

A missionary parish in the spirit of *Evangelii gaudium*

Abstract

This article examines Holy Trinity Kariobangi Catholic Parish in Nairobi, Kenya, as a concrete embodiment of Pope Francis' vision for a missionary Church set forth in *Evangelii Gaudium*. The parish, entrusted to the Comboni Missionaries in 1974, has cultivated a robust culture of participatory pastoral planning through Small Christian Communities (SCCs) and collaborative ministry, a legacy shaped by the AMECEA guidelines and Lumko Institute methods. The central argument posits that Kariobangi Parish exemplifies the key missiological principles of *Evangelii Gaudium*: a permanent state of mission, a return to the kerygma, a culture of encounter, and a preferential option for the poor. The parish's identity is animated by a network of ministries—including biblical formation, care for the needy and sick, and social justice advocacy—that concretize these principles. These initiatives, from SCCs meeting in informal settlements to health programmes in Korogocho and educational and economic empowerment projects, demonstrate that authentic evangelization is inseparable from holistic service and accompaniment. The article concludes that by integrating the Comboni charism with the papal call for renewal, Kariobangi Parish functions as a vibrant "community of communities" that is both evangelizing and evangelized, offering a model for missionary parishes striving to bring the joy of the Gospel to the peripheries of the contemporary world.

Synthesis

Five major takeaways from Holy Trinity Kariobangi Parish

Holy Trinity Kariobangi Catholic Parish in Nairobi offers a compelling model of Pope Francis' vision for a missionary Church. The parish demonstrates that the principles of *Evangelii Gaudium* are not abstract ideals but lived realities capable of transforming communities. The following five takeaways synthesize the most significant lessons from this vibrant missionary community.

Takeaway 1: The Parish as a “Community of Communities” Rooted in Scripture

The parish remains a dynamic structure when it embraces its identity as a “community of communities” centred on the Word of God. Through 75 Small Christian Communities (SCCs) meeting in homes and even in the narrow spaces between shacks, Kariobangi has created a decentralized network where faith is lived, shared, and connected to daily life. These SCCs are the backbone of parish life—spaces of mutual support, prayer, and practical solidarity where neighbours reflect on the Sunday readings and discern how the Gospel speaks to their struggles and hopes. Drawing on the Lumko Institute's participatory methods and practices like *Lectio Divina*, parishioners learn to listen attentively to God's Word. The formation of readers, catechists, and pastoral leaders ensures credible proclamation, while families are encouraged to keep the Bible at the centre of their homes. This biblical spirituality sustains the parish's missionary outreach and ensures every member has a place of belonging and a role in the Church's mission.

Takeaway 2: The Primacy of the Kerygma and the Formation of Missionary Disciples

The centrality of the kerygma—the foundational proclamation of God's saving love in Jesus Christ—animates all pastoral activity at Kariobangi. Whether through preaching, catechesis, youth programmes, or family ministry, the primary goal is always to help people encounter Christ personally and deepen their relationship with Him. Faith formation is understood as a lifelong journey, not mere sacramental preparation. The parish seeks to form mature Christians capable of witnessing to the Gospel in their families, workplaces, and society. Catechists and lay leaders receive ongoing formation to exercise responsibility within the community, while modern communication tools like social media and the parish YouTube channel extend evangelization beyond church walls.

The ultimate aim is not simply religious knowledge but the formation of missionary disciples: men and women whose encounter with Christ inspires them to share the joy of the Gospel with others.

Takeaway 3: A Church That Goes Forth—Encountering the Peripheries with Hospitality

Kariobangi embodies Pope Francis' call for a Church that leaves its comfort zones and reaches out to those on the margins, cultivating a culture of encounter that mirrors Christ's mercy. Located near informal settlements like Korogocho, the parish does not wait for people to come to church but actively goes out to encounter them. This openness welcomes everyone regardless of social status, ethnicity, religion, or personal circumstances, treating each person with dignity as one created and loved by God. This hospitality strengthens rather than weakens the Church's identity. By becoming a place of dialogue, accompaniment, and acceptance, the parish reflects the merciful face of Christ and becomes a spiritual home where people experience healing and transformation. Whether through home visits to the sick, outreach to families in crisis, or simple presence in the neighbourhoods, Kariobangi demonstrates a Church that goes forth to the peripheries and welcomes all as members of God's family.

