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 Theme 3: Reinventing Africa: Challenges, Biblical Reflections and Christological Reflections

### **Three Case Studies of African Christology among the Sukuma People in Tanzania**

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#### **Abstract**

*The first Case Study is “Jesus Christ as Eldest Brother/Intercessor.” The Sukuma (Tanzania) people’s name for Jesus Christ is “Eldest Brother/Intercessor.” It is the eldest brother, the first born male who offers sacrifice in the Sukuma Ethnic Group tradition. Jesus Christ is the intercessor to the one God who is called the Creator and Source and “Liwelelo” (“God”) in Sukuma. The second Case Study is “The African Jesus Teaching in African Parables.” If we truly believe that Jesus Christ is present with us now then the African Jesus encourages us to teach the Good News of Salvation in African parables. There is a story of the Sukuma people called “The Parable of the Two Brothers.” For a story of African origin this “African parable” has interesting parallels with “The Parable of the Prodigal Son” (Luke 15:11-32). The third Case Study is “An African Reading of the Bible.” Jesus Christ taught in parables and stories that were hidden by their very nature. In our ministry with the Sukuma people in Tanzania we asked the local Christians to choose a specific story from the New Testament that they like to interpret within their own African culture and values. After a lot of discussion they chose the “Parable of the Friend in Need in Luke” (11: 5-8). Finally we examine the “Sukuma People’s Different Way of Doing African Christian Theology.” These three case studies describe the content of an evolving Sukuma Christology from the grassroots, communal experience of the Sukuma people in Tanzania. It is important to look also at the process or methodology of this theology that includes African Palaver Theology.*

American Maryknoll priest Donald Sybertz and I have written several books about African Narrative Missiology and inculturation especially among the Sukuma people in Western Tanzania. The [Sukuma Ethnic Group](#)<sup>1</sup> is the largest ethnic group (approximately six million people) in Tanzania.<sup>2</sup> and lives mainly in rural areas in the northwestern part of the

country on or near the southern shores of Lake Victoria. They<sup>3</sup> are agricultural-pastoralists whose lives focus on farming (maize, sorghum, cassava, sweet potatoes, cotton, etc.) and herding cows. Based on our research, here are three case studies of African Christology (what in the context of the life and culture of the Sukuma people can be called Sukuma Christology). This is followed by some reflections on our process or methodology based on experience and context called the “Sukuma People’s Different Way of Doing African Christian Theology.”

### **1. Case Study No. 1: Jesus Christ as Eldest Brother/Intercessor**

One day the Tanzanian theologian Charles Nyamiti asked us: “Give an example of something new and different in the local theology that you are trying to develop in Tanzania.” We gave him the Sukuma name for Jesus Christ: “Eldest Brother/Intercessor.” Many African theologians (Kwame Bediako, Benezeth Bujo, Francis Kabasele, Kä Mana, Ukachukwu Chris Manus, John Mbiti, Emmanuel Milingo, Takatso Mofokeng, J.N.K. Mugambi, Anne Nasimiyu-Wasike, Charles Nyamiti, Mercy Oduyoye, John Pobee, Anselme Sanon, Harry Sawyerr and Enyi Ben Udoh) have written a number of excellent books about Jesus as Ancestor, Chief Diviner-Healer, Elder Brother, Guest, King-Chief, Liberator, Mediator and so on.<sup>4</sup> But the Sukuma people in Tanzania take this a step further based on their cultural traditions. For them Jesus Christ is “Eldest Brother/Intercessor” (“Nsumba Nntale/Ngabiji” in Sukuma). This is a double name that is linked together.

In Sukuma society the first-born boy or eldest brother has special honor and privilege. The eldest of the elders is the lineage head. In this patrilineal society the eldest son receives the family inheritance from his father. When growing up he receives special honors and privileges. He is looked up to by his younger brothers and sisters. It is the eldest brother,<sup>5</sup> the first born male who offers sacrifice in the Sukuma tradition.<sup>6</sup> In the Sukuma language his

name is “the sacrificer” (“maholelo” or “jitongelo” in Sukuma). When sacrifices are offered in a special place of prayer (in a sacred grove or at an important tree or rock formation on a hill or at a crossroad of paths) in Sukumaland, the eldest brother performs this ritual using spontaneous prayers. He makes an offering to the ancestors and to the Supreme Being on behalf of all the people. The privileged role of the eldest brother in leading the intercessory prayers is important. He is the intercessor to the one God who is called the Creator and Source. “Liwelelo,” the word for “God” in Sukuma, is translated as “The World.” God is personified as unique and all powerful.<sup>7</sup>

Here are two examples of Sukuma prayers. In the Sukuma prayer for healing, “Look On Your Child and Heal Him/Her,” the here and now is stressed:

"So and so (name of deceased ancestor), look on your child and heal him/her. When? Today. May your child give birth. When? Today. May the rain come. When? Today. May our cows give birth? When? Today. May we have well-being both in body and soul. When? Today. May all that is bad in our lives be thrown into the lake and be eaten by the crocodiles. May we live in peace. And may you God please help us."

A prayer to God and the ancestors says:

O Liwelelo, I beg you to give me the power of divination which has been offered to me by my ancestors. I implore you, O Spirit of Good Luck, so that I may have strong powers and be greater than other magicians. My urge to divine is genuine, and now I beg you Liwelelo and you my ancestors to give me accurate divinations and thoughts of plant medicines, so that I may both treat and cure.

This is vividly portrayed in an impressionistic oil painting on the left wall as you enter in the Archives Building at the Sukuma Museum at Bujora outside of Mwanza, Tanzania.

The painting is called “Matambiko” (Swahili for “Sacrifice”) by Charles Ndege and Innocenti Ibarabara. It depicts a Sukuma man kneeling and offering prayers of intercession before a big sacred tree situated amidst the large rock formations by Lake Victoria – a well known scene in the Mwanza area. The skulls on the ground represent the presence of the ancestors. An

oversized bow and shield are stylistically painted in the rocks to symbolize that the ancestors are heroes in Sukuma society. The miniature hut on the ground near the eldest brother contains food for the ancestors to insure good relationships with them. The ancestors intercede so that the elder's prayer is accepted by God.

