Journal of Asia Adventist Seminary 22.1–2 (2020–21): 93–109

Small Groups in Family Contexts: A Paradigm for the African Church

DAVID ODHIAMBO

Adventist University of Africa, Kenya

Abstract

The focal point of the local church seems to shift and continues to move from the public assembly to the private setting of the household gathering post-COVID-19 pandemic. The houses or homes have become the heart or the core of church fellowship. Moreover, with the opening up of worship places, some church members appear to prefer to worship from the comfort of their homes. The development brings to the fore the family setting as the integral component of the Sabbath gathering. This paper intends to evaluate the vital role of small groups in households or the family settings of the local church within the African context. Firstly, it explores how the communal social dynamic of African families promotes fellowship and discipleship within small groups. Secondly, it examines the theological ramifications of small groups in the household context of the New Testament. Thirdly, it investigates the leadership involvement in small group settings, emphasizing and identifying the training and launching of leaders in the family context. Finally, the article surveys how evangelism finds implementation in small groups in the family contexts. The study concludes that the Christian home has become an integral component of the local church, providing a collaborative ministry environment post-COVID-19 within the African community.

Keywords: Household, Ubuntu, Small Group

1. Introduction

Before delving into the intricacies of small group, household, and ubuntu, it is important to briefly preview the impact of the covid pandemic on public worship. The advent of the COVID-19 pandemic saw unprecedented changes in public worship services of the local churches. All public worship or physical gathering shifted to the houses and homes.[1] At the initial stage, the absence of members in the sanctuaries or halls of assemblies posed a dilemma for both the pastors and the congregants as it seemed to challenge authentic interactions.[2] Nevertheless, church members maintained interpersonal connections in small family-based groups via virtual platforms. Thus, the home and/or house churches represented hope while at the same time introducing a new reality in the life and practice of the church.

Furthermore, with the availability of online services, it was possible for two to three persons or even more to virtually participate in worship services from the comfort of their homes or houses.[3] In this set up, the laity and pastors conducted service without the physical presence of the congregation. As a result, the focal point of the church service underwent shifts, moving away from the traditional confines of the physical building known as the church. Instead, the church relocated to the houses and homes where "the people of God" (also known as the *ecclesia*) gathered to seek and experience the presence of God.[4]

In light of the preceding analysis, a notable resemblance can be discerned between gatherings in residential settings and the historical model of early Christian house churches.[5] One common model of early Christian house

1 Kyle K. Schiefellbein-Guerrero, "Worship in the Face of Corona: Ritual Place, People, Polymodality," in *Church After the Corona Pandemic: Consequence for Worship and Theology*, ed. Kyle K. Schiefellbein-Guerrero (Gettysburg, PA: United Luteran Seminary, 2023), 3.

2 Schiefellbein-Guerrero, "Worship in the Face of Corona," viii.

3 Some congregations were not prepared for the digital migration, while others were sceptical about the extended impact of the pandemic.

4 The term "people of God" infers a theological connotation, underscoring the spiritual and communal aspect of the group's identity within their faith tradition. It is used here as an ethnically open category (Acts 15:14–18; Rom 9:24–26; 2 Cor 6:16–17). See a more detailed discussion on the term in David Horrell, "'Race,' 'Nation,' 'People' Ethnoracial Identity Construction in 1 Peter 2:9," in *Becoming Christian: Essays on 1 Peter and the Making of Christian Identity*, LNTS 394 (London: T&T Clark, 2013), 133–63.

5 See I. Howard Marshall, "Church and Temple in the New Testament," *TynBul* 40.2 (1989): 204, https://tyndalebulletin.org/article/30540-church-and-temple-in-the-new-testament.

churches involved members congregating for prayer in a building that still served as a private residence (Acts 1:13; 2:46; 5:42; 12:17; etc.). In other cases, house assemblies would gather in renovated private residences, and as the congregation expanded, they would transfer to a new and larger structure dedicated solely to the purpose of being a church.[6] It is the former model that provides a suitable framework for the emerging trend of house or home churches in the post-COVID era. In the subsequent section, we will explore the characteristics of households gathering from the Jewish background before delving into the activities carried out within the early Christian church.

