (or "communion of communities") ecclesiology is fundamental to how SCCs are a new model of church in Eastern Africa today. The parish is indeed a communion of SCCs. Pope Francis emphasizes the close link between SCCs/BCCs/CEBs and the parish and the rich pastoral reality on the local level.

It is significant that the pope distinguishes "basic communities" that are best known in Latin America with the more widely used name "small communities." They all actively participate in evangelization. It is worthwhile noting that our Ebook on "SCCs in Eastern Africa" has chapters with extensive documentation and theological reflection on "Promoting the Missionary Outreach of SCCs in the AMECEA Region" and "SCCs' Involvement in the New Evangelization in Eastern Africa."

No. 119 of *The Joy of the Gospel* states:

In all the baptized, from first to last, the sanctifying power of the Spirit is at work, impelling us to evangelization. The people of God is holy thanks to this anointing, which makes it infallible *in credendo*. This means that it does not err in faith, even though it may not find words to explain that faith. The Spirit guides it in truth and leads it to salvation. As part of his mysterious love for humanity, God furnishes the totality of the faithful with an *instinct of faith--sensus fidei* -- which helps them to discern what is truly of God. The presence of the Spirit gives Christians a certain connaturality with divine realities, and a wisdom which enables them to grasp those realities intuitively, even when they lack the wherewithal to give them precise expression.

New pastoral decisions, recommendations and practices are part of the *Sensus Fidelium* (Latin for "sense of the faithful") – the body of the faithful as a whole, the People of God) that should be recognized and valued by higher church authority.

In Eastern Africa Small Christian Communities are theologizing from their own experience and context, for example, SCCs that use the annual Kenya Lenten Campaign booklet, the Ndoleleji Research Committee in Shinyanga, Tanzania<sup>8</sup> and small communities that use the "See," "Judge" and Act" process as part of a theological reflection method in Zambia. Once given a start, these local groups make the connections in a process of participatory theology. Creative ideas emerge in the group reflection process. American theologian Father Robert Schreiter, CPPS points out that local theologies can be constructed with the local community as theologian:

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<sup>7</sup> Hubertus van Megen in a conversation with the author, Lilongwe, Malawi on 16 December, 2013.

<sup>8</sup> An 8:01 minute video on YouTube called *Opening a Door on African Theology and Music* portrays the life and ministry of this committee.  
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kf6HC67CbD8&list=UUPt7naU3SfuLxcr1O-Z4YLA&index=8&feature=plcp>

The experience of those in the Small Christian Communities who have seen the insight and power arising from the reflections of the people upon their experience and the Scriptures has prompted making the community itself the prime author of theology in local contexts. The Holy Spirit, working in and through the believing community, give shape and expression to Christian experience.<sup>9</sup>

This is the local African Christian community theologizing.<sup>10</sup> Local gatherings of SCCs in Eastern Africa that reflect on their daily lives in light of the *Bible* can be a real theological locus or theological moment. No. 89 in St. John Paul II's Apostolic Exhortation *The Church in Africa* under "Living (or Vital) Christian Communities" states: "These small communities reflect on different human problems in the light of the Gospel." Archbishop Anselm Sanon of Bobo Dioulasso Archdiocese in Burkina Faso emphasizes that "theology becomes again a community affair. African theologians must work with and within the Christian Communities."<sup>11</sup> Doing theology with local people on the ground<sup>12</sup> can lead to practical, pastoral solutions.

### **An African Theologian Reflects on SCCs**

The Dossier of the March-April, 2014 issue of *New People* focuses on "Small Christian Communities." The excellent lead article is by Tanzanian theologian Laurenti Magesa on "The Joy of Community in Small Christian Communities." He praises *The Joy of the Gospels* as magnificent and linguistically and stylistically very accessible:

The document has been described as Pope Francis' "blueprint for evangelization" in the present century. If the number of times some notions appear in the text is any indication of the document's fundamental intention, then the document is definitely about love (a concept mentioned 154 times), joy (109), the poor (91), peace (58), justice (37), and the common good (15).

