Small Group Communication and the Asset Mapping Methodology:
Enhancing Participation in the Small Christian Communities in Nigeria

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Abstract

This article which references the importance of communication in small groups with regard to good use of members' talents for the sustenance of the group is drawn from my doctoral dissertation presented at the Pontifical Gregorian University, Rome, 2008.

1.0   Introduction

All larger organizations build their strength on small local groups. Through active participation in these smaller units, the avenue for actualizing the goals of the bigger groups is not only provided but this participation makes the larger groups endure (Schmale, 1993:11; Esman & Uphoff, 1984:18). In Africa, participation in smaller units of the family and the community is not only the bedrock of the entire society, but it is also that which determines the survival of the larger society (Babatunde, 1992:228; Wiredu, 1998:21; Ladele, 1986:98; Mulago, 1971:115). This is affirmed in small group studies where it is believed that groups endure through the active participation of its members (Stogdill, 1974:386; Freire, 1990:76). Here, authors have identified a strong relationship between leadership, participation, membership satisfaction and group effectiveness (Jung & Sosik, 2002:313; Foels et al., 2000:692).

Like in the society, the Church is made up of various groups, out of which is the small Christian community. A renewed expression of these communities follow the injunction of Vatican II which views the Church as the "People of God" (Gaudium et Spes, no. 32) and maintains that "Jesus Christ, the mediator between God and man, established and ever sustains here on earth his holy Church, the community of faith … through which he communicates truth and grace to all men" (Lumen Gentium, no. 8). The mission of the SCCs is to bring the Church closer to the faithful in small groups as members find a connecting

cord between their faith and daily life situations (Lorscheider, 1977:143). Thus, the communities are identified through "the celebration of the liturgy as a small group; an attempt to be sensitive to life events and to celebrate them in a prayerful way and involvement in and service to society" (Bissonnette, 1984:40).

Sensitivity to the life events of people in small groups entails that each member is recognized as an active subject and not a passive object (Freire, 1990). Each person's individual talents are capabilities is recognized and employed in and for the group. This, according to the asset mapping theory, enhances participation in small groups. Thus, effective communication in small groups and active participation in communities require putting at the disposal of the group, every factor, both physical and otherwise that can resonate with the participating members and thereby improve their commitment to the group (Kretzmann & McKnight, 1993:1; Beaulieu, 2002:2).

Putting every asset at the disposal of the community is much needed in the Nigerian SCCs which currently record a decline in terms of members' participation. Experiences from various dioceses in Nigeria show that the initial enthusiasm is replaced with a lukewarm attitude in many places. This is the submission of Ikpiki in his research on the communities in Warri diocese when he says, "these basic communities do not seem to create a sense of community among members. In general, most of the SCC groups in Warri diocese are incapable of responding to the needs of the members" (2005:84).

The inability to respond to the needs of the members stems from the issue of non-participatory leadership which confronts many of these communities (Ibid, 73). Active participation of members is enhanced through a leadership that engages their capabilities and carries them along in the communities' activities (Burns, 1978:4; Hoyt & Blascovich, 2003:704). Therefore, the aim of this work is to apply the asset mapping methodology to the problems facing the SCCs in Nigeria in a bid to proffering lasting solutions to them. To do this, we begin with a cursory view on the nature and purpose of the SCCs.

2.0   The SCCs as an Avenue for Merging Faith and Life

The SCCs are expressions of the Church in its local form. The organization of the communities follows the Vatican II which calls for a more active involvement of the laity in

the mission of the Church. The communities help people to avoid the effects of anonymity in the large parish setting since members get to know one another on a more personal basis. They do this through two basic operations of sharing the Word of God and practical application of the shared Word in the life of individual members (Clark, 1972:55). Here, Christ is seen to be very present and active in the lives of members. This merge between faith and life brings about a practical approach to theologizing, hence, Cadorette says,

> The Christology that arises out of grass roots small communities is practical in its origin, its intention, its methods and its goals. These groups reflect on the Gospels, the sources at hand, to learn how to live and act and what they might hope for. From the outset they take a practical approach. It ordinarily does not occur to them to discuss 'who' Jesus is, or 'what his nature is'; they look at what Jesus does, and listen to what he says, empathize with those he heals or encourages or scolds. They try to understand what his message is, what wisdom he teaches, what salvation he envisages. Their interest is operational and not ontological (1995:31).

The end point of an ideal SCC is the creation of a group of lay Catholics who are not only vast in their knowledge of God through His Word that has been shared, but also a people who see themselves as a real community where the survival of the whole depends on the strength of its individual parts. Thus, the second dimension of SCC activity helps members to integrate their faith with their life in order to transform not only the life of individual members but also their society at large (Nercey, 1997:64; Ayco, 1988:306). They engage in self help projects, visiting the sick, organize loans, etc. To effectively do this, an ideal SCC is recognized by the following Characteristics.