2. Establishment of Small Groups in the Early Christian Era

2.1 Jewish Connections

The modern church encounters significant challenges when it separates itself from the Jewish roots that are deeply embedded in the Old Testament. Unfortunately, such tendencies often fail to recognize that the Jewish expressions served as the primary frameworks for the early church.[7] Consequently, the structure and functioning of the early church were greatly influenced by the teachings and principles of the temple in Jerusalem.[8] Vincent Branick highlights the archaeological findings of the Essene community at Qumran, which reveal how religious life and practices were carried out within household settings.[9] The gatherings of Israel offer a lens through which the early church understood the meetings, especially in the functional dimensions.

The assembly of God's people in the Old Testament emerged out of the divine selection and covenant, a concept at the core of the Scriptures. In the Exodus story, it is clear that God has chosen the Israelites as His preferred people, as He liberates them from Egyptian subjugation (Deut 7:7–8). The exodus is vital knowledge needed for their assembly, for it is at Mount Sinai where the covenant between God and the Israelites is formed. This pivotal moment established the Israelites as a distinct community, bound by divine

6 Floyd V. Filson, "The Significance of the Early Church," *JBL* 58.2 (1939), 106, https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/3259855.pdf.

7 Ronald E. Heine, *Reading the Old Testament with the Ancient Church* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), 31–32.

8 Marshall, "Church and Temple," 211.

9 Vincent Branick, *The House Church in the Writings of Paul* (Wilmington, DE: Glazier, 1989), 36–38.

law and purpose, and it laid the foundation for their identity as a people chosen by God to uphold His commandments and to serve as a testament to His power and faithfulness.

The covenant, as outlined in texts such as Exod 19:5–6, emphasizes the communal nature of their belief system: "Now therefore, if you will indeed obey my voice and keep my covenant, then you shall be a special treasure above all people, for all the earth is mine is mine; and you shall be a kingdom of priests and a holy nation to me."[10] The prophetic books, like Ezekiel and Daniel, uncompromisingly maintain the collective obligation of the public to maintain this sacred pact (Ezek 16:16–60; Dan 9:1–10). The concept of being together, in this context, is not just a physical congregation but a collective spiritual response to the divine edict and promise—a major motif that is threaded throughout the Old Testament.

The Septuagint (LXX)—the ancient Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible—renders the Hebrew word *bayith* ("house") as *oikos* and *oikia.*[11] The Hebrew term *bayith* encompasses various meanings depending on the context.[12] It signifies a room within a building (Esth 2:3; 7:8), the entire family unit including the father (Gen 50:8; 1 Sam 1:21), wives, sons, daughters (Gen 36:6), dependent relatives (Gen 13:1), servants (Gen 15:2–3), attendants (Gen 14:14), and slaves (Gen 17:13, 27).[13] It also refers to a group of relatives that lies between the immediate family and the tribe (2 Sam 9:7), as well as encompassing household possessions such as wealth, tools, slaves, and livestock (Exod 20:17; Esth 8:1). Both within the LXX and the broader Hellenistic world, the words *oikos* and *oikia* are employed to denote both the physical structures (buildings) and the people residing inside them, with only slight distinctions in usage.[14] Religiously, the significance of the home remained intact. It was within the confines of the home where one of the most crucial religious observances, the annual celebration of the Passover feast, took place (as mentioned in Mark 14:14f).[15]

This typical transmission of faith happened during the celebration of the feasts. Philo comments regarding the celebration of the Passover are insightful:

[10] Here and in the following I will use the NKJV translation, unless otherwise indicated.

[11] Harry A. Hoffner, "*Bayith*," *TDOT* 11:110.

[12] Ludwig Koehler and Walter Baumgartner, *HALOT*, s.v. "*bayith.*"

[13] Hoffner, "*Bayith,*" 11:111–16.

[14] Branick, *House Church in the Writing of Paul*, 37.

[15] David G. Peterson, *The Acts of the Apostles* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 557.

