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Creating communities through pastoral care and counselling

in the fragmentations of urban African life

topics:
- *African spirituality of community life*
- *urbanisation and the fragmentation of life*
- *re-building caring communities as a challenge for pastoral care*

Abstract

Communities provide essential foundational structures for human interaction and life sharing in togetherness. From the beginning, the primary intention of human life in communal living is that communities are life giving, life sharing and life supporting. This research investigates how the very essence of communities, which is building life together, has been fragmented, in the process of urbanization. The factors responsible for the fragmentations within the context of city life in the African milieus are explored. The need for creating and re-creating communal life in the cities and the strategies are also explored, using pastoral care and counseling as the central intervention tool.

Introduction

"*And the Lord God said, it is not good that man should be alone; I will make him a helpmeet for him*" (Gen. 2:18). Wholesome life implies caring and sharing together. From the biblical perspective, God's intention is that human life be shared in community of people and nations beginning with the nuclear family as the smallest unit. Community life is inclusive. All living things live in families, colonies and communities.

The community compositional dimensions are conceptually and empirically independent. That is to say, communities can be found displaying all sorts of combinations of characteristics. Within a metropolis, it is possible to find a highly sophisticated middle-class group, who are highly familistic while another community may be impoverished or low in familism. Thus, the compositional variables are several and it is difficult to find completely homogeneous communities. There are always some individuals or families that may choose to deviate from community norms.

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This paper has a dual-focus. On the one hand, it seeks to understand modern cities as a context within which human life suffers fragmentations in all dimensions. On the other hand it is concerned about the Church impacting the cities through pastoral care and counselling to the effect of creating communities of life despite the presence of fragmentation factors.

The search for community life in the intercultural context of the city life through pastoral care was focused around the concept of "our oneness" in the Body of Christ. Apostle Paul writes: "*Endeavoring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit, even as ye are called in one hope of your calling; One Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all, and through all, and in you all.*" (Ephesians 4:3-6)

In this sense, we, being one Body, are called into one God's community. In the biblical perspective, one major characteristic of community of believers is that we all share the same hope of our calling into eternal life by experiencing salvation through personal faith in Jesus Christ.

Theoretical background

From the sociological concept, Parelius and Parelius (1978:330) define communities as socially meaningful territories. Within the context of this operational definition, it is implied that a community can contain a wide variety of interdependent institutions and social groups. Communities can be young or old. For example, a typical community might include a number of businesses, churches, service clubs, schools, young people as well as old-timers who have lived within the confines of that territory all their life.

From the psychosocial context, a community offers to its residents their agreed boundaries and unique characteristics. In this sense, residents often develop strong emotional attachments to the areas in which they live. Often, such sentimental feelings lead to communities thinking, believing and behaving in such ways that convey the message that they are better than the others nearby. The consensus efforts often exerted by members in a community to defend itself against encroachment in a given metropolitan area or in a given rural setting are clear indications of the existence of social hierarchy of prestige among communities.

Studies by Gerald Suttles (1968) in the United States of America revealed another very important variable in understanding the concept of community life. This is the variable of social cohesion. The cohesion of a community in this sense refers to the strength of its normative or moral order, and the degree of consensus on basic values and rules of behaviour that exists among residents. That is to say, a community is uniquely itself by its nature of homogeneity or heterogeneity of the population in terms of social rank, ethnicity, and life style (Parelius and Parelius, 1978).

There is yet a third concept of meaning to be explored. This is the concept of independence as emphasized by social ecologists. Studies by Donald Bogue (1961:524-533) reported that the degree to which the community is self-sufficient and self-governing, containing all the basic institutions and resources necessary for the residents to maintain themselves indefinitely determines a community. Although it is impossible to maintain total independence in contemporary urban African communities, in terms of economic, political, entertainment, medical care,

police protection, general securities and other matters, yet, the issue of self-sufficiency is centrally a very important factor of consideration.

In summary, understanding the concept of communities within the context of this research involves three related variables and these are social composition (i.e. rank, ethnicity and familial life style) social cohesion and independence.

African theological background

The spirituality of community life

In African theology, the Supreme Deity (God in heaven) rules over every community. He does this together with several other smaller deities (gods). Each of these deities is charged to superintend over an activity in the community e. g. fertility, harvest, fishing, healing etc. Among these gods, there is one named god of the land (ala), governing the territorial space of each community. Its shrine represents the major altar of the land, its priest is the chief priest of the land and it's people and leads them in worship and purificatory rites. Thus, a community comes under the surveillance of the god of their land with ancestors as agents.