Particularly for the church *in* and *of* Africa, these notions gain ultimate theological and practical meaning only in the context of community, precisely

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<sup>9</sup> Robert Schreiter, *Constructing Local Theologies*, Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1985, p. 16.

<sup>10</sup> The Peruvian theologian Gustavo Gutierrez, OP says that "the poor have a right to do theology." We can extend this to say that women have a right to do theology, youth have a right to do theology and African Small Christian Communities have a right to do theology.

<sup>11</sup> Anselme Sanon, "Press Conference," *The African Synod*, 5, 2 (March/April, 1994, p. 14.

<sup>12</sup> The Loyola Institute for Ministry at Loyola University (Jesuit) in New Orleans, Louisiana, USA has a LIMEX Program that includes two online specialization courses on Small Christian Community Formation: "The Inner Life of Small Christian Communities" and "The Public Life of Small Christian Communities." <http://lim.loyno.edu/onsite> The process of theologizing is important. The first course explores mutuality and the role of conversation, with its risks and potentials, in the inner work of Small Christian Communities. It explains how conversation is a root metaphor for SCC life.

of Small Christian Communities (SCCs). We say “particularly,” in reference to the African church, because it is in the Eastern African ecclesiastical region (known as AMECEA), perhaps more than anywhere else in the Catholic world, where, for close to half-century now, there has been a formal, conscious, deliberate, and extensive ecclesial and ecclesiological effort to promote and sustain SCCs as a foundation of evangelization. Which means that, in Africa, SCCs have not only been a theoretical idea but a practical mission of the church; here SCCs have enjoyed not only theological elaboration and endorsement, but concrete pastoral application.

Theologically or ecclesiologicaly, SCCs are now widely seen in African Catholicism as the “place of evangelization,” the context of “witnessing” to the Gospel of Jesus Christ, the place of Christian “hospitality.” SCCs are also understood as the privileged *loci* for the practical realization of the theological characteristics of evangelization that Pope Francis enumerates in his exhortation: namely, love, joy, peace, justice, and the common good. They are also the places where the evangelical virtues of faith, hope and charity, mentioned by St. Paul (in 1 *Corinthians* 13) achieve concrete expression.<sup>13</sup>

Later in the article Magesa adds:

What, therefore, has come from Africa in the form of SCCs is a blessing of the Holy Spirit to and for the church worldwide. The full potential of community called church in its evangelizing or liberating role can only be realizable if evangelization takes place in SCCs. This is where the pragmatic work of justice, reconciliation, and peace can be fashioned, informed by that supreme joy that can be found only in the Gospel, the good news, of Jesus our Ancestor. SCCs are the way of being church.<sup>14</sup>

SCCs in Eastern Africa are increasingly an inculturated model of church. This responds to Pope Francis’ call in Numbers 115-118 in *The Joy of the Gospel* under the section “A People of Many Faces:”

The People of God is incarnate in the peoples of the earth, each of which has its own culture. The concept of culture is valuable for grasping the various expressions of the Christian life present in God’s people... Through inculturation, the church introduces peoples, together with their cultures, into her own community, for every culture offers positive values and forms which can enrich the way the Gospel is preached, understood and lived... We would not do justice to the logic of the incarnation if we thought of Christianity as monocultural and monotonous... We cannot demand that peoples of every continent, in expressing their Christian faith, imitate modes of expression which European nations developed at a particular moment of their history,

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<sup>13</sup>Laurenti Magesa, “The Joy of Community,” “Small Christian Communities,” Dossier in *New People*, No. 149, March-April, 2014, 20-26, p. 22.

<sup>14</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 26.

because the faith cannot be constricted to the limits of understanding and expression of any one culture. It is an indisputable fact that no single culture can exhaust the mystery of our redemption in Christ.