> At this time the whole household takes on the sanctity of a temple. The sacrifice becomes a seder meal…. The whole people, old and young, ascend to the status of priests to conduct the holy service (the seder). For they all celebrate the great migration, when over 600,000 men and women happily exited from a land of cruelty and animosity towards strangers.[16]

The evidence presented establishes the significant role of Jewish families as focal points for religious practices, laying the groundwork for the development of the early Christian church. Multiple indications highlight the family as the primary environment for passing down the faith. Within the Jewish context, God instructs households to wholeheartedly love Him and diligently teach His commandments to their children (Deut 6:7). The commendation bestowed upon Abraham, esteemed as a friend of God, stems from his guidance of his children and household to faithfully follow the ways of the Lord, upholding righteousness and justice (Gen 18:19).

In concluding the Jewish connection of the house church, the archaeological findings and historical evidence presented above shed light on the significant role of the private house in Jewish religious contexts. The private home held a crucial position in religious development, serving as a foundation for faith within the Jewish religious framework. The Jewish household acted as a protective stronghold, safeguarding the people's religious practices from external disruptions.[17] Remarkably, this concept of the household as a religious center persisted and evolved into the early Christian era. Therefore, it becomes imperative to explore the nuptial stage of the New Testament church, examining how the household and homes continued to function as vital religious centers.

During the intertestamental period, the concept of a "people of God" manifests itself in numerous ways throughout the literature and historical records. The notion of a distinct Jewish community, unified by a shared identity, is evident in the repeated invocation of this terminology (2 Macc 5:19; 7:33; Jub 1:24; 1Q 9:19–20). Although the particular phrase may vary in its formulation, the same idea of a unified people still resonates.

The Dead Sea Scrolls, discovered in the mid-20th century, contain numerous references to the Jewish community's self-understanding as a covenant people, devoted to God's commandments (1Q 2.21–22; cf. Exod 18:21,

[16] Philo, *QE* 1, 10.

[17] Jacob Neusner, *Judaism in Monologue and Dialogue: Studies in Judaism* (New York: University Press of America, 2005), 32.

25).[18] The Scrolls also emphasize the importance of communal life and obedience to the divine will (1Q 1.18, 20). Moreover, the First and Second Books of Maccabees provide a comprehensive history of the struggles and successes of the Jewish community during the Maccabean revolt.[19] The historical accounts of the books delineate the tenacity and piety of the Jewish community in confrontation with outward hardships (1 Macc 2:15–22; 2 Macc 1:7–8). During the transitional period of the intertestamental era, these sectarian gatherings unmistakable expressed a character, alliance, and devotion to their spiritual legacy within the communities. The communal identity of an elect people persisted as a prominent motif during the period and formed the basis of the early Christian era.

2.2 New Testament

The continuity of this communal life served as the basis for the development of the early Christian era (Acts 1:15–16; 6:2). Within this time frame, the concept of being a chosen people was given a fresh perspective, reformulating its Jewish roots to focus on a broad range of beings who were committed to the teaching of Jesus Christ (Acts 2:14; 2:44; 4:32; 5:14). The early Christian church thus assumed the communal spirit of God's special grouping, emphasizing the concept of an *ecclesia* or a congregation of believers (Acts 11:21, 26).

This shift in the communal character included adherents of both Jewish and Gentile backgrounds, further enriching the diversity of the religion (Acts 6:1; 10:34–35; 11:1). The early Christians conceived of themselves as a direct broadening of the elect, influenced by their personalized relationship with the Almighty and stirred by the mission to promote the Good News to the world (Acts 3:15; 5:32; 9:13, 32). This reshaping of the communal founding played a critical role in moulding the Christian church out of its Jewish origins, eventually developing into a widely spread Christian faith.

As mentioned above, during the early Christian era, the formation of intimate house meetings served as a defining characteristic of the church. The

[18] For a longer period it was thought that those related to the Dead Sea Scrolls (DSS) were the creators of the "Qumran community," a phrase indicating the archaeological and literary relics uncovered at the Qumran site. For further discussion see John J. Collins, "Sectarian Communities in the Dead Sea Scrolls," in *The Oxford Handbook of The Dead Sea Scrolls*, eds. Timothy H. Lim and John J. Collins (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 151–73, esp. p. 158.