2.1   Characteristics of an ideal SCC

The weekly meeting of the communities has the following format: Introduction to the session; First song; First prayer; Reading the scripture passage slowly and meditatively aloud; History and context of the reading; Individual reflections on the reading; Lessons and experiences of the Church; Sharing of individual experience in the light of the reading; Planning; Evaluation (to see if we live the values espoused in the readings); Announcements; Final prayer of thanksgiving and blessing; Final song (Deles Jr., 1988:216-217). This format derives from the characteristics of the SCCs which show that while the communities begin

after the example of the Holy Trinity, they extend to the practical application of the sharing in the lives of individual members.

2.1.1   A Community Based on the Holy Trinity: O'Halloran maintains that, "the theological vision underlying small Christian communities springs from the depths of the Trinity and through Christ impacts the Church and the whole world" (1996:129).   When the SCC is convoked, the faithful enter into the presence of the Holy Trinity, through an experience which enables them to feel a loving union with the Father through Jesus by the work of the Holy Spirit.

2.1.2   Hearing the Announcement of the Kingdom – the Word of God: Having been convoked as a community after the example of the Holy Trinity, the SCCs make hearing the Word of God their starting point.   Mesters holds that "the Word of God is not just the Bible … the Word of God is within reality and it can be discovered there with the help of the Bible" (1981:122).   Thus, the sharing that goes on here is such that merges faith and life situation of members.

2.1.3   A Community of Affective Union and Support: For Lafont, "the Church as the body of Christ and the People of God is not to be considered merely in theory but also in practice; in the concrete communities where men and women gather, where the gospel is announced, the sacraments are celebrated and one's gifts are employed" (2000:94).   This means employing ones gifts at the service of the whole community.   While this begins by listening to each other's inner experiences of faith as a community, its end-point is unity and the support members get from one another.

2.1.4   Unity and Reconciliation in the Local Community and the World: The unity experienced on the personal level is also transmitted to the local community through the SCC.   Azevedo gives an example of Latin American countries where "local people have been banding together, managing their fear, and changing their environment through the instrumentality of Christian base communities" (1987:85).

2.1.5   The Church as a Community of Communities: The signs of the Church as One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic find their proper expression in the SCCs since it is here that we find

the Church of Christ truly existing and operating (Pinto, 1985:161). While maintaining their link with the universal Church, the communities multiply the presence of the universal Church in smaller units where people have a sense of belonging.

2.1.6   A People of Faith that Announces the Word to the World: The mission of the Church is that of evangelization; "She exits in order to evangelize" (EN, no. 14). Through the mutual love and concern members show to one another in the SCCs, the communities not only proclaim the Word to the world but they also offer practical examples on how to build a more caring society and therefore become models for others.

These characteristics show participation to be inherent in the ideal SCCs, whether through sharing the Word of God or the practical application of that sharing to the life of members. In the sharing, the experience of a member articulates and clarifies that of the other and there develops a resonance between each member and the group at large. The same is true of the practical activities such as visiting the sick, care for the poor, self-help projects etc. Through joint participation in these activities people feel the presence of Christ in their daily situation and their participation is enhanced. To what extent has this been the case in the Nigerian SCCs and what is their present situation?

2.2   The Nigerian Experience of the SCCs

An excursion into the emergence and present situation of the SCCs in Nigeria can not be separated from the global and continental experiences of the communities. O'Halloran traces the origin of the base communities in modern times to Latin America (1984:9). Here, the communities emerged out of a need to merge the socio-cultural and political realities with the religious experience of Catholics. One of the factors responsible for the formation in Latin America of the communities known as the CEB[1] was the struggle against the capitalist system that was perpetrated through the colonial masters (Ribeiro, 1980:74). It was an attempt to merge people's faith and life situation.

In Africa, the effort at establishing the communities started in the 1970s when the bishops of AMECEA resolved to make the systematic formation of small Christian communities their key pastoral priority in the years ahead (Kalilombe, 1976:261). For them, the African Church

must become really local. That is, self-ministering, self-propagating and self-supporting (*AMECEA*, 1974:9-10). In their view, the SCCs are,

> A small group of the people of God – small enough to be manageable in life and work … it is in this community that Christian commitment is fully lived, deepened and becomes the leaven and light of its members. It is in this small group that the Church of Christ is as it were, given a 'human face' in its fellowship, service and witness; for here authentic Christian life and work emerge. Thus every member of the people of God assumes his or her mission in the Church (*AMECEA*, 1979:288).