As the eldest of the elders and the lineage head Jesus Christ is the head of every family. The Biblical parallels are clear. Jesus Christ is "the firstborn among many brothers [within a large family]" (*Romans* 8:29). "He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation" (*Colossians* 1:15). "From Jesus Christ, the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead, and ruler of the kings of the earth" (*Revelation* 1:5). *1 Corinthians* 15:20-23 says: "Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have fallen asleep (died). For since death came through a human being, the resurrection of the dead also came through a human being; for just as all die in Adam, so too in Christ all will be brought to life. But each one in proper order: Christ the first fruits; then, at his coming, those who belong to Christ." Jesus Christ is the first one to be reborn and we are reborn with him.

There are many biblical texts of Jesus as intercessor. "It is Christ Jesus who died, rather, was raised, who also is at the right hand of God, who indeed, intercedes for us" (*Romans* 8:34). "So he is able to save completely those who come to God through him, because he always lives to intercede for them" (*Hebrews* 7:25). "I am not praying only on their behalf, but also on behalf of those who believe in me through their testimony, that they will all be one, just as you, Father, are in me and I am in you. I pray that they will be in us, so that the world will believe that you sent me" (*John* 17:1-26 especially verses 20-21). "Whatever you ask the Father in my name he will give you" (*John* 16: 23).

But there is a key difference. Jesus Christ is the "Eldest Brother-Intercessor" who leads ongoing intercession for human beings in heaven. Unlike the African eldest brother

who only infrequently makes intercessions to the ancestors, Jesus Christ is always interceding for human beings.<sup>8</sup>

When we searched for a title for the chapter on Ecclesiology (the theology of the church) in our book on African Narrative Theology we chose “The Church as the Family<sup>9</sup> of God.” This metaphor emphasizes relationships and widening circles of participation. In the great family of God, the Father is the "Chief Ancestor." Jesus Christ is the "Eldest Brother" who is a loving and caring brother. To complete the circle the prayer *Glory Be to the Father* has been inculturated to say: “Glory be to the Father, the Creator and Source, to the Nursing Mother,<sup>10</sup> to Jesus, the Great Healer and Eldest Brother and to the Unsurpassed Great Spirit. Amen.”<sup>11</sup>

In turn the Christian Church can be pictured as a great family with Jesus Christ as the head serving under the Father. Humankind is bonded together in a universal brotherhood and sisterhood. All Christians are adopted sons and daughters. One part of this great family is the African community in Christ. It is significant that the main theological insight of the 1994 First African Synod was "The Church as God's Family" (Number 63 in the Apostolic Exhortation on *The Church in Africa*) that covers both the theology of the Church as Family and the Church-as-Family Model of Church.

Much of this research is in our book *Towards an African Narrative Theology*. The African Edition is published by Paulines Publications Africa and the North American Edition is published by Orbis Books.

## **2. Case Study No. 2: The African Jesus Teaches in African Parables**

Jesus Christ taught in parables that were situated in the context of his Jewish culture, but had a universal meaning. If we truly believe that Jesus Christ is present with us now, then the African Jesus<sup>12</sup> encourages us to teach the Good News of Salvation in African parables.

These parables are situated in the context of the African culture, but have a universal meaning. Listen to a true story of the Sukuma people in northwestern Tanzania called “The Parable of the Two Brothers” as collected by the Sukuma Research Committee in Bujora, Tanzania:<sup>13</sup>

Two brothers wanted to go to a distant country to make their fortune. They asked their father for a blessing saying: "Father, we go on our way to make our fortune. Your blessing please." Their father agreed saying, "Go with my blessing, but on your way put marks on the trees lest you get lost." After they received the blessing the two brothers started on their safari.

The older brother entered the forest and cut down some of the trees as he passed and made marks on other trees. He did this for his whole journey. The younger brother took another route. While on the way he arrived at the house of a certain person. He knocked on the door. He was invited in and made friends with the children of that family. The younger brother continued on his journey and made friends wherever he passed. Finally the two brothers returned home. On their arrival their father gave them a warm welcome saying, "How happy I am to see you back home again, my sons, especially since you have returned safely. Wonderful! Now I would like to see the marks that you have left on the trees."

So the father went with his firstborn son. On the way the older brother showed his father all kinds of trees that he had cut down and others with the marks that he had put on. They traveled a long distance without eating on the trip. Finally they returned home empty-handed. Then the father set out with his second born son. During the journey the younger son and his father were warmly received by different friends. They were treated as special guests at each place they visited. A goat was slaughtered to welcome them. They were very happy. They brought home many gifts including meat.

Then the father summoned his two sons and said: "Dear sons, I have seen the work that you have done. I will arrange a marriage for the one who has done the best." He turned to the firstborn son and said, "My son, I think you are foolish. You cannot take care of people. I told you to put marks on the trees wherever you passed. You have cut down many trees. What is the profit of all these trees?"

Turning to the second son he said: "My son, you are clever. I am happy you have put such important marks wherever you have gone. Wherever we passed we received a very good welcome. This came from your good personal relationships with the people we visited." Then he said: "My dear children, now it is good for me to give my reward. I will arrange a big feast for my younger son. We will slaughter a cow for him. For my younger son has made good and lasting marks wherever he passed."

From this Sukuma story comes the proverb: *To make marks on the trees*. The theme of the story and the proverb is "Good Personal and Family Relationships in Life." The meaning is that to build good relationships with people is a very important priority in our lives as the younger son did. Western people can learn a great deal from Africans on how to be present to other people and to relate to them in a life-giving and positive way. Africans are deeply aware of the presence and needs of other people in their lives. To pass by a person without greeting is totally *un-African*, but is considered a normal way of relating in the Western world. In Africa everything is done to maintain good personal and communal relationships, harmony and peace at all costs. Anger and confrontation are looked down on. Among the Kuria people in Kenya and Tanzania the greatest sin is to strike a parent. For African people one of the main purposes of existence is to bless and not to curse.