[19] Antony E. Gilles, *The People of the Book: The Story Behind the Old Testament* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2001), 138.

family meeting provided the basis for new communities. Luke identifies the new followers of Jesus in Philippi meeting in the home of Lydia (Acts 16:15, 40). These gatherings emerged as a result of the apostles' proclamation of the message of Christ, fostering deep connections with God and intense interactions among believers. Acts of the Apostles illustrates how these communities met from house to house (Acts 2:46; 5:42; 12:12).

In its embryonic phase, the local band of Christ's disciples assembled in intimate abodes.[20] This practice derived from the requirement for privacy and clandestine in a period when Christianity had not yet been widely accepted or become a legitimate religion (1 Cor 1:16). Worshippers gathered at the domiciles of fellow Christians to entreat, contemplate Jesus's teachings, and savor the bread of fellowship, which is viewed as an archaic representation of the Lord's supper (Acts 2:46). These home-based assemblies incited a feeling of closely-knit fraternity and enabled the flow of spiritual revelations and cheering among the original Christians. As Christianity flourished and was recognized, these petite home assemblies transformed into more formal church congregations and played an integral role in the emergence of Christian adoration as we know it today.

In the NT, the community became God's house or temple. Paul employs the spiritual temple-motif in his letters to the Ephesians: "You are fellow citizens with the saints and of the household of God. And are built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ himself being the chief cornerstone, in whom all the building *fitly framed* together grow unto a holy temple in the Lord, in whom ye also are built together for *a habitation* of God through the Spirit" (Eph 2:19–22, emphasis is mine). The Apostle Peter also takes up the spiritual temple-motif: "You also, as living stones, are being built up into a spiritual house, a holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ" (1 Pet 2:5 NIV). Otto Michel fittingly asserts, "the motif of the οἶκος τοῦ θεοῦ is referred to the community, yet it is not really a metaphor of the *familia dei*, οἶκος remains the actual house, a spiritual, supraterrestral, divine, and heavenly structure."[21]

Paul, in his letters, references the exchange of correspondence taking place in private homes (1 Cor 16:19; Rom 16:3, 5; Phil 2; Col 4:15). Filson observes that these home and house settings not only served as the social backdrop for the church but also acted as spaces for private domestic activities.[22] In fact, a single family, such as Aquila and Prisca, became the initial

[20] Otto Michel, "οἶκος," *TDNT* 5:130.

[21] Michel, "οἶκος," 5:126–27.

[22] Filson, "The Significance of the Early Church," 106.

nucleus of the church, with the Christian community gathering around their house church (1 Cor 16:19). As time progressed, these private dwellings transformed into assemblies that encompassed all Christian households and individuals (1 Cor 1:9).[23]

Paul identifies persons and the property of households as *oikos* and *oikia* respectively. He says that he baptized the "house [*oikos*] of Stephanas," and commends the Stephanas household *(oikia)* as the first fruits of Achaia as having "devoted themselves to service for the saints" (1 Cor 16:15f). Luke uses *oikos* as he refers to the baptism of household in Acts: Lydia (16:15); the Philippian jailer (16:31–34); Crispus, the ruler of the synagogue of Corinth (18:8; cf. 10:2; 11:14; John 4:53). In these occurrences, the Greek word *oikos* denotes wealth, possessions, or the physical room, whereas *oikia* infers the relatives, servants, or even clients of a household. Both words, however, are used interchangeably for dwelling, the family, and kin.

Paul's letters reflect his deep understanding of the familial dynamics within the early Christian community. He addresses the recipients as brothers and sisters, embodying a paternal role, as evident in his reference to himself as a father figure to his spiritual children (1 Thess 2:11). Moreover, Paul employs vivid metaphors, likening himself to a pregnant mother giving birth to the Galatians (Gal 4:19). Filson notes that while the use of family-related language predates Paul in religious groups, he uniquely applies it to the context of the house church.[24] This language is not merely a formality, but holds profound significance in Paul's writings, signifying the deep bonds and communal nature of the early Christian fellowship. Through this familial lens, Paul establishes himself as an apostle and a nurturing father figure, uniting the believers as a closely-knit spiritual family. The gathering of believers in private homes aligns both with practical considerations and Paul's theological vision for the Christian community.