For these bishops, the formation of the SCCs in Africa must follow the African culture of care for every member of the community. They hold that,

> SCCs are means by which the Church is brought to the daily life and concerns of people to where they actually live. In them, the Church takes on flesh and blood in the life situations of people. In them, people are enabled to recognize the mystery of Christ among them, 'Emmanuel', God with us. In them, Christians experience joy and freedom of the forgiveness of their sins, in baptism and penance, and they are 'made alive' in Jesus Christ, in an environment of fraternal love and personal faith. In them, they can truly experience the Church as a new way of being together and it is in them that they are saved in hope (Ibid, 266).

2.2.1 Formation of the SCCs in Nigeria: Fulfilling a Pastoral Need

Drawing from the experiences on the universal and continental levels of the SCCs, dioceses in Nigeria embraced the communities in the 1970s. On the national level, one of the early attempts at encouraging the formation of the communities was at a talk given by Fr. Malachy Cullen in 1984 during a symposium organized by the CBCN[2] on the New Era of Evangelization in Nigeria.[3] Here, the communities were seen to be essential to the evangelization mission of the Nigerian Church. Another opportunity came with the first National Pastoral Congress held in Ibadan in 2002. At this Congress, the bishops followed the injunction of the African Synod Fathers and appealed that parish structures and modes of administration should be modeled upon the family. Thus, they called for the re-conception

and re-organization of the large parishes into small or basic Christian communities so as to realize the family model of the Church (CSN: 2003:233).

In his research on the SCCs in Kaduna archdiocese[4] of Nigeria, Eje holds that the reason for their formation is pastoral (Eje, 1989:138-139). In Warri diocese the formation of the SCCs was in 1988 as a way to forestall the mass exodus of Catholics to the New Age denominations (Ikpiki, 2005:55). In the archdiocese of Ibadan, the path for the formation of the SCCs was made through the Renew process which came to the archdiocese in the late 1980s out of the need to cater for the large heterogeneous group of people found here. At that time, the small number of priests could no longer cater for a more personal pastoral touch on the large population of Catholics (Olusola, 2005:43).

The SCCs started in Lagos archdiocese in 1976 at Regina Mundi parish through the efforts of Sr. Mariam Therese and Mr. Matthias Faleye (Faleye, 1985:13). This historical fact was corroborated by Anthony Cardinal Okogie thus, "the BCCs/SCCs stated in Regina Mundi Mushin in the early 1970's but not sustained, this almost led to its collapse. A new dawn began for SCC at St. Michael's Catholic Church Ketu under Fr. John Trout, SPS in 1992".[5] The formation of the communities is as a result of the need for small groups where people can get to know each other on a more personal basis and where their pastoral needs could be readily met. Thus, the communities have been effective in assisting the Catholic population to overcome the effects of anonymity in many of the big cities in Nigeria and they have aided the pastoral needs of such people. Nevertheless, there are certain challenges which hinder active participation in these communities in Nigeria.

2.2.2   Challenges facing the SCCs in Nigeria

In his research on the SCCs in Warri diocese, Ikpiki argues that most of the communities have not been effective on their mission based among other factors on the lack of effective communication skills in the way the facilitators coordinate the meetings (Ikpiki, 2005:73). Thus, present situation of the communities in many dioceses in Nigeria shows a rapid decline in membership and an extinction of many of the communities. What obtains in many communities is leadership which employs the one-way, top-down model of communication (McQuail & Windahl, 1981:43; Melkote & Steeves, 2001:108). Here, the leader knows it all

and members' capabilities are neither recognized nor employed for the group. With this situation, the group becomes the property of the leaders as members feel alienated.

Leadership and their inability to harness the talents and assets within their communities is a major bane to the African continent in general and Nigeria in particular. Here, leaders insist on being obeyed without question on the understanding that they alone know what is best for the others (Kalilombe, 2002:11; Kiriswa, 2001:101). Thus, the issue of leadership both within and outside the Church was the theme of the 17th conference of the Catholic Theological Association of Nigeria (CATHAN)[6]. Here, Bishop Abegunrin of Osogbo diocese of Nigeria holds that, "the problem of leadership, or rather good leadership is, no doubt, the bane of our country and many other African Nations today" (2004:13). He continues that the Church can not be separated from any discourse on leadership at the Nigerian national level "since the Church does not exist in a vacuum but in the world and in particular societies and it is affected by the same issues and problems that characterize such a society" (2004:14).

