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Consistency of Members to Small Christian Community Meetings in Tabaka Catholic Parish, Kisii Diocese

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the participation consistency of members in small Christian community meetings and their involvement in church activities at Tabaka Catholic Church. Members of small Christian communities can reach out to others for pastoral work without relying solely on the priests, which requires active participation. However, some members do not attend the weekly meetings, and others do not recognise the importance of participating in church activities. The study utilised public participation theory as a framework for its analysis to help discuss the importance of consistency of members in active participation. The target population comprised 776 participants. Simple random sampling, purposive sampling and census were used to select 237 respondents comprising 2 priests, 84 leaders, 105 church members, 4 catechists and 42 youth. Data was collected through interviews, questionnaires and observations. Statistical packages for social sciences (SPSS) was used to analyse data. The findings revealed that members of small Christian communities often fall behind due to a lack of interest, non-commitment to meeting attendance, varying leadership styles, and differences in socio-economic status. The study recommends that leaders of small Christian communities and the church should put a greater emphasis on the importance of joining the group and actively participating in both the weekly meetings and church programs.

Keywords: Active participation, consistency, meetings, small Christian communities.



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INTRODUCTION

Small Christian communities are among the most effective pastoral approaches for encouraging lay involvement in evangelisation (Healey, 2012). Through these communities, laypeople can engage in church activities and deepen their understanding of the scriptures. This participation enables them to become witnesses to the truths contained in these texts. Active involvement in small Christian communities allows members to gain a better understanding of the scriptures, and this prepares them to reach out to those who are passive. Members also encourage others to participate in church activities, fulfilling their role as Christians.

Active participation is important in small Christian community meetings. As highlighted in Ecclesiastes 4:9-12, "two are better than one because they have a good return for their labour." If one person falls, the other can help them up, but if someone is alone and falls, there is no one to assist them. Today, members of small Christian communities do not attend the weekly meetings, others have withdrawn from the church, and some do not see the need to join such groups. Most Christians hold the misconception that small Christian communities are for the old, women and those who do not have work to do.

In North America, Christians engage in small Christian missions, praying, scriptural readings, and various group activities to strengthen their faith. Despite the positive impact of evangelisation in the United States, a study by Kimeli (2020) observed that in developed Western countries like Canada and the USA, small Christian communities are often seen primarily as welfare organisations that support those in need. This trend indicates a materialistic societal focus, prioritising charity and participation in weekly meetings over spiritual growth. There is a pressing need for individuals to develop holistically, allowing communities to flourish spiritually.

A study by Njoroge (2019) revealed that in Kenya, women make up 61 per cent of the participants in small Christian communities, highlighting their significant presence in these groups. A study by Muttai (2016) revealed that absenteeism is particularly pronounced among men, leading to lower participation rates in community activities. Kimeli (2020) confirmed this by noting that while 70 per cent of women are active in

small Christian communities, only 30 per cent of men maintain active participation. This affects the participation of members. Kimeli (2020) indicated that only 10 per cent of Christians between 15-25 years attend weekly meetings. These sentiments show a sense of laxity among Christians.

The primary aim of forming small Christian communities is to assist the clergy in their evangelising efforts. These communities play a significant role in the church's mission, as commissioned by Christ through the Great Commission (Matthew 28:19). Church leaders, especially bishops and priests, emphasise the importance of spreading the gospel through weekly meetings, visiting the sick, prisoners, burying the dead, offering comfort to one another, and contributing to the church's development (Njoroge, 2018). Church leaders regularly remind Christians of the importance of active participation. However, many members are still not engaged. There is low attendance and gender imbalance in small Christian community meetings, and some do not see the value in forming or participating in these groups. A study by Olusola (2008) indicated that only 13.6 per cent of people attend these weekly meetings. Additionally, Njoroge (2019) indicates that 61 per cent of attendees are women, which highlights that church activities are primarily undertaken by a small group. These gaps prompted this study on consistency of members to small Christian community meetings in Tabaka Catholic Parish, Kisii Diocese.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Small Christian communities are seen as effective vehicles for evangelisation. Within these communities, members have the opportunity to hear the gospel. They meet weekly to discuss strategies for reaching others through evangelisation. During these gatherings, members begin with Bible sharing, followed by meditation on the word of God. This process aims to help members apply what they have learned, such as teachings on forgiveness or sharing experiences. Through this approach, members gain insight into the church's mission, which is crucial because a solid understanding of scripture enables them to assist the clergy in evangelisation efforts (Fanwong, 2015). They first evangelise among themselves, and once they feel informed, they can share the good news with their neighbours (Njoroge, 2019). The Bible serves as the foundation for the faith and life of the members of small

