

10. Stimulating Change in Local Contexts

Richard N. Rwiza

Small Christian Communities (SCCs) as a new model of the Church are a pastoral priority in Eastern Africa and the world over. They are an expression of the existing praxis of the local Church. SCCs can serve a key role in a pastoral strategy for promoting intercultural theological ethics. Theological Ethics is a way of reflection that considers the human aspiration to understand the will of God in human life. When using the Bible, SCCs have to take into account the historical and time-conditioned nature of the text on the one hand, and yet acknowledge the normative value of God's Word for the Church of every age on the other. SCCs stimulate change by sharing life experiences motivated by biblical reflection. Doing intercultural theological ethics implies being engaged in dialogue. Let us consider the distinctive role of SCCs in stimulating change by focusing on the practical life of their members.

From Pastoral to Practical Theology

Intercultural theological ethics focuses on the existing praxis of the Church. This implies a movement from pastoral to practical theology.¹ According to Rodrigo Mejia Saldarriaga, pastoral theology is referred to as practical theology for various reasons. First, its material object is the praxis of the Church in the heart of a particular human situation. Pastoral activity is a matter of the whole life and activities of the Church in the world. It is not restricted to the activities of the clergy or the liturgy. Hence, in promoting intercultural theological ethics, it is not enough to affirm that "Jesus is the answer" if we ignore the (burning) questions posed in SCCs.

¹¹ Rodrigo Mejia Saldarriaga, "From Pastoral to Practical Theology," *Good Shepherd: A Journal of Pastoral Theology* 1, no. 1 (2016): 28–41.

In this context, we are dealing with a (pastoral) theology that is born out of praxis and it deserves the name practical. Mejia Saldarriaga writes that “the formal object of Pastoral Theology, or its good, is the analysis of those situations of the Church in the light of Faith and Tradition in order to propose an ever adequate pastoral praxis.”² By implication, the focus is not on the pastor but on the faithful for whom the pastor renders service. SCCs serve as spaces for engaging with the practical realities of life as experienced by believers and are thus a pastoral priority.

Practical theology “begins with a base in practice, moves towards theoretical reflection, and then returns to practice.”³ It attempts to make sense of the life of faith in a particular culture. This is done by narrowing the gap between God and faith on one hand, and the lived reality in the specific culture on the other. It is an issue of the hermeneutics of lived religion, such as that which is experienced in SCCs. It is a theory of text interpretation and is concerned with the critical development of text interpretation. It is basically linked to the human aspiration to understand the will of God in human life.

In the context of SCCs, practical theology is deeply committed to living a life of faith, rather than intercultural or disciplinary reflection.⁴ Practical theology focuses on the ministry and less on intellectual reflection that is done in academic institutions. “Theology in Africa is engaged with African contextual life issues which result in multiple African theologies, rather than one type of theology.”⁵ Such a focus on context leads to a theology of contextualization. A Small Christian Community is fundamentally a communion of families; this is its context. It is in this setting that people experience God’s Word and have an opportunity to share the Eucharist. They share their time, possessions, and meals in the theological context of solidarity. In SCCs, the Gospel is contextualized.

² Mejia Saldarriaga, “From Pastoral to Practical Theology,” 30.

³ Vhumani Magezi, “Practical Theology in Africa: Situation, Approaches, Framework and Agenda Proposition,” *International Journal of Practical Theology* 23, no. 1 (2019): 119.

⁴ Magezi, “Practical Theology in Africa,” 117.

⁵ Magezi, “Practical Theology in Africa,” 117.