Commenting on the problem of low participation in the SCCs in Lagos archdiocese, Cardinal Okogie says, "when the SCC functions properly, the communities are good to their parishes and thus to the archdiocese but we are still a long way from the goal… participation in the BCC in the archdiocese is a sorry tale because it depends on very few individuals".[7] Fr. Louis Odudu of the CSN[8] sees the inability of the leader to harness the talents and capacities of group members as a major reason why many have left the SCCs. According to him,

> It is true that generally there is this mentality or attitude that the leader knows it all; he has the solution to everything. Sometimes you see it happening in the SCC and that is why we try where possible to let people know it is not all about I am the leader, it is rather more of service. But you do not rule out the fact that this attitude definitely influences the community and sometime it can bring big problems when some self-made leaders run the communities as if it is their personal business and they don't want to allow others to have input. They will be the one to read the Bible, they preach, they will be one to pray, they want to be the treasurer, they want to be everything, you see this happening. Leadership is not just one person doing it all, it is about functions, and that is why shared leadership comes in. If the basic things that have to be

done are shared out of course people will be more committed. They will feel part of it and be more responsible for the community itself.[9]

With the present situation in the Nigerian SCCs, this study attempts at examining how leaders can become more participatory to the extent that they employ the individual and community assets so as to enhance participation in their communities? This will be explored in the next section which examines into the asset mapping methodology.

3.0 Asset Mapping Methodology

The asset mapping methodology was developed by John Kretzmann and John McKnight and it is one of the latest approaches to enhancing participation in small groups. A community asset is defined as "a person, physical structure or place, business, service or other accessible resource used by local residents for their personal, social, economic or cultural benefit" (Arundel et al., 2005:5). The theory holds that there are two approaches people employ towards building of and confronting problems in the community. One is to begin by focusing on the needs, deficiencies and problems of the community while the other begins from the point of view of discovering a community's assets and capacities (Kretzmann & McKnight, 1993:1).

This methodology was employed by Arundel et al. (2005)[10] in their study of three communities in Toronto. Here, they identified the following as important to understanding a given community:

- Physical assets: neighbourhood infrastructure, housing, transit and mobility, shopping, public and private spaces.
- Social assets: neighbourhood connectedness, participation, engagement, neighbourhood development, pride of place, neighbourhood voice and influence.
- Diversity-related assets: supports for diverse population groups and interests, including language, settlement and employment supports.
- Service assets: range of programs and services and locally based neighbourhood planning and service coordination/collaboration assets.
- Safety and mobility assets: ability to participate safely and without fear (Arundel et al., 2005:6-7).

These researchers developed a model at the end of their study which was based on five asset variables of availability, proximity, accessibility, capacity and quality of the community assets. They found out that these variables were useful in understanding the barrier and facilitating conditions that influenced the use of an asset (Ibid 84). They also linked participation in community to social and economic factors. According to them, "individuals can not participate in and contribute to local neighbourhoods if they and their families lack basic income and housing. Neighbourhood assets can play a critical role to support and encourage local engagement and participation" (Ibid, 85).

The methodology of asset mapping could also be seen in certain skills identified in individuals, such as playing musical instruments, drawing, singing, acting etc (Allen, 2006). The same is true of human experience which forms an important capacity in the person and which shapes his relationship in the community. While a good experience leads to better functioning, a bad one leads to a bad functioning in the community. Wallace refers to the bad experience as a crisis of meaning and he defines it as that which occurs when an individual who is under chronic, physiologically measurable stress, receives repeated information which indicates that his mazeway does not lead to action which reduces the level of stress (1956:226). Among others, he gave a list of indicators of bad experiences as loneliness, alcoholism, depression, shock, humiliation (Ibid).

Ngara holds that apart from identifying categories of leaders in a group, "there are individuals in the community with talents which need to be recognized and nurtured for the benefit of all" (2004:25). Thus, in the SCCs there are people with various capacities and talents. The one who is a good listener may be employed to bring the group back to what has been discussed; the good singer can be employed to lead in the hymns; the one with the ability to make art work may employ pictures or drawings in group discussions so that through such media, the discussions will be more readily remembered and actions taken. However, the non-participatory type of leadership in the Nigerian SCCs alludes to the linear communication model they employ and how this leads to the difficulty in identifying the talents within the group or channeling such talents for the group.

Bernas, in his Basic CLC Training for the SCCs in the Philippines alludes to a practical application of the asset mapping to leadership training. He gave a 9-phase programme for

leadership training that includes: community building, faith experience, prayer programme, SPES[11] programme, retreat, practicum, general principles I and II, evaluation, planning and programming.   After the training, it is believed that the leaders will possess certain capabilities which they will look for in their members. These are:

- ➢ Know their strengths and weaknesses.
- ➢ Show their concern for others by sharing their time, talent and treasure.
- ➢ Adjust in any situation.
- ➢ Identify and analyze SPES problems of their small group and the larger community and provide solutions to them.
- ➢ Facilitate their own group to become a Christian community.
- ➢ Realize the importance of personal prayer and practice it.
- ➢ Facilitate the making of group decisions.
- ➢ Articulate the reason for their Christian involvement.
- ➢ Sacrifice other priorities for the sake of Christ's mission (Bernas, 1988:268).

