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The People Who Do All Things Together: Living Base Ecclesial Communities in the Democratic Republic of the Congo

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Abstract
This article analyzes the pastoral practice and ecclesiological vision of living base ecclesial communities (CEVBs) in the Democratic Republic of the Congo through a case study in the Diocese of Tshumbe. Contextualizing this within the broader history of Global South base communities, the author argues that CEVBs exemplify Vatican II's people of God ecclesiology and Africa's image of the church as the family of God. They also embody Pope Francis's calls for a more synodal and dialogical church that empowers laity, provides opportunities for women's leadership, and integrates faith and social concern.

Keywords
African Catholicism, base communities, church as family of God, Democratic Republic of the Congo, ecclesiology, small Christian communities, synodality, Vatican II

Introduction

Growing up amidst the social turbulence of twenty-first-century Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), Tharcisse Onema found solace in his village's rich Catholic communal life. In particular, he spent many evenings reflecting on Scripture with family

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members and neighbors in his *communauté ecclesiale vivante de base* (CEVB), or living base ecclesial community. Teachers by training, his parents took other CEVB children into their homes, and it was through studying Scripture in his CEVB that Onema first developed a desire to attend minor seminary. Nor was his CEVB—located in Dionga village within Tshumbe Sainte Marie Parish—limited to religious study. Members were actively involved in a wide array of charitable and community ministries including visiting the sick, providing food for the hungry, repairing roads, and cleaning water sources such as creeks and streams. When Onema was later ordained a priest, a group of Dionga mothers gave him a Bible, a chasuble, several goats, and a special letter with six points of advice for his priestly ministry. When his parents died while he was away at major seminary, the "CEVB did everything," including purchasing a tomb for his father, providing burial cloths, bringing gifts to the family, providing goats for the funeral celebration, and even paying his seminary fees for three years. For Onema, his vocation as a priest grew out of his experience in the local base community: "If I am a priest today, I am the fruit of this community. They gave me the training to know the name of God."[1]

Onema's experience speaks to the crucial importance of base ecclesial communities in the DRC and the broader Catholic Global South. First widely studied in the Latin American context, base communities received extensive scholarly attention among both liberation theologians and social scientists during the late twentieth century.[2] However, these communities have been important well beyond Latin America: the eastern African region counted over 180,000 Small Christian Communities (SCCs) in the 2010s.[3] In the DRC, base communities compose the foundation of the church in

1. Tharcisse Onema, interview with author, Righini, Kinshasa, DRC, January 8, 2023. Interviewees are named through permission of the subject(s).
2. Classic early theological studies include Alvaro Barreiro, *Basic Ecclesial Communities: The Evangelization of the Poor* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1977); José Marins, Maria Teolide, and C. C. Trevisan, *Basic Ecclesial Community: Church from the Roots* (Manila: Human Development Research and Documentation, 1982); Leonardo Boff, *Ecclesiogenesis: The Base Communities Reinvent the Church* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1986). Social scientists tended to focus on the connections between base communities, democratization, and social change. See James C. Cavendish, "Christian Base Communities and the Building of Democracy: Brazil and Chile," *Sociology of Religion* 55, no. 2 (Summer 1994): 179–95, https://doi.org/10.2307/3711856, and, more recently, Elizabeth O'Donnell Gandolfo, "*Cuando el pobre crea el pobre*: Decolonial Epistemology in the Ecclesial Base Communities of El Salvador," in *Decolonial Christianities: Latinx and Latin American Perspectives*, ed. Raimundo Barreto and Roberto Sirvent (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), 241–54.
3. Joseph G. Healey, "Beyond Vatican II: Imagining the Catholic Church of Nairobi I," in *The Church We Want: African Catholics Look to Vatican III*, ed. Agbonkhianmeghe E. Orobator (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2016), 189–211 at 197. See also Joseph G. Healey, *Building the Church as Family of God: Evaluation of Small Christian Communities in Africa* (Nairobi: AMECEA Gaba Publications CUEA Press, 2012, 2022), https://smallchristiancommunities.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/Build_new.pdf. A longtime Maryknoll missionary in Kenya and Tanzania, Healey played an instrumental role in the pastoral implementation and ecclesiological analysis of African SCCs over the course of five decades.

both urban and rural areas, integrating faith formation with community and family life. In Lingala, the language most widely spoken in DRC's capital, Kinshasa, a CEVB is known simply as a *lisanga*: the "people who do all things together."[4]

Although Congolese base communities have flourished for over fifty years, they are not well known in Western theological scholarship due to linguistic differences and logistical research barriers.[5] This article addresses the lacuna by shedding light on the history, ecclesiology, and continued religious and social salience of base communities in the DRC. The argument proceeds in four movements. First, I contextualize the Congolese story within the broader history of the base community movement in the Global South, paying particular attention to Brazil, the Philippines, and eastern Africa where such communities originated and thrived. Second, I trace the historical development and foundational theological and pastoral vision of CEVBs in the DRC, also one of the original homes to base communities. Third, drawing on field interviews with forty-seven base community leaders, I offer a more in-depth case study of the theological vision, structural organization, and pastoral work of CEVBs in the Diocese of Tshumbe in the Sankuru region of central DRC. Exemplifying the African ecclesiology of the "church as family of God," these communities are the living foundation of the Catholic Church in this rural diocese in terms of faith formation, charitable works, and community building. At the same time, I will also show that a sociopolitical quietism characterizes Tshumbe CEVBs and underscores a missed opportunity to fully integrate faith formation, catechesis, and Catholic social teaching. Finally, on a constructive note, I conclude by considering the ecclesiological fruits and lessons these communities demonstrate for the broader global church especially in the North American context. In essence, CEVBs offer an impressive model for lay faith formation, exemplify Vatican II's vision of the people of God, and embody a synodal church at the African grassroots.

The Postconciliar Rise of Base Communities in the Catholic Global South

In Latin America, Brazil is widely seen as the nucleus of the base community movement in the post-World War II Catholic world. Here the *comunidade ecclesiais de base* (CEB) started in the 1950s as an outgrowth of the Catholic Action movement and as a response to the rapid twentieth-century growth in Protestant churches and the acute shortage of rural Catholic clergy.[6] Dom Agnelo Rossi and other forerunners trained lay

4. Bernadette Ngela, Euphrasie Masesa, Béatrice Losi, and Marie Bangwadi, interview with author, Saint Etienne Parish Kinseso, Kinshasa, DRC, January 6, 2023.
5. North American scholars have tended to focus on Anglophone communities in eastern Africa and Spanish-speaking communities in Latin America rather than Francophone Africa. DRC's lack of road infrastructure, ongoing military conflict in the east, and political instability have also contributed to this lacuna.
6. Andrew Dawson, *The Birth and Impact of the Base Ecclesial Community and Liberative Discourse in Brazil* (San Francisco: Catholic Scholars Press, 1999), 50–52. On the origins of Catholic Action in Europe and Latin America, see John T. McGreevy, *Catholicism: A Global History* (New York: Norton, 2022), 168–69.

catechists to sustain the faith community through weekday gatherings of Bible study, prayer, and music as well as the Sunday *missa sem padre* (Mass without a priest).[7] In the aftermath of Brazil's 1964 military coup and under the influence of Paulo Freire's "Base Education Movement," Brazilian base communities developed a stronger social and political edge.[8] Theologian-practitioners such as Leonardo Boff went so far as to describe the movement as a kind of "ecclesiogenesis," namely a "rebirth" of the church in local, lay-led communities that would reflect the "reciprocity" and "belonging" that characterized the original Christian communities of the New Testament.[9] These communities expanded rapidly in the 1970s with upwards of 80,000 Brazilian CEBs by the end of the decade.[10]

Building upon these foundations in Brazil, as well as in Chile, Peru, Panama, Nicaragua, and Mexico, CEBs grew rapidly across Latin America in the years following Vatican II and the epochal 1968 Medellín conference organized by CELAM (the Consejo Episcopal Latinoamericano, or Latin American Episcopal Council). Medellín defined a CEB as "a community, local or environmental, which corresponds to the reality of a homogenous group and whose size allows for personal fraternal contact among its members."[11] Latin American CEBs facilitated the firsthand study of scriptural texts. Building on the methodology of Catholic Action, however, they also encouraged participants to apply the text to the social contexts of members' lives through a five-step methodology of see, judge, act, evaluate, and celebrate.[12] CEBs also conscientized members to greater awareness of their oppression, used the Bible to counter negative and fatalistic concepts of the self, and committed the Catholic Church to the poor's "struggle to be free."[13] This has lent a socioeconomic, justice-oriented edge to Latin American CEBs, exemplified in the recent mission statement of a group of urban base communities in El Salvador: "These communities continue to dedicate themselves to the fight against poverty and injustice on the local, national, and international levels. We are committed to contributing to God's Kingdom of peace and