Theological Contextualization

Intercultural theological ethics is linked to theological contextualization—that is, the quest to localize or find the situational meaning of a metanarrative. This can be seen as a process of inculturation. As Daniel Dei observes, “Contextualization of the Gospel is a missiological necessity.”⁶ It is a matter of theologizing while being aware of the context. As Peter Ignatius Gichure notes, “Doing contextual theology is not a choice but an imperative.”⁷ Intercultural theological ethics is an attempt to combine many apparently contradictory positions into a form that can be understood and accepted by most people in the Church. This is done while remaining truthful and faithful to the Christian tradition. According to Lisa Sowle Cahill, “Catholic social ethics offers a tradition of political practices, Church teaching, and interpretation theologies that explicitly connects the praxis of the reign of God with public analysis and participation.”⁸ In this context, contextual theology is a process of making the Word of God incarnate in a given community. Such a setting can be that of a Small Christian Community. It is a context for doing intercultural theology, which is a means of interpretation, a method of doing theology. In this vein, A. Dulles notes, “The present helps us to liberate ourselves from the tyranny of the past, and the past to escape from the idolatry of the present.”⁹

Theological contextualization in Africa seeks to make the message of Christianity meaningful within the comprehensive worldview of the African milieu. It takes into account the local language and symbolism of the culture used in SCCs. Daniel Dei writes, “Theological contextualization’

⁶ Daniel Dei, “An Integrated Approach to Theological Contextualization in Africa,” *Currents in Theology and Mission* 46, no. 3 (2019): 11.

⁷ Peter I. Gichure, *Contextual Theology: Its Meaning, Scope and Urgency* (CUEA Publications, 2008), ix.

⁸ Lisa Sowle Cahill, “Theological Ethics, the Churches, and Global Politics,” *Journal of Religious Ethics* 35, no. 3 (2007): 392. Catholic social thought has attempted to adapt to global cultural pluralism.

⁹ Avery Dulles, *The Survival of Dogma* (Doubleday, 1987), 183.

represents the search for the meaning of the Christian message in thought, behavioral and feeling patterns that resonate with familiar symbolisms found in the comprehensive worldview of the recipients' cultural milieu."¹⁰ Contextualization encourages recipients to theologize themselves, linking local churches and local theologies. It is a means to promote intercultural theology. "The crux of contextualization is the smooth communication and interaction between the message of Christianity and different cultures," as Stephen Bevans notes.¹¹ This indicates the fact that religious beliefs and practices are inseparable from the culture of a given people.

Intercultural theological ethics has opened room for various models of contextual theology.¹² In the anthropological model, the main challenge of a theologian is to uncover God's self-revelation as expressed within the culture of those receiving the message of Christianity. The translation model focuses on the need to communicate the message of Christianity in different cultures in a dynamic and functionally equivalent way. In this context, the main task of the theologian is to search for meaningful ways of expressing the Christian message in different cultures, and in a way that does not compromise the content of the never-changing Word of God.¹³ Thus, there is a need "to appreciate the challenge of pluralism: to dialogue from and beyond local culture and to interconnect with a world church not dominated solely by a northern paradigm."¹⁴

One of the crucial pastoral and ethical challenges facing the Church in Africa is that of dual allegiance—the tendency of Christian converts in

¹⁰ Dei, "An Integrated Approach to Theological Contextualization in Africa," 12.

¹¹ Dei, "An Integrated Approach to Theological Contextualization in Africa," 12.

¹² See Stephen Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology* (Orbis Books, 2002).

¹³ Bruce Fleming, *Contextualization of Theology: An Evangelical Assessment* (W.C. Library, 1980), 62.

¹⁴ Linda Hogan and Kristin Heyer, "Beyond a Northern Paradigm: Catholic Theological Ethics in Global Perspective," *Journal of the Society of Christian Ethics* 39, no. 1 (2019): 21–22, who quote from the Catholic Theological Ethics in the World Church (CTEWC) mission statement. The CTEWC network has managed to promote theological conversations across and beyond the boundaries that construct and reinforce marginalization.

Africa to culturally profess belief in Christianity but revert to indigenous ways of perceiving and responding to reality inwardly.¹⁵ This dichotomy is even experienced in SCCs. Intercultural theological ethics has to focus on an integrated approach, and as Dei observes, “Respect for recipient culture must always be a starting point.”¹⁶ This is a positive view of the culture of another. Missionaries ought to express the content of God’s self-revelation in a manner that is intelligible to recipients.

Everyday solidarity is a framework for integrating theological ethics and ordinary moral choices.¹⁷ It is a way to promote a culture of moral discernment among the faithful, even in SCCs. The ability to discern what is good and what is bad requires the type of moral reflectiveness that leads to convictions. Solidarity highlights the relational and social dimensions of the human person. Such awareness of common interests and norms offers a calculated alternative to individualism. Solidarity in SCCs insists that moral change requires not only personal conversions but also changes to social structures. It is founded in human interconnectedness. Solidarity summons personal conversion and structural change.