Thus, for active participation in the group, leadership must involve the people by identifying their capacities, coordinating such assets and employing the assets for the good of the community. Consequently, this study hypothesizes:

Communities where the capacities of members and the group assets are recognized and utilized witness active participation of members in community activities than communities in which these assets are neither recognized nor utilized.

4.0   Analyzing the Asset Mapping Theory and Participation in the Small Christian Communities

To test the aforementioned hypothesis, this study employs a mixed method of social research, that is, the qualitative and quantitative methods.   The instruments employed were documentation, participant observation, in-depth interview and questionnaire. The work was designed to investigate two principal groups of people, that is, the leaders and members of the communities. This was further divided along the dimensions of the ex-member and present members on one hand and ex-leaders and present leaders on the other. This was done in order to have a vast platform upon which to examine their various views concerning the situation of the SCCs.

Apart from the participant observation and in-depth interview which was carried out at various dioceses of Nigeria, the administration of the questionnaire was done in a particular archdiocese for effective distribution, collection and analysis. The particular case here was the Archdiocese of Lagos. This gives a good representation of the communities in Nigeria owing to the fact that it serves as the socio-cultural, economic, political and religious hub of the nation. For effective administration of the questionnaire, two parishes were brought out from each of the 5 deaneries, making a total of 10 parishes in all. From each of the 10 parishes, 2 SCCs were again selected, making a total of 20 SCCs. Here, a purposive sampling of the SCCs gave a total of 200 leaders and 300 members to make the total of 500 respondents. In analyzing the findings here, I shall begin with the members' capacities as assets for the community.

4.1 Members' Capacities and Talents as Assets for the Communities

The importance of members in any group can not be over-emphasized. This part of the study examines the various capabilities which members possess and how these can be channelled towards their active participation in the communities. Here, I examined relational factor since the human person is a relational being. Thus, we shall begin our analysis with the idea of having relationships.

4.1.1 Relational Factor as an Asset

The first issue here borders on marital status since our aim is to get the level at which members of the communities participate in other social gatherings and how this helps them to better understand the group life (Keyton, 1999:192). The AMECEA bishops pointed the familial relationship out as the foundation upon which the SCCs in Africa are built. Apart from the benefit of having familial relationships, many of the respondents claim to belong to two or more other societies or groups in their parishes. The table below gives the response from the part of leaders and members.

Table 1: The marital status of the respondents

Marital status	Leader	Member	Total	Total Percentage
Married	113= 76.4%	201= 81.0%	314	79.3%
Single	35= 23.6%	47=19.0%	82	20.7%
Total	148= 100%	248= 100%	396	100%

The response to the aspect of marital status from the side of leaders shows 76.4% or 113 respondents who are married while 23.6% or 35 persons are still single. There was none of them that claimed to have been divorced or widowed. The same is true of members where 81.0% or 201 persons are married while 19.0% or 47 persons are still single. Also in this section there is no divorced or widowed member. Even those who claimed to be single live with their parents together with other family members in most cases. The total percentage for the married persons in the communities is 79.3% while only 20.7% are still single. This shows a higher percentage of the experience of family life among both the members and leaders respectively.

The other way of ascertaining this dimension of the variable is to see whether members of the SCCs belong to other societies or groups in the parish. Belonging to other groups mean they have other avenues of relating with other people apart from what they have on the SCCs level. All the leaders and members claim to belong to one society or the other and their level of participation in these other groups is seen below:

Table 2: The rate of participation in other groups to which respondents belong in the parish

	Leader	Member	Total	Total Percent
Inactive	14= 9.5%	25= 10.0%	39	9.8%
Active	43= 29.1%	90= 36.3%	133	33.6%
Fairly active	36= 24.3%	82= 33.1%	118	29.8%
Very active	55= 37.2%	51= 20.6%	106	26.8%
Total	148= 100%	248=100%	396	100%

This table shows that the highest total percentage is found in the category of leaders and members who claim to be very active in other groups they belong to with 33.6% response. However, to further explain active participation in relation to the number of groups they belong, I made a cross-tabular examination of the responses for members with regard to their level of participation in these groups. The finding shows:

Table 3: A cross-table showing the number of groups members belong to in relation to their level of participation in the groups