Takeaway 4: The Preferential Option for the Poor and Integral Human Development

The parish's unwavering commitment to the preferential option for the poor is inseparable from its evangelizing mission and expressed through concrete acts of solidarity and empowerment. Through *Huduma ya Wahitaji* (Ministry to the Needy), struggling families receive food, basic necessities, and accompaniment. The elderly, the sick, and persons with disabilities are supported with care and dignity. Yet the parish moves beyond simple charity towards empowerment through initiatives like the Kariobangi Women Promotion Training Institute, Napenda Kuishi Vocational Training Institute, Huruma Verona Savings and Credits Cooperative, and educational projects including St. John's School and St. Martin School. The Comboni Health Programme in Korogocho serves marginalized populations, including those living with HIV/AIDS. Underlying these efforts is a conviction rooted in the Comboni tradition: the poor are not passive recipients but protagonists of their own development. The dream of “the regeneration of Africa through Africa” begins when people discover their capacities and become agents of transformation in their communities.

Takeaway 5: The Participation of the Entire People of God in Collaborative Ministry

Mission belongs to every baptized person, and Kariobangi Parish is built on the active participation of all the faithful in a collaborative model of ministry. Drawing on the Lumko Institute's methods and AMECEA guidelines, the parish has cultivated a strong culture of participatory planning, monitoring, and evaluation coordinated by the pastoral team and Parish Council. Lay faithful, youth, families, ecclesial movements, and parish associations all contribute their gifts and charisms. Each SCC member is entrusted with a ministerial service carried out through neighbourhood-based teams, requiring continuous training at leadership and ministry-specific levels. The parish's Justice, Peace and Integrity of Creation (JPIC) ministry—including human rights advocacy, paralegal training, participation in popular movements, and collaboration with Tangaza University—demonstrates a Church that courageously engages structural injustice. This participatory approach ensures the parish is not dependent on a single leader but is a community of missionary disciples exercising their gifts in service of the Gospel.

Conclusion

Holy Trinity Kariobangi Parish stands as a powerful example of a missionary parish in the spirit of *Evangelii Gaudium*. These five takeaways—the parish as a decentralized community rooted in Scripture, the primacy of the kerygma and formation of missionary disciples, a Church that goes forth in encounter and hospitality, the preferential option for the poor and commitment to integral human

development, and the participation of the entire People of God in collaborative ministry—are interconnected expressions of a single missionary vision. Through the Holy Spirit, this parish continues Christ's mission of bringing good news to the poor, healing the broken-hearted, and offering hope to all. It is, in every sense, a Church permanently in mission, filled with the joy of the Gospel, and dedicated to the service of humanity.

A missionary parish in the spirit of *Evangelii gaudium*

Fr Jean Paul Bitia MCCJ

Introduction

Kariobangi Catholic Parish has a rich missionary history that began in 1961 with the Spiritan Missionaries. In 1966, Fr. Thomas Meagher CSSP started celebrating Mass and visiting families in their homes on the outskirts of Nairobi, in the Kariobangi area. A plot of land was acquired, a church was built, and in 1974 Holy Trinity Parish was entrusted to the Comboni Missionaries.

A decisive moment came under the leadership of the late Fr. Mario Porto, a gifted pastor who spoke a language everyone could understand. The parish embraced the pastoral guidelines of AMECEA, promulgated in 1973, which promoted Small Christian Communities (SCC) and a ministerial approach to pastoral life. Drawing on the participatory methods developed by the Lumko Institute, the parish adopted a collaborative model of ministry coordinated by the pastoral team and Parish Council. This established a strong culture of participatory planning, monitoring, and evaluation.

Kariobangi Parish in the Light of *Evangelii Gaudium*

In *Evangelii Gaudium* (*The Joy of the Gospel*), Pope Francis calls the Church to a new era of evangelization marked by joy, mercy, and missionary outreach. He envisions a Church permanently in mission, one that leaves its comfort zones to encounter people where they are and bring them the liberating message of the Gospel. This vision finds concrete expression in the life and mission of Holy Trinity Kariobangi.

Pope Francis teaches that the parish is not an outdated structure, but a community capable of continual renewal. It is called to be a “community of communities” and a centre of missionary outreach that remains close to ordinary people. A missionary parish cannot be satisfied with maintaining existing structures or serving only regular churchgoers. It must actively seek out those who are distant, forgotten, wounded, or searching for meaning.

At the heart of this renewal lies the proclamation of the *kerygma*—the fundamental announcement of God’s saving love in Jesus Christ. The *kerygma* proclaims that God loves every person, that Christ gave His life for our salvation, and that He continues to offer forgiveness, hope, and new life. Pope Francis insists that all pastoral activity must be rooted in this joyful proclamation because an encounter with Christ transforms hearts and forms disciples.

Kariobangi Parish places evangelization at the centre of its identity. Through preaching, catechesis, Small Christian Communities, family ministries, youth formation, and missionary outreach, it accompanies people on their faith journey. Parishioners are encouraged not only to receive the Gospel but also to become missionary disciples who share the joy of Christ through their words, actions, and witness.