Christian communities. They focus on the gospel reading from the previous Sunday, preparing it for discussion the following week. This practice equips members with the necessary skills to share the word of God with others.

Before Vatican II, the Catholic Church had a hierarchical structure with the pope at the top and the laity at the bottom (Fanwong, 2015). However, after Vatican II, there has been an increased emphasis on the role of the laity (Gakuna, 2019). The laity, which included the men, women, and youth, are called to serve God through their baptism and confirmation, empowering them to evangelise the faith. Since the laity constitute the majority of the church, it is their responsibility to understand the word of God and share it with others, especially as the number of Christians continues to grow (Gakuna, 2019). Members of small Christian communities often hesitate to participate actively in church activities. For instance, working-class individuals may claim they have busy schedules that prevent them from engaging. Gakuna discussed various activities for the laity in evangelisation. This study aimed at discussing member's hesitation in church activities.

These community groups meet every Sunday in members' homes on a rotational basis. During these meetings, they pray, reflect on the word of God, and centre their activities around worship. God speaks to us

through our prayers. Members are encouraged to use events from their lives as opportunities for prayer, allowing them to connect their spiritual practices to everyday experiences (Pikiti, 2015). Pikiti's work discussed the prayers offered in this group but left out the aspect of consistency and participation of small Christian communities.

Small Christian communities serve as vital spaces for the active preparation of lay faithful members. Regular attendance enables participants to engage effectively in church activities. The more the lay faithful attend these small groups and reflect on the word in the context of their lives, the more they participate actively in the parish Eucharist (Kim, 2011). However, Gakuna (2019) noted that a lack of commitment among Christians can lead to inactivity within these small Christian communities. Many members avoid attending the weekly meetings and miss opportunities to learn and share the gospel, ultimately hindering their ability to evangelise. This observation highlighted the need for this study.

METHODOLOGY

The study was carried out in Tabaka Catholic Parish, Kisii Diocese. The study adopted a descriptive study design with the aim of observing and describing participation trends among small Christian community members. Data was collected using questionnaires, interviews and observation.

Table 1: Category, Target, Sampling Procedure, Sample size

Category	Target	Sampling Procedure	Sample Size	Percentage
Priests	2	Censors	2	1%
Leadership	280	Purposive	84	35%
Church membership	350	Simple random	105	44%
Catechist	4	Purposive	4	1%
Youth	140	Simple random	42	19%
Total	776		237	100%

The information for the sample size was determined by Mugenda and Mugenda (2003). According to him, a sample size of 10 per cent is okay for a population exceeding 1000, while a sample of 30 per cent is okay for a population of less than 1000. In this case, the study used 30 per cent to determine the sample size. The target population consisted of 726 participants. A sample size of 237 participants was acquired through simple random sampling for church members and youth, censors for

priests and purposive sampling for leaders and catechists.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The study revealed several factors that prevent members from actively participating. Data collected through the questionnaire highlighted these obstacles. The findings regarding members' consistency in attending small Christian community meetings are presented below:

