

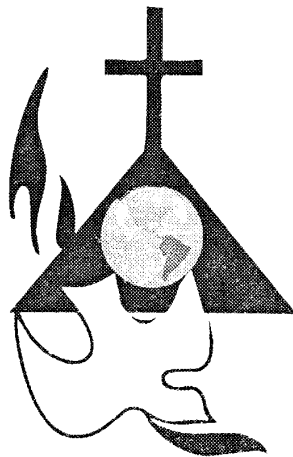
SCCs - A GLOBAL MOVEMENT

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We read and hear a lot about Small Christian Communities (SCCs) in Mumbai and in India. What about the rest of the world? Do they also have communities similar to ours? What is the impact of these communities in their respective countries? Just as the Church is universal and spread across the whole globe, the "new way of being Church" too has manifested itself all across the world, through a variety of "ecclesial movements which continue to give the Church a vitality that is God's gift and a true springtime of the spirit" (Pope John Paul II: *Novo Millennio Ineunte*). In his foreword to the book *'Small Christian Communities Today: Capturing the New Moment'*, Cardinal Cormac Murphy - O'Connor (Archbishop of Westminster, England) writes..."this 'new moment' of SCCs is a global moment, one that is true of the Church at all points of its compass....a Church endlessly refired by the Holy Spirit, just as it was at the beginning in Jerusalem".

While many of the challenges faced by the Church are shared across the continents, the SCC movement has acquired different forms and a plethora of nomenclature in different regions, since the movement seeks to develop contextually and to respond first to local needs. At one count, the number of names (SCCs, BCCs, BECs, NGGs, FSGs, SFCs etc) is

Mr Terence Fonn is a member of the FILMC team, who animates several Gospel sharing groups in Mumbai, along with his wife, Beryl.



said to have been in excess of 3000! Let us journey through the six continents and take a quick peek at some of the myriad forms of the SCC movement across the globe, as captured by J G Healey and J Hinton, who have edited the book named in the foregoing paragraph.

Latin America

In Bolivia, despite some indifference to the process of decentralisation that SCCs offered, these very same base communities had empowered people to live out their faith in an atmosphere of poverty, exploitation and violence. Also, an extraordinary "moment" is a Twinning project - a group "pen pal" friendship - between SCCs in El Salvador and faraway Chile. These "twins" while communicating via e-mail, aptly demonstrated the importance of twinning for SCCs to develop a broader viewpoint, a wider vision and a way of looking outside themselves to a larger experience of being a Church on the move.

In Cuba, while house churches were the only feasible way of being Church, being as they were a sign of subtle resistance against the political system, and given the on-going shortage of clergy, lay people have taken on responsible leadership.

North America

In the face of the crises facing the Church and the dwindling number of priests, Small Faith Communities (SFCs) in California have envisioned impacting family, neighbourhood and society with the Gospel, so that people's lives will be filled with hope. To move forward towards making this vision a reality, it was required that each parish become more and more "a community of SFCs" with people living committed lives such that when parishes are built with SFCs, "there are no spectators; they are all players!" In Washington DC, a distinguishing characteristic of the community is that its members have developed an inclusive and participatory style of liturgy, featuring "dialogue" homilies. "New moments" in North America include some very concrete steps to bring about a fruitful relationship between the RCIA and SCCs.

Europe

In Italy, one community, reflecting on its Eucharist-community relationship is convinced that to "break the bread" like Jesus, means to share our lives with others. Another such community has provided a space for the activity of listening to people who turn to them in uncomfortable situations; people who, as in Christ's day, are refused elsewhere and are looking for someone with whom to open a wound or find a way out of despair.

In Britain, against the backdrop of a steep decline in church-going, "A New Way of Being Church" ("New Way" for short), is the outcome of a Catholic experience within an ecumenical setting initiated by a team from Brazil. "New Way" has also been experimenting with "dialogue" sermons to discover how many people come to church to share how their lives really are, and so to connect life with faith.

