

Small Christian Communities and Promotion of Peace in the Catholic Church in Vihiga County, Kenya

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Abstract: This paper analyzed how Small Christian Communities (SCCs) promote peace in the Catholic Church. Specifically, the paper examines: Catholic Church understanding of peace; causes of conflicts in the SCCs; and Church's conflict resolution mechanisms through community based approaches as well as use of mediation. This paper is part of a larger study was conducted in 2016 and 2017 in 74 SCCs in the five parishes of the Catholic Church in Vihiga County, Kenya. The paper makes an argument that the Church's mandate to promote peace is derived from Matthew 5:9 "blessed are the peacemakers for they will be called children of God"; subsequently, the Catholic Church fulfils this mandate through the use of SCCs as the key avenue for promoting peaceful co-existence at the grassroots level.

Keywords: Peace, conflict resolutions, Small Christian Communities, Catholic Church.

INTRODUCTION

Peace is promoted when there is conflict among people. Magondu [1] states that, conflict arises from differences which if not properly handled will produce sharp disagreement and sometimes violent clashes. It occurs whenever people disagree over their values, motivations, perceptions, ideas, or desires.

Sometimes these differences look trivial, but when a conflict triggers strong feelings, a deep personal and relational need is at the core of the problem—a need to feel safe and secure, a need to feel respected and valued, or a need for greater closeness and intimacy. Since conflicts also when there are disagreements, disputes or controversies in ideas or viewpoints among two or more individuals/groups, the need to resolve them before they develop into crises is imperative.

In attempting to resolve conflicts, Mwangi [2] notes that the conflict manager needs to understand origins, patterns and possible outcomes of the conflict. The conflict manager therefore must identify the issues in the conflict by asking the actors involved why they are engaged in the conflict. This will enable the conflict manager find the best solutions. Since no conflict is ever about a single issue, the conflict manager should employ practical means of conflict management e.g. the process called fractionating the issues. In this process, the conflict manager classifies the different issues into two groups, simple or complex, and therefore gives form and structure to the process. Fisher [3] notes that the likelihood of reaching a satisfactory solution to a conflict can often be increased by separating or 'fractionating' the large issues involved into smaller workable ones. Mwangi concurs that fractionating the

issues is an important tool for practical conflict management". When engaged in a process such as negotiation for example, it helps to encourage the parties to deal with the more straightforward (simple) issues before moving to the more complex ones.

Traditionally as observed by Marandu [4], the African society managed to maintain peace and harmony in the society by using their own community-based methods of conflict resolution. In the event of two conflicting communities, elders from both sides gathered and proposed ways for peaceful conflict resolution. One speaker put proposals forward after another and the rest kept silent and listened carefully. One elder would lead a prayer invoking the name of God for guidance and light, and finally they would conclude by voting to know which norm of action should be observed. The procedure followed what today can be termed as interplay between the dynamics of grace and 'locally inherited wisdom'. Indeed, the Second Vatican Council document 'AD Gentes'9[5] was right in affirming the 'secret presence of God' in all customs and cultures leading them to perfection in Christ.

The ability to skillfully mediate conflicts comes easier to some people than others as noted by [6]. However, to fully master it requires training, experience

and mentoring from other peace builders. When in a high stakes situation, a small mistake, such as a poorly chosen word, can have many negative repercussions. Moreover, if the mediator does not know how best to channel people's anger and frustration, dialogues can often become stuck in a rut, unable to move forward. Mediators should be focused people, to prevent the process from being hijacked and run off track. They must also be diplomatic, thoughtful and tactful to avoid causing unnecessary offense.

The Church's charisma and likewise her unique nature and position for reconciliation, at whatever level, needs to be recognized. This position lies in the fact that the Church's essential mission is to help people live peacefully. The Church feels has always had an obligation to go to the roots of the conflict, in order to bring healing and to re-establish, so to speak, an equally original reconciliation which will be the effective principle of all true reconciliation. Therefore, the Church has the mission of proclaiming this reconciliation [7]. In the context of the change now taking place on the continent and world over, the church has a role to play in reducing or eliminating all together the root causes of simmering or open conflicts and effecting true peace. One way of effecting true peace is by becoming agents of peacebuilding and reconciliation [8].