The spiritual fragmentation of city life is then symbolized in non-ownership of the city land by one specific deity, since urban dwellers come from several lands. By implication, the city land has not one major *altar* but several *imported altars,* and no chief priests, but priests of various cultures of both foreign and indigenous religions.

Community life in the African sense: ancestral lineage

The immediate past and present African sense of community life was and still is that of being *his brother's keeper.* Theologically, psychologically and socially, the African *was and is, because his brother was and is.* The *male link* familistic theory reinforces the African spirituality of ancestral lineage and worship. *He is the son of his father, who was the son of his own father. Therefore, he lives because his father lived.*

Thus, the African community life is deeply embedded and rooted back to his ancestral linkage. He is primarily a member of a community whose smallest unit is not the nuclear family but the *extended family* (Mampolo and Nwachuku, 1991). He lives not in a house by himself and his wife and children alone, but he lives in *a compound of houses* within his kindred of the same ancestral lineage. The kinsmen affinity extols the male child preference around which, in most cases a compound can exist. He lives for the advancement of the kinsmen *(Umunna).* He succeeds for them and makes them proud. Likewise, his failure brings them communal shame. His worldview is communitarian and this includes a troop of ancestors at the background.

In summary, the African is a community-based person. (Lartey, Nwachuku and Kasonga, 1994). Extreme individualism, which extols western narcissism, capitalistic competitiveness and rivalry, was despised in the eyes of the African of old. But what is the situation now within the melting pot of interculturality of city life? This dilemma creates part of today's *schizophrenic image* of the urban African.

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Workbook on Intercultural Pastoral Care and Counselling _____ 230

The umbilical cord theory of African community-based life

Nwachuku (1995), noted that contemporary Africa, there is still the element of community mystery built around the placenta of a newly born baby in the rural village communities. When a baby is born into the compound, the umbilical cord is cut. When this falls off the placenta, the waste cord is ritualistically buried at the base of a symbolic family tree. This gives a rite of passage and perpetually identifies the individual as a member of the larger family comprising the ancestral clan. The *fetus' helplessness* experiences the collective protection as first experience of communal love and the umbilical cord tie serves as symbol of membership to the body of kinsmen (the *Umunna).* The ritual thus introduces indelible concepts of belonging and acceptance. Thereafter, the child has a claim on the clan lineage and its inheritance. These in turn produce a sense of connection, orientation, and rooted acceptance of the individuality of the member, and the sensitivity of his existence. Today, city born children do not experience this community rite of entry. In its place there is the naming and christening ceremony.

Taking the approach of replacing idolatry and ancestral worship as spirituality of African community life with the biblical baptisms, confirmation and women dedication after child birth, there arises these questions: how can the city church emerge in reality as a community strong enough to be a substitute? How can the new symbols of community life and care in the church rendered to a city born child or an adult urban dweller offer enough spirituality to the church member in order to replace the old symbols?

Spirituality of community life and African theology: past and present

In the context of the ethnic social composition made up of all ethnic kindred (the *Umunna)* in the immediate past, the kin communal feeling induces the social cohesion. This also goes with being independent of other communities around in their political, economic and security services. Thus, there evolved a perpetually strong collaborative partnership between the kinsmen. This was sealed in the rural villages at the ancestral worship with blood sacrifice during cultic rituals, purificatory rites and ritual worships to celebrate births, weddings, deaths, festivals of seasons, harvests and victories, with moon light stories and dances. The degree of kin togetherness was evident in all men drinking wine together from one drinking horn at assemblies and household gatherings. Women cooked within the compound and children ate together. Suspicion and fear of witchcraft was minimal.

The living was sensitive to the cries of one another while the dead watch in surveillance of the living. It was one community of the living and the dead who were yet living; though dead. Life together was both living and worship. The worldview was and still is cosmological. Theology was natural and practically emphasized in living a good life for yourself and your brother. The evil man, the witch and wizard *(Onye nsi)* was known and punished. The thief was killed and the rebellious son disowned (Nwachuku, 1996).

One is tempted at present to believe that all was or is well with the idyllic characteristic of the rural village community existence. Although these were obvious facts, in contrast to the urban social environment especially in Africa, with Nigeria as case in point, there continued to evolve a gradual degradation of human lif e even in village communities. The mythical image of rural atmosphere and the all-embracing involvement of community life leave one in dilemma why there is the continuous rural migration to urban cities, which offer an insensitive social life in

contrast. The fragmentation of life by poverty, neo slavery, illiteracy, under development and unemployment seem to vex the mind of a growing new generation that could no longer contain the rural life. Despite urban challenges, rural population chooses to flee to the cities.