Authentic evangelization, however, cannot be separated from concern for the poor and vulnerable. This conviction is evident in the Comboni Health Programme (CHP) in Korogocho informal

settlement, which serves marginalized people, including those living with HIV/AIDS, helping them live longer, healthier, and more fulfilling lives. The Gospel calls the Church to recognize Christ in those who suffer and to respond with concrete acts of solidarity.

Guided by the preferential option for the poor, Kariobangi Parish has developed ministries that respond to the community's diverse needs. Through *Huduma ya Wahitaji* (Ministry to the Needy), struggling families receive food, basic necessities, and accompaniment. The elderly, the sick, and persons living with disabilities are supported with care and dignity. Educational initiatives empower children and young people, while counselling and support ministries bring hope to those facing personal or family difficulties. These are not simply charitable activities; they are visible expressions of the Gospel and signs of God's compassionate presence.

The missionary outreach of Holy Trinity Kariobangi is also marked by a culture of encounter. Following Pope Francis' invitation to draw near to others, listen to their stories, and build genuine relationships, the parish welcomes people regardless of social status, ethnicity, nationality, age, religion, or personal circumstances. Every person is treated with dignity because each one is created and loved by God.

This openness strengthens rather than weakens the Church's identity. By becoming a place of hospitality, dialogue, and accompaniment, the parish reflects the merciful face of Christ and becomes a spiritual home where people experience acceptance, healing, and transformation.

Pope Francis also emphasizes that missionary renewal requires the participation of the entire People of God. Mission belongs not only to priests and religious but to every baptized person. Lay faithful, youth, families, ecclesial movements, and parish associations all contribute their gifts and charisms to build a vibrant, inclusive, and outward-looking community.

Holy Trinity Parish is therefore a missionary parish in the spirit of *Evangelii Gaudium*: a community centred on Christ, nourished by the Word and the Eucharist, committed to proclaiming the Gospel in word and deed, reaching out to the peripheries, serving the poor, and welcoming all as members of God's family.

Through the power of the Holy Spirit, the Parish continues Christ's mission of bringing good news to the poor, healing the broken-hearted, and offering hope to all. In doing so, it embodies Pope Francis' vision of "a Church permanently in mission, filled with the joy of the Gospel, and dedicated to the service of humanity."

The parish also reflects the charism of St. Daniel Comboni through its commitment to missionary discipleship, the primacy of the *kerygma*, a Church that goes forth, a culture of encounter, and a preferential option for the poor.

Ministries at the Service of the Gospel

The missionary identity of Holy Trinity Parish is not expressed only through structures and programmes but through a network of ministries that bring the Gospel into the everyday realities of the people. Inspired by Christ's mission of proclaiming the Word, celebrating the sacraments, and serving humanity, these ministries seek to accompany people in their concrete situations and help them encounter the living God.

a. The Ministry of the Bible (*Huduma ya Biblia*)

The Ministry of the Bible occupies a central place in the life of the parish because the Word of God is the foundation of all evangelization. Over the years, Kariobangi has cultivated a strong biblical spirituality, largely through the seventy-five Small Christian Communities that form the backbone of

parish life. Every week, Christians gather in homes – or even in the spaces in-between the shacks, since the homes are too small – to share the Sunday readings, pray together, and reflect on how the Gospel speaks to their daily struggles and hopes.

These gatherings are much more than Bible study groups. They are spaces where faith is connected to life, where neighbours support one another, and where the Word of God becomes a source of encouragement in the midst of economic hardship, family challenges, and the demands of urban life. The parish continues to draw on the Lumko approach and on methods such as *Lectio Divina*, which encourage people not only to read the Scriptures but also to listen attentively to what God is saying to them through His Word.

Particular attention is given to the formation of readers, catechists, and pastoral leaders. Through regular training, they learn not only how to proclaim the Scriptures well but also how to become credible witnesses of the message they announce. Families are encouraged to keep the Bible at the centre of their homes, fostering a culture in which prayer and reflection on the Word become part of everyday life.

b. Ministry to the Needy (*Huduma ya Wahitaji*)

Concern for the poor has always been one of the distinguishing characteristics of Kariobangi Parish. Situated close to areas marked by poverty and social vulnerability, the parish encounters daily the faces of those whom Pope Francis calls “the discarded.” For this reason, service to the needy is not regarded as an optional activity but as an essential dimension of Christian discipleship.

Through *Huduma ya Wahitaji*, parishioners accompany families facing hunger, unemployment, illness, and social exclusion. Assistance is offered in many forms: emergency support, food distribution, educational assistance, and personal accompaniment. Yet the parish has always sought to move beyond a model of simple charity towards one of empowerment and human development.