Reconciliation after conflicts informs structural actions to identify and support structures which would tend to strengthen and solidify peace in order to avoid relapse in conflict [9]. Boutros-Ghali further explained that, reconciliation implies building structures for peace in all phases of a conflict, not merely after the violent phase has been replaced by a fragile peace. Structures that contribute to strengthening and solidifying peace can be institutions that offer forms for peaceful conflict resolution or that prevent violence, such as church institutions

According to Magesa [10], there are four core values that promote healing in a conflict situation from a religious worldview. The first value he notes, is the fact that all human beings have "human dignity". They are created in the image of God. Second, human beings live in God's world. Therefore as creatures, they need to accommodate one another. Third, religion, and subsequently churches, should help humanity to cross the boundary of negative ethnicity that characterizes our society. Churches should henceforth emphasize commonality of the citizens, particularly the essential characteristic of humanity, shunning the accidental characteristics such as political party affiliation, negative ethnicity and the geographical divides. Fourth, churches should preach the Gospel with an emphasis that justice is required for human prosperity and peace. Therefore, church leaders, as shepherds who tend congregations comprising diverse political, socio-economic, cultural and ethno-linguistic backgrounds

need to be impartial on various standpoints as heads of churches. This will limit divisions within congregations, hence harmony and unity [11].

With these views in mind, this paper, sought to understand the role of SCCs within Catholic Church in Vihiga, in promoting peace and peaceful co-existence. The study was pegged on the theory of functionalism, a theory developed by Emile Durkheim [12] and expounded by Branislow Malinowski, Talcott Parson and Alfred Radcliffe Brown; and much later by people like Francis Abraham [13]. The latter explains that every element of a system has a function that contributes positively to the continued operation of that system or negatively to its disintegration and change. The central focus of functionalism is analysis of such contributions, which are called eufunctions (positive), dysfunction (negative) or, 'survival', that is, an element that makes no contribution at all or has outlived its purpose.

Functionalism, to Abraham therefore, seeks the contribution of religion in human society based on its central characteristics, namely, its transcendence of everyday experience in the natural environment; uncertain nature of human conditions; and, their limited aptitude and conditions. Dissimilar parts of the society as Samirah [14] shows make unique contribution towards collective life. Durkheim's functionalism therefore shows that to get to macro levels there is need for smaller internal mechanisms that contribute to the greater whole.

By inferring functionalism, this paper is based on the premise that SCCs, organs that are at the Church's micro level, are necessary components for encouraging peace and peaceful co-existence within communities. The paper therefore examines the roles that these Church family cells play in this endeavor to contribute to the greater whole.

Objective

To analyze how Small Christian Communities promote peace in the Catholic Church in Vihiga County.

METHODOLOGY

This study sought to analyse and give a descriptive scrutiny of how SCCs promote peace among the communities they live in, and in the Catholic Church in Vihiga County, Kenya. The study was carried out between 2016 and 2017 and targeted 74 SCCs in the five parishes of the Catholic Church in Vihiga County namely: Luanda, Hambale, Buyangu, Chamakanga and Erusui. Qualitative methods of data collection, which included in-depth oral interviews and questionnaires, were employed. Open-ended questionnaires were prepared and administered according to the information required as per objectives of the study. This study utilized secondary sources, which were derived from

published books, journals, and unpublished thesis. Data collected through the questionnaires and personal interviews, was synthesized systematically and logically compiled to analyse involvement of SCCs in promotion of peace in the Catholic Church in Vihiga County. Data was coded manually and organized under different themes. Data was then analyzed thematic and major concepts or themes identified and discussed. Data the narratives from open-ended questionnaires and in-depth interview were are presented through direct quotations/verbatim excerpts.