The urban question

Sule (1994:3) describes urban attributes as seducing rural migrants to flock the cities because of the glamour of electricity, pipe-born water, better housing facilities and promise of higher in come, for better life.

Defining urbanization, Wirth (1938) noted that the concept carries with it the assumption of size, density and heterogeneity. These attributes produce such a wealth of stimuli on the inhabitants of cities. Thus, they either develop protective responses by making their social contracts more formal than informal, more particular than general, more secondary than primary or more critical than natural. Consequently, this led to a growing specialization of roles, or where controls failed, led to a state of *"anomie"* and to a state of social disorganization, vices, depravity and misery as are found in modern urban centers of today.

This aspect of urban social environment has attracted not only the attention of social ecologists but also that of pastoral care gives and counsellors. The conceptualization of the relationship between cities and what they do to community life has been sufficiently underscored by the evidence of fragmentations of human life.

African concept of urban life and communities

The concept of communal life permeates the rural communities as part of African basic philosophy of life. This transcends the western concept of urbanization in terms of kindred disintegration. In this sense, urban dwellers in all Nigerian and all African cities still *carry* over the idea of kindred togetherness unto city life. Thus, urban dwelling congregates along parallel lines of ethnicity, local government areas, regional, state and village groupings. When once any new city migrant arrives, he or she looks for a house near his people.

Nigerian cities therefore polarize in enclaves dominated naturally by major clan, ethnic, tribe and national lines, e.g. *Ibo quarters, Housa quarters, Yoruba quarters, Efik quarters etc*. In a city within a state, the groupings follow ethnic lines. Naturally, the boundaries expand beyond ethnic lines to embrace state boundaries in cities outside the state. Outside Nigeria, the tribal boundaries yet expand to include all Nigerians, no matter the state or tribe.

The sense of affinity strives to maintain certain symbols of togetherness in the cities by certain social activities such as:

1. Building a civic hall of meeting known by their name e.g. Ibo Hall, Yoruba Hall etc.;

2. Institutionalizing ethnic unions and making membership almost mandatory for everybody from that particular village or group e.g. Ibo Union, Yoruba Union, etc.

3. The assemblies serve as both support and censor to monitor good behaviour, progress or failure, as well as show support and solidarity in weddings, burials or emergency needs.

4. Yearly, during Christmas festival, which serves as holidays for Africans, over 80% of urban dwellers in their urban-based unions return to their village communities to organize community development building projects in liaison with the rural unions. That is to say, ethnicity and kindred have not yet been drastically fragmented in Africa by urbanization.

5. However, city fragmentation of human life to an African takes a different dimension from that of the Western World. The issues of fragmentation in African cities are greatly evident in terms of poverty, slum dwelling, over crowding, diseases, hunger, begging, homelessness, unemployment, illiteracy, low standard of living, widened gap between the rich and the poor and marginalization of majority masses.

6. Generally, it also shows consequences of the national debt burden on the poor masses of the citizens, and these are debts incurred by the government to urbanize and industrialize for the comfort and leisure of the rich and the governance. African theology and pastoral care must address these issues in recreating African urban life.

It is therefore, evident that both development and fragmentation are neither Western nor African. Life fragmentation is a human factor. Although western modernity has impacted African community life in the urban societies faster than would have occurred, yet it cannot be argued that urbanization is purely western. For example, the Yorubas of Nigeria had always been urban dwellers, yet with very strong communal ethnic orientation wherever they are located, whether in the past or the present.

The fragmentation dilemma and our African stories

It has been established in the preceding discussion that primarily, fragmentation is a human factor enhanced by city structures and social environment. But somehow, the African is still unaware of the changing social environment in essence. So, we Africans struggle to live in the reality of the fragmentation dilemma and city schizophrenia. Caught in social transition, we still live in the daily schizophrenia of being African and Western, rural and urban, elite and illiterate, rich and poor, sophisticated and simple, informed and ignorant, independent and dependent, religious adherent and syncretism, Christian and idolater. Our daily struggles with fragmented life are reflected in the brief stories below. All names are imaginary but real life stories.