7. Dawson, *Birth and Impact*, 55.
8. J. B. Libanio, "Experiences with the Base Ecclesial Communities in Brazil," *Missiology* 8, no. 3 (1980): 319–40 at 322, https://doi.org/10.1177/009182968000800305.
9. Boff, *Ecclesiogenesis*, 5.
10. Libanio, "Experiences with the Base Ecclesial," 324. Missionary clergy and local women religious played a central animating role in many of these communities through catalyzing CEBs' community organizing, land reform activism, and broader social activism. See Madeleine Adriance, "Agents of Change: The Roles of Priests, Sisters, and Lay Workers in the Grassroots Catholic Church in Brazil," *Journal of the Scientific Study of Religion* 30 (1991): 292–305 at 302, https://doi.org/10.2307/1386974, and Libanio, "Experiences with the Base Ecclesial," 331.
11. Dawson, *Birth and Impact*, 159.
12. Philip D. Wingeier-Rayo, *Where Are the Poor? A Comparison of the Ecclesial Base Communities and Pentecostalism—A Case Study in Cuernevaca, Mexico* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2011), 44–45.
13. Libanio, "Experiences with the Base Ecclesial," 330; J. Stephen Rhodes, "Interpreting Reality in Latin American Base Communities," *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 15, no. 3 (1991): 110–14 at 112, https://doi.org/10.1177/239693939101500306.

justice on earth."[14] CEBs' commitment to social activism also led to opposition from significant elements of the Latin American hierarchy, and formal ecclesial support for base communities declined significantly under the papacy of John Paul II (r. 1978–2005).

Although Latin American CEBs garnered more international scholarly attention, the Philippines also became a center for base communities in the 1980s and 1990s.[15] Started in Mindanao in the late 1960s, Basic Ecclesial Communities (BECs) were embraced as a national pastoral strategy by the Second Plenary Council of the Philippines in 1991.[16] Filipino BECs shared their Latin American counterparts' commitment to integrating Bible study, liturgy, and social action and also included a stronger emphasis on ecological and environmental awareness. For example, in the late 1980s, Filipino BECs in San Fernando, Bukidnon, shut down the timber industry on their island, famously celebrating Mass in the middle of a highway to block the passage of logging trucks.[17] Whereas Latin American bishops often disagreed over whether to support CEBs, Filipino bishops have generally encouraged them. In 2013, 92 percent of Filipino dioceses reported that BECs were a pastoral priority, and 72 percent of parishes had established BEC networks.[18] Exemplifying Christian baptismal theology as expressed in *Lumen Gentium*'s people of God ecclesiology, the Filipino BEC is envisioned as a "priestly, prophetic and kingly/servant people and as the Church of the Poor," which includes the regular integration of liturgy and social action.[19] The concept of "total human development," which Christopher Moxham calls the "central tenet of the [BEC] movement" in the Philippines,[20] has encouraged

14. O'Donnell Gandolfo, "*Cuando el pobre crea el pobre*," 245. On the origins of this pastoral approach in El Salvador, see Thomas M. Kelly, ed., *Rutilio Grande, SJ: Homilies and Writings* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2015).
15. To be sure, Asian base communities were not limited to the Philippines. The fifth Federation of Asian Bishops (FABC) plenary assembly in 1990 called for the Asian Church to become a "communion of communities" and subsequently launched the Asian Integral Pastoral Approach (AsIPA), which included a central focus on Basic Ecclesial Communities. BECs are found across the continent, including in India, South Korea, Singapore, Sri Lanka, Taiwan, and China. Cora Mateo, "Rerooting the Faith in Asia through SCCs," in *Small Christian Communities Today: Capturing the New Moment*, ed. Joseph G. Healey and Jeanne Hinton (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2005), 124–27; Ramesh Lakshmanann, "A New Way of Being Church: FABC Teachings on Basic Ecclesial Communities," *Asia Pacific Mission Studies* 1, no. 2 (2019): 46, https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/286139537.pdf.
16. Amado L. Picardal, *Journeying towards a New Way of Being Church: Basic Ecclesial Communities in the Philippines* (Quezon City, Philippines: Claretian Communications Foundation, 2016), 4–5.
17. Picardal, 108–13.
18. Picardal, 43.
19. Picardal, xii, 8–9. See Paul VI, *Lumen Gentium* (November 21, 1964), §10–13, https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19641121_lumen-gentium_en.html (hereafter cited as *LG*).
20. Christopher Moxham, *Christianity and Radical Democracy in the Philippines: Building a Church of the Poor* (New York: Routledge, 2023), 12.

local income-generating projects, the expansion of private property ownership, and nonviolent activism. This more gradualist Filipino approach contrasts with the wholesale structural revolution anticipated in some streams of the Latin American CEB movement during its 1960s–1980s heyday.[21]

In the eastern African context, small Christian communities originated as a new pastoral strategy in the fertile years following the Second Vatican Council. In the mid-1960s, Musoma Diocese in northern Tanzania initiated *chamas*, small groups of lay Catholics that gathered in their villages for prayer and scriptural discussion. In 1972, Bishop Patrick Kalilombe of Lilongwe, Malawi, introduced a diocesan pastoral plan that called for the establishment of SCCs in all local parishes, and he later joined one as an ordinary member. In 1973, the Association of Member Episcopal Conferences of Eastern Africa (AMECEA) adopted SCCs as a regional pastoral priority, positing that "Church life must be based on the communities in which everyday life and work take place: those basic and manageable social groups whose members can experience real inter-personal relationships and feel a sense of communal belonging, both in living and working."[22] Similar shifts toward base communities were unfolding across Francophone Africa including the Republic of Congo, Cameroon, Burundi, Rwanda, and Burkina Faso, and the South African Catholic Bishops' Conference also adopted lay-led, small Christian communities in 1975.[23]

SCCs were endorsed as a primary expression of the African ecclesiology of "Church as Family of God" at both the First African Synod in 1994 and the Second African Synod in 2009. In this sense, SCCs are based in extended families yet also called to relativize blood relations within the waters of baptism.[24] SCCs—what Joseph Healey prefers to call the "original manner of being church" or, following José Marins, the "church on the move"[25]—have continued to enjoy strong

21. Moxham notes how Filipino BECs' lack of scale and meager financial resources have limited their ability to initiate and sustain long-term, income-generating activities and social reform. Moxham, 113.
22. Healey, *Building the Church*, 54. See also J. J. Carney, "The People Bonded Together by Love: Eucharistic Ecclesiology and Small Christian Communities in Africa," in *Modern Theology* 30, no. 2 (April 2014): 300–18, at 302–3, https://doi.org/10.1111/moth.12097. AMECEA currently includes nine nations in eastern Africa: Malawi, Kenya, Tanzania, Uganda, Zambia, South Sudan, Sudan, Eritrea, and Ethiopia.
23. Joseph G. Healey, "Small Christian Communities in Africa: Histories, Themes, Development, and Challenges," in *Handbook of African Catholicism*, ed. Stan Chu Ilo (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2022), 171–84 at 172.
24. For an extended theological commentary on this connection, see Kieran Flynn, *Communities for the Kingdom: A Handbook for Small Christian Community Leaders* (Eldoret, Kenya: AMECEA Gaba Publications, 2007), 82–114.
25. Healey, "Small Christian Communities," 176; Healey, *Building the Church*, 56n126. In making this point, Healey is arguing that the modern African Catholic Church is rediscovering the ecclesiology of the Acts of the Apostles (Acts 2:42–47; 4:32); what appears to be a new way of being church is in fact the original way. This echoes the *ressourcement* theology of Vatican II, namely going back to the sources of the tradition to renew the church today.

hierarchical backing over the past fifty years. As with both Latin American and Filipino CEBs, eastern African SCCs are intended to create tightly knit, lay-led communities of between ten and twenty families meeting weekly in homes or local village worship spaces.[26] SCCs also reach out to uncatechized, extended family members and "help the neighboring families to live in a spirit of fraternity and sense of spiritual togetherness."[27] In summary, they help Catholics share their faith in their homes, rather than limiting Christian community life to the parish building. SCCs have also facilitated the Catholic Church's shift toward a more "bottom-up" ecclesiology: in countries like Tanzania, parish leaders must be drawn from the ranks of the SCCs.[28] Perhaps due in part to the close involvement of the hierarchy, eastern African SCCs have generally not had the same degree of justice activism as one sees in Latin America and the Philippines.

Even before leaders in Latin America, the Philippines, and eastern Africa launched base communities, however, Congolese leaders were initiating a similar pastoral strategy. It is to the historical and ecclesiological roots of the Congolese CEVB movement that we now turn.