A related Sukuma interpretation of this Sukuma story is found in the "Elaboration" section of the book *Wasukuma Hutangaza Injili* (the English translation is *The Sukuma People Proclaim the Gospel*). Using the I Corinthians 13: 1-13 passage on "love," the commentary on this "Two Brothers" story says: "The goal of life is love of neighbor and of Almighty God. The sign that we have succeeded in this goal is that we count our riches in our neighbors and friends. It is these riches that we will carry to heaven when all other activities are for this earth only."<sup>14</sup>

For a story of African origin this "African parable" has interesting parallels with "The Parable of the Prodigal Son" (*Luke 15:11-32*). There is a mutual illumination and mutual enrichment when African stories and biblical stories are used together.<sup>15</sup> As a Uganda proverb says, *One hand washes the other*. It is not that the biblical parallels validate the Sukuma examples. Rather the Sukuma stories are meaningful and part of African Christian Theology in their own right. Tanzanian theologian Laurenti Magesa states:

If we take inculturation/incarnation seriously, the biblical truth, the Christic reality, is already present in these stories by virtue of the values they contain in themselves. The task of the theologian, it seems to me, is to articulate these values, to bring them out as clearly as possible as salvific values, as the reality of divine revelation present differently.<sup>16</sup>

Some universal values taught in these two stories are forgiveness, love, reconciliation, inclusiveness, personal and family relationships and close bonds and joy within the family.

Both these stories have three main characters: a father and two sons. At the end of each story the younger son gets the glory and the reward. But the African story has several different twists. Both sons go on a long journey. Then the father himself accompanies them on their second trips. The younger son does not waste his life, but in fact cleverly builds up personal relationships. The theme of the African story is "Good Personal and Family Relationships in Life" that is central to the African worldview.

The biblical story has its own twist that brings a unique depth. The theme of the biblical story is "Forgiveness" that is central to the Christian worldview. In fact, forgiving love<sup>17</sup> is the heart of God's relationship with humankind and the heart of Jesus Christ's teaching right up to and including his death on the cross. The biblical story illuminates the African story by a dramatic reversal. The prodigal or bad son is restored to the family and rewarded with gifts. The wastrel is given a feast. The father says: "But we had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found." (*Luke* 15:32).

An African interpretation of "The Parable of the Prodigal Son" offers an additional insight related to the African values of community and unity. Due to his wild and dissolute living, the younger son is outside the unity of his family circle. This creates separation and incompleteness. When the older son complains that he has not been rewarded for being faithful, he fails to understand his father's explanation that he is already part of the family community, that he is already on the "inside." "Son, you are always with me, and all that is



mine is yours" (*Luke 15:31*). The love and compassion of the father is so great that he wants immediately to bring his marginalized younger son back inside the family circle. An Oromo (Ethiopia) and Kipsigis (Kenya) proverb says *No matter how skinny, the son always belongs to the father*. Here the core values of community and forgiveness come together.

An added African touch is found in the painting of this prodigal son story in the *Life of Jesus Mafa Series*<sup>18</sup> from northern Cameroon in West Africa. Against the background of traditional Mafa huts and hills, the whole family runs out to welcome the younger son when he returns. Both the father and the mother warmly embrace the almost naked boy. The emotion-filled mother expresses special joy and excitement. The son is welcomed back with "prodigal" love by both of his devoted parents. The family circle is complete again.

Through African stories, proverbs and art the African Church is enriching the World Church. Africans are writing a narrative contextual theology of inculturation and liberation out of their own experiences and lives. Kenyan theologian John Mbiti reminds us that art is a significant part of theology – in fact, it is called visual theology or symbolic theology. Another important type of African contextual theology is oral theology. He writes:

Oral theology is produced in the fields, by the masses, through song, sermon, teaching, prayer, conversation, etc. It is theology in the open air, often unrecorded, often heard only by small groups of audience, and generally lost as far as libraries and seminaries are concerned. Symbolic theology is expressed through art, sculpture, drama, symbols, rituals, dance, colors, numbers, etc.<sup>19</sup>

### **3. Case Study No. 3: Sukuma Reading of the Bible**

In 40 years of preaching and teaching about the importance of inculturation in Africa my favorite question is to adapt Jesus Christ's question in *Mark 8:29* to read: "Who do you Africans say that I am?" or more specifically "Who do you Sukuma say that I am?" Who Jesus Christ is to the Sukuma people is linked to their "Sukuma Reading of the Bible."<sup>20</sup> During a Holy Saturday Morning Prayer Service in Mwanhuzi Parish in Shinyanga Diocese

the Sukuma Christians were invited to privately reflect on a display of the excellent biblical drawings from the *Life of Jesus Mafa* series from Cameroon. The seven colored drawings emphasized the miracles (“the great deeds of Jesus Christ” as the Sukuma like to say): “Jesus Feeds the Five Thousand” (No. 24); “Jesus Heals the Ten Lepers” (No. 39); “Jesus Raises Lazarus From the Dead” (No.44); “Jesus Dies on the Cross” (No.55); “The Angels Tell the Women at the Empty Tomb that Jesus Has Risen” (No. 56); “Jesus Appears to Mary Magdalene After His Resurrection” (No. 56a); and “Jesus Ascends Into Heaven” (No. 59).

Then we asked the Christians which was Jesus' greatest miracle. 90% out of the 80 people present chose the "Raising of Lazarus from the Dead." The Sukuma greatly fear death since it is closely connected to superstition and witchcraft. So for Jesus to raise a person from the dead is his greatest deed and shows his great power. One of the Sukuma people's favorite Sukuma Christian names for Jesus Christ is “Victor over Death.” In fact Jesus' greatest miracle and his most powerful act was to rise from the dead himself. He overcame the evil powers of witches and witchcraft. Jesus overcame death. He is greater than death. Just as Christ was raised from the dead, the first born of the dead/the first fruits of the harvest, we are raised from the dead with Christ as the first part of the harvest. Christianity challenges the Sukuma people to a deeper understanding of salvation and the resurrection event.<sup>21</sup>

This Sukuma understanding of Jesus Christ can be linked to the way Jesus Christ taught in parables and stories that were hidden by their very nature. This challenged his audience/his listeners to interpret them within their own situation, in their own cultural context. After the scriptures were written, we began with a Jewish reading of the Bible, then a Greek reading of the Bible, then a Roman reading of the Bible and so on for two thousand years until today.

