

SMALL CHRISTIAN COMMUNITIES

A Dynamic Christianity for Young People

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Catholic theology of communication has developed, in the last thirty years, largely from the foundational pastoral document, *Communion and Progress* (C&P), mandated by the Fathers of the Second Vatican Council in the council document, *Inter Mirifica*, no 23. The theological orientation of the document C&P is in turn based largely on the central documents of the Second Vatican Council, *Gaudium et Spes*, *Lumen Gentium* and *Dignitatis Humanae* and from the major encyclicals written at the time of the Second Vatican Council, such as *Pacem in Terris* and *Mater et Magistra*. The first eighteen numbers of C&P have outlined the theological guidelines indicating how the Church is to develop communications in its pastoral action.

No. 8 of C&P, for example, has given a basic pastoral definition of communication: "In the Christian faith, the unity and brotherhood of men are the chief aims of all communication and these find their source and model in the central mystery of the eternal communion between the *Father, Son and Holy Spirit* who live a single divine life." Again, in no. 11b, C&P states, "*Communication* is more than the expression of ideas and the indication of emotion. At its most profound level, it is *the giving of self in love*... Christ communicated to us his life-giving Spirit who brings all men together in unity." No. 18

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of C&P states, "A deeper understanding and a greater sympathy between men, as well as fruitful cooperation in creative work, these are the marvellous benefits that should come from social communication." One must quickly add that these are *normative* statements as the frequent use of the word "should" indicates.

Over the last thirty years there has been a relatively large outpouring of research and publication on theology and communication which has brought C&P to bear on many aspects of the Church's pastoral communication. One could mention a sample of the publications in India, particularly the book edited by Joseph Palakeel, *Towards a Communication Theology*.¹ The late Avery Dulles also made significant contributions to a theology of communication.² Also significant is the series of books on theology and communication published in the series, "Communication, Culture and Theology."³

The challenge is to translate the normative documents such as C&P into practical applications in the Church's pastoral action. Given the emphasis in these documents on communication as community, one of the prime areas of application is to the practice of Small Christian Community (SCC). The following article attempts to apply some of the vision of theology and communication to a model of Small Christian Communities based on the extensive current literature on SCCs but especially on my own experience with SCCs in Latin America and more recently in Africa and on the research with students in doctoral and MA theses in Africa,⁴ India and in the Philippines. The present article is not intended to be a comprehensive evaluation of the SCCs, analysing the problems that this approach to Christian community has encountered in some parts of the world. Rather, it is presented as an application of a theology of communication to one form of Catholic communication with priority for reaching young people and reaching those who are, in some way, estranged from our parishes and normal pastoral activities. Such an

¹Joseph Palakeel, ed., *Towards a Communication Theology*, Bangalore: Asian Trading Corporation, 2003.

²Avery Dulles, "The Church and Communications: Vatican II and Beyond," in Avery Dulles, ed., *The Reshaping of Catholicism*, San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1988.

³A sample of the approximately ten books published in the series are the following: Patrick Granfield, ed., *The Church and Communication*, Kansas City, MO: Sheed and Ward, 1994; Philip Rossi and Paul A. Soukup, ed., *Mass Media and the Moral Imagination*, Kansas City, MO: Sheed and Ward, 1994; Paul Soukup, ed., *Media, Culture and Catholicism*, Kansas City, MO: Sheed and Ward, 1996.

⁴Particularly useful has been the doctoral study of SCCs in Zimbabwe by Sylvester Igboanyika, *Effective Pastoral Planning for Building Small Christian Communities in Africa*, Doctoral Thesis, The Gregorian University, Rome, 2002.

application merits a full book-length treatment to provide a full treatment of Church documents, the current theological debates, and a full treatment, for example, of youth cultures. The best that can be done is to refer to the extensive publications on SCCs cited in the footnotes. The focus here is on a more illustrative presentation of communication strategies of pastoral communication in SCCs.

The starting point of this analysis must be one's experience with young people. Young people in the Global South are hungry for an action religion. In my living with groups of young people—counselling, retreats, teaching – I have discovered that these youth are particularly interested in five aspects of religious experience:

- Feeling deeply the biblical word of God, as if Jesus is speaking to them.
- Participatory sharing of their religious experience and their inspirations in life.
- A practice of religion that confronts the poverty, bad governance and other problems of the Global South, but as this touches their own personal problems of getting into universities, getting jobs and being able to help their families.
- Experiencing the transforming power of the Spirit in their own lives. There is something of the miraculous in this, but also something very pragmatic, finding the help of the Spirit in their own life ambitions.
- Discovering a community of mutual support and of loyalty of friends that they can count on.

All this they can and do discover in what we have come to describe as “small Christian communities” (SCCs). Although there is great diversity of the SCCs throughout the world,⁵ usually the focus is on five things: 1) deep union with Jesus through biblical reflection;⁶ 2) becoming consciously aware of the action of the Holy Spirit through communal sharing⁷; 3) learning to be a responsible, participatory Church⁸; 4) developing capacity for active participation in the

⁵James O'Halloran, *Small Christian Communities*, Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1996, 122.

⁶Bernard J. Lee, *The Catholic Experience of Small Christian Communities*, Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2000, 142-143.

