

## **Youth Small Christian Communities: Creating the Path by Walking**

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In the 1970s, the Catholic bishops of Eastern African countries discussed how to implement the teachings of the Vatican Council II while building a local church, truly African in character. Reflecting on the experiences of other churches, and a pilot program implemented in St. Charles Lwanga Parish in Lusaka Archdiocese, Zambia, the bishops tackled the matter in various meetings. Their conclusion was reached during the 1976 meeting of the Association of Member Episcopal Conferences in Eastern Africa (AMECEA), the association uniting Catholic bishops in the region. They stated that “systematic formation of Small Christian Communities should be the key pastoral priority in the years to come in Eastern Africa.”

Today, Small Christian Communities (SCC) are a reality in most parishes. In the past years, this pastoral set up has registered great success, but also experienced some setbacks. Much depends on the will of the participants to work and commit themselves to a journey of faith with fellow believers. In any case, a trend witnessed in most SCCs is that most participants are adults, with a preponderance of women. Men and youth are often absent from the SCC. This is surprising if one only observes that the majority of the population is made up of younger people. Where are the youth? Why do they not attend their local SCC?

During a workshop in Meru, in central Kenya, participating youth shared about their experience in SCCs. They said that they did not like to take part in SCC activities because they feared interacting with so many adults. The activities were also boring and the behaviour of adults put them off. Praying with these people did not seem important to them. In other words,

the present SCC setup is not conducive to attract younger people. The activities SCCs promote do not seem to have any positive significance on the youth.

A group of SCCs animators wanted to find an answer to these issues and provide the youth with the opportunity to live the *jumuiya* experience (*jumuiya* is the Swahili word for local community). Through workshops and other animation tools, younger Catholics in Nairobi and surrounding dioceses were contacted and helped to form Youth Small Christian Communities (YSCC). These are smaller groups of young people which are campus, school or parish based. They meet weekly to share the gospel and their experiences in life. YSCC wish to heed Pope Francis' challenge to be committed in words and deeds to reach out to the poorest and neediest. In particular, Pope Francis challenges SCC members to reach out to "the marginalized and those on the periphery of society." As committed youth, we decided to create the path by walking, because we want to reach all the youth and encourage them to meet and share the joy of the gospel.

The experience of YSCC has so far been positive. It has also diversified to respond to local needs. Here below, we wish to share three different ways the YSCCs in Kenya have developed.

### **Youth Jumuiya at Kenyatta University**

With a student's population of over 70,000, Nairobi's Kenyatta University is one of the largest academic institutions in Kenya. Among the students, many are practicing Catholics. In the main campus, there are nine SCCs in which students are the leading stake holders. Of these nine SCCs one, St Augustine SCC, is dedicated to University Staff. The other eight are an example of campus-based YSCCs. Each YSCC is dedicated to a saint: Dominic, Patrick, Francis,

Catherine of Siena, Michael, Augustine, Ann, Perpetua and Felicity, and Cardinal Otunga. All meet weekly in the evenings in various lecture halls that are booked at the start of the semester. St Dominic gathers students who stay outside the campus. St Patrick and St Ann are based in Ruiru Campus, which is a branch of Kenyatta University just outside Nairobi. Cardinal Otunga YSCC is dedicated to alumni.

These SCCs are also divided into smaller groups called “families”, each comprising fifteen members. They also meet weekly. For example, the community of St Dominic has four families: St Jude, St Patrick, St John and St Maria Goretti. St Patrick meets on Monday evenings, St John meets on Thursday evenings, St Jude and St Maria Goretti meet on Sunday evenings. In the Family SCCs people have a closer group where to share and reflect on the gospel of the coming Sunday. These family meetings are also the occasion to look into problems student face, and find a solution. Not surprisingly, these problems touch the daily lives of young people. Students want to explore matters of relationship, dating, and sex. Campus life often offers answers to these issues that differ from those of our faith. It is important to revisit the teaching of the gospel and of the church to support a life of witness. The question of job opportunities is frequently raised. Unemployment is a reality awaiting most of them at the end of their studies. YSCC members like to debate about job opportunities and income generating activities.

Other topics that spring up in the weekly meetings are issues of Justice and Peace; the danger of spending free time in gambling, wasting time and money, a reality much present in campus; discussion about social media, music and fashion.

### **Action, Challenges and Way Forward**

The YSCCs at Kenyatta University carry out various activities throughout the semester to bond with other YSCCs members and other university students. YSCCs members do charity work, like visiting the children's homes, visiting prisoners, visiting the sick in hospitals and the physically challenged. St. Dominic's members at times wash clothes at the House of Mercy Children's Home in Nairobi, Kenya. Another activity is liturgical animation. Every YSCC is given the chance to animate Mass every semester with dancing, preparing the prayers of the faithful and arranging the chapel for celebrations. All YSCCs organize visits to support some of their friends who have problems. If a friend is sick, some YSCC members go on behalf of the community to see him or her. A little contribution is given any time it is possible. When some of the members are unable to clear their school fees, a fundraising is organized. There have been cases when fellow students have been helped to pay their rent and their board.