In theological circles today there is a lot of discussion on the special ways of interpreting scripture, or on a particular approach to scripture. This view proposes that there

are many different and authentic ways of a contextual "reading" the *Bible*. These can vary according to sex (from the perspective of a woman or a man), economic class (poor or rich), and geography (Global South or Western World) and so on. One example is some of the basic questions explored in *Searching the Scriptures, Volume 1: A Feminist Introduction* edited by American theologian Elizabeth Schussler Fiorenza. Do men and women read the scriptures *differently*? Do they bring different concerns and presuppositions to the text, use different methods, read with different eyes? And should they? So popular today are a feminist reading of the Bible, a black reading of the Bible, a justice and peace reading of the Bible, etc.

Following the deepest meaning of inculturation there is an African way (or *many* African ways) of reading and interpreting scripture. This is called a contextual "African Reading of the Bible." In our ministry with the Sukuma people in Tanzania especially in Shinyanga Diocese and Mwanza Archdiocese we asked the local lay Christians to choose a specific story from the *New Testament* that they like to interpret within their own African culture and values. This would be different from the standard biblical commentaries, most of which have come from the West. After a lot of discussion they chose "The Parable of the Friend in Need"<sup>22</sup> in *Luke* 11: 5-8. Here is the Sukuma people (living in small villages in rural Tanzania)'s African cultural reading and interpretation of this story of hospitality:<sup>23</sup>

There are actually three main characters in this story. The first character is the original friend-traveler-guest who probably arrives unexpectedly at a friend's house and the cupboard is bare. The second character is this friend who has no food so goes to wake up another friend at midnight to borrow three loaves of bread. This third character is the householder who grumbles about being woken up.

This parable can be interpreted on different levels. One level is whom do people of a particular culture identify with in the story. Westerners probably identify with the householder who is in bed with his children and with the door locked. The person grumbles about being disturbed. A Western interpretation might include a series of practical questions: "Why didn't you

come earlier?" "Why didn't you telephone?" "Why didn't you plan ahead?" "Why didn't you buy extra bread in advance?"

Africans identify with different characters in the parable for different reasons. Unifying factors are person-centered values, hospitality and flexibility. First they identify with the original friend-guest who probably arrived either unexpectedly or late. With the many problems of transportation and communication in Africa travel is very uncertain, delays are common, and notifying a friend when you are coming is often very difficult. So Africans find themselves in a situation of arriving at any hour, even late at night, and needing to adapt to different contingencies. This is real life in urban<sup>24</sup> and rural Africa.

Then Africans identify with the second person in the story when he or she probably dropped everything to welcome the original friend-guest. Hospitality is a "given" in African society. Recall the African proverbs *A guest is a blessing* and *A guest is never an interruption*. In the Sukuma culture everyone would likely get up to welcome the newly arrived person. When the host or hostess person discovers there isn't enough food, it is quite natural and common that he or she would go to another friend for help. The woman of the house who does the cooking would go next door with several others to ask for extra food. It is not good for a guest to go to bed hungry. When you have a problem you ask help from your friends. This is a daily occurrence in the African reality. Even late at night a person may need to borrow water, salt, flour, or even medicine. Friends and neighbors help and are helped.

Finally Africans identify with the specific action of the householder when he or she opens the door and helps the friend. In the African relationship circle, going out of one's way to help a friend is both expected and common. Africans would be cautious about opening the door at night for a stranger, but for a friend or neighbor this is part of friendship and mutual help. A Swahili proverb says *A trusting friend brings fullness of life. The person who gets one has a treasure.*<sup>25</sup>

The Sukuma people's traditional interpretation is that Jesus uses this parable in the context of teaching about perseverance and persistence in prayer. In light of so many physical, material, and spiritual uncertainties, Africans certainly identify with the need for perseverance and persistence in prayer and life in general. In many parts of Africa there is a basic struggle for survival. Patient endurance and resiliency are the themes of many African proverbs. *Patience is the key to tranquility* (Swahili, Eastern and Central Africa). *Patience is the world's medicine* (Hausa, Nigeria). *The patient person eats ripe fruit* (Haya, Tanzania). *The person who is willing to wait drinks the rich new milk of the heifer* (Oromo, Ethiopia).

*Patience can cook a stone* (Fulfulde, Benin, Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Central African Republic, Chad, Mali, Niger, Nigeria, Sudan, and Togo).

But Vietnamese Scripture scholar vanThanh Nguyen's interpretation sheds new light when he states that this parable is wrongly commonly linked with the "Parable of the Persistent Widow" (*Luke* 18:1-8): "This is a common erroneous assumption for in this parable there is no implication of persistency at all. The friend did not ask repeatedly, but rather, he asked only once. He doesn't even knock, but instead he calls out loud."<sup>26</sup> The Sukuma people would be very flexible to adapting to this more accurate interpretation.

On another level this story can be seen as a microcosm of today's world. In one contemporary interpretation of this parable, the original friend-guest symbolizes the poor, those who do not have many material goods, people of the Global South. The friend-visitor who comes knocking is God, or conscience. The householder is the rich, those who have many material goods, especially people of the Western World. God challenges the rich to help the poor, the Western World to help the Global South. God keeps knocking until God's pleas are answered. Another interpretation is that the friend-visitor represents the people of the Global South who should be self-reliant and help themselves and not depend on help from the Western World.

#### **4. Sukuma People's Different Way of Doing African Christian Theology**

These three case studies above describe the *content* of an evolving Sukuma Christology from the grassroots, communal experience of the Sukuma people in Tanzania. It is important to look also at the *process* or *methodology* of this theology. It is a different way of doing African Christian Theology – whether it be the Sukuma people in Tanzania as we document or other ethnic groups/other specific groups of people like women, youth, the economic poor, Small Christian Communities, etc. in other countries in Africa. Nigerian

theologian Agbonkhanmeghe Orobator points out that a useful lesson on the nature and method of theological reflection in Africa emphasizes the necessity of taking experience and context seriously. This means

repositioning theological reflection within the context of community called church and the wider society. Consequently, it becomes clear that it is not enough to theologize exclusively on the basis of the intellectual acumen of the theologian, while he or she comfortably ensconces himself or herself in the protected milieu of academia. “The work of theologizing,” or, according to Tutu, the “exhilarating business” of theological reflection, must spring from the forthright observation and experience of the situation in the life of the believing community wherein echoes the strong but gentle wind of the Spirit.<sup>27</sup>

Nigerian theologian Afe Adogame points out that an important element of “doing theology” in Africa today is a dialogue that is not confined to the seminary or the academy. African churches offer spaces of dialogue that are empowering in themselves:

“They engage in theological reflection with grassroots men, women and even children in Bible study groups, house-cell fellowships, seminars and workshops. Thus African churches, through their numerous programmes based on the specific socio-cultural and political contexts in which they operate, are developing, writing and accessing a theology of their own.”<sup>28</sup>

Uganda theologian John Waliggo calls this “contextual theologies from below.”