Historical and Pastoral Background to the CEVB Movement in the DRC

The origins of Congo's base community movement can be traced to the groundbreaking 1961 pastoral directions of the Congolese Catholic bishops.[29] After decades of Belgian colonial favoritism, the Catholic Church faced a much more contentious political environment in independent Congo. The January 1959 Leopoldville riots that sparked Belgium's rapid decolonization targeted Catholic mission churches, and the assassination of Patrice Lumumba in January 1961 led into a more acute phase of civil violence. In response to this crisis and reflecting recent ecclesiological developments like Placide Tempels's Jamaa family movement,[30] the bishops' pastoral directions were notable for their call to empower the laity and inculturate the church. In language that anticipated the impending Second Vatican Council, the bishops wrote that laity

26. Flynn, *Communities for the Kingdom*, 58.
27. Christopher Cieslikiewicz, "Pastoral Involvement of Parish-Based SCCs in Dar es Salaam," in Healey and Hinton, *Small Christian Communities Today*, 99–105 at 100.
28. Healey, "Small Christian Communities," 173.
29. When I use language of "Congo" or "Congolese," I refer to the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC). Widely referred to as "Belgian Congo" during the colonial period, the country was renamed "Zaire" in 1971, and then DRC in 1998. DRC should not be confused with the neighboring Republic of Congo. The two are sometimes distinguished by their respective capitals (Congo-Kinshasa versus Congo-Brazzaville).
30. Piet Clement, "Tempels Revisited: The Conversion of a Missionary in the Belgian Congo, 1930s–1960s," in *Religion, Colonization and Decolonization in Congo, 1885–1960*, ed. Vincent Viaene, Bram Cleys, and Jan De Maeyer (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2020), 241–60 at 242–43.

were "not only made by the Church. They make the Church."[31] Even more noteworthy, a hierarchy still predominantly composed of Belgian missionaries recognized that a "Church which has appeared for a long time as European in its cult, its teaching, its organization" needed to more deeply encounter the "fundamental values of African society."[32] Challenging the bifurcations of the colonial period, the 1961 instructions aimed to form Catholic communities that could be both "authentically Christian" and "authentically Congolese" through integrating faith and daily life in an apostolate of "personal and living contact."[33] Toward this end, the bishops argued that the Catholic Church should cultivate the development of "human communities in which they share the same faith, the reciprocal exchange of fraternal love, and participation in the same sacraments."[34] Such communal formation would happen not through traditional institutional means but rather through adopting a "*pastorale de proximité*," helping the church to become incarnate where regular people lived, worked, played, and suffered.[35]

If the 1961 instructions provided the theoretical foundation for the Congolese church's shift to living base ecclesial communities, practical implementation did not commence for some years. The early 1960s were a period of tremendous turbulence in Congo. The diamond-rich Katanga province briefly seceded; Lumumbist and later Simba militias launched wholesale rebellions against the newly independent state and terrorized local populations; and the postcolonial state itself rotated through multiple unstable coalitions before General Joseph Mobutu launched a military *coup d'état* in November 1965 and ushered in decades of corrupt, authoritarian rule.[36] In the midst of the relative political stability that followed Mobutu's coup, Catholic bishops gathered in 1967 for their seventh plenary conference and first since 1961. Building on Vatican II's people of God ecclesiology, the bishops called for the Catholic Church to become a "church of the poor" and move "near to the Congolese people," forming lay-led communities that would reflect an engaged, adult Christian faith and not simply a

31. *Actes de la VI Assemblee Pleniere de l'Episcopat du Congo. Léopoldville, 1961, 20 Novembre–2 décembre* (Léopoldville, Congo: Édition Secretariat General de l'Episcopat, 1961), 23. English translations from the original French are my own.
32. *Actes*, 25–26.
33. *Actes*, 164–65.
34. *Actes*, 38.
35. Roger Alfani, *Religious Peacebuilding in the Democratic Republic of Congo* (New York: Peter Lang, 2018), 97. See also Richard Mugaruka, "L'experience des communautés ecclésiales de base et les défis de l'après guerre dans l'est de la R.d. Congo" (conference lecture, L'Église catholique et l'éducation civique dans les communautés ecclésiales vivantes de base, à l'aube du IIè synode sur l'afrique [du 21 au 25 avril 2008], Faculté Catholique de Kinshasa, 2008), 32.
36. David Van Reybrouck, *Congo: The Epic History of a People* (New York: HarperCollins, 2014), 315–35. On the extreme violence suffered by both missionaries and local Catholics during the Simba revolts, see Dries Vanysacker, *Les martyrs oubliés? Les missionaires dans la tempête de la rébellion des Simbas au Congo en 1964–1966* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2016). Reflecting his broader call to indigenize and reject Western etymology, Mobutu renamed himself "Mobutu Sese Seko" in 1972 (after renaming Congo as Zaire).

"religiously instructed" population.[37] What became known as *les communautés ecclésiales vivantes de base*, or "living ecclesial communities of the base," were also arising more organically across Kinshasa and around the country. In fact, members of Kinshasa Saint Etienne Parish's CEVB Bolingani ("loving each other") trace their origins to 1966.[38]

It was in the 1970s, however, that Congolese CEVBs really blossomed. As Mobutu took an anticlerical turn and cracked down on the Catholic Church's youth movements, banned Christian names, and briefly exiled friend-turned-foe Cardinal Joseph Malula,[39] Catholic leaders realized the crucial importance of developing diffuse, grassroots, lay-led communities that could withstand formal institutional persecution. Malula, the Archbishop of Kinshasa, spearheaded this ecclesiological shift. Recognizing that colonial missionaries had tried to "Christianize Africa" without "Africanizing Christianity,"[40] Malula argued that base communities could achieve both evangelical goals by deepening laypeople's faith practice, connecting the church to "the problems of the neighborhoods," and more fully indigenizing the church with African values.[41] Continuing a trajectory in his thought going back to the 1950s, Malula also believed that CEVBs could preserve ecclesial independence

37. Édouard Litambala Mbuli, *Repenser les communautés ecclésiales vivantes de base: Perspectives d'une nouvelle évangélisation en context congolais* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2021), 110–12; Marco Moerschbacher, *Les laïcs dans une Église d'Afrique: L'oeuvre du Cardinal Malula (1917–1989)* (Paris: Karthala, 2012), 88–90.

38. Euphrasie Masesa, interview with author, Saint Etienne Kinseso, Kinshasa, DRC, January 6, 2023. Congolese theologians Josée Ngalula and John Mobiali date the beginning of Kinshasa CEVBs to 1971–72 (Josée Ngalula, "History, Development and Status Quo of Basic Christian Community (BCC) in Africa," in *Proceedings of the International Symposium on In the World of Today? The Church on Her Way in Basic Christian Communities*, ed. Marco Moerschbacher [Tübingen, Germany: 2012]), 5; John Mobiala, "Gènese et situation actuelle des communautés ecclésiales vivante de base (CEVB) dans l'archdiocèse de Kinshasa," 3–4, https://www.academia.edu/36100468/John_MOBIALA_Genèse-situation_actuelle_CEVB_à_Kinshasa.pdf). In the Diocese of Tshumbe, CEVBs started as early as 1972 (Gabriel Okoko, interview with author, Kolo Djamba, DRC, December 30, 2022).

39. Bernard Ugeux, *Les petites communautés chrétiennes, une alternative aux paroisses? L'expérience du Zaïre* (Paris: Cerf, 1988), 51–53.

40. Moerschbacher, *Les laïcs*, 102.

41. Moerschbacher, *Les laïcs*, 42. Malula was an accomplished scholar himself and had collaborated with a group of expatriate African priests to produce one of the first works in critical African theology: Albert Abblè, ed., *Des prêtres noirs s'interrogent* (Paris: Cerf, 1957). Malula earned further postcolonial plaudits when he famously called for a "Congolese church in a Congolese state" at his 1959 episcopal consecration. Léon de Saint Moulin, "Origine et developpement des ministers laics a Kinshasa," in *L'avenir des ministères laïcs: Enjeux ecclésiologiques et perspectives pastorales: Actes du Colloque celebrant le 20ème anniversaire de l'institution des Ministères laïcs à Kinshasa (du 19 au 24 novembre 1995)*, ed. Léonard Santedi Kinkupu (Kinshasa: Editions Signes des Temps, 1997), 51–71 at 52.

by "distancing the Church from the State while strengthening its ties with the population."[42] In a 1973 clergy conference, Malula famously exclaimed that he "wished to bombard the current parishes by making them burst into small communities of a human dimension."[43] Malula's commitment to CEVBs was complemented by his broader embracing of lay parish leaders known as *bakambi* who prepared liturgies, conducted catechesis, and provided social relief for parishioners.[44] Malula also became one of the continent's leading advocates for liturgical inculturation, best exemplified in the "Zaire Rite" approved by the Vatican in 1988.[45]

Formally adopted as a national pastoral priority at the Congolese bishops' twelfth plenary assembly in 1975, CEVBs drew inspiration from the Acts of the Apostles 2:42–47 model of prayer, fellowship, economic mutuality, and common table. Whereas parishes were organized around the celebration of the Mass, CEVBs brought the church into homes and local chapels in urban neighborhoods and rural villages alike. A typical meeting would include prayer, music, the liturgy of the Word, group reflection and application, and a financial collection. Each community of fifty-to-one hundred Christians was led by between seven and nine lay leaders; Malula mandated strict equity in male and female leadership in Kinshasa CEVBs, a requirement that remains today.[46] These communities were expected to be in communion with the broader church, and yet priests were explicitly instructed not to direct CEVBs but rather to support and encourage their lay leaders.[47]

