

Original Research Article

Evangelization through Inculturation in the Small Christian Communities in the Catholic Church in Vihiga County, Kenya

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Abstract: The church all over the world has a mandate to evangelize as stated in Mathew 28:19. To fulfill this mission, the Catholic Church has adopted inculturation as an agent of evangelization within the Small Christian Communities (SCCs) as the church at the grassroots in line with Vatican II teachings. This paper specifically examined how SCCs evangelize through inculturation in the Catholic Church in Vihiga County, Kenya. Data was gathered from 74 SCCs within five parishes within the Catholic Church in Vihiga County. The study depended on in-depth interviews, questionnaires and observation to gather study for analysis. The findings revealed that SCCs evangelize through inculturation in various ways and have been able to convert their neighbors from other denominations. Accommodation of different cultures within the catholic faith has played a key role in evangelization.

Keywords: Small Christian Communities, Evangelization, Inculturation.

BACKGROUND

SCCs are very instrumental in bringing the Gospel down to the lives of the people. They are effective way of making people feel that they are fully part of the church's evangelizing work (Healey, 2016). The lay faithful through the SCCs have a very effective role in the whole process of evangelization. They can very well build up the believers into a community of faith and love. Thus, the SCCs are means and occasion to proclaim the Gospel in a concrete manner and share God's love in an effective way.

From a pastoral point of view, SCCs are means of integral evangelization and a field of inculturation, where people can learn to pray, and use symbols and practices that arise out of their own traditions, so that their faith and life can become one. They are also an excellent situation from which to discover and promote lay ministries, which serve the needs of the local community. They have become tools of transformation, change and liberation by integrating faith and life in a concrete context. In them, the church learns how it can be Christ's ministering presence in the land of Africa (Pelton, 1997).

Evangelization invites people to experience God's love and mercy through the sacraments, especially through the Eucharist and Penance and Reconciliation. Evangelization is the essence of the Church's identity: "The Church on earth is by its very nature missionary since, according to the plan of the Father, it has its origin in the mission of the Son and the holy Spirit" (Ad Gentes, no 2). Pope Paul VI reawakened the Church's evangelizing mission, Blessed John Paul II championed the call for the Evangelization, and Pope Benedict XVI has reaffirmed the need for the New Evangelization. In *Go and Make Disciples: A National Plan and Strategy for Catholic Evangelization in the United States*, the Catholic bishops of the United States have expressed a sincere desire to invite all of God's children to their place in the Church: "We want to let our inactive brothers and sisters know that they always have a place in the Church and that we are hurt by their absence—as they are. . . . we want to help them see that, however they feel about the Church, we want to talk with them, share with them, and accept them as brothers and sisters" no 40.

Evangelization is a mandate from Jesus in Mathew 28:19 therefore, the Church is an evangelizer.

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The church also needs to be evangelized in order to proclaim the gospel. The Catholic Church uses various methods in fulfilling its mission. The church uses SCCs as one of its agents in evangelization. SCCs members are receivers and proclaimers of the gospel in words and actions. They integrate faith and life in fulfilling the mission of the church. Their mission begins from the family in an upward approach to the community and the church at large.

SCCs seemed to live as African extended families, and this is what Magesa (2004:43) describes, that: "SCCs were meant to be cells where the Christian faith would be intensely lived and shared. They were in fact seen as the ecclesiastical extension of the African extended family or clan". More scholarly writings show that a SCC is a small neighborhood, parish-based group in an urban or rural area that is a pastoral model of church that transforms the parish into a communion of communities and an instrument of evangelization Klessier et al (2002). In the context of Vihiga County, SCC is a small group of around 10-15 families who meet weekly usually in their homes (but sometimes in a parish, a school or another institution), to reflect on the *Bible* especially the Gospel of the following Sunday, and connect it to their day-to-day activities.

Therefore, the Catholic Church throughout its history has encouraged evangelization as part of its mission. The study was pegged on functionalism theory which Durkheim emphasized that societies are held together by means of a collective conscience, that is, powerful beliefs and sentiments that are shared in common by members of the society, and that exert a strong influence on individuals behavior (Goring, 1992). The theory was applied to show how SCCs evangelize to many within and outside the Catholic Church through inculturation.

OBJECTIVE

The study examined how SCCs evangelize through inculturation in the Catholic Church in Vihiga County Kenya.