Table 2: What Hinders Members from Active Participation in SCC Meetings

Factors	SA	%	A	%	D	%	SD	&
Lack of interest	91	41	88	39.6	5	2.3	8	3.6
Money contribution/poverty	97	43.7	87	39.2	8	3.6	0	0
Leadership styles	94	42.3	80	36.0	11	5.0	12	5.4
Lack of commitment	85	38.3	89	40.1	8	3.6	10	4.5
Work/Business	88	39.7	93	41.9	8	3.6	5	2.2
Differences in socio-economic status	79	35.5	85	38.3	7	3.2	10	4.5

The data indicates a lack of interest significantly affects member participation in Small Christian Communities (SCC). Most respondents, 91 (41%), strongly agreed, and 88 (40%) agreed that this lack of interest has impacted SCC members. Many Christians hold a misconception that SCCs are for the unemployed or those with nothing to do, and some individuals hesitate to join these groups because they believe there is no financial compensation or that participation is a waste of time. A small number disagreed 5 (2%) and strongly disagreed 8 (3%) that a lack of interest affects active participation among members. This indicates the significant problem with the active involvement of Christians in Tabaka Parish.

On the second factor, 97 (43.7%) of the respondents strongly agreed that financial contributions pose a hindrance to active participation in SCCs. An additional 87 (39.2%) agreed that financial constraints limit member participation. During interviews, participants highlighted the financial demands placed on SCC members, noting that each community is assigned a specific monetary target. One interviewee said, “Some members may avoid SCC meetings to escape being asked for contributions they cannot afford, leading them to skip weekly gatherings” (Interviewee 2). Another member commented, “We engage in various activities within our groups, but lately, most of these require financial contributions. Given today's tough economic conditions, many Christians might skip SCC meetings to avoid contributing, as they struggle to meet their own financial needs” (Interviewee 5).

These findings are in agreement with other studies, such as those by Monywa & Oduke (2019), which indicated that members in the Kisii Diocese face

financial challenges. When it comes to contributions to diocesan funds, many are unable to participate, resulting in diminished engagement with church activities. Other studies, such as those by Njoroge (2018), have highlighted that many members earn very little, making contributions difficult. In Tabaka Parish, members reported that many SCC activities require monetary contributions, causing those with limited financial resources to refrain from attending. Only 8 (3.6%) respondents disagreed that financial contributions hinder active participation in SCC activities. This greatly affects the participation of members.

On the item of leadership, 94 respondents (42.3%) strongly agreed and 80 respondents (36.3%) agreed that leadership styles impact active participation in Small Christian Community (SCC) activities. According to the interviews conducted, respondents shared the following insights:

Leadership can significantly affect member attendance. When leaders themselves are inactive, members tend to mirror this behaviour. A leader should lead by example; simply speaking about involvement without demonstrating it will lead to disengagement among members. (Interviewee 1)

Communication also plays a vital role. If leaders fail to communicate the meeting time and place clearly, weekly attendance of members will drop. Additionally, when leaders demonstrate questionable conduct, such as not being accountable for collected contributions, members become dissatisfied, negatively impacting their participation. (Interviewee 4)

From the data collected, only 11 respondents (5%) disagreed, and 12 respondents (5.4%) strongly disagreed that leadership styles do not affect member participation

in SCC activities. The evidence suggests that leadership styles indeed influence participation levels. For example, when leadership is dictatorial and leaders do not listen to members' views. Making decisions unilaterally can lead to disengagement. This study aligned with findings by Njoroge (2018) and Olusola (2011), who pointed out that some leaders fail to consider their members' ideas and impose their decisions, insisting on unquestioned obedience under the assumption that they know what's best. Gakuna (2019) further observed that a lack of commitment among leaders can lead to member inactivity, causing the group to stagnate. Many members in small Christian communities are reluctant to participate actively, especially those in the working class who have busy schedules. This situation leads to division among members, as differing opinions and priorities may cause them to avoid participating in weekly meetings altogether.