Likewise, Vatican II's ecclesiology of communion was a central organizing principle for the CEVBs. After 1977, the Congolese Catholic parish was reconceived as a "communion of communities," and the CEVBs were expected to demonstrate how Christ present in the sacraments could also be present in the proclaimed Word and in

42. Congo Research Group and Ebuteli, *The Catholic Church in the DRC: A Neutral Arbiter or at the Heart of Protests* (New York: Congro Research Group, 2022), 7, https://s44308.pcdn.co/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/report-crg-ebuteli-the-catholic-church-in-drc.pdf.
43. Moerschbacher, *Les laïcs*, 104; Saint Moulin, "Origine et developpement," 60.
44. Eugène Moke, "Les ministères laics et l'organisation de la pastorale dans l'Archdiocese de Kinshasa," in Kinkupu, *L'avenir des ministères laïcs*, 29–35 at 32. As Moerschbacher notes, *mokambi* is the Lingala word for "chief," so the title carried significant cache for a lay leader within a Congolese cultural context. Moerschbacher, *Les laïcs*, 11.
45. Bengt Sundkler and Christopher Steed, *A History of the Church in Africa* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 1022. Malula's interest in liturgical innovation stemmed in part from his service on the liturgical commission at Vatican II. Moerschbacher, *Les laïcs*, 52. On the deeper theological and pastoral meaning of the Zaire Rite, see Stanislas Kambashi, "'Catholic and African': The Zaire Rite," *Vatican News*, February 1, 2023, https://www.vaticannews.va/en/church/news/2023-02/zaire-rite-use-catholicity-africanness-congo-drc-libambu.html.
46. Marie Bangwadi, interview with author, Saint Etienne Parish Kinseso, Kinshasa, DRC, January 6, 2023.
47. Moerschbacher, *Les laïcs*, 115.

love of one's neighbor.[48] In this regard, their work extended far beyond weekly gatherings as the CEVB became the face of the Catholic Church in terms of family conflict resolution, the corporal works of mercy, and even financial credit initiatives that enabled members to start small businesses and pay school tuition for their children.[49] The communities were also expected to offer a prophetic social voice amidst the severe sociopolitical challenges of postcolonial Congo. This social mission was most famously exemplified in the central role that Kinshasa CEVBs played in the February 1992 "March of Christians" protesting Mobutu's continued authoritarianism and calling for the restoration of the *Conférence nationale souveraine* (CNS).[50] Likewise, in the midst of eastern Congo's ongoing conflicts, base communities have trained paralegals to teach human rights to the local population and organized peace and civic education workshops.[51]

Championed by Cardinal Malula, Congolese base communities influenced both *Christifideles Laici*, Pope John Paul II's 1988 encyclical on laity in the church, as well as the 1994 First African Synod's primary ecclesial metaphor of the church as family of God.[52] But Congo's brutal 1996–2002 war disrupted all of Catholic life, including CEVBs, and in more recent years lay devotional movements like the Kizito-Anuarite have become more popular among younger Congolese.[53] Whatever the setbacks, Congolese CEVBs continue to constitute the foundation of the Congolese church in the 2020s, especially in rural areas such as the Diocese of Tshumbe.

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48. Moerschbacher, 128–29. Communion ecclesiology is also vital to the practice of SCCs in eastern Africa. Joseph G. Healey, "Synodality in the African Context" (comments, FutureChurch's SynodWatch Series, July 12, 2023, 2, https://smallchristiancommunities.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/07/12-July-2023-Comments-on-Synodality-In-An-African-Context.pdf).
49. Josée Ngalula, "Rôle joué par les CEVB à Kinshasa pour une Église prophétique," in *Culture et foi dans la théologie africaine: Le dynamism de l'Église catholique au Congo Kinshasa: En memoire de Ludwig Bertsch (1929–2006)*, ed. Marco Moerschbacher and Ignace Ndongala Maduka (Paris: Karthala, 2014), 122.
50. Opening in August 1991, the CNS brought together over 2,000 delegates from across Congolese civil society to chart a more democratic future, with the goal of drafting a new constitution. Mobutu suspended the CNS in November 1991, leading to major popular unrest. The violent government crackdown on the March of Christians backfired, and Mobutu ultimately agreed to restore the CNS, although its political goals remained stymied. On the role of Catholic leaders and lay groups in the CNS and the march, see Anicet Muyombi, *L'engagement de l'Église catholique dans le processus de democratization en République Démocratique du Congo* (Lausanne: Peter Lang, 2007), 50–52.
51. Alfani, *Religious Peacebuilding*, 48; Mugaruka, "L'experience des communautés écclesiales de base," 2, 23.
52. Moerschbacher, *Les laïcs*, 220.
53. Pamphile Nkongo, interview with author, St. Etienne Parish, Kinseso, Kinshasa, January 6, 2023. This movement is named after one of the Uganda martyrs of the 1880s and one of the Congolese martyrs of the 1960s.

A Contemporary Congolese Case Study: The *Cundas* of the Diocese of Tshumbe

The Diocese of Tshumbe is predominantly populated by the Batetela ethnic group. Remembered for their anticolonial uprisings against the Congo Free State, the Batetela are a loosely organized Bantu ethnic community composed of Otetela speakers spread across the Kasai region and Sankuru province in the central region of DRC.[54] The Batetela's most famous native son was Congo's first elected prime minister, Patrice Lumumba. A part of the metropolitan Archdiocese of Kananga and the territory of Lubefu, the Diocese of Tshumbe's twenty-three parishes are spread across a huge geographic expanse equivalent to the land mass of Belgium. The domestic and international profile of Tshumbe's Catholic Church grew under its former ordinary, Bishop Nicolas Djomo Lola, who spent eight years as president of the Congolese National Episcopal Conference (CENCO).[55] In addition to securing international funding for a wide variety of development projects, Djomo started Université Notre Dame de Tshumbe (UNITSHU), a Catholic university that provides programs in agronomy, medicine, and business with the goal of enabling rural Congolese to pursue a practical higher education without moving to Kinshasa.[56] But whatever these tangible gains, Tshumbe remains a very poor, remote diocese, in part because the absentee state has not invested in infrastructure, leaving development work largely in the hands of the Catholic Church.[57] Despite or perhaps because of these challenges, CEVBs—known locally in Otetela as *cundas*, which can be translated as either "branches" or

54. On the complex, evolving origins of the Batetela ethnic grouping, see Thomas Turner, "'Batetela,' 'Baluba,' 'Basonge': Ethnogenesis in Zaire," *Cahiers d'Études Africaines* 33, no. 4 (1993): 587–612, https://doi.org/10.3406/cea.1993.1494.

55. Appointed in June 2022, the current bishop of Tshumbe is Vincent Tshomba Shamba Kotsho, a former diocesan priest from the Archdiocese of Kinshasa.

56. The university's website provides more information on its history and current academic programs, https://unitshu.ac.cd. On Djomo's leadership style and pastoral projects, see J. J. Carney, "'The Bishop Is Governor Here': Bishop Nicolas Djomo and Catholic Leadership in the Democratic Republic of the Congo," in *Leadership in Postcolonial Africa: Trends Transformed by Independence*, ed. Baba G. Jallow (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 97–122. Shortly before his retirement, Djomo faced serious allegations of covering up a case of sexual abuse in his diocese. Chico Harlan, "A Congo Teen Alleged Rape by a Priest. She Had to Flee. He Can Still Say Mass," *Washington Post*, July 15, 2022, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2022/07/15/congo-catholic-priest-sex-abuse/. The diocese vigorously disputed the charges with the *Washington Post*, and the accused priest was exonerated in civil and ecclesiastical trials.

57. To share just one personal anecdote that illustrates this point: In 2011–12, Bishop Djomo secured funding from Catholic Relief Services to construct a 150 km road between Lodja and Tshumbe. Despite local upkeep efforts, however, the road has fallen into disrepair due to a lack of government investment. In 2013, the 90 mi. Land Rover journey took around two hours. When I returned a decade later, this journey lasted over six hours. Author's field notes, January 4, 2013, and December 30, 2022.

