

## A MULTI-MEDIA APPROACH TO BIBLICALLY-BASED SMALL CHRISTIAN COMMUNITIES

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One of the most significant forms of religious revitalization in the Catholic Church today is the spread of the Small Christian Communities (SCC), especially in the new Churches of Latin America, Africa, India and Asia. These communities of, ideally, not more than 20 or so participants are typically centred around the weekly group reflections on a biblical passage. The central communication method is non-directive group discussion led by a group animator which seeks to bring all members to participate deeply, to dialogue and to advance toward some form of consensus regarding group action to carry the values of the gospel. The objectives of the SCCs are to gradually bring about the conversion of the participants to gospel values, to give witness to gospel values in the larger community by, for example, visits to the sick and imprisoned, and to bring about the gradual transformation of cultural values and institutions. The essential objective is to give witness to the gospel values of love, compassion and justice and to build local communities

### **Personal Experience with SCCs**

My initial experience with the SCCs was in Honduras in the 1970s where I carried out an evaluation of what was considered one of the most successful experiences of SCCs in that it was a national program of the episcopal conference and brought about a total transformation of the Catholic Church in Honduras. I was also involved in some training in Honduras. At the Gregorian University I have directed some 25 or more Licentiate theses dealing with SCCs in various parts of the world, especially Africa. Most important I was heavily involved with some doctoral theses evaluating SCCs in India and Africa. Now, in the Centre for the Study of African Culture and Communication at the Catholic Institute of West Africa we have a number of MA theses each year dealing with SCCs and we are following closely how graduates are setting up programs of training and promotion in Nigeria and other parts of West Africa.

We have discovered over the years that, although biblical reflection is the central activity everywhere, there are many different forms of organizing and promoting SCCs according to the local Church organization.

### **The Objectives of the SCCs**

The SCCs are most permanent and successful when the local parish delegates to them the essential responsibilities of the parish:

1. Building friendship relations with all persons in the geographical area or network of cultural interest and being a personal support to those who are facing some form of life crisis.
2. On the basis of personal friendship and personal support, outreach to non-practicing Catholics and others interested in participating in the Catholic community.
3. Catechesis of members and preparation of parents for baptism and the sacrament of reconciliation, preparing the young for confirmation and for a happy married life. Above all the SCC is expected to cultivate a deep love of Eucharistic union with Jesus. A love of the Lord Jesus is central to the life of the SCC.

4. Promote a series of secondary organizations for youth, women, men and for local community development in which it is possible to live gospel values.
5. Carry out activities to guarantee the financial support of the parish.
6. One of the major general objectives is to link faith and gospel values with life. One of the major problems in the Church is the passive acceptance of Catholic truths. People know what they should do, but it is difficult to live the values in everyday life.
7. One of the major objectives in the SCCs is simply getting in contact with the people. For example, in one parish in Honduras with 50,000 baptised Catholics, the two parish priests helped to organize more than 125 SCCs. These were organized in sectors of 25 with a supervisor who visited them at least every six months, and led the people in each community in responding to problems of the SCC. The six or so supervisors were members of the parish council, planning the support for the SCCs. The parish had its own training centre running continual courses in group animation methods, biblical reflection, social analysis, and many different areas of theology. One diocese in Honduras had, at the time, a program of three levels of theological education for the leadership of the SCCs. The planning of the SCCs was carried out by a council that included lay leaders of the SCCs.

### **A Multi-Media Approach to Communication**

An SCC is typically centred around an “evangelizing team” of deeply converted, emotionally mature Catholics who are trained in biblical understanding, group animation, organizational leadership and other forms of communication. This evangelizing team leads those associated with the SCC in the following forms of communication:

