

Role of Lay Women in the Small Christian Communities in St Charles Lwanga Catholic Parish in Vihiga County, Kenya

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Abstract: This paper assessed the role of lay women in the Small Christian Communities. It discusses various roles of lay women in the Small Christian communities in the Catholic Church. The study was conducted in various SCCs in the five sub parishes within St Charles Lwanga Catholic Parish. This was because the SCCs are the family cells in the Catholic Church where evangelization and any church activities takes place before being presented to the church and the parish onwards. The paper will center its emphasis on the roles of lay women within the SCCs because they are the majority and the most active yet their roles and presence are yet to be recognized in the entire Catholic Church. The study was based on both primary and secondary data collected for a period of one year. The study was descriptive in nature.

Keywords: lay women, Small Christian Communities (SCCs).

1. BACKGROUND

Small Christian Communities is a term mostly used in the Catholic Church to refer to the basic social groupings whose members experience real interpersonal relationships and feel a sense of communal belonging both in living and in working (Kilonzo 2008). The SCCs are a link of the gospel to real life situations and intensifies the process of evangelization (Kurgat 2004). SCCs are like the heart of the church where all Christians get their spiritual and social needs from their interpersonal relationship with one another.

The idea of the SCCs was adopted as a pastoral priority by the bishops of East Africa in 1973. It was justified by the fact that while the church of Christ is universal, it is a communion of SCCs rooted in their own society. Church life must be based on communities in which everybody life and work takes place. These basic Christian communities are manageable social groups where members are best suited to develop real intense vitality and to become effective witnesses in their natural environment (Kurgat 2004). The SCCs as link of the gospel brings the power of the gospel to bear upon all the departments of socio-spiritual life of the community. Through SCCs families becomes more aware of the socio-spiritual affairs that concerns them.

In the history of the Catholic Church, lay women have played a variety of roles and the church has affected societal attitudes to women throughout the world in significant ways. There are many important and fulfilling roles that women can do. They are mothers, religious teachers, parish secretaries, and heads of parish and diocesan ministries, Eucharistic minister, lectors and ministers of the word (Bokenkotter 2004). Lay women play a very vital role in the Small Christian Communities as the main agents of evangelization in the Catholic Church.

Flannery (1975) explained that, the Second Vatican Council taught that the laity's specific character is secularity. That is, as Christians who live the life of Christ in the world, their role is to sanctify the world by directing it to become more Christian in its structures and systems. Lay involvement has taken diverse forms including participation in the life of the Parish, unions of prayer, lay apostolate, Catholic Action, secular institutions and lay ecclesial movements. The role of the

laity lay women includes lay ministries such as lay organizations and SCCs. Lay women played a great role in the SCCs, they have united people of God through spreading the gospel and their teachings on spiritual matters

Objective:

The objective of this study was to find out the socio-spiritual roles of lay women in the Small Christian Communities in St Charles Lwanga Catholic Parish in Vihiga County, Kenya

2. METHODOLOGY

The information contained here comes from two sources: First, library research and second, field research conducted for a period of one year. Primary Data was derived from first hand information through in-depth oral interviews, observation questionnaires and document analysis methods. Primary data was the main source data which was supplemented with secondary data gathered from relevant library data gathered from published books, unpublished thesis, articles ,church and government records, archival materials and local dailies.

There are five sub parishes and twenty three mass centers at St Charles Lwanga Hambale Catholic Parish. Four sub parishes were purposively sampled for the study. They include; Hambale Town, Hambale rural, Hatemesi and Welgina. Wadsworth (2005) states that purposive sampling targets a particular group of people. They were reliable for the study. Four officials from the four sub parishes were consulted for the study as they possessed knowledge useful for the study. This gave a total of sixteen (16) respondents.