"gatherings"—flourish as the beating heart of the local church. In the words of one local priest, "Without the CEVBs, the Church here would fall apart."[58]

In line with the broader national church, the first cundas began in the Diocese of Tshumbe during the 1970s. When asked to describe the nature of a cunda (CEVB) respondents most often used language of an expanded sense of family and a localized sense of church community. Here is a sampling:

- "A small community that shares joys and sufferings."[59]
- "A family; it is not simply about religious things."[60]
- "A community built on God" that helps members "see everyone as part of one family."[61]
- "A gathering of people who follow Jesus Christ."[62]
- "A small church" and "a small group where everyone knows everyone."[63]
- "A place where you can have the Word of God every day."[64]
- "A gathering of at least three families that pray and share life together with a lay leader."[65]
- "A small community tied to a parish, meant to be a community of unity and common life, lacking a priest, with lay leaders."[66]
- The cunda (CEVB) enables members to "learn how to be with others together" and to see the church as "everyone's responsibility."[67]
- The cunda (CEVB) "helps people learn how to love people and help those in need."[68]

58. Jacob Onyumbe, interview with author, Tshumbe, DRC, January 5, 2023. The following section draws heavily on a series of semi-structured interviews I conducted with forty CEVB leaders in the Diocese of Tshumbe in December 2022 and January 2023, along with a smaller number of CEVB leaders in Kinshasa. Interviews were audio-recorded. Interviewees were given the option to remain anonymous. Most were eager to speak on record, however, and I cite them by name wherever possible.
59. Emile Lowambo, interview with author, Tshumbe, DRC, January 1, 2023.
60. Onyumbe, interview.
61. Michelline Sambo, interview with author, St. John Paul II Seminary, Lodja, DRC, December 30, 2022; Thomas Omondjo, interview with author, Kalema, DRC, December 31, 2022; Jacques Dibaya, interview with author, Pongo, DRC, December 31, 2022.
62. Henriette Mondja, Cécile Okako, Catherine Denimi, Paul Omba, and Thomas Omondjo, interview with author, Kalema, DRC, December 31, 2022.
63. Michel Ngomo, interview with author, Tshumbe, DRC, January 1, 2023.
64. Lambert Lotanga, interview with author, Tshumbe, DRC, January 1, 2023.
65. Antoine Loheta and Vincent Shongo, interview with author, Odumbe, DRC, January 2, 2023.
66. Catherine Dikaho, Dominique Loma, and Albert Onotamba, interview with author, Kalema, DRC, December 31, 2022.
67. Michel Ndjo, interview with author, Tshumbe, DRC, January 1, 2023.
68. Gabriel Okoko, interview with author, Kolo Djamba, DRC, December 30, 2023.

One can see several common threads in these responses, including how the CEVB enmeshes the church in local community life, the importance of translating the Gospel message into daily life, and the ways in which the CEVB expands family ties. As one priest summarized, the CEVBs teach people "how to live faith together with others, how to get involved in the community, not alone, but with other people."[69] Such responses shed light on why CEVBs exemplify the African church's family of God metaphor.

CEVBs in Tshumbe have a highly developed leadership structure. The *onombodi* (best translated as "animator" or "administrator") is the overall leader of the community whose job is to "make sure the community grows in a holistic way" through coordinating and overseeing the other seven group leaders.[70] Yet as several CEVB members told me, the *onombodi* is also accountable to those he or she serves. In fact, members can call out a poor-performing CEVB administrator and even oust him or her in a public meeting.[71] The second key role is that of catechist. This leader is the religious teacher for the CEVB, leading prayers, preaching on the scriptural readings for the day, visiting the sick, and counseling those struggling in their faith. Tellingly, the Otetela word for catechist, *osambisha*, literally means "the one who preaches."[72] Beyond these two primary leadership roles, the Tshumbe CEVB leadership team also includes an *ofundji* (the "writer" who serves as secretary); an *ondaki* ("counselor") who facilitates conflict resolution and family/community reconciliation; an *okokedi* ("protector") who is the first line of support for the sick; an *omombi* ("steward") who manages finances and stores food and livestock for community celebrations, the parish, and emergency aid; and an *onongodi* ("welcomer") who provides hospitality for visitors.[73] Many Tshumbe CEVBs also have an *osambi* ("consoler") who is tasked with providing bereavement services for the mourning. Importantly, leaders are not democratically elected but emerge out of collective group discernment centered on the various charisms involved in each leadership role. Although men dominate the positions of animator and catechist, women serve prominently in leadership roles related to financial stewardship, conflict resolution, hospitality, and consoling. In a culture where polygamy is still commonly practiced, CEVB leaders are also expected to practice monogamy and have valid, sacramental marriages.[74]

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69. Alain Lomandja, interview with author, Righini, Kinshasa, DRC, January 7, 2023.
70. André Djamba Mpoto, interview with author, St. John Paul II Seminary, Lodja, DRC, December 30, 2022.
71. Augustin de Paul Olongo and Albert Loma, interview with author, Dionga, DRC, January 2, 2023.
72. Louis Loma Kota, interview with author, St. John Paul II Seminary, Lodja, DRC, December 30, 2022.
73. Louis Loma Kota and André Djamba Mpoto, interviews. Mpoto served as the animator in this community; Kota was the catechist.
74. Michel Ngomo, Jean Poto, and Michel Ndjo, interview with author, Tshumbe, DRC, January 1, 2023; Christine Mbutshu, Lambert Lotanga, Jean Akasa, and Alphonse Nambokonda, interview with author, Tshumbe, DRC, January 1, 2023. In some cases, conflicting marital practices have led to the forced resignation of leaders.

Tshumbe CEVBs meet anywhere from weekly to daily for one to two hours. A typical gathering begins with prayer, often a standard Catholic devotion such as the Our Father, Hail Mary, the Liturgy of the Hours, or the rosary.[75] This is followed by music, often in a praise and worship style. After an invocation of the Holy Spirit, the catechist reads and preaches from either the daily lectionary or the upcoming Sunday readings and Gospel.[76] After this Liturgy of the Word, members report on the news from the neighborhood, especially related to illness, recent deaths, and the concomitant need for both home visits and funeral provisions.[77] At times meetings include further sacramental catechesis, especially in preparation for baptism, as many Batetela delay baptism until primary school due to the inaccessibility of priests.[78] Meetings close with prayer and often a shared meal and further community discussion.[79]

In Tshumbe, CEVBs play a central role in facilitating faith formation, especially in terms of increasing biblical literacy, socially reinforcing the practice of the faith, and increasing personal knowledge of Catholic teachings.[80] This can take the form of sacramental preparation for youth and the nurturing of religious vocations; the local church in fact requires a CEVB endorsement of a particular candidate before he or she is admitted to seminary or religious life.[81] On a personal level, one female leader spoke of how hosting CEVB gatherings in her home strengthened her family's ongoing prayer life; another credited her CEVB participation for enabling her to become

75. Emile Dende, Emile Lowambo, Emile-Gaspard Lotake, and Thomas Kalonda, interview with author, Tshumbe, DRC, January 1, 2023.
76. Antoine Loheta, interview with author, Odumbe, DRC, January 2, 2023. This lectionary-based approach is also common in eastern Africa. Jemboy S. Caspis, "Missionary Life and Outreach of SCCs in Africa and around the World" (paper, Hekima College conference, Nairobi, Kenya, May 2013), 10, https://smallchristiancommunities.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/04/Jemboy_Caspis.pdf.
77. In central and eastern Africa, funerals are community gatherings in which dozens of extended family members and friends can descend on a home for weeks of mourning and feasting. The financial cost can therefore be monumental.
78. Okoke, interview.
79. Sambo, interview; Okoke, interview; Michel Ndjo, interview with author, January 1, 2023. In Kinshasa, CEVB leaders spoke of a formal role for this liaison for community news, known as the "*Bomoyi ya CEVB*"—"the person who shares the news of the families on the streets." Bernadette Ngela, interview with author, Saint Etienne Parish Kinseso, Kinshasa, DRC, January 6, 2023.
80. Albert Onotamba, interview with author, Kalema, DRC, December 31, 2022; Alphonse Nambokonda, interview with author, Tshumbe, DRC, January 1, 2023.
81. Michel Ngomo, Jean Poto, and Michel Ndjo, interview with author, Tshumbe, DRC, January 1, 2023; Thomas Kalongda, interview with author, January 1, 2023; Jérome Omba, interview with author, Odumbe, DRC, January 2, 2023; Tharcisse Onema, interview with author, Righini, Kinshasa, DRC, January 8, 2023. For local priest and Hebrew Bible professor Jacob Onyumbe, regular encounters with the Scriptures as a child in his CEVB shaped not only his priestly vocation but also his path into academia: "I became a biblical scholar because I grew up in the CEVB." Onyumbe, interview.

humbler and to listen before speaking.[82] Many spoke eloquently of the inspiration of certain biblical passages in their faith lives. For CEVB treasurer Christine Mbutshu, the book of Ruth's Naomi provided a model of family care in the aftermath of the death of a loved one. Her colleagues Jean Akasa and Lambert Lotanga highlighted the Gospel of Matthew's call for forgiveness and for Christians to be "salt of the earth and light of the world."[83] Importantly, multiple leaders mentioned how participation in a CEVB allowed them to see religious practice through a lens of active communal engagement, rather than a lens of passive obligation. As one leadership team noted, it is one thing to listen passively to a homily preaching communal virtues; it is quite another to learn these virtues in practice by sharing a community garden with your fellow CEVB members.[84] In turn, the proximity of CEVBs was critical to community faith formation and engagement. CEVB leaders could immediately address a member's spiritual need or crisis during the day or night, whereas a priest's response might take days or longer due to travel distance.[85]