⁷James O'Halloran, *Small Christian Communities*, Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1996, 159.

⁸Joseph G. Healey and Jeanne Hinton, ed., *Small Christian Communities Today: Capturing the New Moment*, Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2006, 125

Eucharist⁹; and 5) becoming part of an outgoing evangelizing team.¹⁰ Increasingly, I am inclined to use the term “small evangelizing teams” to capture the youthful dynamics of small Christian communities. The people who become involved are both evangelized and become evangelizers. The SCC is based on the premise that *every* Catholic is an apostle doing some form of team evangelizing work that emerges from the inspiration of reading and discussing the scripture.

Certainly not everybody in a parish will be drawn to participate in the SCCs. Most come with the invitation of a friend and often at a moment of crisis in life such as a sickness, death or major problem that has shattered the meaning of life. They come for the deeper reflection, to reintegrate their lives and regain some purpose in life. All the studies have shown that the growth of the SCCs is related directly to the degree of understanding and support of the parish priest and the skill of the facilitators of the meetings.¹¹ Some may attend for a while and profit much and then for many reasons discontinue. If the SCC is conducted well, virtually every participant will say that it is an occasion when they discovered their Christianity, really. The SCC becomes the moment of real Christian conversion. Many become active in SCCs over a lifetime because it is such a source of joy in their lives.

Parishes where a relatively large number are participating in SCCs will become the flagship parishes of the dioceses. Vocations of all kinds will flourish, especially *genuine* vocations to the priesthood.¹² The financial generosity will be notable.¹³ Eucharistic celebrations will be enthusiastic drawing crowds from all over. The communication and outreach of the parish will be significant.

⁹Amado Picardal, “BECs in the Philippines,” in Joseph G. Healey and Jeanne Hinton, ed., *Small Christian Communities Today*, Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2006, 120.

¹⁰Thomas A. Kleissler, Margo A. LeBert and Mary C. McGuinness, *Small Christian Communities: A Vision of Hope for the 21st Century*, Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2003, 235-256.

¹¹Kleissler et al, *Small Christian Communities*, Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2003, 173-194.

¹²In the author’s evaluation of the pastoral programme of the Diocese of Choluteca in Honduras in the early 1970s, the SCCs were flourishing largely under the leadership of the men in the communities, especially the younger men. The example of their fathers, leaders in the SCCs, inspired many young men to follow the vocation to the full priesthood in the diocese.

¹³For example, when the author gave training courses for the leaders of the SCCs in Honduras, the SCCs not only were the site of baptisms, first communions and marriages, but undertook supporting the parish generously.

Converts to Catholicism will be numerous. The witness of Catholics from these parishes in the public life of government and in the professions will be outstanding. But much depends on how the parish priest takes an interest in and supports the SCCs.

Too often small Christian communities have become passive prayer groups, reciting formulaic prayers. Often, too, they are catechizing groups in which a catechist exhorts them. In either case, the participants are relatively passive and led. In some contexts, unfortunately, the SCCs have become fund raising units for the parish. The prayer recitation and catechizing have their place, but the communication process in the SCCs should be something entirely different. It is evident that SCCs are something quite different from the typical parish organizations in that they are much more prayerful, participatory and biblical.¹⁴ More than other kinds of parish organizations, the SCCs lead to a deepening of personal conviction and growth in interior union with the Lord Jesus.

1. Deep Loving Union with the Lord Jesus through Biblical Reflection

First of all, the meetings of the SCC are essentially a sharing of the members' inspirations received in the reading of a biblical passage. The primary purpose is not "bible study", but to come to personal familiarity with the Lord Jesus in the biblical word, in biblical scenes and in the biblical mysteries. As we shall explain, an SCC meeting is ideally about 8 to 12 persons, and never more than 15. Meetings are typically held every two weeks or so, according to the convenience of the members. Although core members may be faithful in attending every meeting, it is not unlikely that some may come every other meeting or occasionally. A strong friendship develops between members and every meeting is a reunion of friends. Meetings are led by a facilitator whose main role is not primarily to instruct but to invite each member of the group in an orderly fashion to share with the group the meanings which he or she has discovered in the reading of the scriptural selection.

The dynamic of the SCC is focussed around four questions:¹⁵

(1) What do I understand that Jesus or the author of the scripture passage was trying to say to that audience at that particular time?

The facilitator invites each participant to state briefly the best answer to the question and encourages members to listen attentively to each

¹⁴Christopher Cieslikiewicz, "Pastoral Involvement of Parish-Based SCCs in Dar es Salaam," in Joseph G. Healey and Jeanne Hinton, ed., *Small Christian Communities Today*, Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2005, 99-105.

¹⁵This would be an adaptation of the Lumko Method. See Lumko Institute, *Training for Community Ministries Series*, Delmenville, South Africa: Lumko Institute.

other. The facilitator emphasizes that there are likely to be many different interpretations or answers to the question, and that the subjective perception and meaning is what is important. Each person in the group will bring out a particular detail and each person discovers something new, often influenced by the life context and experience of that person. As participants learn to read the bible in preparation for the meetings they will become more attentive to what is actually said in the bible and what is the context of the passage. They will also become more attentive to commentaries that are often given at the margins and in the footnotes of an edition such as the African bible.

