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## 5 **AsIPA** **The Asian Integral Pastoral Approach is: For Christ, Community, Collaboration, Action and Celebration** *By Wendy Louis*

The 'new way of being church' will always be 'new' because it needs a new heart and a brave, trusting heart to implement the vision of Vatican II. The temptation to fall back to 'old' ways, which are less challenging and more predictable, is always great. The experience of the last 20 years in Singapore and Malaysia has shown that no amount of using the right words, writing books, calling numerous assemblies and having the best techniques will bring about the change we talk about unless the courage to change is also present. So, what needs to happen and how does AsIPA play a role?

### **AsIPA - what is it and who can use it?**

#### 1. An approach. A method. A bag of tools.

The structure of any session using the Asian Integral Pastoral Approach will have the following key features:

- All in the group will have access to the same information. The leader does not have more information.
- The one who leads is called a facilitator and constantly invites others to read, to share in small groups, to report, to reflect on questions and to pray. The leader never takes on what can be done by others. He respects the group and does not appoint people to read but waits for them to respond to his invitation.
- Scripture and / or Church teaching are always an important part of the session.
  - Scripture will often be used in a prayerful and meditative way as in the Gospel Sharing methods to truly enable the whole group to encounter the Risen Lord among them. Scripture texts are also given for group study so that people can discover for himself or herself the challenge of the Gospel.
  - Church teaching is given in paraphrased or original form in paragraphs allowing groups to study it for themselves and reflect. Of course the writer due to the limitation of time and relevance selects paragraphs.
- The text is the teacher so no expert is needed.
- The experience of using Gospel sharing methods or AsIPA texts over time results in greater community spirit and shared leadership, due to the trust that results from

the respect for adults and their experience of God and life.

The approach is built upon the following convictions:

- That the essence of Church is the mystery God in communion and the experience of 'Koinonia' is foundational to living and acting as church.
- That Christ can be and is encountered in his word and in the community in a living and life-giving way. This is regardless of the educational levels of the people gathered and happens even when no priest or expert is present.
- That all the faithful are gifted by the Holy Spirit and called to a common mission as communities of faith and as individuals.
- That the laity are co-responsible collaborators and not just helpers of the priests and religious.
- That the community of faith as a community of adults has a vast faith experience and wisdom, which should be listened to and nurtured.
- That facilitating, non-dominating leadership is key to the self-confidence and sustenance of the community.

## 2. Integral

Living as Small Christian Communities helps the people of God integrate faith & life in a more holistic manner.

Everything that the One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church is called to be and do is also the 'work' of the members of a Small Christian Community. The Church in the neighbourhood is the Church in microcosm and therefore should also:

- Worship & Praise God the Father, Son & Spirit;
- Witness to the life of the Trinity in unity & communion;
- Hand on the faith to adults and children;
- Care for the outcast, the sinner & the poor;
- Serve society and speak out against injustice.

## **The Four Marks of the Church**

The four marks of the Church take flesh in the communities and become an integral part of lived faith:

*One*

- Unity between the small community and the parish community;
- Unity between the families and the parish community mediated by the SCCs.
- Unity between the small communities who come together for feasts or projects of the parish.
- Reconciliation and renewal strengthen unity in these communities. The effort to forgive and be forgiven builds a deeper Christian life and a more authentic unity.

#### *Holy*

- Christ is the centre. The Word of God is alive in the midst of the community and sanctifies the community.
- Sharing the Gospel regularly brings many people very close to the Lord in their daily lives.
- Prayer, praise and Eucharistic celebrations mark the life of the community.

#### *Catholic*

- All are invited in the neighbourhood.
- All baptized are members.
- No one is excluded, whether addict or sinner. Sometimes the 're-membering' of fallen away Catholics can more easily take place in the non-threatening setting of people's homes.
- Spouses who are not Catholic also feel a sense of belonging without the obligation of going to Church.