Nigerian Scripture Scholar Teresa Okure emphasizes the importance of African women theologians’ dialogue with people on the grassroots. When someone described Teresa’s own method or process of reading the Bible with people who were not Bible experts as “marketplace hermeneutics,”<sup>29</sup> she considered it the “highest compliment” because this was the very method that Jesus used.

The local Sukuma communities in Tanzania, be they Small Christian Communities (SCCs) or local chapters of our Sukuma Research Committee,<sup>30</sup> are indeed theologizing from their own experience and context. Once given a start, these local groups make the connections in a process of participatory theology. Creative ideas emerge in the group

reflection process. American theologian Robert Schreier points out that local theologies can be constructed with the local community as theologian:

The experience of those in the Small Christian Communities who have seen the insight and power arising from the reflections of the people upon their experience and the Scriptures has prompted making the community itself the prime author of theology in local contexts. The Holy Spirit, working in and through the believing community, give shape and expression to Christian experience.<sup>31</sup>

This is the local African Christian community theologizing. Local gatherings of SCCs reflecting on their daily lives in light of the gospel<sup>32</sup> can be a real theological locus or theological moment. Archbishop Anselme Sanon of Bobo Dioulasso, Burkina Faso stresses that in a truly African church "theology becomes again a community affair. African theologians must work with and within the Christian Communities."<sup>33</sup> Doing theology with local people on the ground can lead to practical, pastoral solutions as emphasized by Malawian theologian Clement Majawa in his closing remarks at our conference.

The local African community doing theology based on its experience and context is called by many names: African Palaver Theology.<sup>34</sup> Mango Tree Theology. Story-telling Theology. We use a very African participatory process and methodology that prioritizes "African palaver." This African ethic of communications is a patient and sustained process of mutual speaking and listening to one another, sharing a cross-fertilization of ideas and arriving at decisions and solutions through discussion, dialogue, consultation and consensus<sup>35</sup> rather than monopoly and confrontation. This is also very "Sukuma" where the local people try to build relationships and harmony and avoid confrontation at all costs. Also the community or group is more important than the individual.<sup>36</sup>

In describing the background to the writing of his book *Theology Brewed in an African Pot* Agbonkhanmeghe Orobator states:

Doing theology is not an isolated enterprise, primarily in Africa where doing theology is a community event. At Hekima College [Nairobi, Kenya],

where I teach, one of my favorite classes is called simply “Palaver Session.” This is the time when students sit in a round hut and talk about God, faith and their religious experience in an African context. Sometimes we have something to drink and munch on as we dialogue, debate, and converse. As I will show in chapter 1, two characters from Chinua Achebe’s well-known novel *Things Fall Apart*, Chief Akunna and Mr. Brown, seem to have done theology in a similar manner.<sup>37</sup>

This process is an important step to developing an authentic contextual African Christian Theology on the grassroots level.

The Sukuma people’s way of doing contextual African theology is also a local African narrative theology of inculturation – one of many types of African Christian Theology. It can be called cultural theology. The starting part is African culture, but specifically African oral literature and the wide range of narrative and oral forms -- proverbs, sayings, riddles, stories, fables, myths, plays, prayers, songs and dreams -- explained in their historical and cultural contexts. Mbiti points out that

African oral theology is a living reality. We must come to terms with it. We must acknowledge its role in the total life of the church. It is the most articulate expression of theological creativity in Africa. This form of theology gives the church a certain measure of theological selfhood and independence.<sup>38</sup>

Ghanaian theologian John Pobee presents an ongoing challenge:

The urgent task is the collection of myths, proverbs, invocations, prayers, incantations, ritual, songs, dreams and so on. The collections made so far are rather haphazard and are part of sociological and anthropological studies. We are asking for the specific theological mind to be brought to bear on the vast materials of the sources of African Traditional Religion.<sup>39</sup>

## **5. Challenges for the Future**

The Sukuma people, especially their culture and values in Tanzania, are changing rapidly due to the decline of their ancestral cults and ceremonies,<sup>40</sup> economics, historical disregard for their traditions, imposition of Western culture, influence of the media on youth, secularization, urbanization and other factors. We cannot remain in the romanticized cultural



past. If the traditional role of the Sukuma (and other African ethnic groups) eldest brother offering sacrifices to the ancestors and God is dying out/disappearing, an evolving Sukuma Christology will see new patterns and shapes based on new experiences and new contexts.<sup>41</sup>

In light of our specific conference theme of “Reinventing Africa: Challenges, Biblical Reflections and Christological Reflections,” the next 50 years will reveal new examples and case studies of African Christology as part of African narrative theology of inculturation that is one of the many types of African Christian Theology. As the worldwide proverb says *We create the path by walking.*

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## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup>In many African ethnic groups (formerly called tribes) "wa" or "ba" stands for "the people of" (for example, "Wasukuma" or "Basukuma"), "ki" stands for "the language of" (for example, "Kisukuma"), and "u" for the geographical area (for example, "Usukuma"). For simplicity this article uses only the root word throughout to cover both the people and the language (for example, "Sukuma"). The root word is used as both a noun and an adjective. The word "Sukumaland" is used for the geographical area in northwestern Tanzania where the majority of Sukuma live.

<sup>2</sup>Tanzania is an independent republic located in East Africa on the Indian Ocean south of the Equator. Its area is 945,087 square kilometers (364,900 square miles) which is approximately the size of: Egypt or Nigeria; the states of Texas and New Mexico combined; twice the size of California; or about four times the size of the United Kingdom. Its population according to United Nations statistics in 2009 is 43.7 million people. The breakdown of religions is debated. One source cites: 31 percent: Muslims; 27.2 percent: African Religion; 20.7 percent: Catholics and 20.3 percent: other Christians.