METHODOLOGY

The research was done in Catholic Church in Vihiga County, Kenya. There are five parishes in the county namely: Luanda, Erusui, Hambale, Buyangu and Chamakanga. There are 279 SCCs across these parishes. Simple random sampling was adopted to sample 74 SCCs for the study. The study focused on the role of SCCs in evangelization through inculturation. Data collection relied on in-depth interview, questionnaires and observation for a period of six months. Five priests, 5 assistant priests, 5 catechists and two SCCs members from the 74 SCCs were consulted for the study. 74 questionnaires were administered to 74 chairpersons of the selected SCCs. Data was analyzed through thematic analysis and presented in narrative excerpts and discussions.

EMPIRICAL FINDINGS

SCCS AND EVANGELIZATION

(a) Understanding of Evangelization

From the various questionnaires administered, respondents understood evangelization as follows:

SCC 7: It is preaching of the word of God and witnessing Christ in our life.

SCC 12: It is the art of spreading the Good News to the people in different areas close to you so as to reach the maximum possible number of people.

SCC 30: It is spreading of the message of Christ in word and action to different parts of the world.

SCC 60: It is proclaiming the Good News and sharing them with each other and making converts within our neighborhood.

Many respondents understood evangelization as preaching the word of God among themselves and their neighbors through reading the bible and sharing the readings as per their understanding. To others, evangelization was more than Good News spread verbally but also through their own words in their actions as they interact in their daily activities.

In the activities of SCCs, evangelization is understood not just as the conversion of neighbors to Christianity so that they become members of the Catholic Church. Rather, it is more broadly the vocation of the lay faithful in the world to be accomplished in many ways. Through a life of harmony the lay faithful better realize the work of the Holy Spirit in their neighbors and experience God's providence in their neighborhood. Members of SCCs engage in a fellowship of life with their many neighbors and work together for the common good (Kim, 2011). In this way, they fulfill their vocation in the world and accomplish evangelization.

Rich (2014) defines Evangelization as the action of proclaiming the Good News of Jesus Christ. As the apex of God loves plan of Salvation History, Jesus is, in his person, message, and redemptive sacrifice on the cross, the ultimate saving good news for us. Jesus embodies the Gospel, indeed the very Good News of God. This is made eminently clear in Luke's Gospel when Jesus chooses this passage from Isaiah to explain his mission: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring glad tidings to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, and to proclaim a year acceptable to the Lord" (Luke. 4: 18-19).

According to Barreiro (1982), Pope Paul VI on *Evangelization in the Modern World* No. 15, the church is an evangelizer, but it begins by evangelizing itself...The Church has a constant need to be evangelized, if she wants to retain her freshness, vigour and strength in order to proclaim the Gospel. The SCCs can be said to be places of focal points and vehicles for evangelization. Members of the SCCs are both hearers of the gospel and privileged beneficiaries of evangelization, as well as proclaimers of the gospel themselves and they do this both in words and in actions. In and through them, the Christians hear the good news. Many Catholics today, through the SCCs have developed a new love for scripture and as such, they give witness to the truth of these words.

Evangelization seeks to invite modern man and culture into a relationship with Jesus Christ and his Church. Evangelization strives to engage our culture and to help us draw our inspiration from the Gospel. The New Evangelization calls all Catholics first to be evangelized and then in turn to evangelize. While it is directed to all people, the New Evangelization focuses specifically on those Christian communities that have Catholic roots but have “lost a living sense of the faith, or even no longer consider themselves members of the Church.”(John Paul II, 1995). It is a call to each person to deepen his or her own faith, have confidence in the Gospel, and possess a willingness to share the Gospel. It is a personal encounter with the person of Jesus, which brings peace and joy. Evangelization provides the lens through which people experience the Church and world around them.

Evangelization can therefore be defined as preaching of the word of God through fellowships and conversion of neighbors to join the Christian faith. It is aimed at proclaiming the Good News of salvation to all and extending it to the neighborhood. SCC first evangelizes among them, and shares the Good News with their neighbors. In connection with functionalism theory, Durkheim believed that human beings do not function as an individual but as part of the society and his/her functions as a being has strong foundations in the society. Therefore, this theory was adopted to show how SCCs members evangelize among themselves and within their neighborhood.

