

Small Christian Communities – Background Information (Adapted from Arbuckle, 1990 by Jane Anderson)

Small Christian Communities (SCCs), which sometimes are also called Basic Christian Communities, House Churches, Intentional Christian Communities, Grassroots Church – started to evolve in the late 1950s in Brazil, quickly spreading to other parts of South and Central America, West and East Africa, the Philippines, and to a much less degree parts of the First World. The movement was spurred on by the ecclesiology of the Second Vatican Council (1962-65), which emphasized the active participation of all the baptized.

A SCC is a group of individuals or families that know, care for and share with one another, worship together and seek to centre their life, relationships and activities on Christ

SCCs have evolved for the following reasons:

- A growing awareness of the inadequacies of the traditional parish
- The discovery that the Gospel calls people to worship together, even when priests are not available
- The growing awareness by the people at the grassroots, particularly in the developing world, that they are economically, politically and culturally oppressed, and that together they can do something about it. In the developed world, the emphasis is on making connections between life and faith through sharing with other believers
- The recognition that small-scale, natural communities, e.g., based on family ties, geographical proximity, already exist and they can be used as foundations for inculturation: Gospel reflection, worship, mutual service and action for social justice

The following outlines a comparison of models between the respective traditional parish and SCCs.

Structure

Hierarchical – strong grid

Democratic – weak grid (flexible – allows for diversity; co-responsibility, collaboration)

Doctrine

Tradition based

Gospel based

Conducted by

Clerics

Laiety: male & female ('laos' – baptized)

Social origins

Middle and upper classes: supporters of social/economic/political status quo

The poor and marginalized: those who become aware of rights and obligations in church and society

Sacraments

Instruments of individual salvation

Signs of Gospel love/social justice

Religious values

Stress individual piety

Stress common action

Focus of Church

Rome (universal church)

The poor/marginalized (local church)

In the Developed World, SCCs have been slow to emerge because conditions that fostered their emergence in the Developing World are generally not present. In Australia, for example, people have not generally been adversely affected by the priest shortage; those in need often turn to secular agencies – e.g., trade unions, political parties, welfare institutions – to meet their needs. The Australian culture also emphasizes individualism rather than mutuality, a perspective that is not conducive to the emergence of vigorous community life based on sharing and service.

Where SCCs have emerged in the First World, they tend to have the following qualities:

- Members feel the loneliness of urban living and the consequent need for community support
- Dissatisfaction with the lack of quality liturgical/prayer/Gospel-theological education services provided by the traditional parish structures
- They tend to be non-clerical; the equality of men and women is stressed
- At times, they are openly ecumenical.

Useful Internet Sites:

- Small Christian Communities Global Collaborative Website (with an emphasis on Africa) -<http://www.smallchristiancommunities.org/>
- Cyber Christian Community WA (makes available a small selection of articles on SCCs) - <http://members.westnet.com.au/sheltie/index.html>
- Small Christian Communities (mostly American) - <http://www.personal.psu.edu/ddz/faith.htm>

Practical Steps Towards Building Christian Communities

(Adapted from Joinet n.d.)

The vision: 'to gather in unity the scattered children of God' (John 11:49-52; Eph. 2, 11-18).

The Model of SCCs has the following features

1. A community of faith, helping to strengthen one another's faith. Every member of the Christian community has this vocation, but the whole community as such also has this vision: to help one another to understand the faith, to deepen it, and to make it relevant to daily life.
2. A community of prayer, of worship. The members pray and worship together. They read the Scriptures together, listening to God.
3. A community of service, helping one another and even those who do not belong to the Christian community. It can be rendered through: works of mercy; social activity, development, and political awareness and involvement.

Forming SCCs

A basic Christian community is a small group of people who feel related through an awareness of togetherness in Christ and, wherever possible, rooted in a natural community.

People who do not feel related will not form a real community. For example, a group of Catholics is not a living community unless they know and feel that they are united by the same faith and the same Spirit.

People feel related only if they are not numerous. For example, large parishes are problematic for forming community.

There are groups that can become communities when their members become aware of their relationship to one another, but five types of groups are important for understanding the life of Christian communities. These are communities based on:

1. The extended family.
2. A neighborhood relationship
3. Profession – those who have ties with members of the same profession.
4. A common interest – e.g., a particular sport, hobby
5. A common idea – religious communities, for example, those who share the same values, the same vision of life, and by their efforts to transform life and society according to this vision.

A Christian community is a community of ideals, brought together by sharing the same vision, the same values,

and by their efforts to transform life and their own society according to this vision.

However, experience shows that a community of ideals is strong when it is rooted in another type of community, because the factors of coherence in the two kinds of communities strengthen each other.

A Strategy

People can be encouraged to join SCCs through conscientisation, helping people to:

- become aware of their needs and problems
- apprehend that they can solve the needs themselves, at least to a great extent. It is the transition from passiveness to active participation
- take a decision

- implement a decision.

Conscientisation is directed to making people aware of their needs, but also of their own possibilities to solve these needs. It takes time, patience, perhaps a few months or longer.

A structure gradually emerges from the needs. For instance,

a) a group wants to pray regularly. There will have to be a prayer leader. Let the members of the group take turns in leading the prayer meetings, and the best leader will emerge in the course of time. This is emergent leadership which is not imposed from above.

b) a Bible group may emerge from the need of deepening their faith.

c) a group of individuals desire to support their faith and life in a mutual context. Groups, having become aware of their needs, meet and discuss; they become involved, and leaders emerge from that involvement. Thus, a certain structure is gradually being built up. It is a process which takes time, but an emergent leadership is being rooted in the community to a greater extent than the leadership which comes from an appointed council.

Through the process of conscientisation a community will get leaders

- who emerge from the group; according to the various needs of the group
- whose importance is seen in the light of the needs
- who proved to be capable of seeing and feeling the needs
- who can help people find a solution to the needs
- who can communicate and relate with the people
- who can stimulate them to implement the decisions taken
- who can coordinate the efforts.