Number of other groups and level of participation	MBRTPTG				Total
	Inactive	Active	Fairly active	Very active	Percent
2 groups	0	7	26	30	63= 25.4%
3 groups	0	11	15	10	36= 14.5%
4 groups	6	31	20	3	60= 24.2%
5 groups	10	28	12	0	50= 20.2%
6 & above	9	13	9	8	39= 15.7%
Total	25	90	82	51	248=100%

The highest total percentage with reference to the number of groups which members belong to and their level of participation is found in those who claim to belong to two other groups with 25.4%. Even those who belong to four have a high percentage of 24.2%. The number of other groups they belong is therefore not an excuse for not attending the SCCs. The highest rate of participation here is also in the category of active with 90 members or 36.3%. With this background of having the experience of familial relationships and participation in other groups, the question is why is it difficult to put the same experience into practice in the SCCs? Thus, I examined the community asset in terms of participation which should derive from the familial relationship.

4.2   Community assets

A vital asset to the community is the active participation of the members. This is so since we have established in the introductory part that the survival of the whole depends on the strength of its individual parts. However, members' participation is a function of the

satisfaction they derive from the communities' meetings/activities. In most of the communities, meetings are held once a week. While some members pick and choose when to go for meetings, for others, late coming is a major problem which draws the community back in its activities. The findings on this aspect are given below.

4.2.1 Active Participation of Members as an Asset

To ascertain the level of participation, I formed questions based on the number of times the communities meet and the average number of members' attendance at such meetings. In almost all the extant communities in Nigeria, meetings are held once a week. Since the communities meet weekly, I asked members to rate their level of participation based on the times they attend the meetings. The response to this is seen in the table for leaders and members that is given below:

Table 4: The rate of attendance at SCCs meetings by the respondents

Attendance at meetings	Leaders	Members	Total	Total Percent
Less 1/4	10= 6.8%	17= 6.9%	27	6.8%
1/4	26= 17.6%	69= 27.8%	95	24.0%
2/4	40= 27.0%	71= 28.6%	111	28.1%
3/4	48= 32.4%	61= 24.6%	109	27.5%
4/4	24= 16.2%	30= 12.1%	54	13.6%
Total	148= 100%	248=100%	396	100%

From the table above, attendance for both leaders and members at the rate of every meeting, that is, four times in four meetings has the last but one in terms of the total percentage of 13.9%. On the other hand, for leaders, the highest percentage is 32.4% for those who claim to miss only one meeting on the month. The same is not true for members since the highest rate of attendance here is 28.6% for those who attend two times out of the four meetings in the month. On the whole, a total percentage of 28.1% for both leaders and members attend meetings twice out of the four times the communities meet in the month.

Participation in the SCCs with regards to attendance of members at meetings presents a serious problem in many of the communities. Many of such communities have large number of Catholics such that if all were to belong to the SCCs, then each parish should have hundreds of communities. But this is not the case as the SCCs are limited to 10 or 20 communities per parish where the number is highest. The same is seen in the case of the number of community members when juxtaposed with the number of Catholics within a certain location. Jude of the CSN explains,

> I think one parameter you can use to indicate the level of success will be the rate of participation in terms of a particular location or residential area. Take for example, Dolphin estate where I stay, we have at least, may be 50 or so Catholic families. However, in the few times I was able to attend, you don't have up to maximum of 15 families; 15 is even too much. Most times a number of about 20 persons in a maximum of 50 families. So if you want to measure it based on that indicator, I am not sure we will be recording success.[12]

Moreover, while many communities claimed to have as many as 20 persons on the register, different persons appear each week. Jan laments the situation in her community thus, "it is off and on as it is today. At the time when we newly started, we had 20 persons or even more but now little by little we begin to decrease".[13] Jude goes beyond the issue of irregular attendance to that of imbalanced level of participation at the meetings. According to him,

> I think in the community itself, there is an imbalance in terms of participation. You don't actually have a balanced participation in terms of members of the family: father, mother and children, educated, uneducated and what have you. The community I participated more in at the Holy Cross Cathedral, you probably have 10, 11 children and 2, 3 adults coming in; there is an imbalance.[14]

Based on the aforesaid, how can leaders map out and utilize the various capacities inherent in their communities so as to achieve the active participation of members? This will be our concern in the next section of this work.

4.3   Recognition and Utilization of Individual and Group Assets

Here, leaders were asked if they noticed any form of special talents in their members and the members were asked to state whether their leaders recognize the talents they possess. Coupled with the individual and community assets that have been examined in the section above are the talents for the small group which this study has earlier brought out to include ability to recount group process, singing, acting drama, drawing and other gifts that contribute to group life. The response is given in the table below.