Empirical findings

This study analyzed how SCCs are involved in promotion of peace. The study is divided into the following themes: Catholic Church understanding of peace; causes of conflicts in the SCCs; and conflict resolution mechanisms, including community based approach and use of mediation and reconciliation.

Catholic Church Understanding of Peace

Peace building is paramount after conflicts as an action to identify and support structures which would tend to strengthen and solidify peace in order to avoid relapse in conflict [15]. Dolye argues that peace building implies building structures for peace in all phases of a conflict, not merely after the violent phase has been replaced by fragile peace. Structures that contribute to strengthening and solidifying peace can be institutions that offer forms for peaceful conflict resolution or that prevent violence, such as church institutions.

The Church is founded on Christ who is perceived by Christians as the "Prince of Peace" (Isaiah; 9:1-6, Luke 2:14; 19:38, Ephesians; 2:14, 2 Thessalonians; 3:16). Jesus said that He came so that the world may have life in abundance (John 10:10). Njoroge [16] notes that peace and the Church are inseparable. In the beatitudes, Christ gave a summary of his teachings: "blessed are the peacemakers for they will be called children of God" (Matthew 5:9). Njoroge also adds that the Church is called the body of Christ. To maintain the integrity, churches must advocate for peace and love among their adherents.

The role of the church in peacemaking and reconciliation is strengthened by the fact that the social and political crisis in the society questions radically the message of the gospel. The church's initiatives for reconciliation were anchored on the concept that peace is the tranquility that flows from right order. When we put right order into the structures of our society, the tranquility that results is peace. Many people, however, perceive peace as the absence of war or violence [17]. In this paper, we argue that peace should be seen as the transformation of contextual and destructive interactions into more co-operative and constructive existence.

Thus the church is necessitated to mitigate conflicts in order to live to her mission. Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs), The Church and Church- Based Organizations (CBOs) such as Caritas, Diakonia, Inter-life, Church of Sweden, Swedish Mission, Covenant Church, Swedish Ecumenical Women Council and Swedish Mission Council have been involved in peace building processes in areas affected by ethnic conflicts in Africa [16]. Likewise, the Church has been involved in peace building and reconciliation in Kenya. The Catholic Church involvement has also been strengthened by her commissions such as, Catholic Justice and Peace Commission (CJPC), which has representatives in all SCCs.

From the questionnaires, respondents understood peace as follows:

SCC 23: it is a state of being in harmony with each other in the community.

SCC 39: it is a state where conflict does not exist among people in a given community.

SCC 43: it is harmonious living among people whereby their human dignity is respected.

Peace can therefore be understood as a state of harmony in the community where there are no conflicts. People relate freely with each other without any hindrance. But at times in their interaction, when conflicts arise among members it calls for conflict resolution and peace building through various approaches such as reconciliation through dialogue, apologies, interventions through mediators among others. The Catholic Church has been involved in peacemaking as part of its mission. Through CJPC in the SCCs it has been an instrument of peace where there is conflict among its members.

Causes of Conflict in the SCCs

The study findings show that there are several causes of conflicts within the SCCs in the Catholic Church in Vihiga. Data from the questionnaires shows that conflicts are caused by the following.

SCC 3: When leadership is poor it leads into conflicts. This happens especially when leaders fail to listen to the members of the SCC and dictates them on what to do. At times it leads to divisions in the SCC.

SCC 17: Family differences bring in conflicts. Some members who are from one clan don't even visit each other. They have unresolved issues which have broken communication among them.

SCC45: Some people have tendency to speak ill about others and spread rumours. This brings tension and divisions within the SCCs.

Further respondents to the in-depth interviews during the study put forth the following:

Respondent 28: conflicts are normal occurrences in any society. Whenever we have health interactions among people in the community, conflict must occur. Fahali wawili hawakai zizi moja (Two bulls cannot stay together in one stable). Within our SCCs we differ with our neighbors who are our clan members. We differ because of progress in one family than the rest. We are in conflict with our neighbors who are members of our SCCs because of the way we bring up children. A fight between children while playing can bring conflict among many to a level of destabilizing an SCC.