Magesa expands on the inculturation or contextualization of ministries in SCCs in Eastern Africa:

The varieties of ministries particular to each SCC are a consequence of prayer. It is obvious, on account of this, that ministries in SCCs should, therefore, not be predetermined or streamlined to fit preconceived needs. It cannot be emphasized enough that felt spiritual and pastoral needs must be allowed to determine needed ministries in SCCs, and these will vary from one community to another. It is a variety that constitutes the vivacity of the church, as we have noted Pope Francis argues. Do we need ministers to the sick, the homebound, the non-Catholics among us, the young, the poor? Are there among us who can teach the *Bible* or keep accounts? Can they offer these services to other communities or the parish at large? Is it possible or feasible to establish a financial outreach ministry to less privileged communities around than ours? Scripture, the church's tradition contextualized in our experience, and prayer, will unearth endless possibilities of self-emptying service associated with human sinful but graced nature.<sup>15</sup>

Pope Francis emphasizes the importance of the *Bible* in Numbers 174-175 in *The Joy of the Gospel* under the section "Centered on the Word of God:" "All evangelization is based on the Word of God listened to, meditated upon, lived, celebrated and witnessed to." He affirms the importance of the practice of *Lectio Divina* in Numbers 152-153 under the section "Spiritual Reading." This confirms the central place of *Bible* sharing and *Bible* reflection in the life and ministry of SCCs. Lectionary-based faith sharing SCCs can be places of brotherly and sisterly communion that foster reconciliation and deeper sharing.

Magesa explains this challenge in an Eastern Africa context:

The life of SCCs must be rooted in Scripture – in studying it, seriously reflecting on it, internalizing it, and acting upon it. To spend only a few minutes casually reading and commenting on this or that passage of Scripture once a week, as is the custom in many SCCs, is totally inadequate. SCCs are theological communities and as such they must be scriptural communities. If "the study of the sacred page is ... the soul of sacred theology," as Vatican II tells us in the *Constitution on Divine Revelation (Dei Verbum, DV 23)*, then it must form the center of the life of SCCs as well...

Where does the SCC get sustenance for its growth and flourishing. Looking at the example of Jesus himself, we do come up with some essential requirements: they include listening to the Word of God, reflection on it, prayer, and action. The four conditions form a single movement in the dance of inculturation as evangelization in SCCs. All are necessary for the evangelization of the self (or, in this case, evangelization *ad intra*, within

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<sup>15</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 26.

one's heart to change personal perceptions and attitudes), and that of the neighbor (*ad extra*, or building up communion, the Reign of God on earth).<sup>16</sup>

Finally Mageza “thinks outside of the box” when he says:

From its inception as a community after the outpouring of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, this is what the church in the New Testament was – a communion of believers who were “of one heart and mind,” leading them to share everything they had (*Acts* 4: 32). To say, then, that SCCs constitute a, or the, “*new way of being church*” is a serious mischaracterization. More correctly, in SCCs, with the help of the Holy Spirit, the African church is pioneering in the rediscovery of the *original manner of being church*.<sup>17</sup>

### **Pope Francis’ Dream of a Missionary Option**

What is the way forward? No. 27 under the section “An Ecclesial Renewal Which Cannot Be Deferred” is a call to action for SCC members in Eastern Africa. Pope Francis says:

I dream of a “missionary option”, that is, a missionary impulse capable of transforming everything, so that the Church’s customs, ways of doing things, times and schedules, language and structures can be suitably channeled for the evangelization of today’s world rather than for her self-preservation. The renewal of structures demanded by pastoral conversion can only be understood in this light: as part of an effort to make them more mission-oriented, to make ordinary pastoral activity on every level more inclusive and open, to inspire in pastoral workers a constant desire to go forth and in this way to elicit a positive response from all those whom Jesus summons to friendship with him. As John Paul II once said to the Bishops of Oceania: “All renewal in the Church must have mission as its goal if it is not to fall prey to a kind of ecclesial introversion.”

If SCCs in Eastern Africa are truly a way of life and not just a program or project, they must be constantly renewed in the spirit and practice of these words of Pope Francis. This is part of the Catholic Church’s missionary transformation. There is the Swahili (Eastern and Central Africa) saying that is translated *to be called is to be sent*. SCC members are called to be disciples of Jesus Christ. Then they are sent out as missionaries and evangelizers to proclaim joyfully the Good News of Salvation in Jesus Christ.

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<sup>16</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 26.

<sup>17</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 24.

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