Non-probability sampling was applied to sample out the twenty three mass centers. Castillo (2009) states that non-probability sampling is sampling where the samples are gathered in a process that does not give all the individuals in the population equal chances of being selected whereby purposive sampling was used to sample seventeen (17) mass centers. The researcher targeted at least five (5) respondents from each mass centre who were also sampled purposely. This gave a total sample of eighty five (85) respondents. Purposive sampling enabled the researcher to get rich information for in-depth analysis about the topic under study.

In the seventeen mass centers, there are thirty (30) Small Christian communities (SCCs). Simple random sampling was applied. In simple random sampling, each member of the population has an equal chance of being selected as subject. The entire process of sampling is done in a single step with each subject selected independently of the other member of the population. At least five (5) respondents from each SCC were sample out. This gave a total of one hundred and fifty (150) respondents. This gave the researcher data that was used to generalize the data collected in line with the objectives.

Both qualitative and quantitative techniques were employed in the data analysis. Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS) programme was used to analyses data collected from the questionnaires. Together with data collected from the other tools, they were compiled together and analyzed through coding into meaningful themes and presented in a descriptive form. Qualitative data was analyzed thematically and presented into themes which formed sub-headings according to the objectives of the study. The data was then systematically compiled and presented in a descriptive design.

3. EMPIRICAL FINDINGS

The results of this study will be presented in various sub –themes based on various roles of lay women in the Small Christian Communities.

LAY WOMEN AS EVANGELIZERS:

According to the resurrection account, Jesus chose women to bear witness to his resurrection John 20:11-18, Luke 24:1-12, Mathew 28:1-10. This choice reflects women's equal call to discipleship. It was upon testimony of women that the proclamation of the resurrection depended. This call for equal discipleship is also reflected in the fact that the spirit of prophecy was given to both male and female disciples in Acts 2:12. Jesus vigorously promoted the dignity and equality of women amidst a male dominated society Burke (2009).This means that women are evangelizers alongside men.

Mugambi (1989) contends that in their Gospel Jesus' attitude towards woman is very clearly documented. Jesus bears the message of liberation for all especially the disadvantaged. In the theology of Christology which is based on a holistic view of life, women are reflected as liberators. Jesus asks women not to accept hardships and pain fatalistically but to work at eliminating the suffering and creating a better place for all. Jesus Christ is calling all women of good will to work for the

liberation of all people. The identification with the poor, the oppressed and the down trodden can seem impracticable without the hope and assurance of Jesus Christ's cross and resurrection to affirm that it is God's own understanding we are called to fully participate in it.

When Jesus rose from the dead, the first persons He met were: Mary Magdalene, Joanne and Mary the mother of Jesus. Jesus instructed them to go and share the good news with the apostles. They became messengers of Jesus (John 20:10-18). Likewise, lay women have been on the forefront in evangelizing. There are lay women serving as catechists in the church and their work is to teach the doctrine of the church and also instructing the Sunday school.

Oyweka (2000) further points out that biblically women are seen as having same status before God as everyone else. Women have different roles and are to complement men for the benefit of the church growth. Denying women opportunities in the church means leaving out half of the world's population and much more than half of the church membership. It is important to ensure that women are given representation in the church by involving them in the church work at all levels.

Lay women in St Charles Lwanga Catholic Parish played a great role in the SCCs, they have united people of God through spreading the gospel and their teachings on spiritual matters. They are at least 50% of the members in the Small Christian Community who are receiving the sacrament of holy matrimony and young children receiving the sacrament of baptism. They have made the members of their Small Christian Community be able to discuss the scripture, pray and recite the rosary together as a family. They have assisted the needy within their Small Christian Communities, visited the sick and prayed for them as a way of giving them hope in life and encouraging them. They offered guidance and counseling services within their Small Christian Communities therefore strengthening their members' spiritual growth, improving their socialization skills as well as their family life. Small Christian Communities are like a home where every member experiences a sense of belonging.