In view of African solidarity, members of a Small Christian Community share a common concern for the common good. African spirituality has been a catalyst for spiritual formation. “At the broadest level authentic spirituality is an integrative wholistic response to the command to choose life,” as James N. Amanze writes.¹⁸ This is rooted in the natural desires, longings, and aspirations of the human heart.

In Africa, Christianity is attracting followers in great numbers. According to a report from 2010, “Sub-Saharan Africa now is home to about one-in-five of all the Christians in the world (21%) and more than

¹⁵ Dei, “An Integrated Approach to Theological Contextualization in Africa,” 16.

¹⁶ Dei, “An Integrated Approach to Theological Contextualization in Africa,” 16.

¹⁷ Conor M. Kelly, “Everyday Solidarity: A Framework for Integrating Theological Ethics and Ordinary Life,” *Theological Studies* 81, no. 2 (2020): 414–437.

¹⁸ James N. Amanze, “Contextuality: African Spirituality as a Catalyst for Spiritual Formation in Theological Education,” *Ogbomosho Journal of Theology* 16, no. 2 (2011): 2. He is quoting Marie McCarthy, “Spirituality in a Postmodern Era,” in *The Blackwell Reader in Pastoral and Practical Theology*, ed. J. Woodward and S. Pattison (Blackwell, 2000), 199.

one-in-seven of the world's Muslims (15%).”¹⁹ A report from 2020 states that “[b]y 2020, these two world religions found themselves in a strong position with Africa becoming the continent with the fastest population growth in the post-World War II era. . . . By 2020, Christians and Muslims combined accounted for over 9 out of every 10 people in Africa (94%).”²⁰ African spirituality is a reality. As Amanze observes, “It is a genuine brand of spirituality born and bred in Africa long before the coming of Europeans as a political entity and of Christianity and Islam as religious ideologies.”²¹ In Africa, religion is so diffused that it penetrates the entire spectrum of African life as experienced in SCCs. A considerable number of Africans are deeply dedicated to Christianity or Islam and yet continue to practice elements of traditional African religion. Even in SCCs people still continue to hold on to their cultural values. This points to the relevance of inculturation.

Meaning of Inculturation

Intercultural theology has been a sphere for doctrinal development. Inculturation and doctrinal development have been a means of incorporating new insights into the Christian Tradition. Doctrinal development is a concept in theology that suggests that the claims and insights of Christian doctrine grow over time. Such development can be historically situated. Rose Kane refers to Avery Dulles who “views development of doctrine as reformulations of Church teaching in each age to reflect the needs,

¹⁹ Pew Research Center's Forum on Religion & Public Life, “Tolerance and Tension: Islam and Christianity in Sub-Saharan Africa,” April 15, 2010, www.pewresearch.org/religion/2010/04/15/executive-summary-islam-and-christianity-in-sub-saharan-africa/.

²⁰ Amadu Jacky Kaba & The University of the Gambia, “The Numbers and Percentages of Christians and Muslims in Africa, 2020,” *The International Journal of African Catholicism* 11, no. 1 (2022): 18, www.researchgate.net/publication/382214185_The_Numbers_and_Percentages_of_Christians_and_Muslims_in_Africa_2020.

²¹ Amanze, “Contextuality: African Spirituality as a Catalyst for Spiritual Formation in Theological Education,” 13.

concerns and outlooks of each age.”²² It is a way of articulating some novelty. There is progress in the understanding of Christ’s teachings in line with what is contained in the Tradition and promulgated by the magisterium of the Church.

Inculturation remains culturally specific. However, it contains promise as a way to generate doctrinal development for the wider Church. According to Pedro Arrupe, inculturation contains “the incarnation of Christian life and the Christian message in a particular cultural context in such a way that this experience not only finds expression through elements proper to the culture in question . . . but becomes a principle that animates, directs, and unifies the culture, transforming and remaking it so as to bring about a ‘new creation.’”²³ Thus, inculturation contains a dimension of universality, but also calls for changes within ourselves. We are affected individually, as are SCCs. Inculturation is a process that integrates Christian faith into local socio-religious realities. SCCs must not be on the receiving end.²⁴ Inculturation entails an effort to articulate the meaning of the Gospel in a particular context in response to the realities of that milieu.