It is reasonable to conjecture that the interface between the Jewish home as a religious center and the objective of the Christian home or house meetings underscores the enduring importance of the family unit in nurturing and transmitting faith.[25] The early Christian small groups, influenced by

[23] Charles Anthony Stewart, "Churches," in *The Oxford Handbook of Early Christian Archaeology*, eds. David K. Pettegrew, William R. Caraher, and Thomas R. Davis (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019), 129.

[24] Filson, "The Significance of the Early Church," 111.

[25] The family unit in the Greco-Roman was considered to be a "social construct which mediates relatedness.… [It] consisted of a variety of persons who were not related

Jewish traditions, found a natural extension of their worship and fellowship within the intimate settings of households. Furthermore, it is important to consider the context in which these early Christian small groups operated and the broader implications of their significance within the development of the early church.

3. Functions of the Household in the Early Christian Era

3.1 Household interactions

The household and consequently the house meetings of the early Christian era formed the basis of satisfying relationships, purposeful interactions, and designated roles. Family members played a crucial role in forming the core of the initial assembly, with their close bonds and shared faith driving the community's spiritual journey. Luke's comment on the life of apostles offers insights to their identity and mission: "And day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they received their food with gladness and generous hearts, praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved" (Acts 2:46–47). Given the intense communal intimate relationships—sharing all things in common—the household members developed a sense of belonging and necessity to assign tasks within the fellowship and beyond.

3.2 Household Structures

The intimate connections of the household assemblies lead to the formation of internal structures to serve both the fellowship and the larger society. The households gathered for prayers and collections of material and financials to assist another household (Phil 4:14–18; 2 Cor 8:1–5). Moreover, baptisms of the whole households and not just individuals happened (Act 16:13–34; 17:2–9; 18:1–11). Del Birkley aptly affirms that the aspect of small group as a church involves "personal functions (aid personal spiritual growth); maintenance functions (develop function unity and koinonia); and task

genealogical to each other" (Ray Laurence, "From Oikos to Familia: Looking Forward," in *Families Greco–Roman World*, eds. Ray Laurence and Agneta Strömberg (New York: Continuum, 2012), 15.

functions (mobilize for commitment and ministry)."[26] The small group of a house church, therefore, facilitated personal ministry, household nurture, and evangelism. Transitioning from the analysis of household fellowship, we now turn to the African philosophy of Ubuntu, which provides a unique lens through which to view community and connection. This approach emphasizes the deep-rooted belief that individuals in society are interdependent and collectively human.

4. African Family and *Ubuntu* Small Group Typology

The object of this section is to simply extract from the African social ethos such portion of typical character consonant to house church and small group dynamics. The typology of the African family relates in various points to the house church and small group operations. In order to assess whether the African communal ethos is in line with the small group objectives, this section explores the connections between African cultural values and the life of small groups.

Historically, the African family expressed itself in the context of social bonds and cultural traditions rather than through individual traits.[27] Romose argues that the African community is a dynamic interplay between men and women, characterized by a profound commitment to each other, ultimately resulting in their collective existence.[28] The understanding of community also entails the recognition of social contracts that define their associations and responsibilities. The interconnectedness within the African community, as Romose asserts, is driven by common goals that shape individual choices and experiences. Consequently, an individual's life and personal history are intricately intertwined with the collective narrative and shared social goods of the communities in which they reside, encompassing both material and moral dimensions.

4.1 The Ubuntu Interactive Concept

The term *Ubuntu* is comprised of the prefix *ubu-* and the stem *ntu* to project

[26] Del Birkley, *The House Church* (Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 1988), 143.

[27] M. B. Ramose, "The Philosophy of Ubuntu and Ubuntu as a Philosophy," in *Philosophy from Africa: A Text with Readings*, ed. P. H. Coetzee and A. P. J. Roux, 2nd ed. (London, UK: Oxford University Press, 2002), 325.

[28] Ramose, "The Philosophy of Ubuntu," 327.

the notion of being in general.[29] Scholars offer various definitions of the term *Ubuntu*. According to Michael Battle the concept of *Ubuntu* originates from the Xhosa expression *'Umuntu ngumntu ngabanye abantu'*, which means that an individual finds expression in the relationship with others.[30] He avers ubu-ntu expresses the fundamental essence and meaning of humanity of the Bantu-speaking people. To attain the full philosophical import of the term *Ubuntu* requires elaborate documentation beyond the scope of this paper.

