

THE SMALL CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY IN ASIA
– **TOWARDS A NEW WAY OF BEING CHURCH**
– **By Virginia Saldhana FABC OLF Executive Secretary**
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As I write two significant events are unfolding in the world. The first is the economic crisis that has hit the entire world affecting the lives of people everywhere. The second is the ongoing Synod of Bishops on the Word of God.

At the synod a Cardinal from Honduras, perhaps reflecting the anxiety caused by the manipulation of the markets by some, asked "What has been the role of the teaching of the word of God in them? Did we help them to find God in the word? Why aren't the values of the Gospel the guide of their lives upon arriving to public life, and in whatever situation they find themselves in?"

Some bishops pointed out that very often God speaks to the poor, even those who do not know how to read and write but listen to the Word of God carefully. Bishop Ramaroson of Madagascar said his people's thoughtful comments on the readings might surprise many experts.

In Asia, these comments ring true in the numerous Small Christian Communities (SCCs) or Basic Ecclesial Communities (BECs) that are centered on the Word of God.

Ever since the Bishops of Asia articulated their vision of a New Way of Being Church as "communion of communities", in 1990, the FABC Offices took on the responsibility of making this vision a reality. In particular, the Office of Laity AsIPA desk which was formed in (date) responded to the requests of bishops to assist in the training of diocesan and national teams for building BECs / SCCs.

The Executive Secretary of the AsIPA (Asian Integral Pastoral Approach) Desk, Ms. Cora Mateo is assisted by a team of persons from different parts of Asia known as the Asian Resource Team (ART), who meet annually to plan training programmes, create and review new training modules, and take up training programmes at the International, National and diocesan levels for SCC co-ordinators and directors.

Most recently the ART met in Singapore to discuss and plan for the forthcoming 5th AsIPA General Assembly to be held in Davao, Philippines from 20th to 27th October, 2009. The theme for the 5th General Assembly flows from that of the 9th Plenary Assembly of the FABC on the Eucharist and from the Synod of Bishops on the Word of God, "Do this in memory of me" - Bread broken and Word shared in SCCs.

Participants will be given an immersion experience of life in the SCCs in the surrounding region over the weekend of October 24th- 25th. This has come to be a regular feature of the General Assembly. It gives Bishops and SCC directors/co-ordinators present a chance to learn and share their experiences.

AsIPA General Assemblies are held regularly since 1998. General Assemblies have helped to consolidate and strengthen the pastoral thrust for SCCs in the Church in Asia. Reports from the member conferences present a review of efforts in the Church in Asia to move towards the vision of a Participatory Church – A communion of

communities. The delegates present renew their commitment to work towards the vision of a new way of being Church using the AsIPA programme. Reports of struggles and successes give fledgling efforts hope to persevere in their work towards the vision of a New Way of Being Church. Challenges are identified, discussed and experiences shared to help and encourage each other in the common vision. The General Assembly evaluates the progress made and points out areas for improvement.

The Bishops present feel a great sense of hope and satisfaction on hearing the stories from the grassroots. Stories that reflect what the Bishops at the Synod in the Vatican hope to see – the Word of God bearing fruit in the lives of Christians, especially those holding responsible positions in public life.

Starting each day of the assembly with the 7-Step Gospel Sharing, is a spiritual experience that helps to affirm the importance of this practice in the sustenance of the SCC.

Speaking at the Synod on the Word of God Bishop Oswald Hirmer of South Africa points out that through the Seven Step Gospel Sharing which is mentioned in the *Instrumentum Laboris* of the Synod, is commonly used in SCCs, “we try to get ‘in touch’ with the Lord. Small Christian communities and neighbourhood groups use the Seven steps as their spiritual basis, connecting life with the Word of God. The secret of the Seven Steps lies in the fact that the Word of the Bible is not taken as a mere information about Jesus but as a sacramental sign of Christ’s presence among us.” “The Seven Step Gospel sharing, if well celebrated, can renew the faith in a parish and revitalize grass-root communities from within. It can become a school for deep listening to the Word of God; a school for articulating the faith and strengthening one another in the faith; a school how to learn the art of silence and experience the mystery of Christ’s presence among us.”

SCCs/BECs have been instrumental in nurturing and strengthening the faith community and this is particularly so in situations where a priest takes care of many parishes. . The 6th step of the 7-step Gospel Sharing also pushes communities to reflect on their mission in the neighbourhood bringing about greater growth in the participation of the laity in the Kingdom-Mission.

Some of the important challenges that need continued attention are:

First, the in-service training of priests as well as the inclusion of training and orientation to SCCs/BECs in seminary training. This will help priests to become catalysts in the movement towards the vision of the Asian Bishops’ of a New Way of Being Church.

Another challenge is the leadership style of not only the lay co-ordinators of the SCC/BEC groups, but of the clergy as well. Servant-leadership will truly reflect Christ who is the centre of the New Way of Being Church.

A third challenge is to strengthen communities in the use of the Gospel as the centre of their lives, bringing the Word of God to life so that it can permeate all areas of life. The importance of reflection on the Word of God in community cannot be over emphasized.

However, the stories of the fruit of gospel sharing in community continues to inject hope and strength into efforts to build and sustain SCCs throughout the Church in Asia. Six countries have national teams actively working to help dioceses with training and creating material for sustaining SCCs. Some of them are represented on the ART that assists local Churches in training national and diocesan teams for SCC animation. Most of the ecclesiastical conferences have made the formation of SCCs their pastoral priority. It is increasingly being recognized that the SCC is an important instrument of gospel witness and evangelization in Asia.