(b) Inculturation as a Means of Evangelization

The study also revealed that evangelization is done through inculturation. Data was gathered through in-

depth oral interviews, observation and scholarly literature. According to Waliggo (1986), inculturation means the honest and serious attempt to make Christ and His message of salvation evermore understood by people of every culture, locality and time. It means the reformulation of Christian life and doctrine into the very thought-patterns of each people. It is the conviction that Christ and His Good News are even dynamic and challenging to all times and cultures as they become better understood and lived by each people. It is the continuous endeavor to make Christianity truly “feel at home” in the cultures of each people.

In addition, Assenga (2014) in his article on *Cultural orientation and evangelization in Africa* in *Tangaza Journal* states that, while inculturation is an essential step in evangelization, inculturation must be seen as both the intimate transformation of authentic cultural values through their integration in Christianity on one hand, and the insertion of Christianity in various human cultures on the other. The two approaches must be taken together. Evangelization should always precede the using of the cultural categories and values for the gospel. Assenga added that, Culture is an embodiment of a given people’s way of life in its entirety. It includes their entire worldview or their general orientation of life. It encompasses a particular people’s language, their relationship with the divine/supernatural, their mode of dressing, feeding, bringing up of their young ones, recreation, marriage and burial. The particular aspects of culture cannot be comprehended in isolation from the other aspects, since each of them portrays an aspect of the whole. For example, one cannot master the language of a given people without knowing their worldview, the understanding of which often explains why they use particular constructions of words, symbols and proverbial patterns. These must be understood in relationship with the place they live, their history and their entire livelihood.

The results from in-depth oral interview and observation revealed how cultural values are used in evangelization in the SCCs. These are discussed below.

Five priests, 5 assistant priests, 5 catechists and two SCCs members from each of the 74 SCCs indicated how evangelization is carried out through inculturation (table 1):

Table 1 Ways of Evangelizing through inculturation

Response	Frequency	Percentage
1 Prayers in various local dialects	43	26.4
2 Offerings in form of local foodstuffs	39	23.9
3 Luhya art in Liturgical preparation	37	22.7
4 Traditional forms of art accompanying music	25	15.3
5 Carrying out traditional rites of passage in a Christian way	19	11.7
Total	163	100

Source: Field data

The use of various local dialects in prayers was the highest response at 26.4% in evangelization through inculturation. This was followed by offerings in form of locally available foodstuffs at 23.9% and was closely followed by use of Luhya art in liturgical preparation during Sunday mass led by various SCCs. Evangelization through inculturation was also done through traditional forms of art accompanying music and through various rites of passage conducted in a Christian or as per the church teachings on inculturation. This was evidenced in the responses below from various respondents.

Respondent 5: As a clergy, we always encourage Christian's right from their SCCs to embrace their cultural welfare by incorporating their cultural values in their way of worship. During prayers for the faithful we encourage Christians to pray in their various languages for easy communication with their creator. We encourage even all rites of passage for example marriage and death rites done within the community to be done both in a cultural and a Christian way. That is why incase of any marriage or death, the church always refers someone to the community since we cannot ignore our culture neither our religion. In doing so, as a church we have been able to accommodate through conversion some of our immediate neighbors who have been uncomfortable or rejected from their faith because of their cultural traditions.

Respondent 125: Every time when we are animating mass in our SCCs, we carry food stuff such as grains, eggs, greens among others as our offerings. We carry our offerings depending on what we have harvested during that season and what we have in our homesteads. Our way of giving offerings has attracted our neighbors from other denominations who are used to offer money for offerings. From within our homesteads no one lacks something to offer to God. This has made us always to have new converts in our SCCs.

It was observed that during mass led by various SCCs especially those in rural set up, there was

the usage of vernacular during prayers for the faithful, use of Luhya art in liturgical vestments, in decorating the church and on sacred vessels. Also there was the use of Luhya traditional forms of art that accompanied music as the use of drums, clapping of hands, dancing and body language.

These findings are comparable to those of Pelton (1997) who observed that from a pastoral point of view, SCCs are means of integral evangelization and a field of inculturation, where people can learn to pray, and use symbols and practices that arise out of their own traditions, so that their faith and life can become one. They are also an excellent situation from which to discover and promote lay ministries, which serve the needs of the local community. They have become tools of transformation, change and liberation by integrating faith and life in a concrete context. In them, the church learns how it can be Christ's ministering presence in the land of Africa.