Table 5: The rate at which leaders recognize the talents of members of their communities

Leader's recognition of members' talents	Leader	Member	Total	Total Percent
Yes	87= 58.8%	94= 37.9%	181	45.7%
No	61= 41.2%	154= 62.1%	215	54.3%
Total	148= 100%	248= 100%	396	100%

From the table, a higher percentage of 58.8% leaders responded positively to the question of recognizing the talents of their group members but the same is not true from the experience of the members whose percentage of 62.1% claim not to notice this declaration by the leaders. The same is true of the total percentage which shows 54.3% under the category that the talents are not noticed from the point of view of leaders and members. In a situation where leaders fail to recognize the talents of members, utilizing these talents become more difficult since one has to know what he wants to use before employing such a thing.

Jan is an ex-leader in her community who comments on the need for the talents of members to be recognized and used for the group. She narrates how this assisted her community at the initial stage and how the lack of this has brought a reduction in the participation of members thus,

> By then, the Rev. Sr. promised to help us so that we can be doing little things. For those who do not have anything doing, they asked us to be teaching them sewing. By then I was not having much work but when they came to give me people to teach they were paying me. Although the money was not too much but I enjoyed it and I took the little money on a monthly basis. I was training

about seven. When we started people were gaining from this sewing. But now they are drawing back because we don't have all those kind of things again.[15]

Since leaders were not able to utilize members' talents, they found it difficult to turn community challenges into capabilities as proposed by the asset mapping theory. Thus, when asked about the challenges faced by their communities and what they felt should be done to turn the challenges into opportunities, they simply maintained that they have done all they could and no change has been noticed, hence nothing can be done again. This therefore explains the decline in participation in the Nigerian SCCs. Based on the findings so far, the study's hypothesis which states that communities which recognize and utilize members' and group assets bring about active participation of members has been confirmed. What then can be done to enhance participation in the SCCs in Nigeria?

5.0   Recommendations

Based on the aforesaid, this study affirms that identifying and utilizing the talents of group members contributes to their participation in any group and that this depends to a large extent on the leaders. The leaders are therefore enjoined to be more participatory in the way they animate their community meetings. One way of identifying members' talent is through visitation as attested to by Ebby who describes the experience in her community thus, "that time, our leader wasn't putting more effort into visitation. It is now that people know what the SCC is all about and they want to join. By the time we go to some of them they will tell you they are happy you are visiting them and this has given them the sense that no matter what they belong to a group of people".[16] In visiting both the old and would-be members, there talents are not only discovered but their sense of community is heightened. When this was not employed in Ebby's community participation of members reduced but immediately they resorted to this, a marked positive difference was noticed on the level of participation.

For the leadership to be participatory, training is expedient. The form of leadership training given by Bernas above, presents a challenge to leaders of the SCCs in Nigeria who undergo little or no training. Sandy is one of such leaders who when asked whether she attended any training before leading the community simply said, "No, nothing like that … I had no training before I was elected".[17] Leadership training has been linked to group effectiveness (Burns,

1995:46; Niederman & Volkema, 1999:325; Barling et al., 1996:828). Lumko Pastoral Institute leadership training manual affirms that Leaders should not be domineering but should encourage initiatives from all; leaders should consult community members before making certain important decisions; Leaders should delegate tasks to community members instead of doing what other members could do (Lobinger, 1981:66). Commenting on the connection between leadership training and use of assets, Kretzmann and McKnight say,

> Talking about capacity for finders and developers, perhaps the most important challenge facing community builders involves leadership. Building a team of community leaders who are clearly oriented toward finding and mobilizing the already existing gifts and capacities of residents and their associations is crucial to the success of the community building enterprise (1993:349).

Another way of enhancing participation in the SCCs is through the presentation of the community's needs in small group media which involve all the members in the planning, production, evaluation and distribution of the media production (Kawaja, 1994:134-143). In his study on the need to involve small local groups in development, Tarawalie concludes that community media "makes people conscious of themselves as not just an isolated action group but part of a larger district and regional organization" (2008:83). The high point of the small group media is the practical application of the communities' presentation to the life of individual members.

In the present Nigerian society, the evangelicals have been effective in the practical application of their message to the life of their members. The unemployed get job, those seeking admission to higher institutions are assisted by their Church members etc. In this way, the challenges the communities face are turned into assets through the joint effort of everyone. The SCCs could be more successful if they really merge the faith and life situation of the people within their communities (O'Halloran, 1986:17). In this way, the activities of the SCCs will resonate with the members and it is this resonance that leads to satisfaction which enhances participation.