The objectives of Small Christian Communities form the basis of evangelical roles of lay women in the church. The information recorded from the questionnaires revealed the evangelical roles of lay women in Saint Charles Lwanga Hambale Catholic Parish. It was evident that roles played by the lay women include: prayers, weekly contribution, assisting the needy, encouraging others spiritually and morally and discussing the scripture among others. Lay women have a major role to play right from the SCCs. Emphasis has been put on prayer and reciting rosary as the main aim of any Christian church. During their prayer meetings held on weekly basis, they contributed some money meant for the use in various church projects. Some of the money accrued from the church contributions was used to cater for financial needs within the SCCs. They offered guidance and counseling to Christians within the SCCs as pertains to various issues brought to them. In addition, some lay women within the SCCs were active choir members in the church and also assisted in organizing any church activity such as fund raising and ordinations of religious persons. They are on the front line in building others spiritually; to be like Christ in the church. The evangelical roles of lay women in the SCCs in St Charles Lwanga Catholic parish can be summarized as shown below.

| Role in SCCs | frequency out of 65 | Percent |
|--|---------------------|---------|
| Praying/ reciting rosary | 41 | 63.1% |
| Weekly contribution | 20 | 30.7% |
| Helping and assisting the needy | 18 | 27.7% |
| Encouraging others | 18 | 27.7% |
| Discussing scripture | 18 | 27.6% |
| Visiting the sick and praying for them | 16 | 24.6% |
| Spreading gospel | 13 | 20% |
| Guidance and counseling services | 10 | 15.5% |
| Singing | 9 | 13.8% |
| Organizing church activities | 4 | 6.1% |
| Building others spiritually | 3 | 4.6% |

Evangelization roles played by the lay women in St Charles Lwanga Hambale Parish include: prayers, weekly contribution, assisting the needy, encouraging others spiritually and morally and discussing the scripture among others. Lay women have a major role to play right from the SCCs. Emphasis has been put on prayer and reciting rosary as the

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Socio-political roles of lay women:

Knight (2011) pointed out that certain societies, such as the family and the state correspond more directly to the nature of human beings. To promote the participation of the greatest number of the life of a society, the creation of voluntary associations and institutions must be encouraged which relates to economic and social goals, to cultural and recreational activities and on political affairs.

In support of knight, Kurgat (2004) observed that to enhance morality, the Catholic Church bishops of Kenya established a Justice and Peace Commission with branches in dioceses, parishes, SCCs, seminaries and in educational institutions in 1988. Their pastoral letter explained that its purpose was the education of people towards a stronger sense of justice, to guide pastoral action on fostering justice and peace within the church and in the social, economic and political life of the country. It was to work for the eradication of injustice and to support all those in opposition to injustice.

In the late 1980s together with others National Council of Churches in Kenya (NCCCK) began its call for overhaul of our constitution and need to return to multiparty democracy. In 1991, the church and society committee of NCCCK changed its name to Justice, Peace and Reconciliation Committee (JPRC). They aimed at laying the ground work for massive campaign to educate Kenyan voters to participate in the General election in 1992. Later, in cooperation with the Catholic Church, the council formed the National Ecumenical Civic Education Programme (NECEP). They coordinated civic education and later established the National Elections Monitoring Unit (NEMU) which monitored the 1992 elections. To prepare the voters for the second multiparty elections, the Catholic Church formed the Catholic Justice and Peace commission (CJPC) in order to offer civic education and monitor 1997 general election(NCCCK:2011).

Lay Women have not been left behind politically as Eteye, pointed out during the interview on(11/11/10). Majority of the lay women in St Charles Lwanga Hambale Catholic Parish are members of the Catholic Justice and Peace Commission (CJPC) at the grass -root level (SCCs). The Catholic Church has been championing its political contributions through civic education programme of CJPC. Civic education is given at parish level through seminars to disseminate awareness on current political situation in the country (Kurgat 2004). CJPC deals mostly on justice matters as pertains the church and the world at large .It trains its members to act as electoral observers during either the by- election or general election. They emphasis on free and fair elections country- wide .They also educate on civic education as the sub parish in line with the political civic education. Some lay women are leaders in CJPC as Domtillah Mmbone reiterated. Lay women within St Charles Lwanga Hambale Parish have played a major role as far as peace and justice is concerned. Some were civil education educators during the last general election. After the post election violence lay women were on the fore front to preach peace right from the Small Christian Communities.