The first African Synod affirmed that, a serious concern for a true and balanced inculturation is necessary in order to avoid cultural confusion and alienation in our fast-evolving society. John Paul II (1995) in *Ecclesia in Africa* (pg 48) contends that Africans are challenged to look inside themselves, nurture and emulate values that correspond to the best of their traditions and their Christian faith. Genuine freedom was to come from with inculturation. Africans are encouraged to overcome the fears of embracing their traditional values while embracing Christianity. It is through inculturation of the Gospel that dichotomous modes of living can be overcome, paving way for authentic living as truly Africans and truly Christians. SCCs are venues for transforming humanity from within and making it new. SCCs provide an opportunity in and through the only Son the relations of people with God, one another and all creation will be renewed. For this reason the proclamation of the Gospel can contribute to the interior transformation of all people of good will whose hearts are open to the Holy Spirit's action.

In addition, Nkwarir (2015) states that the theological basis of inculturation is God's incarnation and saving presence in human cultures. Any talk or action about inculturating the Christian faith must be

seen in the light of the mystery of Jesus Christ, and not just as efforts to make a system or an institution more meaningful to people of different cultures. Theological consideration of inculturation cannot fail to begin with a study of divine revelation as model and source of all inculturation. Various cultures have served the revelation of the mystery of salvation. The elevation and sanctification of culture through the process of inculturation is not only valuable for the said culture, but for the enrichment of the entire church.

On the importance of inculturation in evangelization, Mawusi (2009) noted that inculturation is one of the fundamental aspects of the church's evangelizing mission and points to the mutuality between the Gospel and the cultures it engages. The Christian Gospel is to be open to all cultures, bound to no single culture and made accessible to every human person through a process of inculturation, by which the Gospel introduces something new into the culture and the culture brings something new to the richness of the Gospel. The aim of inculturation is to ensure authenticity and depth of faith in African Christianity; to heal cultural alienation, to bridge the gap between faith and life, and thus resolve the many instances of spiritual schizophrenia and double life affecting many of our people.

From in-depth oral interviews and observation it is evident that SCCs are used as tools for inculturation in that it is within the communities that Christ message of salvation can be understood and contextualized within people's culture. This is because, geographically SCCs members are from the same locality therefore majority share the same culture. Due to cultural dominion, they are able to evangelize to each other and even to make converts in a more appealing way.

Secondly, there is cultural accommodation within the SCCs. Members are able to accommodate each other and embrace their culture. This was evident in town centers where some SCCs had members from different ethnic communities. It was reported there was socialization that was beyond ethnic lines. In doing so, they created a sense of belonging which in turn brought room for conversion.

Thirdly, there is contextualization of culture whereby the church encourages members to incorporate their cultures within the gospel like in rites of passage. Findings revealed that within the SCCs, members enjoy their way of worship especially where they incorporate their traditions and cultural way of doing things without being condemned. They enjoy their way of giving offerings during Sunday service. They appreciated how they conduct various rites of passage within their SCCs with acknowledgement from the church. For instance, after initiation, the initiates were brought back to the church through SCCs after seclusion period for prayers and blessings. Their way of carrying out their culture in

religious way has attracted their neighbors and their SCCs are expanding. In doing so, inculturation has been used as a tool in evangelization in the SCCs.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, inculturation has been used as a tool of evangelization in the SCCs in the Catholic Church in Vihiga County through incorporating people's culture with the gospel. This has been done through their ways of worship whereby SCCs member carry out the church service in their cultural way through decorating the church in their cultural arts, praying in their different dialects, being allowed to carry out their rites of passage traditionally and allowed back to the Church afterwards for prayers. Inculturation has in this way created a sense of belonging whereby members of SCCs are able to identify themselves with each other. The accommodation of their different cultural backgrounds has created a fertile ground for evangelization. In doing so, they have been able to spread the gospel of Christ within their culture in a more easy and understandable way.

RECOMMENDATION

The study recommends evangelization to be done within the SCCs through inculturation as it is well understood within the community cultures. In doing so, the church will be in a position to fulfill its mandate of evangelization to all as stated in Mathew 28:19.

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