Ahmed Ali

Ahmed, a professing Moslem youth goes to Lagos to write the Federal Government College Common Entrance Examination. He arrived the famous city of Lagos excitedly being his first time. But his joy was soon gone, when he observed several lunatics along the road. Why are they so ma$_y$ here, he asked? He soon discovered that many Lagosians face disorganized life and people break down in health with the fast pace of a big city life. Why is this so in Lagos? Why is every body moving so fast, even cars? To Ahmed, these are questions without answers. His dreams and excitement about Lagos soon die off and he faces extreme nostal-

gia of his rural hamlet in the village. He longs earnestly to go home for fear of running mad too. In actual fact, the people he saw were not all lunatics, but normal people, homeless and living under the bridges and fly over structures. Every body ran and rushed to take a bus or taxi. In short, life was maddening in itself. Lagos looked more like the biblical city of Gadarenes with many demon possessed by legions. Young Ahmed did not want to run made soon. So, he resolved to return to his village.

Franca Joe

Miss Franca Joe was born and bred at Abuja, the Federal Capital of Nigeria by Christian middle class Nigerians. She had never visited the village and relatives. Rather, she spends her holidays overseas. Once, her father was pressurized by his kinsmen to bring his children home to know their roots. During one Christmas season, Franca's parents took them home (the village). At lunch, some relatives who were present when meal was served were invited to share with them. Franca was shocked at the ease and joy with which the two visitors gladly dipped their hands together into the meal served for her father and drank from the same cup, sharing childhood age grade stories and jokes in reminiscence of the "good old days". Franca was disappointed at the regular invasion of their privacy. Relatives moved straight into the bedroom to greet and share their joy at seeing them. She longed to go back soon, so as to escape from every body's eyes and intrusion. "Here", she said, "everybody wants to know what you are doing. There is a lot of intrusion", she complained. She hated the idea completely and was glad to get back to the city life, where she could be "herself".

Bob and uncle Mike

Mr. Robert had been sent overseas for further studies. His Uncle Mike financed him. On graduating, Bob decided to reside in New York. After several years, Mr. Mike specifically invited his nephew Bob home, for a family meeting. When Bob arrived Nigeria, his first shock was over Uncle Mike's slum dwelling in the ghetto. He, his wife, five children and four relatives were living in two rooms. Bob would neither sit down, eat, nor drink any substance. Mike felt very much humiliated and rejected.

Furthermore, Bob proposed that the family meeting be held in his hotel room. Mike and the rest of the family members felt further insulted. The family elders turned down Bob's offer with vows and curses, swearing never to be involved with him as a family member any more. After few days, Bob flew back to New York. Since then, there had been a total break down in communication between Bob and his uncle Mike and family elders. Kinsmen were shocked at Bob's behaviour towards his uncle Mike who financed his education.

All our African stories have both unique and same meanings to life. That is, African life in modern times is severely fragmented. However, the fragmentation of life means different things to different people within their specific context of village and city life.

Creating caring communities

Suggestions for congregations

Present Jesus Christ and the salvation he gives in the all sufficiency power of the gospel as God the creator, giver of life, Saviour and sustainer of life. He is enough and able to save unto the utter most. He needs no other help of ancestors or other symbols. This knowledge is fundamental to the African convert because many Africans who go to church still practice syncretism.

Pastoral care givers should strengthen believers in Africa as a worshipping community, to see beyond the immediate ethnic community and see the church as one big family. They should equip the believers with practical strategies, in a dialogical community model, with which to work towards a realisation of hope.

Meaningful worship and bible studies should be understood. There should be interpretation of the worship process and messages to local language where English is used as medium of communication. Any body in the community should be able to participate in one language or the other in a community church. (see Nwachuku, 1995).

Care counsellors could mobilise the local congregation to bring hope, love and practical help to the community together with the gospel, in personal contact through door to door evangelism in the neighbourhood. Care efforts must be backed up with active follow-up till results are seen. This strategy creates friendship, love and support with a semblance of familism.

Each local congregation should have a baseline data bank on the disabled in the community and creatively reach out to meet their needs. The help needed includes advocacy in government policies and social welfare services.

Church members are encouraged to invite on regular basis families or couples from the same local congregation into their homes to share a meal. This helps to break down the cold walls of impersonal relationship found in city churches.

In All African Churches there are lively men's, women's and youth fellowships sharply demarcated. More joint fellowships across the board will bring closer and minimise the gender biases, gaps and differences.

The church should spearhead development projects and poverty alleviation programmes encouraging combined efforts such as community tree planting, farm plantations, cottage industries, animal farm projects ie. poultry etc.