Expanding the geographical and historical scope of inculturation gives inculturation more clarity and power. Inculturation acknowledges potential for doctrinal development. “New cultures bring new eyes and new perspectives, such that they will see Jesus differently in ways that stand to challenge, develop and reform the Church’s understanding of the Gospel,” as Kane writes.²⁵ Various cultures have contributed to shaping new trends in SCCs and in global Christianity.

²² Ross Kane, “Inculturation as Doctrinal Development: Shaping International Theological Categories,” *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 24, no. 2 (2022): 240, doi.org/10.1111/ijst.12545. He quotes Christopher Kaczor, “Thomas Aquinas on the Development of Doctrine,” *Theological Studies* 62, no. 2 (2001): 286.

²³ Pedro Arrupe, “Epistola et Documentum studii de Inculturatione (14 maii 1978), Versio anglica: To the Whole Society,” *Acta Romana Societatis Jesu* 17 (1977): 257.

²⁴ Laurenti Magesa, *Anatomy of Inculturation: Transforming the Church in Africa* (Orbis Books, 2004).

²⁵ Kane, “Inculturation as Doctrinal Development,” 256.

Current Trends in World Christianity

Intercultural theology is an exercise in border-crossing. The cultural diversity of world Christianity and new theological voices are unveiling new landscapes of the global Christianity, especially in Africa. Christianity has experienced a radical Southern shift in terms of its center of gravity. The center of religious cultural unity is no longer the West. The Church needs to be culturally adapted in order to represent a world Christianity.²⁶ The center of gravity continues to move to Africans, Asians, and Latin Americans. In the case of Africa, it seems Kiswahili is increasingly becoming one of the notable languages of Christianity. According to Stan Chu Ilo: “World Christianity also brings to greater focus the new challenges facing Christianity” especially “in the new contexts of faith in the Global South and in the Western mainline.”²⁷ Meaning is now conceived in an inter-subjective and intercultural reality, hence the need for intercultural communication. There is now, as Ilo writes, “a movement away from a unilateral, top-down approach to religious and theological education to the integration of multiple sources of truth and diverse approaches of learning, while admitting the diversities and pluralism in God’s revelation in history.”²⁸

What is shared in the process of intercultural theology is the Word of God revealed in Christ and experienced in person, ecclesial communities, and cultural life. As Ilo writes, “Theology is a dialogical movement both internal and external to the subject. Theology is a reflective process of faith by individuals and communities of faith in their experience of God’s

²⁶ Stan C. Ilo, “Currents in World Christianity and the Challenges of Border-Crossing and Intercultural Theology,” *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 158 (2017): 37–56.

²⁷ Ilo, “Currents in World Christianity and the Challenges of Border-Crossing and Intercultural Theology,” 41.

²⁸ Ilo, “Currents in World Christianity and the Challenges of Border-Crossing and Intercultural Theology,” 42.

revelation in particular history. Theology, therefore, can never be formless.”²⁹

The missiological task communicates Christ across cultural and linguistic divides. As Jim Harries notes, “debate on theology has to be a process of the discovery of the unknown using the known, where he of whom understanding is sought is God.”³⁰ There has to be an acknowledgement of the mystery and unknowableness of God. It is only when a person is ready to have one’s concept of God questioned that true theological debate can occur.

In the context of intercultural biblical exegesis, as Jean-Claude Loba writes, the “African context and people are not used just as a field of applying ‘exegetical’ conclusions, but they stand as the subject of interpretation, equipped with genuine epistemological privilege.”³¹ In this context, exegesis is concerned with the meaning of a text in regard to its author and who it addresses, but it may also be conducted with a view towards application to the modern situation. There are various ways that relate the biblical text to the context of SCCs. What is distinctive about the use of the Bible in SCCs is that willingness to be related to life with the aim of uplifting and deifying society. In this way change is stimulated in the local context. It also involves social transformation and justice. This dimension is crucial in inter-cultural theological ethics.