Respondent 35: some conflicts are caused by misunderstanding among members. During our discussions on various issues there are those who feel they have been belittled maybe because of their statuses in the community. In areas where SCCs members are from different backgrounds, some members feel inferior or superior to the rest. They always misinterpreted discussions based on their ego.

Respondent 55: In some cases there has been conflict among leaders. This happens in SCCs where the chairperson of the parish council as a member of an SCC in one way or another undermines the role of the chairperson of that SCC. They may argue over certain issues pertaining to the SCC to a level of dividing the SCC. This happens mostly when issues to do with contributions of money towards the development of the parish are not well addressed.

Respondent 60: Pride among members also leads to conflict. There are those who do not attend SCC meetings in some member's house because they just hate them for no reason. This brings in conflict because they also do not expect those they hate to visit their homes during SCC meetings. This is an interpersonal conflict with affects SCCs meetings. In Kiswahili we say ' Chui na mbuzi hawalali nyumba moja (The leopard and the goat do not sleep in the same house). There is no harmony possible between totally dissimilar people. They do not frequent the same places.

From the interviews it was also reported that some misunderstanding occurs in the SCCs because some members group themselves based on social classes. Those from high social class underrate the rest making them feel inferior and therefore fail to take active roles in the SCC. The low class members always

feel the later should perform all the tasks in the SCCs to avoid conflict of interest.

It was also reported that some people cannot be corrected when they go astray because of their emotions. They are unable to control their temper and keep grudge for long. Because of their emotions, they are always in conflict with some members of SCCs. They do not listen to anyone and this affects their interaction with others in the community. If they are in any leadership position in their SCC, their decision affects many leading to disharmony.

Similarly, Mwangi [2] noted that conflict is considered an endemic feature of society which implies that the phenomenon of conflict in one form or another is an inevitable and ever present feature of society and social interaction. Conflict is a normal and necessary part of human relationships. It is part and parcel of our everyday life, a part of human society. As long as there is human interaction, there will be conflict, therefore, conflict can never be completely eradicated hence the need to manage it properly.

The descriptions of conflicts within SCCs above also conform to Magondi's [1] description of interpersonal conflicts that occurs between two or more individuals. These may result from differences in opinion, motives and actions. In relation to the excerpts above too, is what Palmer [18] identifies as underlying causes of conflict. These include faulty leadership and administrative issues where relationships within the organizational structure are unclear. Leadership that is viewed as too autocratic, too weak or too political creates an organization that has no guidance and is both passive and demoralized. Poorly defined responsibilities due to the church's lack of proper review of roles as changes take place has been a source of disharmony within the people serving in the church.

Kenyan Catholic Church faces conflict that result from poor communication as noted by Magondi [1]. Conflict arises when church members do not learn to communicate with each other and understand what each is saying and meaning. The breakdown in communication mainly results from emotional factors such as stereotypes and personal insecurities which hinder accurate hearing. There are church members who do not enjoy or even use the advice others give them.

From the findings above conflicts are normal occurrences in the SCCs. These conflicts are a result of interaction among members in the society. It can be argued that SCCs in the Catholic Church in Vihiga experience conflicts such as poor leadership, gossips, misunderstanding among members, and conflict between leaders, communication breakdown and differences in opinions emotional and social class conflicts.

Conflict Resolutions Mechanisms

In line with the theory of functionalism, to get to community, national and global peace, peace building must begin from the 'cells' – the small units that feed into the larger picture. The small issues within families, clans, communities, tribes, nations, are what escalate conflict into wars. Consequently, there is need to resolve conflicts and make peace, and in relation to this paper, among members of SCCs. This will contribute to the wider peace in the Church, and subsequently to wider community. The sources of conflict therefore call for conflict resolution.