Lay women as leaders:

Walsh (2005) pointed out that in the early church lay people had a bigger role to play that later became the norm. Not only were they consulted on important matters, but as has been they elected the bishops and chose the priest. Even before Vatican II a greater role came to be envisaged for lay people, mostly symbolized by greater participation in liturgical worship. In recent years lay people have taken administrative roles. They are involved in decision making from the parish level. Kilonzo in Onkware, (2004) noted that women have not only expressed a desire to lead in the community dealing with matters of community development but also in religious groups. This is depicted in most Catholic Churches where women have always led in Small Christian Communities (SCCs).

According to Flannery (1975) ,the Catholic Church teachings points out clearly that the laity can be called in different ways to more immediate cooperation in the apostolate of the hierarchy, like those women and men who helped apostles Paul in the gospel, laboring much in Lord (Philippians4:3, Romans 16:3). They have the capacity of being appointed by the hierarchy to the ecclesiastical offices with a view of a spiritual end. Therefore lay women are not exception and have taken leadership roles in either the SCC or lay women organizations.

Lay women are leaders in the church. Majority are leaders in the Small Christian Communities within the parish. During the interview on 13/11/10), Ajega stated that within Hambale town sub-parish, in each Small Christian Community lay women occupy some posts of leadership. They are either chairpersons or the vice, secretary and treasurer.

Lay women as Counselors:

Sosa (2011) stated that guidance and teachings of the Catholic Church are of great assistance in making decisions at personal and family level. St Paul told the Philippians to work out their salvation with fear and trembling (Philippians 2:12). The teachings of the Catholic Church are an aid to Christian journey. The church pastorally cares for the members by speaking the truth so that can follow God's will with the choices they make in living their life. Therefore guidance and counseling in church is to be emphasized on the teachings of the church. It is integrated with the scripture and preaching. It addresses social, family, personal, vocational, educational and political issues.

Lay women in St Charles Lwanga Hambale Catholic parish have taken up the role of guidance and counseling right from the villages in the Small Christian Communities. Responding to the question of the roles of lay women in the parish, Kiptoo on 29/12/10 contended that lay women do a lot of guidance and counseling to couples. For example, if there was a young couple intending to marry in the church, the counselors in the SCCs took the responsibility of guiding and counseling them on how to conduct themselves in marriage and on how to overcome all challenges in marriage life. They also advised married couples in conflict and tried to reunite them back as added by during the interview on 8/12/10 by Malesi .

Lay Women as Educator:

According to Vatican II (1965), the Catholic Church has been involved in education which aims at developing the whole person intellectually, spiritually and even physically. The church recognizes itself primarily as a teacher. This conviction is drawn from the command of Jesus as given in Mathew 28:19 "Go therefore, make disciples baptizing them in the Name of the Father, of the Son, and the Holy Spirit and teach them all the commands I gave you". The church has an obligation to be fully involved in education as is stated in Vatican Council II. It states that education is in a very special way the concern of the church, not only because the church must be recognized as a human society capable of impacting education, but because it has a duty of proclaiming the way of salvation to all humankind, of revealing the life of Christ to those who believes and of assisting them with unremitting care so that they may be able to attain to the fullness of that life.

In reference to the concern of the wider church, the Catholic Church members; priests, nuns, lay men and lay women are all engaged in various educational institutes to assist the church achieve its goals stated above. This starts from the family as the first educational institution (Vatican II 1965). Within the family women or mothers are the first educators (teachers). In the process of upbringing their children they teach them how to communicate, to pray and to face life situations among other roles.