(2) What inspirations or thoughts came to me about me personally as I read the Passage?

This is the classical "lectio divina," the second reading which has always been part of the Catholic reading of the bible. We read the bible over and over again and we always discover something new each time. Some people keep a diary and write down these inspirations. Always, these inspirations tend to be enlightenments about how God would suggest I respond to the life situations I am in. For example, if I am facing a crisis in my job, I ask how Jesus responded to such crises or how would Jesus suggest that we respond to this or similar crises. Although members would rarely mention a very personal situation, this kind of reflection is very helpful in beginning to ask Jesus to guide us in personal situations and to learn to follow the guidance of the Spirit in various life situations. Often, participants are much inspired by the personal spiritual experiences of others in the group so that they come out of the meetings of the SCCs with a great deal of personal satisfaction. Many people will say that they began to have a more personal, interior spiritual life through the SCCs. This is important for Catholic life in Africa which tends to focus so much on getting particular material favours such as jobs, marriage, childbirth, sickness, and other aspects of material success in life. This question deals with the typical life problems but this sharing focuses more on how we are to live the crises of life in a Christian fashion rather than asking God to be an instrument for our ambitions.

(3) What challenges does this scripture reading pose to us as a group?

This question confronts the group with how the message of the gospel emphasizing forgiveness or treatment of the poor with the real situation in which the group lives. Members of the group began to ask how they, *as a group*, can begin to give witness to the gospel in

their context. This question does not directly invite the group to a particular action, but points up the contrast between what is expected of them as Christians and what they are actually doing. This question moves our Christian morality from an introspective focus on the Ten Commandments and commandments that a particular person may feel more guilty about to how we are living our Christian gospel values. Assuming that the typical biblical passage for discussion would be the gospel of the week (which insures a complete reading of the New Testament over a period of several years), this question moves our ideals to the heart of Christian life and how Christians are contributing to.

(4) What are we going to do? How do we respond to this challenge of the gospel?

This is the most difficult step in the four questions because it moves beyond pure speculation or thinking *about* the gospel challenge to the point of reorganizing our time and life routines. In my life with young people, it is at the action level that our inspiration often stops. Young people are hesitant to step forward to stand out and become known publicly for their commitment to Christian values. Individuals, however, are inspired to take some action for example in coaching less capable students or working in youth centres to tutor youth in computer language or radio production. Once one takes the initiative, friends or others in the group join in. As the practical response develops, it continues to grow. With time, it may become institutionalized or receive institutional backing. Adults may become involved with visiting the sick, helping the jobless find jobs, coaching youth in sports or respond to many other demands.¹⁶

There are organizations such as the Legion of Mary which appear to be doing similar sorts of activities, but often they are not leading Christians to a deeper understanding of scripture and making a deeper faith response to the Lord Jesus. They get involved with rather routine activities such as visiting the sick, but they do not become real evangelizing teams.

2. The Primacy of Love in the Christian Experience

What the Small Christian Communities opens up is the deep three-fold experience of love as the centre of Christianity: (1) the experience

¹⁶In the author's evaluation of the pastoral programme of the Choluteca Diocese in Honduras, it was discovered that this fourth question, "what are we doing to do?" led the SCCs to establish community organizations, support literacy campaigns, carry out reconciliation of families feuding over political violence and support an agricultural education programme for small farmers which the author helped them to design.

of the Father's love for us in Jesus revealed in the awareness of the action of the loving Spirit in our consciousness and in our lives; (2) the experience of mutual love and support in the spiritual interaction of the community with the openness to others, the sharing of concerns and the desire to further the existence of others; (3) as an evangelizing team reaching out to others in our neighbourhoods, workplaces and associations to help them solve their personal and family crises and achieve what they instinctively aspire to realize their needs and talents. The experience of the SCC is the experience of God as love, and without this conscious growing in love in every sense the SCC cannot realize fully its significance. The SCC is a school of this love, not only in learning to love the members of the community, however transitory their participation may be, but especially learning to reach out to the people in our social environment with love and support.

Where the SCCs and many other contemporary experiences of Christian community such as Christian Life Communities, marriage encounter and many other revivals of Christian community begin to fall down is that they are too enclosed in themselves. The SCCs are a context for sharing our own life difficulties,¹⁷ but in the author's experience participants can become tired of encounters in which many do nothing more than pour out their personal emotional problems. The SCCs are not and cannot be a context for psychosocial therapy. The SCC is above all a deep experience of the love of God which is constantly creative, constantly reaching out to others and redeeming them. And if an SCC does not reach out of itself to become loving friends of the people around us, helping other people outside the community discover their human potential and also create loving relationships, the SCC is not fulfilling the Christian experience.

In my own experience of the sharing in a SCC, the high points have been the accounts of how a member of the group has been inspired to reach out to others to help them realize their human potential—helping other students, helping poor boys and girls, helping institutions such as schools for poor children become real schools, becoming involved with legal aid, bringing reconciliation in communities and a hundred other ways of dealing with people in the poverty and oppression of the Global South. Even more inspiring is when the group as a whole collectively begins to reach out to the poor. This is the answer to the fourth question in the reflection on the

¹⁷James O'Halloran, *Signs of Hope: Developing Small Christian Communities*, Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 14-15.

gospel: how are we going to respond to the challenge of the gospel by opening our lives to the pain, problems and aspirations of others.