Suggestions for working with youth

Churches in Africa have not yet recognised the importance of recreational facilities especially for the youth as part of their needed services to be rendered. Church-based clubs such as sports teams, music, drama, art, educational and several other types of clubs will provide a very reliable support body to the Christian youth. They will also provide good peer role models for the city adolescent exposed to several confusing models.

The African Church and city life face serious problems of generation gap which is on the increase. It could be helpful to initiate Seminars where parents and youth meet in regular dialogues over life skills management and shared concerns over

conflicts at interaction. This forum will help bring closer in a steady manner the generation gap which keeps many of the neighbourhood youth outside the church.

In Africa, vocational and employment development seminars are uppermost on the hierarchy of needs of youth due to high rate of unemployment, mass retrenchment and ill prepared retirements. The Church caregivers need to give regular seminars and workshops in this areas. This is an area where the state government has been very silent.

Suggestions for working in neighbourhoods

The situation of portable water is one of the most life devastation factors in African cities. Every urban church should provide and service bore hole water in her premises. Clean water, purchased at regular period of supply from the church will be a great hope restoration to her community. Local streams in African rural villages especially in the heat, provide rallying points of recreation with children singing and swimming together in water games. These lost good images of shared life would be recreated if the bore hole water point at the church is initiated and maintained as on-going essential service of care for the people in the community.

Caring believers should find out the interest and needs of the neighbourhood and run seminars on them. The church should initiate regular open seminars and workshops to inform as well as create awareness on needs of the hour as the case may be. It should also aim at recapturing lost and decaying moral values of community life.

From time to time, the church could organise a people's open forum where the neighbourhood adults meet to evaluate the development progress of the entire community, dialogue over point in time issues of general concern i.e. crime rate and securities and initiate further ideas and action for communal good. This recaptures and recreates the lost village kin's meetings. Neighbours are encouraged to have a personal contact and face to face dialogue with one another.

Generally, in the process of counsellors reaching out to create and recreate communities within the city population, the strategies also recapture re-orientation to love, helping attitude and unity of spirit, which are lost in the impersonal nature of city life. Through newly created care and support communities, new neighbourhoods of inter-tribal and intra-group friendliness emerge across frontiers. Likewise, new sense of openness, trust, sensitivity, consideration and connectedness is generated towards bridging the gap between the rich and the poor which is very evident in city churches and neighbourhood.

Conclusion: the Water of Life to quench a city thirst

Who would give a cup of cold water to quench a city thirst to a nameless African city woman whose life has became so fragmented in the big cities of Lagos, Kaduna, Port-Harcourt, Aba and Abuja? She has become so fragmented that she can no longer freely move about in the city except at noon? Her biblical counter part was named by her city – the Samaritan woman. She had become both nameless and faceless in trying to cope with battered life in the city. At the point of the biblical story, her face and her name (the Samaritan Woman) were worthless. There are many "Women of Samaria" today in our African cities, "many men sick with palsy, and many Gerasene demonics moving about with legions".

Both they and their cities are fragmented and disconnected with community reality. They need healing, and so also do their communities, in order for a reconnection of life to exist once again. African theology of the year 2000 and beyond must seek to encourage a practical daily theologising for daily care and restoration of lives broken by our cities; broken with poverty, hunger, corruption, oppression, abandoned street children, wars, and diseases. The church in Africa must theologise with care and counselling strategies such that deliver life in ways that seek to quench not only the thirst of a woman caught unaware at the city well at awkward time. But such theologising must also seek to quench the thirst of the community where the well is situated.

This is the model of the Good Shepherd. He healed both the spiritual and physical thirst of the woman and also healed her city. All Samaria came to see the Lord for themselves. We all in Africa and our sisters and brethren in the West must seek to see the Lord through the eyes of His loving care.

We all have our individual thirst in thirsty cities. Our cities and we need healing from living waters of life. We must be connecting points like the woman of Samaria, to reconnect our life and our cities back to God's Community. Here is a general invitation unto wholeness of life that we all seek in our churches and cities today: "*And he showed me a pure river of water of life, clear as crystal, proceeding out of the throne of God and of the lamb. And the Spirit and the bride say, Come. And let him that heareth say, come. And let him that is athirst Come. And whosoever will, let him take the water of life freely.*" (Revelation 22:1 & 17)

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Workbook on Intercultural Pastoral Care and Counselling _____ 237