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<sup>3</sup>When I first presented this paper I introduced the two Sukuma priests at the conference -- Father Nicholas Segeja from Mwanza Archdiocese and Father Paskali Kassase Lubango from Shinyanga Diocese -- saying that they are my teachers of Sukuma culture. Segeja wrote his Doctorate Dissertation in the Pastoral Department at the Catholic University of Eastern Africa (CUEA) on *An Ecclesiology of Reverential Dialogue in the Family (Shikome)* and Lubango wrote his Master's Thesis in the Pastoral Department on witchcraft in Sukumaland.

<sup>4</sup>A very good summary is found in Diane Stinton, *Jesus of Africa: Voices of Contemporary African Christology* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books and Nairobi: Paulines Publications Africa, 2004). For a later update see Diane Stinton, "Africa's Contribution to Christology," in Laurenti Magesa (ed.), *African Theology Come of Age* (Nairobi: Paulines Publications Africa, 2010), 13-34.

<sup>5</sup>If the father is alive and able-bodied he offers the sacrifice. When he dies, the eldest brother becomes the head of the family and has the responsibility to offer the sacrifice.

Commentators have pointed out that Sukuma society is still very traditional and lacks a prophetic stance against the bad aspects of the Sukuma culture. For example, it would be very difficult for a young Sukuma woman to go against the family cultural traditions in Sukumaland (the power of the elders as symbolized by the authority of her eldest brother) in getting married. Here the Catholic Church has to challenge the culture and promote equality between the sexes. One commentator asked: Jesus Christ lived fully as a Jew in the Jewish culture of his day. He challenged the Jewish culture and traditions. If Jesus Christ would live fully as a Sukuma in the Sukuma culture today, how would he challenge the Sukuma culture and traditions? One challenge would be related to the Sukuma people's fears connected with superstition and witchcraft.

<sup>6</sup>This is common in other African ethnic groups. Kabasele states that "it is the eldest brother

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who makes an offering to the Ancestors and to the Supreme Being on behalf of all the rest."

Francis Kabasele, "Christ as Ancestor and Elder Brother," in Robert Schreiter, ed., *Faces of Jesus in Africa* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1991), 122.

<sup>7</sup>In two conversations with the author in Nairobi, Kenya on 20 August, 2010 and 26 October, 2010 Father Paskali Kassase Lubango, the former Vicar General of Shinyanga Diocese, provided valuable background information on Sukuma culture.

<sup>8</sup>Explained at length in the section "African Christology as Relational" in Joseph Healey and Donald Sybertz, *Towards an African Narrative Theology* (Nairobi: Paulines Publications Africa, 1996 and Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1997), 82-85.

<sup>9</sup>Originally we chose the term "Extended Family of God" but then took out the word "extended" because Magesa and other African theologians and scholars emphasize that "extended family" originates from a Western sociological conception of family structures. For Africans this wide network of grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins, etc. is simply "family" or on a wider scale "clan." Many have pointed out that this wide family network is the Africans' worst enemy as well as best friend. This family solidarity system (called "the economy of affection") can help needy members, but the more financially successful members can be constantly preyed upon by their "poor cousins."

<sup>10</sup>The Maasai people in Kenya and Tanzania's name for God.

<sup>11</sup>Joseph Healey, *Once Upon a Time in Africa: Stories of Wisdom and Joy* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Book, 2004), 128. Also online in the African Proverbs, Sayings and Stories Website Stories Database. Retrieved 29 October, 2010. [http://www.afriprov.org/index.php/african-stories-database.html?task=display2&cid\[0\]=301](http://www.afriprov.org/index.php/african-stories-database.html?task=display2&cid[0]=301).

<sup>12</sup>In speaking to the bishops of Kenya in 1980 Pope John Paul II linked inculturation to the incarnation: "Christ, in the members of His body in Africa, is himself African." John Paul II,

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*Address to the Kenyan Bishops*, May 7, 1980), AAS 72, 4 (15 June 1980): 497.

<sup>13</sup>The Swahili version was originally published in Kamati ya Utafiti wa Utamaduni Bujora, *Kugundua Mbegu za Injili – Kitabu cha Pili: Familia na Ndoa* (Peramiho: Benedictine Publications Ndanda--Peramiho, 1993), 65-66. An English version was published as “The Two Brothers” in Joseph Healey, *African Stories for Preachers and Teachers* (Nairobi: Paulines Publications Africa, 2005), 64-65. A Swahili version was published as “Kaka Wawili” in Joseph Healey, *Hadithi za Kiafrika kwa Wahubiri na Walimu* (Nairobi: Paulines Publications Africa, 2006), 64-65 and in Joseph Nkumbulwa and Pascal Durand (eds.), *Wasukuma Hutangaza Injili: Neno la Mungu Kwa Njia ya Hadithi za Jadi za Kisukuma* (Mwanza: Privately Printed, 2010), 153-155.

<sup>14</sup>*Ibid.*, 155.

<sup>15</sup>In several places Pobee writes about contextualization -- the juxtaposition of biblical texts and Akan, Ghana proverbs -- in a process of a mutual illumination. For an interesting debate on whether this is a translation model or an adaptation model or an inculturation/incarnation model see his article “*Proverbs and African Christianity*” in John Pobee (ed.), *African Proverbs and Christian Mission*. Papers from the Consultation on African Proverbs and Christian Mission (27-31 March 1995). Published in 1997. African Proverbs, Sayings and Stories Website Ebook. Retrieved on 11 November, 2010.

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In calling for an intercultural hermeneutics today Pobee refers to “the Enlightenment commitment to rationality and the consequent propositional style of expounding reality. Proverbs, of course, do not conform to the propositional style and were consequently not appropriated.”

<sup>16</sup>Laurenti Magesa in email message to the author dated 30 October, 2010.