Mwinyihaji (2001) further added that a woman is equal to a man in the pursuit of education and knowledge. She is entitled to freedom of expression as much as a man is. Her sound opinions should be taken into consideration and should not be disregarded. This is because they can play the same role as men in the society. In reference to Priscilla in Acts 18, she is not only presented as a teacher to other women or some nameless converts, but someone able enough to give Apollo ,a leading male evangelistic ,a more accurate instruction possibly about the important matters of Christian baptism. Women are the primary educators of the family .They educate young and old on the ways of life. This was clearly portrayed in the various questionnaires as majority of women in the Small Christian Communities and in the lay women organizations were either homemakers or teachers, married and single. Hence, they teach young people various virtues to apply in their daily lives. Women encouraged other members to attend adult classes to do away with illiteracy as reflected in a number of questionnaires as a way of solving illiteracy in the community.

Women as Mothers:

Harrison (2009) defines the role of Catholic mothers to be one of the most important role in the church. Mother's role, is to carry the faith to her children. They help to complete and fulfill the expression of humanity that reflects God himself.

They bring unique gifts which Pope John Paul II calls the 'feminine genius' that are apparent physical through their ability to be mothers

Lay women, as Burke (2009) further stated, are the heart of their domestic church (home). As a wife and mother as Chebet noted during the interview on 15/10/10, lay women share their beliefs and faith with their children and husbands. They watch their children as they grow in their own relationship with God and guide them closer to Christ every day. Njoki on 13/02/10 added that women have a chance to support their husband in their faith and allow them have an opportunity to contribute to the parish. Women are an example of Christ's love alive in their family everyday as they care for their children and home. They are the heart of their homes.

Through the bringing up of children at the altar for the reception of the sacraments lay women have assisted in nurturing the faith of young ones (Kelusah OI, 5/05/10). Children have grown up strong in faith through the help of their mothers. In families where lay women as mothers have not brought up their children in Christian foundation, they have problems in adjusting in spiritual matters in future. As mothers, they teach their children prayers, how to pray and when to pray from home before they start their catechism classes.

Luke gives five important glimpses into the roles he affirms to women in the Christian community. In the mother of John Mark (Acts 12:12-17) and in Lydia (Acts 16:12-40) women assume the role of 'mother' to the fledgling Christian community in Jerusalem and Philippi respectively. This involved providing both the home and hospitality needed for the local Christian missionaries passing through (Ong'injo 2006).

Midenyo (OI, 20/12/10), observes that lay women in the SCCs in St Charles Lwanga Parish have always taken their children to the church for baptism. Just as Mary took Jesus to the temple for dedication. This is the first sacrament in the Catholic Church which is meant to empower one to become a member of the Christian community. They monitor the spiritual growth of their children and always encourage them to go to church and attend mass every Sunday. They also nurture the vocations in their children and help ensure that there will be priests and nuns to support the church.

4. CONCLUSION

The objective of the study was to assess socio-spiritual roles of lay women in St Charles Lwanga Hambale Catholic Parish. From the findings, the study shows that lay women played many roles in the parish. They carried many roles in the SCCs. They are educators from their homes to the church where they participate in learning and teaching the young and the old. They are maternal and spiritual mothers where they guide and council on spiritual and social matters. They are capable of taking up leadership roles in the parish from the SCCs. They have participated fully in the economic and political affairs of the parish hand in hand with their male counterparts. They have evangelized to all in the SCCs from the numerous activities they involve in within the parish.

5. RECOMMENDATIONS

The Catholic Church should play an active role in supporting lay women realize their various gifts for the growth of the church. This has been evident from the various roles that women play in the church. They are very vital towards nurturing the faith of all believers and also towards the growth of the church.

Lay women should be encouraged to be confident when spreading the gospel. They should be reminded that before God both men and women are equal. Therefore they should play active roles in the church just like men. Men are also advised to accompany their wives to Small Christian Communities (SCCs) meetings so as to learn more about God and above all to empower lay women by their presence in their gathering as SCCs are the pillar of the church. In doing so the Catholic Church will grow tremendously and will be able to meet the spiritual needs of all its members from the grass root level.

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