

Re-rooting the Faith in Asia through SCCs using the AsIPA Method

By Cora Mateo 2004

Many Church workers often start their pastoral planning session asking the question: How can we make the people more actively involved in Church mission, in parish activities and programs? How can we create an atmosphere where the people feel a sense of belonging in their parish? Some ask further questions with regards to the role of the Church in the neighbourhood, in inter-religious dialogue and joint efforts. For the Bishops of Asia, one very challenging question is: “How can Christianity find its home in Asia?” During the Synod on Asia in 1998, the Bishops recognized that Jesus who was born in Asia, is least known among the Asians. Statistics show that the followers of the Christian faith are less than 3% in Asia where other religions also had their origin and had taken root. For many of the baptized Asian Catholics, their colleagues (even members of their families) still consider them as people who have acquired a ‘foreign’ religion.

During the second Vatican Council, the Bishops of Asia met each other and became aware that among themselves, they have very little links. Their desire to “foster among them solidarity and co-responsibility for the welfare of the Church and society in Asia,” begun when they met in Manila during the visit of Pope Paul VI in 1970. It is the “awakening to see the face of Asia at long last coming to birth as a true community of peoples” and considered the beginning of the Federation of Asian Bishops’ Conferences (FABC), the only one recognized body that can represent the particular Churches in Asia. FABC has 14 full members made up of Bishops’ Conferences and has 10 associate members from countries where there are no Bishops’ Conferences like Hong Kong, Nepal, etc... The highest body is the Plenary Assembly that meets once every 4 years. There are seven Offices to implement the recommendations of the Plenary Assembly: Office of Human Development, Office of Ecumenical and Inter-Religious Affairs, Office of Education and Student Chaplaincy, Office of Social Communication, Office of Evangelization, Office of Laity and Office of Theological Concerns.

During the fifth FABC Plenary Assembly in Bandung, Indonesia, 1990, the Bishops talked about the challenges to evangelization in Asia in the next millennium and the response to those challenges. The response is not so much in talking about the Church or organizing actions or projects, or establishing institutions, but a response that comes from the core, from BEING Church. They then expressed the renewal towards a “New Way of Being Church,” a Church that is: Participative, a Communion of Communities, a Prophetic Church and a Church in Dialogue. Before that Plenary Assembly ended, they articulated the need to have a formation program that would bring about this renewal and the Office of Laity of FABC was designated to take this as its special task.

The first international formation workshop took place in 1991, in Hua Hin, Thailand. The materials used were those from Lumko Institute in South Africa. We had other workshops in Chinese and English and in other places: Taiwan, Malaysia, the Philippines and India. In 1993, those who were involved in reflecting about this experience came together to share their evaluation. What materials can we use so that the Asian who uses them will feel it is for him/her, that it is applicable to their needs and their life situations can fit in easily? It was then when the acronym AsIPA was coined to mean: Asian Integral Pastoral Approach. Looking at the Asian situation, contextualizing the faith was among the main concerns.

Asian means it is reflecting the life situations and cultures of Asia. It is a text that can dialogue with the poor and can integrate the multi-religious context and the socio-economic progress taking place in Asia. It aims to discover the Asian face of Jesus.

Integral refers to the integration of the social and sacred, the individual and the communitarian, the hierarchical and the co-responsibility of the laity and, the theory and the practice. Faith is then made alive in human situations.

Pastoral gives special focus on the role of lay people in carrying out the mission, to realize the dream of Jesus by becoming actively involved. It deals with methods to awaken that co-responsibility of the laity and at the same time, bring about joint efforts where clergy and laity can work together. It offers ways for priest to learn how to work in a team and acquire an enabling type of leadership.

The **Approach** refers to the specific process of involving the people in searching together. It is Christ-centered and at the same time building community that does not live for itself but carries out the mission. It raises awareness about the situation where the message of the Gospel is to be lived and brings about a communitarian response to the needs of the neighbourhood and the wider society.