The theology of the Christian experience of love has been brought out beautifully in Benedict XVI's encyclical letter, *God Is Love, Deus Caritas Est*. There (especially in part two) Benedict speaks of the Church as a community of love, but a community which is continually reaching out to those around the community and helping them to become what they can become, responding to the talents and abilities which God has put into every person and calls every person to realize as best they can.

In many ways Benedict's encyclical, *God is Love*, is bringing to fulfilment the promise of the two great documents of Vatican II, *The Dogmatic Constitution on the Church (Lumen Gentium)* and *The Church in the Modern World (Gaudium et Spes)*. Vatican I was the theology of a Church under siege from the militant anticlericalism of its time, emphasizing the marshalling of the people of God to an almost military defence of itself under clerical leadership. Vatican II dealt with this overemphasis on the hierarchical Church and proclaimed the Church to be "the People of God" who fulfil a mission in the modern world by "witness". One can argue that what was not completed in Vatican II is the emphasis on the great commission, to evangelize not by some form of persuasion but by reaching out in love and support to the people around us.

If the pre-Vatican Church was marked by its evangelizing spirit in the popular missions and international missions, the post Vatican Church has perhaps become too preoccupied with its own internal life and internal issues of liturgy, fundamentalism, breakdown of clerical life and withering of the spirit of the "active religious life". Many in the Church live in envy of the zeal of the Evangelical and Pentecostal movements. Churches in Europe and other modernizing countries seem to be dying and many wonder if the growth of the Church in the Global South is only a superficial opportunism born of their poverty and bad governance.

In many ways the SCCs in their many forms in different parts of the world, are an attempt to put into practice and live what the encyclical, *God is Love*, and the subsequent social encyclical, *Charity in Truth, On Integral Human Development*, are calling the Church to do. Let us now examine in greater detail how the SCCs attempt to do this.

3. Participatory Sharing of Religious Experience and Inspirations

Many younger people, especially those from a background of unemployment and economic insecurity, do not think that they have much to contribute to their parishes. The parishes tend to be

dominated by more elderly people and by those who have a higher economic status. Better educated people have more verbal ability and can easily speak out in parish meetings and in parish organizations. Today, many younger people have never had an acquaintance with priests, religious, or lay leaders and feel shy in the world of "Church". These are the voiceless in our churches, and we must give a voice to these voiceless people because they live in the midst of the greatest problems in the contemporary Global South such as unemployment, crowded universities with teachers who give them little attention, and closeness to aggressive violence. These younger, poorer people can tell us where the witness of a parish is most needed.

Youth and lower-status persons tend to be more at ease at the level of interpersonal and small groups contexts. Young people long to be allowed to participate, but often they have not had much experience in group participation. To get these voices to speak out requires great skill.

The single greatest obstacle to good SCC meetings is a leader who dominates and does not facilitate participation. The success of the SCCs in a parish is having well-trained facilitators.¹⁸ Leadership in the Global South has tended to be very authoritarian, putting people into dependency relationships. The Church of the SCCs brings a completely different style of leadership. Throughout the world (my most direct experience of this is in Honduras, Latin America) the SCCs have flourished where parishes and dioceses have good training programs for facilitators, especially training in non-directive, participatory leadership.

It is important to note that in the context of the SCC speaking out is not just expressing a personal opinion, but, since the context is prayerful reflection on a passage of Sacred Scripture, it is the expression of the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. The opening prayer at the beginning of the SCC will remind all present of this occasion of the Spirit when the person speaking out is a form of prophesying and sharing the guidance of the Spirit with others. The discussions of the SCC are a school of the Spirit, getting participants to sense the presence and inspiration of the Spirit and the urgent need to make this known to the group. This participants do with great humility, searching for confirmation that this is the Spirit in the context of their prayer and discussion.

Most people come to SCC meetings at the invitation of a friend who assures them that it will be a rewarding experience.¹⁹ Those invited

¹⁸Kleissler *et al*, *Small Christian Communities*, 173-194; O'Halloran, *Small Christian Communities*, 49-54.

¹⁹Kleissler *et al*, *Small Christian Communities*, 152-172.

are usually persons who have some degree of personal commitment to Christianity. The one inviting knows this and knows how to explain a bit beforehand how the discussions are developed. It is important that as soon as the person walks into the room the newcomer is welcomed by both the facilitator and members with relaxed, easy cordiality that speaks to the heart of the new person. As the discussions develop, all in the group make a special effort to make this a pleasant, rewarding experience for younger, more shy, newer members.

The leader of the SCC is a facilitator who speaks relatively little himself/herself. The main leadership exercised is to make sure that there is an inviting atmosphere of freedom to speak out, knowing that everyone in the group appreciates what others say and everyone truly listens to others. There are six things the facilitators must do, to create this participatory atmosphere.

(1) The facilitator does this by making sure that everyone, especially the more shy persons, are encouraged to speak out their own thoughts. The facilitator thanks or makes a brief appreciative remark for each person for their intervention, especially when they are hesitant or diffident. When another member of the group recalls with appreciation what someone has said before, the facilitator may reinforce this supportive remark with a very brief recognition. Inexperienced facilitators always tend to overlook some members of the group, especially the more inconspicuous ones.