A Catholic SCC programme, "At your Word, Lord!" (AYWL) - Peter's response to Jesus' command to "Launch out into the deep" after a fruitless night's fishing has changed the face of the diocese of Westminster; since many felt that SCCs were an important instrument of renewal because they not only brought about a Christ-encounter, but built into the programme, the importance of trained leaders.

A different atmosphere prevails in Switzerland where, while churches experience a significant exodus, new religion providers like Hinduism and Buddhism are in high demand. It appears that Christian churches are less and less capable of supplying answers to those seeking, especially youth. In this cold and ageing Church environment, the Base Community seems an important place, providing not only warmth and security, but also solidarity and the hope that another Church is possible.

Africa

What distinguishes SCCs in East Africa, is the challenge they offer to the dioceses in North America and Europe where parishes, far from being a "community" for people are merely a "service station!" In Tanzania, as in Uganda, the election of leaders to the PPCs starts from the level of SCCs and moves upwards from below, and since the SCCs are arranged in "geographical clusters", the leaders are representatives of parishioners who are without socio-economic or interest distinctions; hence the maxim "We are the Church" is not just a slogan, but a way of life.

In Kisumu, the third largest urban centre in Kenya, a great transformation has come about in people's understanding of Christian discipleship, of proclamation, prayer and service to those in need. This has resulted in "caring community ministries" such as visiting the sick, counselling the emotionally afflicted, helping the needy. Many of these have now become neighbourhood projects such as voluntary counselling, nutrition clinics, healthcare and information centres, street visits, temporary shelters, recreation, rehabilitation, non-formal education, waste-recycling, savings and credit bank, library, vocational training, computer graphics etc. The SCCs are at the heart of these projects and each community nominates or sponsors members for training in an area of immediate neighbourhood concern. As Alphonse Omulu says, "We have seen SCCs lighting up neighbourhoods where hope has been a thing of the past."

Asia

In Asia, the coordination of SCCs has been strengthened by the foundation of ASIIPA (Asian Integral Pastoral Approach) in 1993, which aims to evoke an Asian response to the Gospel. SCCs or BECs (Basic Ecclesial Communities) have been formed in over a dozen countries of Asia, stretching from India all across to Japan. The initiative was taken by the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences (FABC) who undertook to usher in the "New Way of Being Church" - a Church that is participatory, a communion of communities, a prophetic Church and a Church in dialogue. Great emphasis was laid on formation, training, exchange of ideas and resource materials among the 14 member countries and to this end, four international conferences have been held under the auspices of ASIIPA, bringing together hundreds of religious and lay delegates. It is indeed encouraging to note that a great deal of discussion, reflection, writing and resource building activity is underway at the Asian level as also in individual nations

and dioceses, so as to make the SCCs meaningful and relevant to the local populace and reflecting the local situations.

Oceania

In Oceania, in an attempt to connect faith with the everyday realities of life, the Australian SCCs follow the YCW way of "See-Judge-Act"; the process being to "see" the experience; "judge" by identifying elements of faith and letting them speak to our experience; and "act" by planning or changing one's attitude. In Canberra, the "Home Church Vision" of a cluster of seven Churches was kindled by all the core reasons of meeting in a climate of warm fellowship, worship and word. One of the delights of the cluster has been to see how people restricted by a conservative and an often rigid Protestant tradition, have expanded their horizons to embrace folk with other views. The "Home Church" has fostered a leadership style free of domination such that people are able to think for themselves and listen genuinely to one another. The "Home Church" is a workshop in relationships shown by a comfortable balance between men and women and youth, who have their own group OTE ("On The Edge"), felt to be a safe place for young people to express themselves in a climate of openness and acceptance, without their feeling judged!

In Wellington, New Zealand, the "Urban Vision Community" has sought to respond to its prophetic calling to live alongside those who struggle. Since community requires caring with, and not just for others, giving dignity, for example, to difficult people who have under-acknowledged insights and ability, requires seeing and acknowledging who they are (sense of identity) and what they have to offer (sense of belonging).

Conclusion

A "new moment" has come and so it is time for a new thing - to move forward to the new reality that SCCs have to offer, to participate in shaping The Church of the Future! ■