Conflict resolution involves assisting in the termination of conflicts by finding solutions to them. Conflict resolution deals with the conflict in a way that brings the conflict to a closure, an end, a resolution that will please either parties or one of the parties in conflict. Conflict resolution is more comprehensive as it implies that the deep rooted sources of conflict are addressed and most of all resolved. This implies that there is no more violence or hostility and the structure of the conflict has been changed [19]. This method "aims at reaching a mutually self-sustaining solution" by identifying and addressing the causes of the conflicts on ground. The method identifies the needs of parties in the conflict and finding new ways of reconciling the groups involved to build a new social relationship [2].

The study findings revealed there are two main approaches used in SCCs in conflict resolution. They are: community based approach and use of mediation and reconciliation.

Community based Approach (CBA)

Data from the questionnaires shows that SCCs have ways of involving community in conflict resolution. The following were captured from the questionnaires.

SCC 3: We encourage those in conflict to try and resolve their differences without first involving a third party. This is because they are the only ones who know the root cause of their conflict.

SCC 20: Where there is breakdown in communication, we encourage members to initiate dialogue to resolve their conflicts and solve their difference amicably.

SCC 50: Conflict among leaders is solved by leaders themselves meeting and agreeing on their different roles to avoid conflict of interest.

SCC 67: Conflicts among SCCs members who are from the same clan are well solved among families affected and the clan.

This was also confirmed from the respondents who provided in-depth information during the study.

Respondent 3: We encourage SCCs members to treat each other as a family. Since all families have challenges, they should learn to overcome them from within. SCC that is faced with family conflicts are advised to solve them at the family level through their clan leaders to ensure their relationship does not affect the smooth running of any SCC. All those who are involved in conflict are supposed to take charge of their actions. Those who are involved for example in gossiping should be approached and be made aware of the effects of their utterances than confronting them. In doing so, a peaceful community will be in existence.

Respondent 45: Leaders should act as role models in the SCC. They should learn to listen to each other and serve SCC as per their respective leadership position. We urge leaders to work as a team and assist the church in achieving its mission on peace building.

Respondent 74: During our weekly meeting we always emphasize on love as the greatest virtue. We believe where love exists conflicts are minimal. In our bible sharing, we are reminded we are peace maker and that is why when closing our meetings we must end with greeting each other as a sign of peace. Since you cannot greet an enemy, one is forced to forget the differences and shake hand as a sign of peace.

In support of the findings above, Ntabona [20] noted that African communities had several ways of resolving conflicts by using traditional institution, which embodied moral authority. He gives an example of Bashingantahe institution in Burundi, which consisted of people, empowered in order to be responsible for truth justice and peace in their environment and wherever they were. Kagabo [21] further gives credit to Bashingantahe due to its role in seeking peace during crisis, and partly, because of the potential it has continued to contribute to the peace process in Burundi.

Similarly, Magondu [1] added that negotiation was very important. Negotiation is a process to achieve one's goals through communication with at least one other party, with the presumed outcome an agreement. It is the process whereby parties discuss matters of concern amongst themselves without involving a third party. It is a non-coercive, voluntary method unlike judiciary settlements and arbitration. Its advantage is that it eliminates the moderating effects of a third party

and the parties themselves map out their future relationships.

The involvement of all actors in peace building is crucial in coming up with long term peace building and reconciliation strategies as pointed out by Njoroge [16]. Intellectuals and professionals will give their interpretation based on their wide experience on the theoretical level. Elders at the grassroots will give their views according to the experience at the grassroots and community level. However, in addressing questions about the nature of involvement between the professionals and the village elders, it is important to distinguish between the initiatives of community members working for change within their own societies and those who work in cultural contexts other than their own. Efforts to professionalize the field should in no way disempower people from advocating for inclusion or working to strengthen inter-group relations in their own communities.

Community based approach of conflict resolution aim at getting a solution from within among the parties involved. The findings of the study also showed that those involved in conflict must come to an agreement to resolve their differences without involving a third party. Solution must come from within because members already know the cause of their conflicts. This should be the first step in solving any form of conflict in any group. It was reported that SCCs members prefer using community based approach to avoid interference by members who do not belong to the same SCCs or even those who are from different faith. It is one way of keeping secrets within their SCCs which if exposed might split the entire SCC and even affect others.