(2) Discussion is encouraged, but controversy or domination by one speaker is avoided by the skilful facilitator who acknowledges the right of a dominant speaker, but with a smooth bit of humour makes it clear that the full participation of all must be respected. The group will soon notice that the facilitator is encouraging the quieter persons, and the group will cooperate in this. Participants learn to be facilitators by experiencing a good facilitator.

(3) The tendency in the early stages of a group is for everyone to speak to the facilitator and not to each other in the group. This comes from a long experience with authoritarian group communication. A major objective of the facilitator is to encourage listening to each other, encourage responding to the observations made by others, and encourage building one's own statements on what others have said. This response to the person-hood of others is a most important form of interpersonal empowerment. Participants discover that the meetings of the SCCs are the first time they are listened to, are respected and are taken seriously. Participants begin to dig deep into

their own religious inspirations and realize that they are gifted by God and that they have a gift from the Spirit of Jesus for others.

(4) A SCC meeting is not just sharing and discussion but it is a movement toward a continuously deepening collective inspiration and response to the scripture passage that leads finally to a conviction regarding how the group is called to respond to the gospel. The facilitator is aware that the shared inspirations are leading toward this response. The facilitator is extremely careful to let the Spirit carry the group toward a response but the facilitator also reminds the group that the Spirit is leading them forward. When striking insights are voiced that evidently impress the group, the facilitator can call attention to this. As synthetic interpretations are voiced, the facilitator notes this so that the group may feel that there is movement toward a response. When the fourth question comes, "How do we respond to this gospel," much of the response has begun to be apparent. Not only is there a rising conviction in a particular meeting, but there is a stronger and stronger set of convictions from meeting to meeting.

(5) The question arises as to whether the facilitator should be an instructor regarding fundamentals of Christianity, especially when the group needs information about the bible or the Church. The facilitator can offer information that is fairly common knowledge about the Bible, but it is good to suggest that those in the group read up on the question and bring the information in the group. This encourages the members to read more about the Bible or about the Church itself.

(6) The facilitator does steer the group toward active witness to the gospel by the questions that challenge the group. The fourth question is the most important because it calls the members of the group to respond in faith. Jesus, in all of his encounters with people, ends the parable or healing by inviting their faith that the Kingdom of God has arrived and inviting them to enter into the active process of building the kingdom. At this point the facilitator may want to more directly extend the invitation of Jesus to respond in faith and in action. Every gospel passage, every apostolic letter or Old Testament prophecy is a challenge to bring about a kingdom of love and service. A possible danger in the SCC is that it may remain a bible study group, a narcissistic experience of inspirations or experience of the warm fellowship of the group and not reach out to other people.

3. Moving from Inspiration to Collective Action

Unfortunately, the vast majority of Catholics do not begin to engage in any active witness to the gospel. The main reason is that they are

not part of any group that is engaging in such action. Many parish organizations in Africa are associations that gather for a mass together, to hear a talk to the large group, to make monetary or other contributions or simply for social occasions. There is no focus on apostolic action that will lead to the conversion of those around them. Organizations such as the Legion of Mary do apostolic action but this may not be based on the life context of the Catholics involved. Most Catholics see no particular link between their faith, their reading of the bible (if they do read the bible) and their life occupations.

The SCCs invite members to begin transforming their life activities into an action that builds the kingdom of God's love. A trader would begin to see buying and selling not simply as making money, but as providing services to others and solving problems of others. A trader might become aware of the difficulties his friends have in getting loans for their business, so the inspired trader suggests that they might form a credit union cooperative. This might lead to cooperative buying, cooperative marketing, cooperative transport. At times, it might be simply a help to a friend who has little experience in the occupation and cannot make the right connections. One of the first steps may be that a person is inspired to transform his or her own occupational morality, for example, by rejecting illegal or corrupt activities. This may be the step toward giving witness, often a very painful step that requires one to quietly reject unethical activities practised by virtually all of one's colleagues.

When the fourth question is being asked, "How do we respond to the challenge of this gospel?," it is better perhaps not to push too rapidly to an action which may be premature. Often it depends on a personal inspiration to take place or to plan how to reorganize one's life activities. It is better to allow personal responses to gradually mature according to the circumstances of life. It is my own experience as a facilitator, at the time of the fourth question, to simply go around the members of the group to have each one tell of their inspirations and how they have decided to give witness. A university student may tell how he or she has been inspired to help slower students prepare for examinations. A young law student may explain how he has been working in a legal aid office. Another may be coaching poor school drop outs in a football team. In every meeting there is some particularly inspiring description of a personal witness to the gospel. All of these actions emerge out of the context in which individuals live, out of their personal abilities, life occupations, or personal requests for help.

At a certain point a collective action may emerge. Some may decide to work together to visit the sick in the area. It may be noticed that

there is a great deal of conflict in the community within families or between families and the inspiration comes to more systematically work to bring about reconciliations. This may be the occasion for inviting an expert in conflict resolution to come in and give some instructive orientation.

4 Developing an SCC into an Evangelizing Team

A basic principle of the SCC is that one evangelizes in the life context in which one is acting every day. Studies have shown that the beginning of a person's entry into the Christian community is often simply an act of friendship, especially being helped in a life crisis by a person who wants only to help you.