6.0   Conclusion

This study is timely as it is crucial considering the importance of the SCCs to the universal Church in general and the Nigerian Church in particular. This is so since the communities

help members to develop their socio-spiritual relationship and the communities develop to bring about an increase in the number of parishes within the dioceses where they are operational. The importance of this study is further brought out in the fact that it is the first attempt at employing the socio-scientific theory of Asset mapping to address the problem of low participation in the SCCs in Nigeria. The study therefore builds on researches which link membership satisfaction to the way they are actively involved in group activities (Bass, 1990:21; Burns, 1978:4; Shin & Zhou, 2003:704; Goleman et al., 2002:15).

The thesis of this study is that communication in small groups depends on a variety of factors out which the use of assets plays important roles. The way these factors are channeled for the good of the community contribute to a large extent on the level of participation in groups. With special reference to the African continent and Nigeria in particular, where people tend to lament their problems and challenges without charting a positive way forward, this study can not come at a better time. The asset-mapping theory has been employed here as a way of helping people to turn their challenges into opportunities so as to bring about better participation in their communities.

In conclusion, this study echoes Cooke who holds that, "To be a Christian means to share the life of the community, a life that is based on faith in Christ. It is as a member of this community that the individual Christian will find his sanctification. It is as a member of this community, sharing the community's life and activity, that a man will be able to discover his identity as a Christian" (1965:31). In fact, the study has shown that "Christianity, by its very nature, is concerned with community. Its mission is the development and fulfillment of human beings, and this can only come about through the interaction of persons in the various kinds of inter-personal relationships. Of these relationships, the most fundamental and the most fulfilling is the group or community, giving a collective witness to Christ" (Shorter, 1973:196). Therefore, each and every SCC is called to engage in this act of witnessing as members' capabilities and group's assets are channeled for the good of the group in such a way that members' satisfaction is achieved and their participation is enhanced.

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Notes

[1] In Latin America, the communities are known by the name, Communidas Ecclesia de Base. This has been earlier explained when I gave the various names by which the communities are called in different places across the globe.

[2] CBCN is the acronym for Catholic Bishops Conference of Nigeria. This is the highest decision making body in the Nigerian Church. Presently, the President of this Conference is Most Rev. Dr. Felix A. Job of the Archdiocese of Ibadan.

[3] This lecture was titled "How Will We Initiate the New Era of Evangelization" in Cullen, M. (1984). The New Era of Evangelization Seminar Proceedings, Ibadan: CBCN, May 13, 65. Here, Fr. Cullen expressed the need for the formation of the Basic Christian communities as an important way of carrying out the evangelization mission of the Church in Nigeria especially after the challenge that follows the visit of Pope John Paul II in 1982.

[4] Kaduna Archdiocese is one of the ecclesiastical provinces of Nigeria found in the northern part of the nation. This present study is however being conducted in a province in the southern part of Nigeria.

[5] Anthony Cardinal Okogie is the archbishop of Lagos for over 34 years. This interview was granted at the chancery on Sept. 27th, 2007.

[6] This is an association of Nigerian theologians who give a wide-ranging collection of essays bordering on the nation from their various fields of specialization. This particular conference was the 17th of its kind and it was held between the 2nd – 5th April, 2005 at St. Joseph's Seminary, Ikot Ekpene, Akwa Ibom State.

[7] Cardinal Okogie, interview granted on Sept. 27th, 2007.

[8] CSN means Catholic Secretariat of Nigeria. This is the administrative arm of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of Nigeria. Fr. L. Odudu is the Deputy Director General of this Secretariat and he is also the Head of Pastoral Department. The activities of the SCCs in Nigeria is under the Pastoral Department of the CSN. Therefore, the view of Fr. Odudu as the Head of Pastoral Department is of paramount importance to this work.

[9] Odudu, L. interviewed 20th September, 2007. Odudu is the director of the Pastoral Affairs department and at the same time the Deputy Secretary General of the CSN.

[10] Arundel et al. belong to The Task Force which was established in May 2004 to address challenges facing neighbourhoods and communities as identified and discussed in the work of the Toronto City Summit and research by both the City of Toronto and United Way of Greater Toronto. The present research is referred to as the Strong Neighbourhoods Task Force and it is one of the six commissioned projects of the task force on different communities in Toronto.

[11] The SPES is the short form of a programme which means: Social, Political, Economic and Spiritual life. It is a program which has to do with the involvement of the communities in the social, political, economic and spiritual life of members of the communities. In the section that espouses the nature of the communities I have shown that the communities are not only spiritual but that with their dual nature, they provide an integral development for the members.

[12] Jude interviewed on 20th September, 2007

[13] Jan interviewed on 27th October, 2007

[14] Jude interviewed on 20th September, 2007

[15] Jan interviewed on 27th October, 2007

[16] Ebby interviewed on 27th September, 2007

[17] Sandy interviewed on 4th October, 2007

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