1. Interpersonal communication to build friendships and deal with the personal problems of all people in the geographical area. Members of the SCC are not so much engaged in proselytization because it is important to respect the religious affiliations of all members of the community, but they are “available” to people to help them in personal crises of sickness, loss of jobs, accidents, moral crises, etc.
2. Group communication methods: getting all in a group discussion to express personal ideas, learn to listen to others and to dialogue, learn how to move to consensus and action in groups. The distribution of printed materials and how to carry on a “*lectio divina*” type of reading of books, pamphlets and newspapers.
3. The use of audio and video productions as a basis for group discussion. Ideally, the group would learn to produce its own socio-dramas, videos or other materials that are the basis of group discussion.
4. The use of radio or TV broadcasts for education, especially biblical and religious education.
5. The formation of action groups to solve community problems. The best form of communication is for participants to discuss among themselves how to solve problems they are facing in the community, and to reach consensus through discussion and how to carry out decisions for action.
6. Today there are diocesan Catholic radio stations and in some cases TV stations that are providing regular services to the SCCs in the area. These often dedicate a period of time every day just to the activities of the SCCs, but they may also have daily biblical enrichment programs (answering typical questions about the Bible), more formal Bible study programs, and programs centred around the different organizations

and activities promoted by the SCCs. Bible-centred programming is one of the most popular and successful types of radio programs on Catholic stations or on other stations.

Many Catholic radio stations begin the broadcasting in the morning or close at the end of the day with a biblical reflection. The participants in the SCCs often provide the core loyal audience of the Catholic radio stations.

### **Typical Methods of Biblical Reflection in the SCCs**

The forms of reflection can vary immensely, but the following is not untypical:

1. The reflection is usually accompanied by different forms of veneration of the Holy Scripture and prayers for understanding and inspiration from the Scriptures.
2. The opening may be marked by prayers and hymns of various kinds.
3. After reading the passages for reflection, very slowly and reflectively, the animator leads the group in a series of questions:
  - 3.1 What does each member of the group think the author of the passage in the context in which the passage occurs is trying to say. The animator attempts to get every person to make a personal contribution and to perhaps comment briefly on what others have said. The skillful animator will lead the group to a certain consensus without closing off possible meanings.
  - 3.2 What does the passage mean to me, that is, what personal inspirations come to me on reading this.
  - 3.3 What does this passage call “us” to do in the present context?
  - 3.4 Finally how are we going to respond to this call to action? This usually means some action of the group of the SCC in terms of personal witness and in terms of group action.
  - 3.5 The animator tries to get the group to come to a consensus about possible action in terms of the usual lines of action that are realistic and possible. Over a period of time the group, through small but persistent reflections usually begins to see how they can concretely live gospel values in the neighborhood.

### **Factors in the Success of Small Christian Communities**

The evaluation of SCC programs in different parts of the world show that there are two major factors in the success of SCCs: 1) the support of the parish priests and the diocese in general, especially the willingness to delegate parish responsibilities to the SCCs, and 2) the training of the lay leadership in the SCCs, especially training in communication. It is clear that this comes down to essentially one factor, the degree to which a diocese and an episcopal conference develops a well-integrated plan, prepares (and obliges) the clergy to support this and sets up a major training program of lay leadership theologically but especially in communication.

Here I would like to focus on the kind of communication training that lay ministers need to have.

#### **1. Interpersonal communication skills**

People are attracted to participate generously in a SCC because a good friend invites them to come to the meetings for prayer and reflection. The initial motivation often comes at a moment of crisis in life –a death or serious sickness, economic difficulties, family

problems or any of the continuous problems that all people have. The core lay leadership needs to be trained in pastoral and interpersonal communication so that they can relate to people at this deeper personal level and so that it is not seen as an intrusion into privacy but as the willingness to help people find a way out of problems in life.

The SCC is never a form of group therapy, but coming in contact with the wisdom and inspiration of Holy Scripture, rekindling of faith in Jesus, learning to pray from the heart and experiencing the warmth of joyous friends. The SCC may be a link to a broader network of resources to help in economic, family or personal problems, but it is primarily seeking to build a personal life integration around love and service to others according to gospel values. The leadership of a SCC sets the tone of confidence in God's love and the interpersonal love that leads to regaining a sense of self-confidence and competence. The sense of working as a team to improve life situations of others has great benefits even at the level of learning how to solve one's personal problems.