One of the biggest problems for most parishes, especially urban parishes, is that the parish is not in contact with most of the parishioners. The priests and other parish staff simply do not have the time to go out and contact people. Some Catholics, when they move into a parish, find the parish church and become members. But many, especially younger people, who have not grown up in the more rural areas, may not contact the parish. People who have never had much close personal contact with parishes or priests, tend to remain marginal. In rural areas the catechist makes contact with everyone in the village. In the cities many people are moving about, and no one makes any effort to visit them and invite them to the parish. The evangelical churches are highly systematic in making contact with the "unchurched" and tend to draw in those who are marginal to other churches.

In many parishes of the Global South the SCCs have become the main instrument in systematic contact with baptized Catholics or others who might be favourable to the Church. Many SCCs in Latin America, Africa, India and the Philippines tend to be geographical drawing in to a SCC in a particular area. A SCC might be made up of the interested Catholic people on a particular street or sector of the city because it requires little travel and because people in the area often share similar interests and life routines. If the parish priest or others want to have systematic contact, they would ask the SCCs to make this contact. Again, this would be done in the ordinary life activities and life contexts of the members of the SCC. The members of the SCC simply make a point of getting to know and establish a friendly acquaintance with the people on one's street as far as this is possible. This may be a challenge because most Catholics in African cities tend to stay to themselves and mix only with relatives or people from their village.

In fact some orientation on how to establish a friendly contact with other persons may be a helpful preparation for more active members of the SCC. Members of the SCC are "men and women for others". The most solid basis of friendship is often the openness to listen to a person's problems in finding jobs, solving problems of sickness, getting into a school or getting one's children into a school or any of many other large or small life crises. Often what members of the SCC can do is to listen carefully to others. The emotional support may be what a person needs most. Members of the SCC may not have easy solutions for these problems but within the network of the SCCs of a parish there are often people who have the time and the experience for making contact with persons and agencies to help the people solve the problem. At times, just the opportunity to visit with a friend and get some orientation and advice may be very helpful. Every personal problem is always also a spiritual problem and often the most helpful thing a member of the SCC can do is to pray with the person and be ready to listen and pray together again and again. The SCC becomes a source of personal and family healing.

Although most people speak of their personal problems in confidence and expect that their problem will be kept in confidence, the "fourth question" period of the SCC when members share how they are witnessing to the gospel can be a time when members of the SCC can share how they are dealing with problems of people who are in need of help. At times, other members of the SCC can offer suggestions. At times, many members may be dealing with very similar problems. From these reflections together there can arise a group decision to focus on a particular problem such as joblessness and look for ways to get help to respond to this problem. So many major services of the Church or initiated by the Church have emerged out of these kinds of shared reflections.

Often the praying with a person seeking personal solidarity is so satisfying and healing that the persons respond to an invitation to come to the meetings of the SCC to reflect upon scripture and to share in the friendship of the group. As their healing grows, they also want to become part of a parish that is celebrating the fruits of discovery of Jesus.

5. Becoming a Man or Woman for Others

St Paul and all of the letters of Peter, James and other apostles speak so eloquently of the fruits of the Spirit, namely, becoming a person for others. One cannot say that one is truly in union with the Spirit of the risen Jesus sent by the Father unless one habitually reaches out in love and concern for others. The SCC should be a school of the Spirit,

continually responding to others not only at the interpersonal level, but in our jobs and in our participation in public life.

One of the fundamental problems in African culture is the lack of sense of social responsibility and sense of the common good. Young people tend to see their life and their education as simply amassing wealth and the power that comes from gaining more wealth. Becoming the “big man” or “big woman” is not so much of growth in public service as gaining power over other people. Families push their children toward amassing wealth for gaining power and the educational system is interpreted as a means of gaining wealth for obtaining power and ostentatious, conspicuous consumption. Few people are willing to become dedicated professional people whose main enjoyment in life is service to others. One of major fruits of the SCC is to counter this cancer which is eating away the contemporary society and to develop people whose lives are primarily a life of work and professional service for others.

6. Developing Spiritually Mature Members in Our Parishes

Typically we have many generous people in our parishes. They head up parish committees, participate loyally in the parish men and women’s organizations, and work in parish fund raising. Charismatic Catholics have a remarkable enthusiasm. But often the faith of these loyal people is little beyond their childhood catechetical instruction. Those who have participated in the SCCs even for a few years have a much deeper familiarity with the scriptures from their reading and discussion. They come to the Eucharistic celebration with a much deeper sense of communitarian unity because they have experienced Christian community more directly. They are much more attuned to the interior law of the Spirit because of the repeated question, “What is the Spirit saying to me in the scriptural reading?” They are much closer to the central Christian values of servant discipleship because they are in direct contact with scripture. This closeness to gospel values develops in them a theological depth and contemporary Catholic theologies in line with the tradition of Vatican II. Because the heart of the SCC is participation and dialogue, they identify with a participatory Church where lay leadership is more pronounced. They identify with the apostolic values of the parish because they are reaching out to people in their neighbourhoods and among their acquaintances.