Stimulating Change in SCCs: Dialogue in Communal Contexts

SCCs have served as fora for inter-cultural ethics, where change is stimulated in a communal context. These basic communities are usually a

²⁹ Ilo, “Currents in World Christianity and the Challenges of Border-Crossing and Intercultural Theology,” 51.

³⁰ Jim Harries, “‘The Name of God in Africa’ and Related Contemporary Theological, Development and Linguistic Concerns,” *Exchange* 38, no. 3 (2009): 276.

³¹ Jean-Claude Loba-Mkoke, “The New Testament and Intercultural Exegesis in Africa,” *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 30, no. 1 (2007): 24.

neighborhood group. The urban model is of persons who live together in an apartment building or row of houses, or workers who live together in a housing project. The rural model is of a communion of families in the same neighborhood or geographical context. Additionally, Joseph G. Healey observes that “SCCs that are composed of a mixture of ethnic groups are common especially in urban or semi-urban areas. But SCCs that are composed of a mixture of people from different economic classes are not common.”³² The issue of various ethnic groups points to the relevance of intercultural ethics.

In stimulating changes, SCCs come from the bottom up. Such communities offer an inculturating contextualization model for the Church, one that attempts to form and transform, drawing on the daily life and experiences of people themselves. In this context, such communities reveal the best of an age while indicating new dimensions of the gospel of fidelity. They stimulate metanoia—changing one’s mind, a reorientation. It can be a basic transformation of one’s outlook or vision. This can motivate a new way of loving God and others. In this context, the Gospel can be lived in an extraordinary way. This is also reflected in the way in which the SCCs refer to their patron saints to transform abstract claims of preaching and theology into concrete lived experiments. The patron saints are the saints to whose intercession and protection, a person or society, a church or a place is dedicated. Such saints are chosen as special guardians over various dimensions of life. Praxis is prior to theology; hence, the theology of SCCs ought to evolve out of practical grassroots experiences.

Light up Neighborhood

SCCs stimulate change by sharing life experiences motivated by biblical reflections. Doing theology in the African context necessarily demands an

³² Joseph G. Healey, “Twelve-Case Studies of Small Christian Communities (SCCs) in Eastern Africa,” in *How Local is the Local Church: Small Christian Communities and the Church in Eastern Africa*, ed. A. Radoli (Gaba Publications, 1993), 78.

African reading of the Bible.³³ This requires the use of appropriate African concepts to illuminate the meaning of corresponding biblical teaching. This approach aims at pointing out the new understanding and application of the biblical text in the local context.

Additionally, SCCs are dynamic in nature and assume various forms as they influence and are influenced by contemporary life. As Alphonse Omolo observes, “These emerging neighborhood communities introduced the sharing of life experiences during Bible gatherings, which began to create solidarity and the realization of the commonality of the hardships that afflicted the communities.”³⁴ The need to reflect on actions and act on reflections cannot be overvalued when implementing pastoral priorities in the local Church.

Most SCCs have not emerged out of great theoretical speeches but rather from the faith and love of a poor and simple people. They have stimulated Christians to seek change. In solidarity with Church leaders, the people have searched for strategies to live out their faith in a locality experiencing extreme poverty, pain, exploitation, violence, and an aspiration for liberation. “Evangelization, in this model of the Church whose center is the laity, the community, the Word of God, and the salvation and liberation of human beings both individually and socially, has produced significant conversions,” Alicia Butkiewicz writes.³⁵ Such conversion is not a single event. Our failings often remind us of the frailty of human nature, and conversion often reminds us of the grace of God that is available to overcome our weakness.

³³ See Albert Ngege Mundeke, ed., *A Handbook on African Approaches to Biblical Interpretation*, (Kolbe Press, 2012).

³⁴ Alphonse Omolo, “Small Christian Communities Light up Neighborhood in Kisumu,” in *Small Christian Communities Today: Capturing the New Movement*, ed. J. G. Healy and J. Hintan (Orbis Books, 2005), 80 [Page numbers to this book refer to the E-book publication].