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<sup>17</sup>This is emphasized in the African short story “What is the Greatest Religion?” in Joseph Healey, *What Language Does God Speak: African Stories about Christmas and Easter* (Nairobi: St. Paul Publications Africa, 1990), 71-72. Also online in the African Proverbs, Sayings and Stories Website Stories Database. Retrieved 29 October, 2010.  
[http://www.afriprov.org/index.php/african-stories-database.html?task=display2&cid\[0\]=502](http://www.afriprov.org/index.php/african-stories-database.html?task=display2&cid[0]=502).

<sup>18</sup>This is perhaps the best known example of African art that portrays Jesus as a Black African Christ. These paintings use a unique participatory method and art style. After long research and discussion, members of the Mafa Ethnic Group in Cameroon acted out various *Bible* stories and scenes. Then a Cameroonian artist painted these dramatized biblical scenes. Some of these colorful and realistic paintings were used in the booklet for the opening of the Eucharistic Celebration of the First African Synod in St. Peter's Basilica in Rome on April 10, 1994. These truly African paintings caused *Time* magazine to comment in its coverage of the opening ceremony: "Most striking of all, the liturgical booklet was illustrated with African paintings that depicted Jesus Christ and his disciples as black." Richard N. Ostling, "Africa: Fertile Ground for Catholicism," *Time*, 143, 17 (April 25, 1994), 52. This is all part of what Mbiti calls "African symbolic theology."

<sup>19</sup>John Mbiti, "The Biblical Basis in Present Trends of African Theology," *Bulletin of African Theology*, 1, 1 (January--June, 1979), 12.

<sup>20</sup>Father George Cotter, M.M. was one of the first pioneers in Sukumaland to facilitate small reflection groups of Sukuma people to use proverbs to get a deeper understanding of Scripture.

<sup>21</sup>How much do the Sukuma people feel the need of salvation? Here is a telling story called “I’ve Got Everything” by Dan Ohmann:

One Sunday after the Baptism of his child, I was eating at the home of Masanja, one of the Sukuma people in Nata, Tanzania. His house, a mud hut



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with a grass roof. His bed, a cow skin on the floor. We ate with our fingers, no silverware. Even while eating I was bitten by some ticks. "Masanja," I asked him, "your wife is a Catholic; your seven children have all been baptized. When will *you* start to pray?" "Padri," Masanja responded, "I have cows, I have a good wife, many children. I have everything! What else can I pray for?"

"Masanja," I answered, "Did your wife and children greet you this morning?" "Of course!" Masanja exclaimed. I asked, "What would you do if tomorrow morning your son walks right by you without greeting you?" Masanja answered, "If he would refuse to greet me, I'd beat him." "But, Masanja," I told him, "you are that son. You say we are all God's children; yet, morning after morning you don't pray, you don't greet your Father in heaven who gave you all that you have. To pray is more than to ask for something."

In Ruth K. Meyer, *A Glimpse into the Soul of Africa: Commemorating Father Dan Ohmann's Forty-Five Years in Tanzania* (St. Cloud, Minnesota, privately printed, 2009), 49.

<sup>22</sup>Based on discussions with local African communities in Sukumaland and original research by John Zeitler in Tanzania. For a fascinating "Asian Reading of the Bible" see vanThanh Nguyen, "An Asian View of Biblical Hospitality" *Vidyajyoti Journal of Theological Reflection*, 74, 1 (June, 2010), 445-459, 404. He calls this same story the "Parable of the Friend at Midnight" and interprets it from an Asian perspective. He rephrases the parable so that the three loaves become three handfuls of rice. The Sukuma rephrasing would be three cups of maize meal (corn flour).

<sup>23</sup>Readers of this article will have their own special (even unique) examples of African hospitality. What has surprised and edified me so many times about African hospitality is the readiness and genuine happiness of Africans to drop everything and prepare a meal when we arrive unexpectedly. Truly we have learned in a very practical way that the African proverb, *A guest is never an interruption*, is not words, but practical action.

<sup>24</sup>The situation is changing in urban Africa where householders would not unlock their doors unless they knew the visitors. Thieves and tricksters try to break into homes in cities in Africa at night so people are increasingly wary.

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<sup>25</sup>Healey and Sybertz, *Towards an African Narrative Theology*, 185-186.

<sup>26</sup>Nguyen, *Asian View*, 446-447.

<sup>27</sup>Agbonkhianmeghe E. Orobator, "The Sky is Wide Enough: A Historical-Critical Appraisal of Theological Activity and Method in Africa," *Hekima Review*, 40 (May, 2009), 41.

<sup>28</sup>Afe Adogame in *African Theology on the Way: Current Conversations*. Edited by Diane B. Stinton (London: SPCK International Study Guide 46, 2010), 170.

<sup>29</sup>Also called "local community hermeneutics."

<sup>30</sup>A particularly active group is the Ndoleleji Research Committee in Shinyanga, Tanzania composed of: Justina Deus, George Edward, Peter Lugandu, John Mahona, Sospeter Mbiyung'he, Regina Nkanda and Donald Sybertz. They produced a booklet about the Sukuma myth of the clever young man Masala Kulangwa and the monster Shing'weng'we called *Tears of Joy: African Story about Heroes and Monsters*. John Mbonde was particularly helpful in preparing editions in Sukuma, Swahili and English. Dar es Salaam, Tanzania: Mathews Bookstore & Stationers, 2006. Presently the committee is writing a lengthy theological interpretation of the myth that is often narrated in a long Sukuma song. This is probably the most famous Sukuma story and is found in many versions. One example is "Lishing'weng'we na Masala Kulangwa" in Kamati ya Utafiti wa Utamaduni Bujora. *Imani za Jadi za Kisukuma Katika Misemo, Hadithi, Methali na Desturi za Maisha* (Paris: Cid éditions, 1988), 296-305.

<sup>31</sup>Robert Schreiter, *Constructing Local Theologies* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1985), 16.

<sup>32</sup>See No. 89 in John Paul II, Apostolic Exhortation *The Church in Africa* under "Living (or Vital) Christian Communities: "These small communities reflect on different human problems in the light of the Gospel" (Nairobi: Paulines Publications Africa, 1995).

<sup>33</sup>Anselme Sanon, "Press Conference," *The African Synod*, 5, 2 (March/April, 1994), 14.