8. Problems of the SCCs in the Global South

(1) Lack of participation of the men in the SCCs. Men do participate in many parish organizations, especially where the organizations

emphasize the typical leadership roles of men in the community. Often in many SCCs leadership roles are held by the few men involved but the majority of the participants are women. These SCCs tend to emphasize the typical devotional practices of women, but have less impact on the leadership structure of the community. In a study of factors influencing the success of SCCs in a diocese in Zimbabwe, it was discovered that where the active outreach of the SCC in the community touched on the roles of community leadership – improvements in community infrastructure such as schools, starting small micro-credit associations, improving recreational facilities for young people – the men become actively involved.

Participation of the men in the SCCs depends very much on how Christian life is defined in the parishes. If Christianity is defined largely as personal devotions and seeking favours from God in solving personal and family problems, then the activities of the SCC tend to be defined in this way. But if Christianity is defined in terms of how one conducts one's life activities – in one's job and professional life, in the development of one's local community, in public political life, in work for social justice and dealing with issues of poverty, in confronting the pervasive corruption in African life – then there is a role for the men. In the Zimbabwe study, where the SCCs focused on the role of the Church in the solving the problems of poverty and underdevelopment in local communities, the men were participating strongly.²⁰ It is this definition of Christianity that the basic document of the Second Vatican Council, *The Church in the Modern World (Gaudium et Spes)* proclaimed. If the men are not participating in the SCCs strongly, then this is a symptom revealing that the life of the parish and the diocese is not a Christianity of *The Church in the Modern World*. This is cause for deeper reflection, not only on the SCCs, but on how the Church sees the role of Christians in the modern world.

(2) A second major problem of the SCCs is that many Catholics do not see that their faith has an evangelizing dimension. Catholicism for many is at best attending Mass on Sunday, maintaining some personal prayer in life (especially in moments of life crisis) and trying to obey the Ten Commandments to some extent. Many Catholics do not see that their Catholicism touches on their daily life activities. They do not see their faith reaching out to help other people or to bring others to participate in the life of the Catholic Church.

²⁰Sylvester Igboanyika, *Effective Pastoral Planning for Building Small Christian Communities in Africa: A Case Study Investigating Strategies for Development and Maintenance of Effective Small Christian Communities in Mutare Diocese, Zimbabwe*, Doctoral Thesis, The Pontifical Gregorian University, Rome, 2002, 271-279.

(3) A central problem is the lack of support by the parish priest of the SCCs and of parish organizations in general. More fundamentally, many priests do not have a strong evangelizing spirit in their own lives and see their priestly role as largely dispensing the sacraments. These priests have little interests in bringing back lapsed Catholics to the faith and less interest in bringing the unchurched to union with the Church. This kind of priest has little interest in forming the SCCs as evangelizing teams.

Often, what is needed is a diocesan-wide policy regarding the implementation of the SCCs, and a cooperative approach toward SCCs among the parish administrators of a diocese. Also needed is a theological formation, especially in the area of ecclesiology, which emphasizes the communitarian and evangelizing role of parishes through parish organizations such as the SCCs.²¹

(4) A fourth factor in the weakness or absence of the SCCs is the lack of a strong youth ministry in parishes. The period of youth in one's life is the time of greatest idealism, hopes for changing the world around one and establishing life ideals. The period of youth is the time for developing a spirit of evangelizing outreach, in discovering a more authentic Christian commitment and cultivating desires for changing the society in which they are going to live. Youth thrives on groups, friendships, participation and action. All of this is at the heart of the SCCs. Most of the people most active in the SCCs have got the interest in a more authentic Christianity focusing on social and spiritual evangelizing in the early years in their lives.

7. What Kind of Support should the Parish Priest Give to the SCCs

A crucial factor in the good functioning is the careful supervision of the parish priest. This includes the following:²²

(1) A monthly meeting with the leading facilitators of the SCCs to discuss problems and progress of each SCC. This can also include some instruction by the parish priests of how SCCs can function as evangelizing teams

(2) The continual development of facilitators. For this, ideally, a diocese should have a leadership training programme and school of theology for lay people. In some parts of the Global South such as the Philippines the major seminary has a division of theological education

²¹Sylvester Igboanyika, *Effective Pastoral Planning...*, 263-270.

²²For a fuller explanation of the role of the priest, see Kleissler *et al*, "The Priest and Parish Staff," *Small Christian Communities*, Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1997, 195-206.

for lay leaders. It is good to have a multi-stage program. The initial orientation of prospective facilitators can start in the parish. As facilitators develop and show their perseverance in this vocation, they can be selected for ongoing training in participatory group communication, biblical studies, theology of the Church, spiritual counselling and whatever other courses seems important. Since facilitators are lay people with work in the parish, the parish priest should be continually selecting candidates for training programmes and monitoring their development as members of evangelizing teams.