## 2. Skill in group leadership and group communication

A SCC is not simply "Bible study", gaining more knowledge about the Bible, but leading participants to listen in their hearts to the word God speaking to them in a way that will heal, enlighten, and bring forth a response of faith. A first level of questioning brings each person to state some detail of the Scripture event. Going round the circle, each person enlightens the others. A second level of reflection brings out what the Spirit is saying to each person regarding the Scripture event. This is the level of the action of the Spirit in the group. Again, a good animator needs to be trained to be sensitive to this and to lead the group forward in way that is spiritually nourishing to the whole group. Most important is to lead each person to state what the Scripture passage is calling the group to do in the social and cultural context in which they live. The animator is non-directive and must be able to listen and discern with prudence and good sense what the Spirit is leading the group toward. The good animator must be able to balance allowing every person to speak while moving ahead gently but steadily to a kind of consensus about the spiritual meaning and the action that the group is inclined to carry out.

The group animator is fully aware that the Word of God is working in the continual transformation and conversion of every member of the group. The leader may be aware of major areas of conversion needed in the lives of people and all are continually encouraged to be honest and transparent in their personal lives, but there is always a respect for the freedom of all and prayer that a real conversion may slowly but surely be realized.

The SCCs are not just Bible study groups and not just prayer groups. They are a team of people in which every one assumes some form of evangelizing action. Every person usually volunteers to carry out some kind of action to visit the sick, to give personal help to some person in problems, to invite others to come to the SCC meetings, to work with some community organization to offer community services. If a person is good in sports, he or she may offer to work with the youth. If one is a good farmer, he or she may volunteer to teach better farming to others. If there is no action in the group, the Word of God is not bringing forth real fruit.

## 3. The reading medium

The leaders of the SCC are aware that the group discussions are not sufficient information for the level of commitment and knowledge needed in a complex modern society. There is a constant encouragement to read more in private whether this be the parish or diocesan newspapers, pamphlets about personal problems, spiritual books or more serious theological books. Not the least is to encourage all to form the habit of reading Holy Scripture every day and to read books about the Bible. Reading enables a person to think and reflect at one's own pace and to come back to think more deeply about a passage or an explanation that is of interest.

The leadership team of the SCC may be aware of some widely used and useful reading materials for the typical questions people have, but there should also be some people in a parish that have a much wider knowledge of useful reading materials and where to get them.

#### 4. Personal consultation

Often a member of the SCC may feel the need to approach a personal spiritual director for guidance or simply personal consolation. Much of this will be done by lay friends who have the patience to listen and to be a supporting friend. Priests and religious must find the time to listen to the personal problems of the members of the SCCs. Much of this interpersonal guidance can be done through internet if members have access to this.

#### 5. The role of the mass media

Today an increasing number of dioceses have a radio station or even a TV station with a rich menu of programs for every type of religious and social interest. The radio, especially, becomes a constant companion with inspiring religious music, religious talks, the rosary, letters and reports about the SCCs. But the stations are also a presentation of the full program of the diocese in the areas of social justice, news of the Church and an interpretation of the public news.

#### 6. Establishing a network of community-building organizations

A major objective of the SCC is to carry out the gospel mandate of building community at the local neighborhood level. Often this sort of community organization does not exist, and the leaders of the SCCs are the initiators of such community organizations. A major objective is to create a social context in which action for cooperation and justice can be lived on a daily basis. These organizations are often the fruit of efforts of many Christian denominations and other religious traditions and are a major form of ecumenical and interreligious cooperation and faith sharing.

It is important that the SCCs not become a pious ghetto of sentimental religion that is without any social justice commitment. The action of the SCC at the local level almost always leads to a deeper awareness of poverty, social problems and injustice. The SCCs must maintain complete freedom from any political party or political movement – whether conservative or progressive – but this does not mean that the gospel message of love and justice remains pious sentimentality. The mass media are perhaps the best way to link the scriptural reflection and prayer of the SCCs to the larger area of social commitment.

Working to build community and higher level organizations to solve the problems of the local community is especially attractive to the men. In some parts of the world, men do not participate in the SCCs because the SCC is perceived as simply a place for praying and hymn singing.

#### 7. The life of the sacraments

There is always a danger that the focus on the Bible may become an end in itself, especially with the strong influence of the charismatic and Pentecostal movements in many parts of the world. The SCC must think of itself as part of a community of communities which comes together for the Eucharist and the celebration of the sacramental presence of the Lord Jesus. A good sign of the true effectiveness of the Word of God is an increase in participation in the sacraments, especially the sacrament of reconciliation and the Eucharist. The ritual presence of Jesus, presence in the breaking of the bread, is a central and most important “medium” in the multi-media approach of the SCCs.