Since life cannot focus only on spiritual matters, nor on charity alone, our members also organize social moments. A particularly popular one is the end of semester bash. It is a way to break the monotony of the campus life. During each semester, the members organize fun activities like dancing, playing football or having a meal together. University students are no different from other youth. Most are hooked up by social media. YSCCs thus try and use social media to spread the gospel. Daily readings are shared through various apps. There are Face Book Pages and every YSCC has its own *WhatsApp* account to keep in touch with everyone else. All these activities are supported mainly through members' contributions.

YSCCs also find some challenges. The model of church presented by the SCC style does not always allow meaningful collaboration with other Christian, and Catholic, groups. There are many Christian associations at the campus: charismatics, Evangelizers of the Word, dance troop, choirs, Legion of Mary and many others. Catholic members participating in these groups feel

comfortable belonging to one of these apostolic groups, they do not see the importance of the YSCCs. Other Catholic students do not want to participate in any group or association. They perceive the YSCC as a waste of time, so they prefer practicing their faith in other ways. Some students come from very poor backgrounds. They need to work during their spare time to pay for their fees, food and accommodation. They simply do not have time left for anything else. This hinders them from contributing to the activities of the YSCCs.

Another challenge comes from sheer numbers. YSCCs in Kenyatta University started on a low key. Now some of them have more than one hundred members. Splitting these *jumuiyas* to build smaller groups to encourage closer interrelation has proved difficult. Students resisted the move. The problem has been partially resolved by creating ‘families’ within each SCC to encourage a more personal participation.

Relationship with Protestant and Evangelical groups is not always smooth. One of the realities we deal with is the poor catechetical preparation of our members. Some are confused by the teaching of other churches and question their own faith. These tensions raise the issue of on-going formation of the youth, especially on the Bible and the basic tenets of the faith. A partial response comes from the Evangelizers of the Word. This is an initiative of the Kenyatta University Chaplaincy which aims at educating Catholic students in their faith.

All in all, the experience of YSCCs at Kenyatta University has been positive. YSCCs have filled a void, giving a space for prayer and spirituality to many students. The YSCCs are also providing a sense of belonging, a family of sorts that supports, encourages and accompanies the members’ lives.

## **Parish YSCCs**

Youth SCCS are present also in parishes. In Dandora, one of Nairobi neighbourhoods, there are six such communities. The first YSCC, St. Banabakintu, was established in 1995. Since it outgrew its capacity, it was later split to give life to St. Kizito and St. Louis Gonzaga in 1998 and 1999 respectively. Later on, new communities formed. Each YSCC has an average membership of thirty people. Besides regular weekly meetings, they meet once a month with their parents' communities to deliberate and plan for the activities of the coming months. Their meetings focus on reflection on the gospel and bonding sessions.

Dandora's experience shows that YSCCs are a good means to promote cohesion and peace amongst the youth. Also, they encourage team work through various joint youth activities, while nurturing talents through discussions, sports and games. YSCCs are also effective in passing along good, positive ethical points, supporting a Christian lifestyle and giving a bird's eye overview of Bible teachings.

Dandora, and other similar parishes, help us to realize the role YSCCs may have in the every day pastoral life in our parishes. YSCCs are places where the youth find a religious experience in their own dimension. They also discover their vocation in life. The youth will be always feeling better in YSCCs because of the language, approach to issues and the use of social media to tackle issues they feel important to their lives.

Clearly, YSCCs pose a challenge to parish life. Young people are a resource and a value. At the same time, one should not close his eyes facing reality. Many parishes are not equipped to work with YSCCs. This is particularly true because there is an increasing number of young parents in the YSCCs. They live issues and have questions that go beyond those of other youth. It is also possible to see the growth of tribalism within YSCCs. This is an unwelcome outcome, yet it is present and it must be addressed. In this present moment, when in Kenya we are living a

prolonged election year, political intolerance is also emerging. This coupled with ethnic division, may prove a dividing factor.

## **Conclusion**

All church groups have their pros and cons. It would be strange to see that YSCCs are all positive. Without closing our eyes to evident shortcomings, one should not forget that the YSCC experience is positive. Certainly, the youth sharing this journey feel that they are the church and act more responsibly towards church life and decision making within its communities. It is evident that the YSCCs encourage stronger interpersonal relationships, acceptance of the Word of God, review of life and reflection upon reality in the light of the Gospel. Thus, the youth become agents of evangelization, they promote the use of the Bible among the youth, and open new pastoral paths to reach other youth.

YSCCs are places where the youth can safely meet, focusing on experiences and real life issues that are important for their growth. They can talk about sex, boy/girl relationships, media, gambling and employment knowing that they will not be judged but guided instead. Through YSCCs, members are encouraged to be responsible and also take responsibilities. Finally, in a deeply divided society, YSCCs are agents of reconciliation and both a path and a place of reconciliation.

The present experience with YSCCs shows that they are good tools for church life and evangelization. If we had more SCCs dedicated to the lives and needs of younger people, we surely would be able to address their issues – religious and social – in a way conducive to their growth. This means that pastoral offices countrywide, at diocesan and parish level, should offer more time to the establishment of such communities. Some tools are available (for instance, see:

[www.smallchristiancommunities.org](http://www.smallchristiancommunities.org) and [www.com/www.smallchristiancommunities.org](http://www.com/www.smallchristiancommunities.org)) and more can be developed. Establishing YSCCs in all parishes could be a step forward towards linking youth's lives to the life of the church.