#### *Apostolic*

- Leadership is exercised in the servant style.
- Service is the outpouring of belief. Love of God is expressed in love of neighbour.
- Ministries develop from within the community to serve both church and society.
- All take on some kind of serving leadership role and these roles are regularly rotated.
- Leadership in the church is exercised by 'strengthening the brethren', praying for each other and building each other up.

The Bishops of East Africa have called the Small Christian Communities "the most

local incarnation of the One, Holy, Catholic & Apostolic Church.”

### 3. Pastoral.

What role does the laity have in the pastoral care of the whole flock? As a part of the faithful of Christ called to continue his mission they play their part in fostering pastoral action.

The AsIPA tools, well used, can help people discover their calling and their gifts to reach out to their neighbours, their families and their colleagues at work in order to share hope, to heal, to care.

- Members of the SCCs regularly visit the sick, the elderly, the latch-key children and those recently bereaved.
- The SCCs can be a great support for families where only one or two members are Catholic.
- The social responsibility of the laity is particularly emphasized in the AsIPA process. This is one of the inherited characteristics from the Lumko institute resources and vision.

### 4. Asian.

- AsIPA aims to gather and exchange the wisdom of the people. It is rooted in the experience of people.
- The word of God is held up as a mirror for their lives and is very close to the culture & lifestyle whether Asian, African or European.
- Pictures or stories that are called ‘codes’ offer an opportunity to the group to interpret their own lives and stories.
- As an Indian Singaporean I would apply the word or teaching to my situation and share its meaning for me. I also bring the word into my daily life as a transforming power.

The Asian Integral Pastoral Approach is about allowing all the faithful to share and uncover the new vision of Church for themselves. It is about sharing leadership through training and formation; putting Christ at the centre through Gospel Sharing and challenging the lay faithful to become church through living out their three-fold priestly, prophetic and royal mission.

**Who does what?**

### **The bishop**

His leadership comprises three tasks: first, to hold up the vision, second, to inspire others with the vision and third, to help the community implement the vision. The bishop may need to encourage his priests to trust the laity more. He may need to grow in trust of the laity himself and be willing to invest time and money on them. He will need to ensure that a strong and well-equipped diocesan team of formators and trainers is built up who are able to journey with parishes at whichever stage they find themselves. This means providing funding for training and dedicated personnel who have this as their priority. In the case of Bishop Oswald Hirner, he sends his personnel for training to the Lumko Institute and involves himself directly in the training of his diocesan animating team. He often travels with them around his diocese to train SCC leaders and catechists in the parishes. This is a very powerful witness. Parish priests feel obliged to participate and eventually as a result of their involvement become more confident and fulfilled as pastors.

### What about the parish priest?

His role will grow as an animator, trainer and inspirer. This will mean a change of timetable for him and a new assessment of priorities in pastoral work. His first action will be to build up a parish team big enough for all the various tasks belonging to the process. By building up a well-formed team he is ensuring the sustenance of the communities of the future and giving a witness to the collaboration and participation he is calling for. The parish priest, in addition to his role, as presider at Eucharist, is also the formator, inspirer and enabler leading & forming the parish training team.

### *Promoting the participatory church*

The understanding of 'participatory' is central to the way a parish priest will operate. When we speak about a participatory church we can sometimes mistake a busy parish with many activities as one that is participatory. It may be quite the contrary. If participation only means helping out with programmes initiated and set up by the parish priest and his council then we have failed. The awareness of the faithful that they have a direct participation in the love, life and mission of Christ is the first and most important starting point: Participation in his passion, death & resurrection. This intimate sharing in the life of Christ nourished and affirmed at every Eucharist is the launching pad of participation in mission. Participation also means that the SCCs are motivated to reach out from within themselves, the action stemming from the Word that has been broken and shared. All the

training programmes conducted will aim to give the Small Communities the ability and desire to live in union with the parish but not dependent on the parish for continuous programming and activities.

*The parish training team* will need clarity of vision, spiritual training, skills training, ongoing encouragement and assistance to deal with the various situations that can arise.