The basic text for running training sessions in the Small Christian Communities is a booklet that has a code to raise the issue, Biblical text related to it, some Church teachings when needed, and guide questions for the group to reflect. It also includes a Supplement to complete the answers given by the participants and a Summary that is like an in-put. The booklet is a guide and with minimum training, the facilitator can run the sessions. There are four series that deal with:

A Series – Topics related to Gospel sharing methods (A/1 to A/8)

B Series – Topics related to starting and maintaining Small Christian Communities (B/1 to B/7)

C Series – Topics to reflect on the Vision of a Participatory Church (C/1 to C/6)

D Series – Topics for the training of Parish Teams (D/1 to D/9)

There are also “Library Topics” that deal with specific issues not belonging to the 4 series on:

1. Parenting
2. Family Life
3. Socio-economic questions
4. Love and service
5. Women’s issues
6. Inter-religious Dialogue

Very essential to SCCs is the coming together to do Gospel sharing, using the 7 steps method started by the Lumko Institute. The AsIPA A series texts explain each step in a simplified manner so that a facilitator can run the session with minimal training. Gospel sharing nurtures the spirituality of SCCs and the vision of a Participatory Church. It is the starting point for SCCs and maintains the faith-filled response to the challenges to be instruments of transformation. In Gospel sharing, they prepare for Sunday liturgy and they reflect on the Gospel message for each of them and as a community in their neighbourhood and thus allow the Gospel to become alive in the very culture and milieu where they people are. During the pastoral visit of one Bishop in Sri Lanka who joined the Gospel sharing of an SCC and listened to the sharing on how the Word touched their lives, exclaimed: “This is the way to be Church.” In Japan, after one Gospel sharing session, a priest expressed: “If I have SCCs in my parish, I know I will never be lonely again.” The Gospel sharing as basic prayer for the SCCs, offers the sacred moment where the communities gather to prepare for the Sunday eucharist and allow the Word to touch their lives and move them to put it into action

Aside from the 7 Steps Method, we also use Gospel Mirror, Look-Listen-Love and Group Response. Like other AsIPA texts, Gospel sharing methods are translated into more than 20 Asian Languages.

After ten years, where are we? The AsIPA Desk continues to be a section under the FABC Office of Laity, based in Taipei, and it functions with an AsIPA Resource Team (ART), presently with 7 members from India (2), Korea, the Philippines, Singapore, Sri Lanka and Taiwan. The main task of ART includes:

1. Facilitating the training of trainers in different countries,
2. Designing the texts, following up the process and doing the final editing, and
3. Maintaining an effective networking among national and diocesan teams.

During the last ART meeting, they finalized the draft for “trial use” of 17 new modules that deal on SCC and Evangelization, SCCs and the Sacraments, SCCs and the Family, Leadership in SCCs and...

In September, 2003, the third General Assembly of Trainers was held in Korea. Thirteen Asian countries with Papua New Guinea and Germany participated with the theme: “SCCs/BECs: Empowering People to Serve.” The 123 participants including bishops, priests, lay leaders and religious brought along their reflection on how much each national or diocesan team has achieved since the previous General Assembly in 2000. They also brought copies of locally produced materials that responded to specific needs. The first part of the General Assembly was an evaluative session on how much of the vision has been implemented followed by the sub-topics as development of the theme:

1. Family
2. Leadership
3. Ministry
4. Spirituality

With the AsIPA method, we have a tool so there can be a gradual process of making the Christian faith alive in the family, in the neighbourhood and taking root in the very culture the people are living in now. It is not the Asian culture we read about, but the present one constructed by the people as they struggle and celebrate, as they become living witnesses among their neighbours with whom they engaged in joint efforts to improve their lives and surroundings. In simple ways, AsIPA aims to contribute in small steps, but constant steps, to bring about the Asian face of Jesus.