One of the principal social and charitable contributions of the CEVB rests in what the Batetela and other Congolese call *salongo*, or community work.[86] Such service includes leveling roads, fixing potholes, clearing footpaths, cutting grass to limit mosquitoes, cleaning creeks, constructing fisheries, and building community gardens. It also includes other prominent corporal works of mercy such as care for the mourning, visiting the sick and hospitalized, engaging in community health and vaccination campaigns, caring for widows and orphans, and burying the dead.[87] Tshumbe CEVBs are also notable for their work in conflict resolution, especially regarding marital disputes, financial debts, land conflicts, and internal disagreements within the CEVB itself.[88] Interviewees highlighted the work of CEVBs in mediating spousal disputes. This stems in part from a desire to discuss marital issues with fellow married couples, as well as laypeople's reluctance to tell priests about the more intimate dimensions of spousal and family life.[89] When facilitating disputes, CEVB leaders draw on

82. Catherine Denimi, interview with author, Kalema, DRC, December 31, 2022; Sambo, interview.
83. Christine Mbutshu, Jean Akasa, and Lambert Lotanga, interview with author, Tshumbe, DRC, January 1, 2023.
84. Olongo and Loma, interview.
85. Christine Mbutshu, interview with author, Tshumbe, DRC, January 1, 2023; Onema, interview.
86. Christine Mbutshu, Lambert Lotanga, Jean Akasa, and Alphonse Nambokonda, interview with author, January 1, 2023.
87. Paul Lama, interview with author, Pongo, DRC, December 31, 2022; Michel Okitawonya, Emmanuel Lokoto, and Paul Lohese, interview with author, Owele, DRC, December 30, 2022; Patrice Owamba Koto and Michel Okongo, interview with author, Momba Okundola, DRC, December 30, 2022; Dominique Loma, interview with author, Kalema, DRC, December 31, 2022; Ngomo, Poto, and Ndjo, interview; Antoine Loheta, Vincent Shongo, and Jérome Omba, interview with author, Odumbe, DRC, January 2, 2023.
88. Ngomo, Poto, and Ndjo, interview.
89. Thomas Omondjo, interview with author, Kalema, DRC, December 31, 2022; Lambert Lotanga, interview with author, Tshumbe, DRC, January 1, 2023.

traditional palaver methods where disputing parties can air their grievances, determine respective responsibility, and seek behavioral change, restitution, and forgiveness.[90]

As in other parts of the world, regular CEVB attendance in the Diocese of Tshumbe is dominated by women. As previously noted, women serve prominently in CEVB leadership, and in interviews, several female lay leaders claimed that personal character rather than gender was the key determinant of authority in the community.[91] Yet in part due to decades of gender-based educational discrimination, few women serve as animators and catechists in rural Tshumbe, especially in comparison to urban Kinshasa.[92] Regardless, the family metaphor is very important for many of these female leaders, with many adopting culturally reinforced maternal roles such as consoling, counseling, and providing hospitality. Almost universally, women were praised as more trustworthy with money than men. As one leader put it, "When you give a woman money, she knows how to keep it."[93] Women's prominent participation in CEVBs also reflects the central social and familial roles of mothers in Batetela society. In the words of one female leader in Lodja, the mother is "the pillar of life," yet the mother can also "put fire" through her words: "If the mother is bad, things will go badly in the family and the village. And if she is good, things will go well."[94]

For all of the successes of CEVBs, manifold challenges remain. Given the primacy of scriptural reflection, the lack of an Otetela translation of the Old Testament is a huge lacuna.[95] And although catechists receive continuing education three times per year at weeklong diocesan synods, priests, animators, and catechists alike felt that religious training could be expanded and deepened.[96] Given Tshumbe's entrenched poverty, it was not surprising to hear leadership teams name a lack of resources as a major pastoral problem. Not only are CEVBs expected to contribute money and foodstuffs to their local priests and parishes, but they are also the front line for providing social welfare, funeral services, and hospitality for members, visitors, the poor, and the destitute. Competition with charismatic Christian churches is also a growing challenge, leading many leaders to request electronic musical equipment such as keyboards and speakers that could compete with Pentecostals' upbeat worship styles.[97] In turn, interviewees

90. Catherine Dikaho, interview with author, Kalema, DRC, December 31, 2022; Emile Dende, interview with author, Tshumbe, DRC, January 1, 2023; Loheta, Shongo, and Omba, interview. On the role of the Congolese palaver in social ethics, see Benezet Bujo, *Foundations of an African Ethic: Beyond the Universal Claims of Western Morality* (New York: Crossroads, 2001).
91. Veronique Andjaki, interview with author, Pongo, DRC, December 31, 2022; Catherine Denimi, interview with author, Kalema, DRC, December 31, 2022.
92. Onyumbe, interview.
93. Augustin de Paul Olongo, interview with author, Dionga, DRC, January 2, 2023. Christine Mbutshu, interview with author, Tshumbe, DRC, January 1, 2023.
94. Sambo, interview.
95. Omondjo, interview; Onyumbe, interview.
96. Dende, Lowambo, Lotake, and Kalongda, interview; Loheta, Shongo, and Omba, interview; Onyumbe, interview.
97. Koto and Okongo, interview; Dende, Lowambo, Lotake, and Kalongda, interview; Onyumbe, interview.

noted a generational shift where CEVBs remain strong among older Congolese but are not engaging young adults at the same depth. This trend was noted especially in Kinshasa, where parish associations like Kizito-Anuarite or Bilenge ya Mwinda were much more popular with observant Catholics under the age of 35.[98] In Tshumbe, youth participation was coveted, and young people were often credited with strengthening the ethos and especially the music of a CEVB.[99]

In turn, the sociopolitical and economic engagement of Tshumbe CEVBs seemed underdeveloped. There was little in the way of CEVB activism around the root causes of poverty or political predation, or the type of "see, judge, act" conscientization method so common in the Latin American BCC context of the late twentieth century, or more recently in the 2010s in Kenya.[100] And although the Congolese bishops have been notable for their outspoken criticisms of state abuses and corruption, most of their French-language statements have not filtered down to the parish or CEVB-level, especially in rural regions of DRC.[101] Interestingly, one Batetela priest with CENCO's national justice and peace commission claimed that sociopolitical engagement was much stronger in Tshumbe in the late 2000s and early 2010s, when he actively conducted local training sessions on faith, justice, and political action.[102] This underscores the important roles of priests, missionaries, and other educated elites in sparking social consciousness-raising among the poor, as evidenced in previous literature on Latin American BCCs.

One can also point to the complex challenge of gender equity. On one level, CEVBs reflect the patriarchal norms of both the Catholic Church and some streams of Congolese society, especially in rural areas where the top positions of animator and catechist remain largely the province of men. In turn, one wonders how a single woman fits into an ecclesial and local culture that largely defines the woman through motherhood. For example, the largest Catholic women's organization in Tshumbe is the Mamans Catholiques, or "Catholic mothers." As CEVB and Mamans Catholiques leader Catherine Dikaho noted, the purpose of this organization is to "teach women how to be good wives and mothers."[103] Another member described the "good wife" in traditional terms—obeying the husband, being polite, making sure husbands leave on time, taking care of the home and children's hygiene, and ironing.[104]

98. Mermans Nzeza and Pamphile Nkongo, interview with author, Saint Etienne Kinseso, Kinshasa, DRC, January 6, 2023.
99. Okoko, interview.
100. Healey, "Small Christian Communities," 177–78.
101. Muyombi, *L'engagement de l'Église catholique*, 196. On CENCO's influential sociopolitical engagement over the past quarter-century, see Raphael Okitafumba Lokola, "The Self-Understanding of the Congolese Church during War: CENCO in the Grip of the Greatest Modern Humanitarian Crisis," *Journal of Religious History*, 44 (2020): 187–211, https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9809.12662.
102. Lomandja, interview.
103. Dikaho, interview.
104. Henriette Mondja, interview with author, Kalema, DRC, December 31, 2022.