It can be concluded that SCCs encourage members to use community based approach. This is done through encouraging members to resolve their differences through communication because they know the root cause of their conflicts better than any other person. Leaders should act as role models and learn to listen to each other. They should work as a team and emphasize on love as a way of solving conflicts in the SCCs and community at large .In doing so, they will create a peaceful community.

SCCs in the Catholic Church in Vihiga County have managed, to a certain extent, resolve conflicts among its members by adopting community based approach. Peaceful environment has been created because members have learned to solve their own problems and conflicts as they occur. However, there are instances when CBA is not always successful, especially when conflicts have a high level magnitude, and the effects cannot be contained within the family or clan. There were reported cases of limited positive dialogue whereby members were shy to point out and condemn a wrong issues and intolerance among some members. Besides other measures, the SCCs showed

that one of the mechanisms that has worked in mediation that is aimed at reconciling the conflicting parties.

Use of mediators

A mediator is a more active and powerful third party whose role is to ensure that dialogue continues and to reconcile the warring parties and appeases the feelings of resentment between the parties to the conflict. Mediators not only facilitate discussions, but they usually impose a structure and process on the discussions that is designed to move the parties toward mutual understanding and win-win agreements [1]. Mediators are sought from within the communities or societies of the parties concerned. Then people who enjoy social recognition for their experience and integrity are sought for as well. A mediator is often connected with one of the parties. In this way, more than one mediator is used. Usually, a smaller or larger group is used, made up of people selected to resolve a particular conflict or of an already existing committee or council of mediators [16]. Similarly, SCCs in the Catholic Church in Vihiga County use mediators as their arbitrators in an attempt to make people involved in conflict to come to an agreement. This was evident from the following data collected from the questionnaires.

SCC 3: We opt for mediators when conflicts are beyond our control as SCC members. Mediators are neutral participants and their suggestion offers a better solution to all in conflict.

SCC 30: Mediators assist in initiating dialogue and breaking all barriers of communication. This offers a quick solution to conflict and peace is restored.

SCC 55: Mediators such as priests offers spiritual guidance which creates room for dialogue and reconciliation.

SCC 74: Through mediators we are able to create room for discussion and air out our differences and out of discussions we resolve our differences.

This was also echoed in the in-depth oral interviews where respondents stated that:

Respondent 10: In case of unresolved conflicts within the community level, we advocate for mediator ether a priest, catechist, a clan elder a representative of CJPC or an elderly person in the affected SCC. They are expected to listen to the cause of conflict from the two sides. They may probe them with different questions in order to get a clear understanding of their conflict. Solution is based on nature of the conflict but the final answer is always reconciliation through open communication.

Respondent 16: We encourage every family to organize for a Jumuiya mass at least once in a year for spiritual guidance. Some of the conflicts within the SCCs can be solved through spiritual guidance through such church activities. The families and even leaders with unresolved conflicts at community level can be able to discuss their grievances with the priest during such occasions. The priest will give a solution with biblical reference to guide the affected and even initiate counseling sessions as a way of follow up in order to avoid re-occurrence of the conflict.

Respondent 98: The affected members may also seek assistance from representatives of CJPC or an elderly person in the SCC. They report the dispute and seek for advice. The CJPC official or the elderly person might initiate dialogue to get an understand of the cause of conflict and reconcile the two parties. They may also suggest on an agreement to be adhered to avoid such conflicts in future. For example issues like in misunderstanding among members or leaders are easily solved by elders of CJPC officials.