Lack of commitment was indicated as a key factor hindering member participation in Small Christian Communities (SCC). The study revealed that 85 (38.3%) strongly agreed and 89 respondents (40.1%) agreed that a lack of commitment negatively impacts participation in SCC activities. Interview feedback indicated:

"As clergy, we encourage our members to actively participate. However, we still see a lack of commitment among SCC members, particularly among the men. If you observe our weekly meetings, the women outnumber the men." (Interviewee 3)

"In our weekly meetings, many men claim to be too busy working to provide for their families. Others struggle with alcoholism, while some are more interested in political matters than in spiritual engagement. When a political leader calls a meeting, many men will prioritise that over attending church gatherings." (Interviewee 4)

Interview responses indicated that members often feel they have more important matters to attend to, with 8 (3.6%) disagreeing and 10 (4.5%) strongly disagreeing that a lack of commitment affects attendance. Supporting these findings, a study by Kimeli (2020) highlighted that men are less active participants in small Christian communities, where members typically meet weekly on Sundays for prayer, reflection on the Word of God, and spiritual nourishment. Kimeli's study noted that 30 per cent of members attend weekly meetings only twice a month, while 20 per cent attend once a

month. This raises questions about the reasons for members' inconsistent attendance.

On the item of work, most of the respondents 88 (39.7%) strongly agreed and 93 (41.9%) agreed that their busy schedule affects active participation in SCC activities. Interviews further clarified that:

"In our SCC, many members feel they should prioritise work to provide for their families instead of attending church gatherings." (Interviewee 3)

"Many Christians in our community would rather engage in activities like carving soapstone or running their own businesses. Some members are employed full-time, leaving them little time to attend meetings." (Interviewee 6)

This aligns with Kimeli (2020), who indicated that 70 per cent of women are active in small Christian communities, whereas only 30 per cent of men participate. Men in the Tabaka parish often prefer political activities over religious ones and feel pressured to work to support their families. Additionally, some view SCC as primarily for women and children. Respondents who disagreed that work hinders participation numbered 8 (3.6%), with 5 (2.2%) strongly disagreeing.

On differences in socio-economic status, 79 respondents (35.5%) strongly agreed and 85 (38.3%) agreed that these differences negatively affect SCC participation. Only 7 (3.2%) disagreed, and 10 (4.5%) strongly disagreed. Njoroge (2018) posited that members from higher social classes often feel superior, leading them to disregard contributions from others and causing those from lower classes to shrink back and refrain from taking active roles within the SCC.

Observations from the researcher's visits to SCC meetings revealed that women significantly outnumbered men, and attendance was generally lower than the SCC registration records indicated. Poor attendance hampers the success of SCC programs, as the few active participants struggle to provide sufficient support. Consequently, this leads to delays in activities and discourages committed members. Those who miss meetings do not receive essential biblical teachings, which hinders the church's mission.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Conclusion: Small Christian communities are important in the mission of the church, yet active participation among members remains a challenge. The youth, seen as the future of the church, are often few, leaving the work of evangelisation primarily to older members. Additionally, men, who are typically viewed as family leaders, are also underrepresented. Many are distracted by other interests, such as politics, and often feel that weekly meetings are primarily for women and children, which prevents them from attending. While many people might be registered as members in small Christian communities (SCCs), attendance is low due to various factors, including work commitments, lack of dedication, financial constraints, and issues with leadership styles. Favourable leadership can help foster

unity, but poor leadership can lead to divisions, causing members to feel unheard and discouraged from participating.

Recommendation: The church and SCC leaders should emphasise the importance of joining and actively participating in SCC activities and programs. Men, women, and youth must engage in church life. Members should be aware that Bible sharing is essential as it is one of the primary ways God communicates with us. For the youth, the church can organise sports activities and seminars to foster engagement and open lines of communication. Parental involvement is also key; parents should bring their children to weekly SCC meetings from a young age. The children will understand that small Christian communities are not just for adults but are for everyone.

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