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<sup>34</sup>There is a lot of discussion and debate on this term. African Palaver Theology is both the name of a process/method and the name of the type of content (like Liberation Theology). Method heavily determines/influences content and vice versa. It is a two way process connected to illuminating African values. The term lacks visibility/recognition in the Western academic world. Palaver means “talk” or “word” and is a neutral word. But it has taken on negative connotations as idle chatter or endless, useless talking. Orobator states: “Because of the considerable investment of time, this mechanism has often been derided as a typically African exercise in unproductive talk.” I see it more positively as a long parley or discussion. Orobator describes its positive value: “This represents a way of resolving potential conflictive situations through prolonged dialogue culminating in consensus.” Agbonkhianmeghe E. Orobator, “Catholic Social Teaching and Peacemaking in Africa: A Tale of Two Traditions” in Elias Omondi Opongo (ed.), *Peace Weavers: Methodologies of Peace Building in Africa* (Nairobi: Paulines Publications Africa, 2008), 39.

People began using the expression “palaver” more after the January, 2008 post-election crisis in Kenya. Among the positive examples of using palaver in the political arena are Kofi Anan’s long, patient and seemingly endless discussions with Mwai Kibaki and Raila Odinga on resolving the Kenya political crisis. Then there are the various mechanisms for peacemaking, conflict resolution and transformation in Africa such as the Gecaca Courts in Rwanda and the “Mato Oput” process in Northern Uganda.

As a process or method of doing theology, Orobator describes it at length in the “Introduction: The Synod as Ecclesial Conversation” to the book *Reconciliation, Justice and Peace: The Second African Synod* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2011 and Nairobi: Acton Publishers, 2011). The chapters evolved out of an intensive seminar-style conference at Hekima College in Nairobi, Kenya in March, 2010. The 21 writers first read all their papers

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ahead of time. At the conference itself, each writer briefly summarized the central thesis of his or her paper and a designated respondent presented a brief response. Each paper was then open for intensive discussion and critiquing by all participants in a group sharing process. Three special observers-reactors gave overall feedback and comments at the end of each day. The papers were then revised for publication.

<sup>35</sup>A practical example of this palaver process is the way Don Sybertz and his Ndoleleji Research Committee can take one full week to research and write up one Sukuma Proverb. The committee members discuss at length with the elders in several villages before getting a consensus on the three parts of a proverb: “Background, Explanation, Meaning and Everyday Use;” “Biblical Parallels;” and “Contemporary Use and Religious Application.” See the Sukuma examples on the African Proverbs, Sayings and Stories Website. [www.afriprov.org](http://www.afriprov.org)

Another important use of palaver is to resolve potentially conflictual situations. Proposition 7 of the 2009 Second African Synod refers to traditional African ceremonies of reconciliation “where a team of sages do public arbitration of cases.”

<sup>36</sup>The Sukuma people are famous for their music and dancing. But if you asked the local people to name a well-known composer, they probably could not. In their creative composing sessions at the Sukuma Cultural Center in Bujora, Mwanza, Tanzania the individual musicians present their separate compositions on a tape and sung live. Then the group jointly decides on a single composition.

<sup>37</sup>Agbonkhianmeghe Orobator, *Theology Brewed in an African Pot*. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books and Nairobi: Paulines Publications Africa, 2008), 11.

<sup>38</sup>John Mbiti, "Cattle Are Born With Ears, Their Horns Grow Later: Towards an Appreciation of African Oral Theology" in *All African Lutheran Consultation on Christian Theology and Christian Education for the African Context* (Geneva: Lutheran World

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Federation, 1978), 49-50.

<sup>39</sup>John Pobee, *Toward an African Theology* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1979), 21. A recent example of how this narrative theology is being done in Africa as a community event is described in Orobator, *Theology Brewed in an African Pot*.

<sup>40</sup>This is true in many parts of Africa. The Ibo people in Eastern Nigeria and the Taita peoples in southeastern Kenya have similar prayers as the Sukuma, but these ceremonies are dying out.

<sup>41</sup>What are some of these new patterns and shapes? First, examples that are connected to the prayers of intercession and bereavement customs in Africa. Diviners and healers (who are, in fact, the priests and ministers of African Spirituality and African Religion) continue to be consulted and followed on many occasions including sickness, death, family conflicts, marriage tensions, inheritance disputes, land issues, times of school examinations, political elections and football matches. NOTE: The terms “African Spirituality” and “African Religion” are preferred without the adjective/modifier “Traditional.” These terms stand on their own.

Members of Small Christian Communities (SCCs) follow the bereavement customs of their different ethnic groups in Nairobi Archdiocese, Kenya. The younger brother of the Chairperson of my own St. Kizito SCC in St. Austin’s Parish died. We had special prayers and a collection. But it was the eldest brother (first born) and the head of the family who led the bereavement customs and plans of the Luyia Ethnic Group including transporting the body of the deceased back to their ancestral home in Kakamega.

Intercessory prayers are increasingly offered online on the internet. A person can post requests for prayers for all kinds of intentions on a wide variety of websites, blogs, Facebook Pages and Groups, Twitter, etc. Bereavement websites are common. These requests for

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prayers can also be sent as text messages or as voice messages on a cellphone. For examples see the “Prayer Corner” on the “Maryknoll Society of Fathers and Brothers Website”

<http://www.maryknollsociety.org/index.php/prayer-corner> and “I Lift Up My Eyes Prayer Ministry Website <http://psalm121.ca/prayer.html>.

Second, stories, parables and metaphors connected to African Christology (for example, Good Samaritan stories in an African setting) that appear on the New Media (Social Media) such as the internet. NOTE: A search of the word “Sukuma” on Google on 11 November, 2010 brought an astonishing 674,000 results or hits in 0.21 seconds.

Christians also share “African Readings of the Bible” online. A recent development is Online or Virtual Small Christian Communities: members post on an Online SCC on Facebook their reflections on the readings of the following Sunday. See “Online SCCs” on the Small Christian Communities Global Collaborative Website. Retrieved 14 November, 2010. <http://www.smallchristiancommunities.org/online-sccs.html>. Online Small Christian Communities Facebook Page. Retrieved 14 November, 2010.

<http://www.facebook.com/pages/Online-Small-Christian-Communities/157439630952524>

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