The central notion of the African community is the configuration of people working together to create peace and love.[31] In this context, common goals within the community dictate individual choices, while the person's life and history are intricately woven into a particular group's social goods. The household, as a fundamental unit of this communal fabric, serves as a nurturing space where individuals develop their dealings with the material and moral world of the communities they belong to.

The social fabric of the African community consists of families, kinship, associations like clans, and then clubs, neighbourhoods, communities, congregations, and more extended social hierarchies.[32] Nonceba Nolundi Mabovula mentions Y. Waghid, B. Van Wyk B., F. Adams, and L. November L.'s slogan that "your child is mine [and] my child is yours," which aptly captures the flavor of African communal life.[33] It means that the child belongs to the community, and the onus remains with the community to make it a significant member of that community—an asset to all.

It is plausible to surmise that the African community embraces communal values that emphasize the individuals' connection to the collective, viewing their actions as mutually beneficial to others and themselves. Within this framework, the household assumes a vital role as a nurturing environment where these communal values are taught and embraced. It becomes a microcosm of the larger African community, fostering a strong sense of interconnectedness and shared responsibility.[34] Individuals within the household strive to cultivate peace and love, understanding that their

29 Michael Battle, *Ubuntu: I in You and You in Me* (New York: Seabury, 2009), 2.

30 Battle, *Ubuntu*, 3.

31 Battle, *Ubuntu*, 15.

32 Battle, *Ubuntu*, 3.

33 Nonceba Nolundi Mabovula, "The Erosion of African Communal Values: A Reappraisal of the African Ubuntu Philosophy," https://www.ajol.-info/index.php/ijhss/article/view/69506.

34 Mabovula, "Erosion of African Communal Values."

choices and actions have ripple effects on both their immediate surroundings and the wider community.[35]

Kwame Gyekye also upholds the philosophy regarding the communal values.[36] He asserts that within the matrix of an African community, a person's interests are bound up with the interests of the group over a great number of issues of life and well-being.[37] Gyekye elsewhere concludes that the members of a community also consider themselves primarily as members of the group that have common interests, goals, and values.[38] This communal cultural philosophy is still an advanced communal life and is commonly known as *Ubuntu.*

4.2 Ubuntu Small Group Dynamic

The following discussion examines the *Ubuntu* socio-cultural methodology and possible developments to advance its dynamcis to communication inside the African Church after the COVID-19 pandemic, with a peculiar emphasis on family-oriented plans. Mabovula mentions Khoza Reuel Jr.'s definition of *Ubuntu* as "an African value system that means humanness or being human, a worldview characterised by such values as caring, sharing, compassion, communalism, communocracy and related predispositions."[39] She further cites Reuel to add that "although it [*Ubuntu*] is culturally African in origin, the philosophy can have universal application."[40] Evidence of the relationship between the African communal cultural systems and the small groups in the church might appear remote and complicated. However, they are discernable in several parts of the life of an African.

The Ubuntu philosophy presents a perceptible spiritual union between the African community and the small group mechanics within the church in multiple ways. There is, however, a specific difference between the two systems, which might be very difficult to detect and which is of some importance to notice. In the context of the African spirit of *Ubuntu*, Mabovula cites Reuel to observe that *Ubuntu* "constitutes the spiritual cradle of African

35 Battle, *Ubuntu*, 15.

36 Kwame Gyekye, *An Essay on African Philosophical Thought: The Akan Conceptual Scheme* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 155.

37 Gyekye, *Essay on African Philosophical Thought*, 155.

38 Kwame Gyekye, "Person and Community in African Thought," in *Philosophy from Africa: A Text with Readings*, eds. P. H. Coetzee and A. P. J. Roux, 2nd ed. (Cape Town: Oxford University Press, 2002), 297–312.