On another level, though, CEVBs and the affiliated Mamans Catholiques reflect creative ways of empowering women within traditional church structures. Kinshasa communities require equal gender balance in CEVB leadership, and even in more rural Tshumbe, women take the leading roles in conflict mediation, counseling, hospitality, and financial management while also actively participating in diocesan synods.[105] Particularly striking here were members' descriptions of themselves as "mothers" of the church, with priests seen not so much as fathers, but rather as sons. In this vein, several female CEVB leaders in Kinshasa described their roles as "taking care of the church like their own family" and being "mothers of the house," including counseling errant priests "like sons" and "bringing them back as their child."[106] Such language underlines an important nuancing of stereotypical clergy-lay or male-female power dynamics and highlights the communal power of the mother in Congolese society. And beyond simply supporting their husbands, the Mamans Catholiques help younger women to conduct responsible family planning and have played prominent roles in peacebuilding and social activism in both DRC and the neighboring Republic of Congo.[107] Whether in the domestic or political sphere, then, the Mamans Catholiques strive to exemplify their Lingala motto: "Nzambe liboso, nzala muinda: God is in front of us, become light."[108]

Ecclesiology in Dialogue: Learning from the Congolese CEVBs

What ecclesiological conclusions might one draw from the Congolese CEVBs, and what applications might apply in the North American context? First, as Congolese theologian John Mobiala has argued, these communities exemplify Vatican II's ecclesiology of the people of God and the African ecclesiology of church as the family of God.[109] In terms of the people of God ecclesiology, not only is the CEVB the primary place where laity hear and apply the Word of God, but the CEVB is also a privileged location for sacramental formation, eucharistic celebrations, and living out one's own baptismal call to a royal priesthood. Here the CEVBs closely embody the vision of *Lumen Gentium*: "They [the faithful] exercise that priesthood by the reception of the sacraments, prayer and thanksgiving, the witness of a holy life, abnegation, and active charity."[110] In turn, the CEVBs are also the primary way in which the Congolese church moves from the sacristy and into the streets, "bridging distance" and "getting involved by word and deed in people's daily lives," as Pope Francis calls for in

105. Onyumbe, interview.
106. Béatrice Losi and Euphrasie Masesa, interview with author, Saint Etienne Kinseso, Kinshasa, DRC, January 6, 2023.
107. Losi, interview. Phyllis Martin, *Catholic Women of Congo-Brazzaville: Mothers and Sisters in Troubled Times* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press), 172–73.
108. Losi, interview.
109. Mobiala, "Gènese et situation actuelle," 12.
110. *LG*, §10.

Evangelii Gaudium.[111] As one CEVB leader put it, "In order to spread the gospel, you can't just rely on the priest preaching in the parish. You need other people who can go to where the priest is not present every day."[112] At the same time, the CEVBs grow out of extended family structures and are best understood as networks of village families. Reflecting the fundamental role of the extended family in African culture and tradition, this ecclesiological metaphor of church as family of God reinforces values of "care for others, solidarity, warmth in human relationships, acceptance, dialogue and trust."[113] Reflecting the trinitarian love that animates the church, the image of family of God strengthens and deepens the relational understanding of church in comparison to people of God.

Reflecting the deeply communal nature of African culture, this emphasis on church as family can seem foreign to many Western ears. American culture is marked by deep currents of individualism, an understanding of freedom as autonomy, and a prioritization of career that combine to push younger generations away from their parents, grandparents, and geographic roots. In turn, Americans typically think of family in terms of the nuclear family. And yet whatever the connectivity of social media and other new technologies, American culture and family life alike suffer from this loss of fleshly encounter, leading to growing experiences of isolation, loneliness, mistrust, anxiety, depression, and the mutual suspicion that is such a hallmark of political polarization. To be fair, intimate, family-based cultures are not a panacea; they can be particularly susceptible to tribalism, provincialism, nepotism, and xenophobia. However, the church as family of God metaphor pushes against ethnocentrism by calling Christians into intimate communion with those beyond their family or ethnic group. Likewise, in embracing an ecclesiology of small Christian communities, American churches can facilitate the formation of more genuine, intimate lay communities that move beyond the confines of the parish building and beyond the polarities and identity politics that mark so much of mass culture and media in modern America.

The Congolese model could also help American religious communities recognize that "the CEVB should serve the entire *quartier*," reaching out to all, whether Catholic or not, who occupy a particular neighborhood.[114] As Congolese theologian Josée

111. Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium* (November 24, 2013), §24, https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20131124_evangelii-gaudium.html.

112. Lambert Lotanga, interview with author, Tshumbe, DRC, January 1, 2023.

113. John Paul II, *Ecclesia in Africa* (September 14, 1995), §63, https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_jp-ii_exh_14091995_ecclesia-in-africa.html. African feminist theologians have also pointed to the potential shortcomings of mapping this theological metaphor too closely on an African family that can be dominated by patriarchy, androcentrism, and ethnocentrism. Teresa Okure, "Becoming the Church of the New Testament," in Orobator, *Church We Want*, 95. In the same volume, see also Philomena Mwaura, "The Gospel of the Family," 145–58.

114. Author's field notes, Righini, Kinshasa, DRC, January 8, 2023. My interlocutor here was a Congolese parish priest.

Ngalula has noted, ecumenical and interreligious engagement in Kinshasa neighborhoods has extended to developing mourning rituals at the deaths of non-Catholic neighbors, including songs, biblical readings, and financial donations.[115] This pastoral approach enables the church to move from simply providing social services to actually accompanying and encountering the poor in their spiritual and material lives.[116] This type of broad communal engagement in service to the common good, accompanied by a preferential option to the poor, also reduces the ever-present dangers of religious elitism and avoidance of the social dimension of spirituality that can accompany renewal efforts in the American church.[117]

CEVBs also have something to teach the broader Catholic world in light of Pope Francis's calls for a more synodal church. If synodality is first and foremost about "journeying" or "walking together" as "baptized persons, in the diversity of charisms, vocations, and ministries," all the while integrating "communion, mission, and participation,"[118] then it is difficult to imagine a better grassroots embodiment of a synodal church than CEVBs. It is in these intimate, local ecclesial communities that women and men not only exemplify "co-responsibility," but also live out their mission to the world in communion with their neighbors, both Catholic and non-Catholic. In CEVBs, all the baptized are called to full participation in learning, sharing, and applying the Word of God, all while listening, dialoguing, and discerning together. It is not surprising that the 2023 first general assembly of the Synod on Synodality praised small Christian communities for exemplifying "structures for participation," as they "live the closeness day-to-day, around the Word of God and the Eucharist."[119]

There is nothing uniquely African about this understanding of church, and advocates for small Christian communities have highlighted their global reach and diverse embodiment across every region of the world.[120] And a growing number of American Catholic dioceses, including my own Archdiocese of Omaha, have embraced small

115. Josée Ngalula, "History, Development and Status Quo," 10.
116. Stan Chu Ilo, "The Church of Pope Francis: An Ecclesiology of Accountability, Accompaniment, and Action," in Orobator, *Church We Want*, 11–30 at 28.
117. Onyumbe, interview; Thomas M. Kelly, *When the Gospel Grows Feet: Rutilio Grande, SJ, and the Church of El Salvador* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2013), 237.
118. Francis, Speech: Ceremony Commemorating the 50th Anniversary of the Institution of the Synod of Bishops (Rome, October 17, 2015), https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2015/october/documents/papa-francesco_20151017_50-anniversario-sinodo.html; XVI Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, "Synthesis Report: A Synodal Church in Mission" (First Session [4–29 October 2023], October 28, 2023), 3, 6, https://www.synod.va/content/dam/synod/assembly/synthesis/english/2023.10.28-ENG-Synthesis-Report.pdf.
119. XVI Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, "Synthesis Report," 6, 22, 37.
120. See, for example, Healey and Hinton's *Small Christian Communities Today*, which profiles SCCs on six continents and through international networks. This global vision is reinforced by the landing page image of a world map on Healey's Small Christian Communities Global Collaborative Website (https://smallchristiancommunities.org), which collects thousands of resources and examples from SCCs around the Catholic world.

faith communities as a pastoral priority for renewing parish life. But I would highlight two areas for growth. First, as in Congo, American parishes could organize themselves more foundationally as a "communion of communities," for example by automatically enrolling new parish members in a small faith community. Second, parishes could also organize consultative and leadership structures around these communities. Parish councils, for example, could be composed of SCC leaders, recognizing with Pope Francis that synodal organs must be "connected to the base and start from people and their daily problems."[121]

A church based in small Christian communities also offers further potential to extend synodal practices at the diocesan level. From Malawi to Uganda, a smattering of African dioceses have instituted synodal gatherings over the past several decades.[122] Synodal practices have long been established in the Diocese of Tshumbe and provide the primary venues for the ongoing catechetical training of CEVB leaders.[123] Importantly, these synods bridge religious catechism and the social needs of daily life. In Tshumbe, an Assumption feast synod in 2022 focused on how to protect the community from disease through better hygienic practices.[124] The CEVBs also provide a structural means for disseminating Catholic teaching beyond elite circles to the grassroots. For example, after receiving religious instruction on the nature of sacramental marriage, a CEVB leadership team set up further catechetical and dialogue sessions on marriage within their own small village.[125] Whereas American churches often rely on email blasts, pulpit announcements, or voluntary parish hall sessions to convey such information, small Christian communities could deepen formation around catechetical and social needs. Such conversations could unfold in an atmosphere of trust and preexisting relationships, and SCCs could even tangibly implement Catholic social teachings in practice (as one saw with Tshumbe's *salungo* community work). This would require moving beyond seeing American small faith groups only through the lens of individual faith appropriation or engaging the Sunday Mass readings, however.