This vision is reflected in initiatives such as the Kariobangi Women Promotion Training Institute, Napenda Kuishi Vocational Training Institute, Huruma Verona Savings and Credits Cooperative, and various educational projects including St. John’s School, Watoto Wetu School, and St. Martin School. These initiatives seek not only to respond to immediate needs but also to create opportunities that restore dignity and promote self-reliance.

Underlying all these efforts is a conviction deeply rooted in the Comboni tradition: that the poor are not merely recipients of assistance but protagonists of their own development. The dream of “the regeneration of Africa through Africa” begins when people discover their own capacities and become active agents of transformation in their communities.

c. Ministry to the Sick (*Huduma ya Wagonjwa*)

Care for the sick occupies a special place in the pastoral life of Kariobangi. In the African context, illness affects not only individuals but entire families and communities. The parish therefore seeks to make visible the healing and compassionate presence of Christ among those who suffer.

Teams of Extraordinary Ministers of Holy Communion regularly visit homes, hospitals, and care centres, bringing the Eucharist to those who can no longer participate in the liturgical life of the community. These visits are often moments of deep human and spiritual encounter. Beyond administering the sacraments, ministers offer friendship, prayer, and a listening ear to people who may feel isolated or forgotten.

The parish also ensures that the faithful have access to the Sacrament of Reconciliation and the Anointing of the Sick. Communal celebrations for the sick, together with healing services organized

through the Charismatic Movement and other prayer groups, help many people find comfort and hope during difficult moments.

This ministry reminds the entire community that suffering does not diminish a person's dignity or place within the Church. On the contrary, those who suffer remain at the heart of the Christian community and call forth the solidarity and compassion of all believers.

The commitment of the parish to health and healing is also expressed through the Comboni Health Programme in Korogocho, which has accompanied vulnerable populations, including people living with HIV/AIDS, for many years. Through professional care and human accompaniment, the programme embodies the Church's concern for the whole person.

d. Social Ministry (*Huduma ya Haki na Amani*)

There is a long Justice, Peace and Integrity of Creation tradition in the Parish, one that dates back to the late 1980s. It is a legacy left by the work of Fr Alex Zanotelli and other confreres who followed in his footsteps. It is a ministry that has developed quite a variety of initiatives in collaboration with other ecclesial and civil society actors, for example: running the yearly Lenten Campaign of the Bishops Conference of Kenya; promoting human rights and social justice – nowadays with trained paralegals; responding to specific situations of injustice and events (like the infamous Kariobangi massacre of 2002); participating in and accompanying the struggle of popular movements, such as that of slums dwellers; and even collaborating with academic institutions for promoting a brand of social transformation inspired by the Gospel, like in the project of University Mtaani, in collaboration with the Institute for Social Transformation of Tangaza University. Currently, the parish is piloting a pastoral programme for promoting the message and the conversion prospected by the Encyclical *Laudato Si'* in Africa.

e. Faith Formation and Missionary Discipleship

Faith formation at Kariobangi Parish is understood as a lifelong journey rather than a preparation limited to the reception of the sacraments. The parish seeks to form mature Christians who are capable of witnessing to the Gospel in their families, workplaces, and society.

At the centre of all formation is the proclamation of the *kerygma*—the joyful announcement of God's love revealed in Jesus Christ. Whether through catechesis, youth programmes, family ministry, Small Christian Communities, or parish associations, the primary goal is always to help people encounter Christ personally and deepen their relationship with Him.

Children, young people, and adults are accompanied through different stages of faith development. Catechists play an indispensable role in this process, generously dedicating their time and talents to forming new generations of Christians. The parish also invests in the ongoing formation of lay leaders who are called to exercise responsibility within the community and participate actively in its missionary outreach.

Recognizing the opportunities offered by modern communication, Kariobangi increasingly uses social media, parish publications, pamphlets, and its YouTube channel to extend evangelization beyond church walls. These tools enable the Gospel to reach people in their homes, workplaces, and daily lives.

The ultimate aim of all formation is not simply religious knowledge but the formation of missionary disciples: men and women whose encounter with Christ inspires them to share the joy of the Gospel with others.

Conclusion

The various ministries that enliven the Parish are essential expressions of the Church's mission. They are based in the Small Christian Communities and provide an organized opportunity for the faithful to express and share their faith along the mandate they receive from the Parish community. Each member of a SCC is entrusted with a ministerial service, which is carried out through ministerial teams based in the neighbourhoods. That requires a continuous training both at the level of leadership (SCC, Parish and zonal Councils) and specific to the particular ministries.

Exercised with prayer, compassion, and collaboration, these ministries help create a parish that is evangelizing, welcoming, and missionary. Rooted in the Word of God, strengthened by faith, attentive to those who suffer, and committed to serving the poor, Holy Trinity Parish strives to be a living witness to Christ's love and a sign of God's Kingdom in the world, in the spirit of Pope Francis' *Evangelii Gaudium*.