39 Mabovula, "The Erosion of African Communal Values," 40.

40 Mabovula, "The Erosion of African Communal Values," 40.

religion and culture [and] finds expression in virtually all walks of life—social, political and economic."[41] There is a genuine example of the African spirit of *Ubuntu* that shows affinity with social dynamics of the small group.

4.3 Ubuntu Spirituality in Small Groups

The spiritual essence of *Ubuntu* encompasses a crucial element of small groups, house church, and family, as they contribute to personal spiritual growth and foster unity and *koinonia* rooted in a strong commitment to the collective identity.[42] *Ubuntu* places significant emphasis on sharing, shared responsibility, and communal celebration.[43] Furthermore, it cultivates harmonious human relationships while honouring and dignifying every individual. The profound impact of *Ubuntu* within a network lies in the value it ascribes to human existence and the inherent dignity of every person. The framework, especially its view of the elderly, who played an essential communal function in consolidating *Ubuntu* values. This is exemplified in John Mbiti's statement that "whatever happens to the individual happens to the whole group and whatever happens to the whole group happens to the individual."[44]

The basic elements of small group resonate with *Ubuntu* building the African church. Further, Graham Tomlin elucidates that "small" groups or "cell" groups bring about "the intimacy that becomes possible due to their smaller size, the emphasis lies upon sharing one another's lives, and the importance given to the small group as the basic unit of church life, cells have a greater capacity to create genuine and effective community than many other models of church life."[45] While there are local variations, it is possible to identify common elements that define small group ministries and African communal values. First and foremost, small group ministry places high value on the communal context rather than the individual. The social cohesiveness brings to the fore community outreach with quick, lasting results.

41 Mabovula, "The Erosion of African Communal Values," 40.

42 R. Simangaliso Kumalo, "The Changing Landscape of South Africa and Implications for Practicing ubuntu," in *Practicing Ubuntu: Practical Theological Perspective on Injustice, Personhood, and Human Dignity*, eds. Jaco Dreyer, Yolanda Dreyer, Edward Foley, Malan Nel (Zurich: LIT, 2017), 28.

43 Kumalo, "Changing Landscape of South Africa," 28.

44 John Mbiti, *Concepts of God in Africa* (London: SPCK, 1970), 108.

45 Graham Tomlin, "Cell Church: Culturally Appropriate?," in *Church Without Walls: A Global Examination of Cell Church,* ed. Michael Green (Exeter: Paternoster Press, 2002), 105–6.

The basic elements of *Ubuntu* influences and shapes the structure of small groups. This raises the question of how small groups are connected to and interact with the broader concept of community, necessitating further investigation. Robert Wuthnow surmises that community is the ultimate objective of small groups.[46] Community is the very foundation of the Christian faith, which stems back to the first church and is traceable in the social fabric of the African community that puts heavy emphasis on *Ubuntu*.

4.4 Ubuntu Koinonia

People gather to connect with God and one another in small groups. Wuthnow observes that small groups offer a social solvent and create favorable conditions for spiritual growth and exploration.[47] Ed Stetzer reiterates that "in most churches that are reaching postmodern community [fellowship/small groups?] is a central value in all postmodern communities whether secular or sacred."[48] The environs of small group support belongingness to its constituents, fostering communities more consistently faithful to the Gospel.

By drawing upon the theoretical framework of African communal culture, one can uncover communitarian principles that shape the philosophical underpinnings of contemporary small group ministries. African communities bring together individuals, tribes, and clans through social bonds and cultural traditions, mirroring the confessional and covenantal relationships among believers within the church. The African communal symmetric model fosters harmony and cohesion, starting at the family and small group level, and extending to encompass the global church community.

While it is possible to notice local variations, there are common elements that define~~s~~ the African communities and the house church and modern small group dynamics. In this paper, I have highlighted some basic common elements of the African community that are present in the theoretical structuring of small groups. Two principles at work are discussed below, fellowship and discipleship.

46 Robert Wuthnow, *Sharing the Journey of Support Groups and Americans New Quest for Community* (New York: Free Press, 1994), 345.

47 Wuthnow, *Sharing the Journey of Support Groups*, 345.

48 Ed Stetzer, *Planting New Churches in a Postmodern Age* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2003), 149. See also p. 115.