In support of the findings above, Bob-Manuel [22] says that among the Ndendeuli of Tanzania, mediators play active roles in conflict solving by suggesting an agreement and get as far as pressurizing the parties into accepting it. Pressurizing can be done through talking or singing, shaming and ridiculing. This method can be used in contexts where it is acceptable and in instances where the cause of the dispute is self-evident. In an effort to change the behavior of troublemakers, through ritualized or ordinary conversations, anti-social and conflict-causing conducts are put to shame. This is by individuals gifted in poking fun at others, in jocular ways. Comedians and singers among other social commentators can here be of great influence.

Elders are respected as trustworthy mediators all over Africa because of their accumulated experience and wisdom as pointed out by Njoroge [16]. The roles of these mediators would depend on traditions, circumstances and personalities, accordingly. These roles include pressurizing or manipulating, making recommendations, giving assessment or conveying suggestions on behalf of a party. The mediators can also remain passive, as they are there to represent important shared values. There is no predetermined model, so they are entitled to change their roles from time to time as they perceive the needs at various times. The entire approach is flexible and dynamic, while every part of the talk is related to and influenced by the social context.

The findings above reveals that conflict is resolve through mediators. SCCs use the priest, catechist, CJPC representatives in the SCCs and elderly people in the SCC. They act as third parties and give advice and solution depending on the nature of the conflict. It was reported that they are consulted because they are trusted and are believed to have knowledge on how to deal with various issues. They listen to the cases by involving the conflicting parties and initiate a dialogue or even discussion and at the end offer a solution to the conflict. Mediators are also in a position of a making judgment based on their understanding of the conflict at hand. After listening to the causes of conflict from the conflicting side, he/she ensure fair judgment for all without favoring any side.

Therefore, it can be stated that SCCs in the Catholic Church in Vihiga use priests, catechists, CJPC representatives and elderly people in the SCCs as their mediators. In their role, they solve conflicts in the SCCs by: initiating dialogue, offering spiritual guidance, suggesting agreement, open discussions with the conflicting parties and through giving final judgment. In applying these strategies, SCCs have been effective in promoting peace through mediators.

RECONCILIATION

Nyongesa [23] defines reconciliation as an act by which people who have been apart and split off from one another, because of deferring opinions, begin to walk together again towards peace and cohesiveness. Essentially it refers to the restoration of broken relationship or the coming together of people who have been alienated and separated from one another by conflict to create a community again. It is a long-term process that covers all activities intended to promote peace and overcome violence. As a result, it is plausible to note that the overall aim of peace building is to prevent violent outbreaks of conflicts or to make sustainable transformation of violent conflicts into peaceful action. Thus, conflicts can be dealt in a constructive and peaceful manner. Reconciliation after conflicts informs structural actions to identify and support structures which would tend to strengthen and solidify peace in order to avoid relapse in conflict [9]. Structures that contribute to strengthening and solidifying peace can be institutions that offer forms for peaceful conflict resolution or that prevent violence, such as church institutions.

The study findings revealed that the Catholic Church has its own structures of reconciliation through CJPC representatives SCCs. Data from the field shows that CJPC reconcile conflicting parties in the following ways:

The following were the responses from the questionnaires administered in the SCCs,

SCC 2: CJPC representative encourage those in conflict to resolve their conflict through accepting their mistakes and seeking for forgiveness.

SCC 13: Those in conflict are advised to seek for psychological healing through going for sacrament of penance (repentance) and counseling.

SCC 30: Perpetrators are encouraged to apologize to give room for reconciliation.

Similarly data from the interviewee revealed the following:

Respondent 23: After resolving conflicts among members of SCCs, they are requested to shake hands as a sign of peace keeping from that time. They have to make promise that from that time they will never be in conflict again and that they will be peace keepers throughout.

Respondent 35: Through CJPC, there are always discussions every year during Lent season that tackles various topics such as on leadership, family, society among others that helps SCCs members to manage and control conflicts.

Respondent 90: The conflicting parties are called upon and with the help of CJPC representative in the SCCs they are made to submit their mistakes and seek for confession. They apologize to each other and likewise forgive each other.