The types of work the parish team would be involved in are:

### **1. Awareness programmes – a new vision**

In the initial stages of inviting the people of the parish to decide on their future development the team would present programmes during the Sunday services or at other times to raise general awareness of the new vision of Church.

- These programmes are aimed at providing reasons for change and at offering opportunities for further reflection.
- Awareness can be in any area of church or public life. However, the first and most important awareness is of what the church is challenging us to be today and why.
- Awareness programmes are always open-ended. They invite, they challenge and they leave people free to decide what to do with this new information. This is the hardest part of the process because the response can be slow and unpredictable.
- There are a large number of ready-made awareness programmes in the Lumko series. The ideal situation arises when the parish or diocesan team is able to make their own awareness programmes based on local needs.

### **2. Setting up Small Christian Communities**

When the awareness programmes have been presented, people will express interest to begin small groups or just to know more. The team will need to:

- Journey with those who have expressed an interest to begin, for at least the first 6 to 8 meetings;
- Train facilitators in Gospel sharing and help the whole group understand the deeper meaning of each of the steps in Gospel Sharing. This is the foundation of life in the SCC.
- Help the group decide on feasible outreach or ministries.
- Provide formation in animating leadership and what to look for in a leader.

### **3. Maintaining SCCs**

Once there are a few communities running the most important activity will be to nourish and guide them in various ways:

- Training of new leaders; spiritual formation for leaders and members; conflict resolution;
- Deepening the mission aspect of life in the community by using different methods of Gospel sharing;
- Encouraging SCCs to take initiatives within their neighbourhoods in the light of their Sharing of the Word.
- Giving SCCs their proper place in the parish set-up and giving them a voice by preparing the parish for Pastoral Council elections where SCCs form the basic framework for pastoral planning and shared ministry;
- Conducting parish assemblies and using them as a forum for consultation and planning;
- Forming Pastoral Councilors in the new way of being Church to see the tasks of a PPC in the light of the 'communion of communities';
- Training for ministry development – ongoing training programmes which enable new leaders to emerge from the small communities on a rotational basis and be trained for their roles – for example, training in facilitating Gospel sharing, visiting newcomers in their homes, visiting the sick, praying with the families of the bereaved, organizing home catechesis etc.
- Encouraging all organizations and ministries of the parish to adopt more consultative, participatory and collaborative strategies
- Developing traditions in the parish where SCCs come together for celebrations and feasting.

### **Implementing the New Way of Being Church**

Taking some steps towards a more Christ-centred, communitarian and serving church does not need great resources or personnel. It does not even require that you have Small Communities in the early stages. All that is already happening in the community can be re-oriented in ways that develop greater spiritual depth, more collaboration and genuine participation. This can be applied to preparing feast days, Sunday liturgies, infant baptism or the initiation of children or adults.

**One example:**

Preparing children for first Holy Communion:

a. Christ

- ✓ We have to ask ourselves the question: What can we do to allow the young children to experience communion with Christ before they receive the Sacrament of the Eucharist. How can they actually meet Christ?
- ✓ Regular Gospel Sharing, retreats and spiritual formation for the catechists where time for prayer and silence is focused on a personal encounter with Christ.
- ✓ Parents of the children can be helped to pray with their children at home as they prepare for the Sacrament. Meetings with parents can be focused on helping parents renew their own understanding of the sacrament.
- ✓ Children can be given a special prayer of preparation inviting the Lord to be with them in a special way at the Eucharist when they are fully initiated.
- ✓ Paraliturgies proclaiming the word and listening in silence with parents and catechists.

b. Community

- ✓ Parents are involved in the preparation of their children right from the start. They are helped to give their children an experience of community in the family through family meals and blessings.
- ✓ On the day of first Holy Communion, the children come up to receive the Lord with their families.
- ✓ The parish council greets and welcomes the candidates to full participation in the Eucharist.
- ✓ Adults share their experience of the Eucharist with the children in the SCC.
- ✓ Parents and children together with the regular liturgy team can decorate the church and prepare the liturgy.

c. Service

- ✓ In a participatory Church it is clear that First Holy Communion is not just a private celebration for our personal salvation:
- ✓ We are sent to the world and invited to do exactly what Jesus did his whole life up to the cross. Children can be helped to think about how they can continue Christ's mission.
- ✓ In union with the heart-felt desire of Jesus to share himself, we also share ourselves

by visiting underprivileged children, sharing toys, feeding the hungry, being a better brother or sister etc. The SCCs or the Sunday school class can organize this.