³⁵ Alicia Butkiewicz, “Pastoral Commitment to BCCs in Bolivia,” in *Small Christian Communities Today: Capturing the New Movement*, ed. by J. G. Healy and J. Hintan (Orbis Books, 2005), 17.

Pastoral Priorities

SCCs have been adopted as a pastoral priority of the local Church in Eastern Africa. According to Rodrigo Mejia, “Pastoral priorities are never deduced from theological principles, but they are commanded by the real needs of the people of God.”³⁶ The focus is on a dimension of Jesus’s mission identified in the Gospel, which calls for us to live the message he teaches. Such pastoral priorities are rooted and founded in the faith of the people of God.

In the pastoral priorities of the local Church in Eastern Africa, there is still a challenge of transition. As Mejia observes, “Africa is passing from traditionally closed and rural societies to the global village of today’s world.”³⁷ Changes are part and parcel of life, but they can be assimilated according to the identity of the people. The following question posed by Mejia must also be confronted: “How can Christianity introduced into Africa by foreign missionaries in their own cultural outlook become really meaningful to African people?”³⁸ This pastoral challenge points to the need for the inculturation of Christianity. For the process of inculturation to produce change at the grassroots level, it must not be viewed solely as a clerical responsibility, such that the clergy take on the task of inculturating the Gospel message for the African people, while excluding the people themselves in SCCs.

Participation, Formation of the Youth

SCCs have contributed much in promoting participative ministry. Christopher Cieslikiewicz notes that “the church in Africa is a young church, when one considers that a great percentage of the population is

³⁶ Rodrigo Mejia, “The Pastoral Priorities of the Local Church in Eastern Africa,” in *How Local Is the Local Church: Small Christian Communities and the Church in Eastern Africa. Symposium of Nine Papers (Spearhead 126-128)*, ed. A. Radoli (AMECEA Gaba Publications, 1993), 104.

³⁷ Mejia, “The Pastoral Priorities of the Local Church in Eastern Africa,” 106.

³⁸ Rodrigo Mejia, “The Pastoral Priorities of the Local Church in Eastern Africa,” 107.

sixteen to twenty-five years old. Nevertheless, only a small number of young people participate in the meetings of SCCs.”³⁹ However, this challenge ought to be faced. How can such basic communities appeal to young people? Pastoral strategic planning that ignores the needs, presence, and role of young people in evangelization is destined to fail. Young people represent a vital force and a source of innovation and creativity, which ought to be taken into consideration in setting pastoral strategies.

Formation of the youth is an important strategy for effective evangelization. As the young participants of the pre-synod note, “The Church is asked to devise new approaches and new instruments and forms of involvement, adapted to the young generation, who are asked to participate and add their own characteristic mark.”⁴⁰

SCCs are a strategy to stimulate change by “listening to what the spirit is saying to Churches” (Rev. 2:7). This exhortation is directed to the whole Church to strengthen communion and encourage individual congregations to hold fast to what they have. SCCs are a distinctive sign of the times and a notable voice of the Holy Spirit. Such communities have turned out to be a powerful force of renewal within parishes. “However,” Cieslikiewicz notes, “this new moment goes beyond structures and touches also lay participation in the life of the local Church.”⁴¹ Such active involvement needs to be sustained by a distinctive spirit of synodality.

Expression of Synodality

SCCs are expressions of the Church as a communion of faith, hope, and love. They concretize the spirit of synodality in the life and mission of the local Church. A synod is an invitation for the local ordinary, and the

³⁹ Christopher Cieslikiewicz, “Involvement of Parish-Based SCCs in Dar es Salaam,” in *Small Christian Communities Today: Capturing the New Movement*, ed. J. G. Healy and J. Hintan (Orbis Books, 2005), 74.

⁴⁰ Stella, Leticia, Giulia, Nelson, Paul and Matthias, “Letter of Invitation to participate through the Social Media: We talk together. Pre-synodal meeting for young people 19–24 March 2018,” secretariat.synod.va/content/synod2018/en/pre-synodal-meeting/letter-of-invitation.pdf, 2.