A truly synodal church exists in dialogue and subsidiarity rather than through a micromanaging, top-down, centralized "command and control" model of church. Although Tshumbe priests occasionally intervene in cases where a CEVB animator

121. Francis, Speech: Ceremony Commemorating the 50th Anniversary.
122. Joseph Healey, "Bishop Patrick Kalilombe and the Lilongwe Diocese, Malawi Mini-Synod in 1973–75: One of the Foundations of the AMECEA Small Christian Communities (SCCs) Pastoral Priority Leading Up to the Two 'Synod on Synodality' Sessions in 2023 and 2024" (workshop presentation, SCC Workshop, Malawi, August 21, 2023), https://smallchristiancommunities.org/bishop-patrick-kalilombe-and-the-lilongwe-diocese-malawi-mini-synod-in-1973-75-one-of-the-foundations-of-the-amecea1-small-christian-communities-sccs-pastoral-priority-leading-up-to-the-two/; Sherry Meyer, interview with author, Arua, Uganda, July 2, 2017. Meyer, a lay American missionary, was instrumental in helping the Diocese of Arua institute five different diocesan synods between 1996 and 2022.
123. Okitawonya, Lokoto, and Lohese, interview.
124. Dikaho, interview.
125. Olongo and Loma, interview.

refuses to step down or teaches manifestly wrong Catholic doctrine, CEVBs are allowed to make communal decisions at synod gatherings without a parish priest's endorsement. In turn, the priests rely on the CEVBs for both financial and food contributions, furthering a sense of mutual dependency.[126] In other words, there is a give-and-take here that moves beyond the "pipeline ecclesiology," where the parish center simply instructs the peripheries.[127] This mutual dependency supports Francis's call for a de-clericalized and dialogical church that grows through listening, encounter, and immersion. In the recent words of Kinshasa's Fridolin Cardinal Ambongo, "The privileged space to experience the sense of family spirit and synodality is the Small Christian Communities . . . [this is] where they [the faithful] experience and live synodality as mission, communion, and participation."[128] Yet just as the "synodal assembly is not a parliament," so a synodal church is not a democracy, a point that bears repeating in a North American context that tends to idealize democratic structures for all facets of life.[129] At the parish and diocesan levels, respectively, the pastor and the bishop retain fundamental juridical and teaching authority. But priestly authority should always be exercised in a spirit of service, and episcopal discernment should be informed through active and regular consultation with the people of God. Likewise, rather than fragment into "autonomous congregations" that go their own way,[130] healthy small Christian communities remain in communion with the broader parish, their pastors, and ultimately their bishop.

The CEVBs also offer a promising mode of ecclesial engagement with conflict transformation. Rather than simply call in a priest or outside expert after a crisis erupts, CEVBs are constantly navigating the inevitable differences and tensions that emerge in community life. As one Kinshasa leader of the Bolingani CEVB put it, "Where two people are gathered, there will be misunderstanding."[131] Reflecting the Catholic social principle of subsidiarity, the CEVB offers extensive local knowledge and long-standing relationships that can facilitate the church's conflict resolution efforts. Congolese priests and laity alike commented on the importance of married leaders counseling struggling married couples in their CEVBs, drawing on tangible life experience not available to celibate priests and women religious. This flexibility in turn depends on

126. Onyumbe, interview.
127. Joseph G. Healey, "Basic Christian Communities: Church-Centered or World-Centered?," *Missionalia* 14, no. 1 (1986): 212, https://hdl.handle.net/10520/AJA02569507_212.
128. Fridolin Ambongo, "SECAM President's Opening Speech" (speech, 2023 Africa Synodal Continental Plenary Assembly, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, March 2, 2023), 2, https://smallchristiancommunities.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/AFRICAN-CONTINENTAL-SYNODAL-PLENARY-ASSEMBLY.pdf. Cardinal Ambongo is currently Archbishop of Kinshasa and president of the Symposium of the Episcopal Conferences of Africa and Madagascar (SECAM).
129. Moira McQueen, *Walking Together: A Primer on the New Synodality* (New London, CT: Twenty-Third Publications, 2022), 52.
130. Avery Dulles, *Models of the Church* (New York: Image Classics, 2002), 53.
131. Bernadette Ngela, interview with author, January 6, 2023, Saint Etienne parish, Kinshasa.

priests being open to the gifts of their lay brethren, which requires intentional seminary training to form a parish priest who sees himself as the "servant and promoter of the responsibilities of the laity."[132]

Admittedly, this focus on conflict transformation may be the most difficult for American churches to adopt. In this country, faith communities are largely bystanders to a secular process dominated by courts, lawyers, and civil law. Within the church itself, an individualistic piety tends to take hold when it comes to the sacrament of reconciliation. The sacrament is typically understood as reconciling the individual sinner to God through the mediation of the individual priest, largely dispensing with the deeply social, public, and communal roots of the sacrament.[133] Training lay leaders in a spirituality of discernment could, however, enable small Christian community leaders to have the wherewithal to informally mediate the inevitable conflicts that arise in any community, pointing toward a horizon of reconciliation that transcends the zero-sum, all-or-nothing polarities that mark so much of American judicial, political, and ecclesial life. After all, the core creedal mark of catholicity points to the church's mission to exemplify "unity in difference," or what Pope Francis likes to call a Spirit-guided "harmony" seen in a "bond of communion between dissimilar parts."[134] In comparison to large mega-parishes, the small size of the SCC offers much greater potential to live out this spirituality of communion in practice.

Finally, CEVBs can move Western narratives on the DRC beyond the standard tropes of warfare, political predation, and colonial exploitation. Although these are tragic but true dimensions of Congo's history, repeating them ad nauseam risks becoming what the Nigerian author Chimamanda Adichie has called the "single story" of Africa in the Western mind.[135] If anything, the CEVBs flip the script, with my Congolese interlocutors wondering how and why a country as developed and advanced as the US could lack something as obviously foundational as base Christian communities.[136] At the same time, pastoral challenges common to an American audience also

132. Josée Ngalula, "The Changing Face of Roman Catholic Ecclesiology in Sub-Saharan Africa," in *The Handbook of African Catholicism*, ed. Stan Chu Ilo (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2022), 500–511 at 504.

133. Frank O'Loughlin, *The Future of the Sacrament of Penance* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2007), 15–33.

134. Francis, Speech: Synod23—1st General Congregation: Address of the Holy Father Francis at the Opening Session of the 16th Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops (October 4, 2023), https://press.vatican.va/content/salastampa/en/bollettino/pubblico/2023/10/04/231004f.html. On the creedal mark of catholicity, see Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Creed: What Christians Believe and Why It Matters* (New York: Doubleday, 2003), 268–73.

135. Chimamanda Adichie, "The Danger of a Single Story," TED, October 7, 2009, video, 19:16 at 0:19, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D9Ihs241zeg.

136. Emile-Gaspard Lotake, interview with author, Tshumbe, DRC, January 1, 2023. I would often respond that given current rates of Catholic disaffiliation in the US, the Church's survival here is by no means assured without radical shifts in ecclesiology and pastoral life.

emerged in Congo. These include the Catholic Church's struggle to engage urban youth and intellectuals, which reflects the shared impact of what the Congolese theologian Kä Mana has described as the "disoriented, disintegrated, and dislocated" nature of modernity, whether in Africa or the West.[137] This reminds us that catholicity is not simply about dialoguing across difference, but also about responding to shared challenges from distinct cultural locations.

In the midst of a violent and often anticlerical postcolonial era, the Congolese Catholic Church of the 1960s and 1970s chose to embrace a new pastoral strategy that recentered the church in lay-led base communities. Over the past fifty years, these CEVBs have incarnated the church more deeply in regular Christians' lives, while also bridging the gap between faith formation and community engagement. For sure, many Congolese CEVBs could learn from the Latin American and Filipino models of Christian social activism. Yet in an age of emerging synodality, CEVBs have much to teach in how they practically embody a "church that is the common responsibility of all Christians."[138]

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137. Onema, interview; Kä Mana, *La nouvelle évangélisation en Afrique* (Paris: Karthala, 2000), 27.

138. Kinkupu, *L'avenir des ministères laïcs*, 7. I am deeply grateful to Jacob Onyumbe, Tharcisse Onema, and Raphael Okitafumba Lokola for their Otetela translation and indispensable research assistance during field research in DRC. I also thank Onyumbe, Okitafumba Lokola, Thomas Kelly, Roger Alfani, and Joseph Healey for their critical feedback on draft versions of this article. At Creighton, the Kripke Center for the Study of Religion and Society provided the grant support that made the research possible, and the Institutional Research Board (IRB) provided crucial methodological feedback and research clearance.