3) The SCCs are based on the theologies of the Second Vatican Council, especially the ecclesiology of the Constitution of the Church (*Lumen Gentium*) and the documents dealing with the apostolate of the laity. Almost all leaders in the mission of the SCCs comment that young priests have a weak formation in ecclesiology, especially the ecclesiology of Christian community. The formation of priests is often an experience of Church which is not at all participatory, not stressing the interior life of the Spirit, more legalistic than biblically oriented and with little expectations from the laity other than they be generous financial contributors. Many of the promoters of SCCs have moved to direct courses in the seminaries on ecclesiology, the role of the laity or on pastoral communication.²³

8. The SCCs as Preparation for Participation in the Sunday Eucharistic Celebration

Some have the fear that the SCCs, with their emphasis on their internal group communication, will distract Catholics from identification with the larger parish community and the parish Eucharistic celebration. This could happen if the parish priest and other parish leadership does not integrate the SCCs into the parish life fully and make them an integral part of the parish evangelization. But usually the SCCs bring their members into a deep and integral participation in parish life and especially a deep participation in the Eucharistic celebrations and other aspects of sacramental life.

Firstly, the continual reflections on the scripture enable SCC participants to understand more deeply the announcement of the Word of God and the homiletic reflections on the Word of God. Secondly, because of the familiarity with the scriptural history of salvation and the centrality of Jesus' redemptive sacrifice on the cross, there is a deeper appreciation of the centrality of the Mass as the celebration of Christ's death and resurrection in personal lives and

²³Sylvester Igboanyanika, *Effective Pastoral Planning...*, 264-265.

the history of the world. The Mass is not just a time to ask God for “things” but to unite oneself with the salvific action of the Mass. Thirdly, participants in the SCCs are much more conscious of Christianity as a community of love and the Eucharistic communion as the sacramental unity of the community. Fourthly, since the SCC places emphasis on evangelizing outreach to people in love, the Eucharistic celebration becomes a celebration of mission to bring all people into God’s Kingdom of love. Fifthly, the SCCs are often a preparation for baptisms, first communions and other sacraments as an induction and preparation for the life of the Christian community. One could easily point out other ways in which the SCCs prepare participants for the Eucharistic celebration and a more integral participation in the life of the parish centred around the Eucharistic celebration, but these references are sufficient to indicate other lines of reflection on this question.

Briefly Summing up

As was briefly noted above the SCCs are an important part of the Church’s sense of contemporary ecclesial identity, an understanding of what the Church means in our contemporary socio-cultural-political reality. The Church’s sense of identity is often the result of a dialectical interaction with the context in which Catholics live which generates a Christian response to this context. This response contains in itself a new sense of ecclesial identity in that context. The sense of siege that the Church in Europe felt after the repressions of the Church after the Napoleonic wars and the aggressive secularism generated by the Enlightenment era pushed the Church into a highly authoritarian defensive reaction with an emphasis on a more enclosed Catholicism and a vigorous “militaristic” evangelization. This experience created an ecclesial self-consciousness expressed in Vatican I but also Catholicism as an alternative, almost separate way of life in its social teaching, strong sacramentalism.²⁴

The life of the Church in the one hundred years after Vatican I in which the Church became the symbol of a humanistic ideal in the dehumanizing modernization of the world generated a great self-confidence in the Church in which Catholics now were ready to integrate themselves with the world. The scriptural and liturgical renewal in the years before Vatican II generated a longing for a return to the communitarian, participatory Church of the apostolic times. All

²⁴Avery Dulles describes these dimensions of the pre-Vatican II Church in the chapter on “The Church as Institution” in his book, *Models of Church*, Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1976.

this created a new sense of ecclesial identity summarized in so many ways by the Vatican II.

Vatican II, the theological creativity of the mid-twentieth century, and the new pastoral experiences, however, opened the way for a new sense of ecclesial identity expressed, among many other ways of living Catholicism today, the experience of the SCCs. Here we are thinking of the great variety of forms of SCCs in the Church today – not just the groupings which formally are called SCCs.

It is clear that the SCC in its multiple forms have flourished especially in the churches of the Global South – Latin America, India, Africa, the Philippines, Southeast Asia. The theology of the Global South, with its emphasis on inculturation and contextualization, has summarized exceptionally well the new sense of ecclesial identity. A sign of this new ecclesial identity, as is argued here, has found expression in the letters of Benedict XVI, *God is Love* and *Charity in Truth*. However, these letters are only signs of a new theological flowering. One of the challenges to theology today is to articulate the ecclesial identity of our time – a major aspect of which are Small Christian Communities – and the new theology of communication that is expressed in these communities. Given the fact that the SCCs have flourished especially in the churches of the Global South, the theology of the Church in the Global South will certainly play a major role in generating a new sense of ecclesial identity in the Church as a whole.

The SCCs have summed up well the new forms of communication emerging in the Church – participatory, aimed at consciousness raising, from the grassroots up, dialogical, peace building. These forms of communication are generated by the vision in the first eighteen numbers of *Communion and Progress*, but point to a new theological articulation of the meaning of communication in the Church today.

Cardinal Cormac-Murphy, then Archbishop of Westminster in London, in his brief introduction to the book Edited by Joseph Healey and Jeanne Hinton, *Small Christian Communities Today*,²⁵ called Small Christian Communities the heart of renewal in the Church today. Cardinal Cormac-Murphy further referred to the SCCs as a “global moment” of renewal. It is up to theologians and especially theologians of pastoral communication to articulate what this global moment of renewal means and how we are to live in union with the 2000 year old history of the Church.

²⁵Joseph G. Healey and Jeanne Hinton, ed., *Small Christian Communities Today: Capturing the New Moment*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2006.