4.5 Fellowship

African communities, similar to modern small groups, emphasize the importance of fellowship. Fellowship involves people coming together to share, unite, communicate, and join themselves to one another. This concept can be understood through the Greek word *koinonia*, which signifies partnership, participation, and social interaction, ultimately leading to communion.[49] The definition offers a basis of social bonding that promotes communal synergy. Craig L. Nessan argues that the essence of Christian *koinonia* is "mutual love and concern shown by Jesus to those who followed him."[50] Small groups, reasoned Betty Wieland, "are all about people because the crown of God's creation is people. Its people He want us to build, not programs."[51] The core tenets of the African communities or *Ubuntu* philosophy include caring, humility, thoughtfulness, consideration, understanding, wisdom, generosity, hospitality, social maturity, and sensitivity—all attributes fostering mutuality. Thus, there appears to be a link between the African communities and small group dynamics.

4.6 Discipleship

A very strong aspect of African community is the transmission of cultural values or standards of acceptable behaviors. Likewise, small groups grow Christian believers through the teaching of Jesus Christ. Discipleship is the most common designation of such an objective. Discipleship relates to a "lasting relationship of a pupil or disciple to his/her master or teacher …. The words connected are applied chiefly to the followers of Jesus and describe the life of faith [through obedience to Him]."[52] A disciple is identified as a learner, *mathetes* in Greek. Robert Bagley aptly observes that "spiritual parenting is a primary result of discipleship which can, and in most cases does, emerge from the small group setting."[53]

The relationship between the teacher and student leads to the transmission of practical and theoretical knowledge from the former to the latter. In a wide range of the African communities the younger generation looks up

[49] J. Scattenmann, "Fellowship," *NIDNTT* 1:639.

[50] Craig L. Nessan, *Beyond Maintenance to Mission: A Theology of the Congregation* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1999), 5.

[51] David Stark and Betty V. Wieland, *Growing People through Small Groups* (Minneapolis: Bethany House, 2004), 24.

[52] C. Blendinger, "Disciple," *NIDNTT* 1:480.

[53] Blendinger, "Disciple," 1:480.

to the older generation to acquire understanding of the standard principles regarding the communities' ethos. Such foundational knowledge offers important institutional principles when embraced in the theoretical structuring of the small groups in the African church.

While the terms "disciple" or "follower" are not widely used in African parlance, the principle of growing and building the next generation underpins African communal ethos. The home and community provide the settings for the older generation to transmit moral values to the younger generation through words and deeds. The teaching methods include stories, proverbs, wise saying, and taboos mostly conveyed during various cultural initiation ceremonies. Based on the foregoing cultural matrices, the church in African is able to build small group ministries.

Several features of the concept of *Ubuntu* align with the dynamics of small groups. *Ubuntu* emphasizes the interconnectedness and interdependence of individuals within a community, emphasizing the idea that "I am because we are."[54] Similarly, small groups prioritize building strong relationships and fostering a sense of belonging among their members. *Ubuntu* promotes mutual support and collaboration, which resonates with the collaborative nature of small group dynamics where members work together towards shared goals. Additionally, *Ubuntu* emphasizes the value of collective decision-making and consensus-building, mirroring the participatory approach often found in small group discussions and decision-making processes. Overall, the principles of *Ubuntu*, such as interconnectedness, collaboration, and mutual support, align closely with the dynamics and goals of small groups.

5. Conclusion

The African church has ignored the African community's theoretical framework. It has always remained the core philosophy of Christian life. From its very nature, as explored or cultivated to bear effective results, the Christian life embraces tenets espoused in the spirit of African cultural values—*Ubuntu*. Hence it is not unusual to find the general principles of the African cultural values converging with the philosophy of small group ministries.

This paper contends that the African family—the communal framework—offers an appropriate structure for small group ministry to enhance

[54] John Mbiti, *African Religion and Philosophy* (London, UK: Heinemann, 1990), 105.

discipleship, fellowship, and evangelism. It argues that the communal principles embedded in the African community offers appropriate matrices for the growth and development of the house churches of small groups in the context of Africa families post COVID-19. The African church must endeavor to arrive at some definite ideas and fundamental principles embedded in the African community to foster its growth and development.