African indigenous societies used different methods to resolve conflicts and bring about healing. Bob-Manuel [22] shows that when an agreement is eventually reached, the good news is shared with the groups and communities concerned. The agreement is then affirmed as a social contract in a ritual way, which varies from society to society. The affirmation may range from a handshake in public to an elaborate ceremony as required by tradition. The purpose of this is to spread the news about the satisfactory conclusion of the conflict resolution process. This also places an additional obligation on the parties to observe the agreement. The society plays an important role by assisting in implementing the agreement. From this stage, all the parties and the entire community can check whether or not the parties are really adhering to their commitment. If a party needs face-saving, empowerment or encouragement, sympathetic members of the community often render valuable assistance. Such assistance was needed as mediation had taken place between rebel leaders and the surrounding community. These rebel leaders then were to be accepted back into their societies without being labeled.

Like the conception of change in the conflict transformation perspective, reconciliation can be present and necessarily prescriptive at all personal, relational, structural, and cultural levels. At the personal level, for example, repentance and apology from perpetrators have psychological effects and discourse impacts on the self-perception, thus shaping the identities, of both victims and perpetrators. Apology also serves to build the unity between victims and perpetrators, a change desired in the relational dimension of conflict transformation [24].

For meaningful reconciliation to take place [5] notes that, all parties to the conflict must be central in all efforts to make and sustain peace situating implementation of peace agreement in the personal and social lives of people, and transforming social relationships which have been characterized by conflict, injustice and violence.

Reports on CJPC show that submission and confession that involved a person accepting his or her crimes and subsequently owning them up in public was the most common form of reconciliation. This was followed by mediation, implied dialogue, peace workshops and peace visits [26]. While submission and confession involve an absolution by church ministers; mediation requires church ministers to be intermediaries between the conflicting parties; and, dialogue calls for the facilitation of friendly interaction with conflicting communities.

From the findings and scholarly work above, reconciliation can be achieved if all perpetrators are made to understand the effects of their conflicts in order to get along lasting solution in creating a peaceful environment. Reconciliation involves use of some structures within the church or community in an effort to build peace. In this study, the Catholic Church uses CJPC officials or representatives in all SCCs as their structures in peace building. They have been able to apply various strategies in reconciling conflicting members.

For peace to be promoted in the SCC, the conflicting parties are always encouraged to reconcile in a friendly way after agreeing on solution which suits all them all. Some seek for forgiveness to the offended as a way of healing. Those who had barriers in communication, apologize, shake hands and embrace dialogue. There are those who opt for the sacrament of penance after making peace with their offenders. Finally, there are those who opt for guidance and counseling after accepting their mistakes and seeking for confession. Guidance and counseling is meant to assist them to reform and to forgive and forget. They are to begin a new life full of love for one another.

Therefore, it can be concluded that reconciliation is an important tool of conflict resolution and peace building that has been used by the SCCs in the Catholic Church in Vihiga County to enhance peaceful co-existence among the SCC members as well as community members. This has been achieved through the efforts of CJPC representatives in the SCCs. They have ensured reconciliation through encouraging perpetrators to accept their mistakes, seek for forgiveness, go for the sacrament of penance, through discussions during lent season as preventive measure against conflicts and through guidance and counseling.

CONCLUSION

This paper has showed that SCC in the Catholic Church in Vihiga County experience conflicts like any other groups in any society. The conflicts have been highlighted in the form of personal, family and group conflicts. For a healthy living among the members of SCCs, the paper has shown that to a great extent, the SCC members have been successful in resolving these conflicts through community based approach and use of mediation and reconciliation. While the Church and community leadership has been useful in mediation, the CJPC representatives in each SCC have been useful in facilitating reconciliation. We therefore undoubtedly underscore that SCCs have largely achieved their role in promoting peace at the grassroots level in the Catholic Church.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Peace needs to be promoted at the grassroots level anytime there is conflict to ensure a peaceful society. SCCs members needs to be encouraged to learn to solve conflicts at community level as soon as they occur as a way of controlling spread and magnification of conflicts which can end up in divisions within the communities.

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