⁴¹ Cieslikiewicz, “Involvement of Parish-Based SCCs in Dar es Salaam,” 72.

faithful under him, to journey together on a life of faith. It is an expression of communion. As Vitalis Mshanga notes, “The leaders of the local Church ought to listen to both the local Church as they do to the universal Church, symbolized by the Bishop of Rome. Therefore, the Church is a communion of faith, hope and love.”⁴² There is stimulation of change in the local contexts. The real Church is “the first level on which synodality is exercised is the local Church. Here ‘the pre-eminent manifestation of the Church consists in the full active participation of all God’s holy People in these liturgical celebrations, especially in the same Eucharist, in a single prayer, at one altar, at which the Bishop presides, surrounded by his college of priests and by his ministers.”⁴³ SCCs are fora for theological reflection that serve as a catalyst to motivate and generate religious insights for better celebration of synodality: communion, participation, and mission.

In searching for a new African Christian spirituality, SCCs have a vital role too. According to Laurenti Magesa, “Deconstruction and reconstruction constitute the current vocation of the Church in Africa: it is a process that leads to a new way of being truly African and fully Christian.”⁴⁴ This process demands the destruction of certain time-honored conceptions of both African and Christian identity, but through this destruction a more appropriate contextual way forward emerges.

SCCs: Retrospect and Prospect

SCCs have been adapted by the Association of Member Episcopal Conferences in Eastern Africa (AMECEA) since 1973 as a pastoral priority: “We are committed that in these countries of Eastern Africa it is

⁴² Vitalis Mshanga, “Towards a More Decentralized Church: An Ecclesiological Contribution to the Synodal Process,” in *Utume Theological e-Journal* 3 (2022) [Thematic issue: Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church], 15.

⁴³ International Theological Commission, “Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church (March 2, 2018),” no. 77, citing Vatican II, Constitution *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, no. 41.

⁴⁴ Laurenti Magesa, “Truly African, Fully Christian? In Search of a New African Christian Spirituality,” in *The Church We Want: African Catholics Look to Vatican III*, ed. A. E. Orobator (Orbis Books, 2016), 63 [page numbers correspond to the E-book edition].

time for the Church to become really ‘local’, that is: self-ministering, self-propagating and self-supporting. Our plan is aimed at building such local Churches for coming years. We believe that in order to achieve this we have to insist on building Church life and work on basic Christian communities, both rural and urban areas.”⁴⁵

Effective pastoral planning requires the active involvement of all the faithful, not just the clergy. In addition, all human institutions need to be evaluated occasionally in order to remain faithful to their mission. For the Church, a critical evaluation may shed some light on the strengths and failures of its past and present activities in a specific context. Such a specific area can be composed of SCCs. They give the local Church an opportunity to scrutinize the vitality of the Church in light of its own faith. SCCs help us understand the concrete way of being and acting in the Church.

Conclusion

SCCs are expressions of the Church as a community of faith, hope, and love. Formed and transformed by the everyday experiences of the people, they serve as models of inculturation for the Church. Praxis is prior to theology; hence, the theology of SCCs ought to evolve out of practical grassroots experiences. Intercultural theological reflection on SCCs has stimulated change in the AMECEA region and beyond. The local Church has to be truly local. Doing intercultural theological ethics has helped make the local Church really local, as well as self-ministering, self-propagating, and self-supporting.



Richard N. Rwiza is a Catholic priest from the Archdiocese of Arusha, Tanzania. He is an Associate Professor of Moral Theology at The Catholic

⁴⁵ AMECEA, *Planning for the Church in Eastern Africa in the 1980's: Record of the AMECEA Study Conference held at St. Thomas Aquinas Seminary, Nairobi, 14–21 December 1973*. A summary was published in *African Ecclesial Review* 16, nos. 1–2 (1974): 29–48.

University of Eastern Africa (CUEA), Nairobi, Kenya, with over sixteen years of research and teaching experience. He holds a Doctorate and Masters in Moral Theology, both from the Catholic University Leuven, Belgium, and a Licentiate in Moral Theology from CUEA. Currently, he serves as the Dean, Faculty of Theology, at CUEA. He is the author of *Ethics of Human Rights: The African Contribution*.