

## **Promoting Lay People's Involvement in Small Christian Communities and Mission in Africa**

**By Francis Njuguna**

A Theological Symposium on “Mission *Ad Gentes*: 50 Years and Beyond” was organized by the School of Theology of the Tangaza University College, Langata in Nairobi, Kenya on 8-9 February 2016. An integral part of the symposium was 10 Break-out Sessions (small group discussions) on Tuesday afternoon on questions related to *Ad Gentes*. This reflected the process of participation and interaction during the symposium. Participants drew on four sources:

1. The document *Ad Gentes (Decree on the Mission Activity of Church)* promulgated by the Second Vatican Council in 1965.
2. Father Patrick Mwanja, CSSp's “Introduction” in the booklet *Ad Gentes*.
3. Input of the three plenary speakers' important and challenging presentations.
4. Deeper reflections on the questions published in the booklet *Ad Gentes* as “Pastoral Theological Reflections to Assist the Readers.”

Break-out Session No. 7 reflected on the question: “*Ad Gentes* emphasizes that through Baptism all Christians are called to be missionaries and evangelizers. 99% of the members of Small Christian Communities (SCCs) are lay people. How are they promoting missionary awareness and sharing their faith with others?” Participants including one priest, major seminarians and lay people shared their missionary experiences and community experiences regarding *Ad Gentes*. They used a Group Dynamics Method/Tool to involve everyone in the discussion. When one person finished sharing, he or she called on another person in the group and so on until everyone had shared at least once. This improved the quality (richness) and the focus of the sharing.

It was pointed out that lay people by nature of being baptized are missionaries. Hence they qualify as strong participants in Mission *Ad Gentes* (“mission to all people”) and more so within the Catholic Church's pastoral priorities such as promoting Small Christian Communities (SCCs) in Africa. The small discussion group members were quick to emphasize the quality of sharing and witnessing in small communities as effective areas where *Ad Gentes* is carried out. Part of the reason is that lay people are 99% of the membership of the SCCs. The laity play a big role in this important church pastoral program. A key is learning from each other in the SCCs. We learn more when we listen than when we talk.

One of the most striking examples of sharing and witnessing came from Felix Ngao Nzioka, a member of the Catholic Lay Missionaries (CLM) of Kenya. He described how CLM work through SCCs for change. Some of the CLM members live in communities in Nairobi's slums areas as well as in some remote parts of the country such as Marsabit, Turkana and Garissa. He told this story:

One of our lay missionaries served in a slum in Nairobi, Kenya. He coordinated an informal school that also provided meals to children within the slum. They formed a *jumuiya* (Swahili for “Small Christian Community”) for

children who met after school for both prayers and a football game. One day a young girl approached the Catholic Lay Missionary just after prayers and told him that there was a matter she needed to share with him.

The worst had happened to the poor child. Everyone had noticed a change in her disposition, and all attributed it to the recent death of her mother. What nobody realized was that the girl had been sexually abused by her father and this began a few weeks after the family had buried the mother.

The Catholic Lay Missionary of course took the necessary action and the girl and her siblings were put in a better environment. The girl could have walked to the coordinator's office anytime or spoken to any of the volunteer teachers. But she chose to go to her CLM friend in the small community after they had prayed. Such is the impact I find in the SCCs and how informal, friendly and helpful the SCC members are.

The February, 2016 symposium attracted an estimated 450 participants on the first day and an estimated 300 participants on the second day. It was a rich and engaging experience for everyone.