### **The keys to success**

#### **Leadership in the 'new way'**

Nothing can happen if the leadership of the community is dominating and not trusting. Centralizing activities; showing displeasure when people take initiatives; not giving reasons for refusing or granting permission for various events and activities; controlling finances beyond what is necessary. These are all signs of a lack of trust between the leadership and the laity. This is a most debilitating experience for the people and creates paralysis and deep discouragement eventually.

In the Asian setting, people are still very respectful of the priest and of religious sisters and brothers. They will help out in any way possible and they will be very generous in spite of not agreeing entirely or being given any explanations. How long this will continue however, is very hard to say. In some quarters, where clergy and lay leaders 'lord' it over the people, things are already starting to fall apart. People are demanding greater transparency in finance and parish ministry; people are hungry for formation and are attending courses in Catholic and other Christian churches. The key to the 'new way of being church' is leaders who are Christ-centred, non-dominating, facilitating and enabling and have understood the call to communion. The Laity themselves will often be the obstacle to growth since they have been accustomed to being rather infantile in their approach to church matters and will find a leader who allows them to decide 'weak' rather than consultative. It is a difficult path to tread, to lead and inspire without dominating.

### **Understanding community**

I want to borrow the models of community used by Parker Palmer in his book 'Courage to Teach'. He is referring to educational institutions and their functioning as communities. I will transfer the models to the parish. In studying these models I wish to highlight some reasons why SCCs often have a very short life-span or remain at the level of superficial activities.

1. Therapeutic model – When we think of community we often think of a group of peo-

ple who have shared their personal lives at a very intimate level. This model makes intimacy the highest value in human relationships. We believe that we can be fully known and trust that we will be accepted. In this model all relationships are judged from the point of view of intimacy. Love and companionship are essential in any community but the problem lies in the insistence that the most important thing that should happen in a community is intimate knowledge of each other. This can be good when applied to a family, but when applied to a small Christian community it is inappropriate since we can only achieve real intimacy with only very few people in our lives. When the idea of small communities implies intimacy, many people keep away rather than have to share on a very personal level. When a group have already shared their lives very personally, it is very difficult for others to join in. The pressure to get to know others and to be known is too great for newcomers.

2. Civic model – In this model a wide variety of people who are strangers to each other work in common. They share the same space and resources and they resolve their conflicts. They use the tools of democracy to negotiate, bargain and compromise. They work for the greatest good for the greatest number. We have much to learn from this model. However in the parish we are not strangers since we belong to the Body of Christ so we gather as believers. The rules of democracy are not good enough in our communities since we aim to achieve consensus and the ‘common good’ of each and every one rather than majority vs. minority. Majority decisions have little to do with the quest for the truth.
3. Marketing model – In this model the student and parent in a school are the customers who have to be satisfied. The school authorities and teachers are the products that are being ‘sold’ or evaluated. There is much to be said for accountability and evaluation, which is the strength of this model, but the tools for measuring may be way off and the thing we are trying to measure is not measurable. A different take on this model is that marketing an idea and disseminating information can be done more easily when the parish is organized into smaller zones and neighbourhood groups. Many parishes use the structure of SCCs to service the needs of the parish. The SCCs are organized as one would organize a labour pool - for better liturgical services, feast day celebrations, maintenance and fund-raising for church building and so on. The members of SCCs will be only those ‘faithful’ who are willing to be used by the parish leadership and have the time to be involved in all the parish activities. Many who see no benefit to themselves in the SCCs will stay away since belonging entails a huge commitment

of time in activities, which may not be in line with their gifts or conviction.

4. **Reality is Communal model** – In this model we look at our ‘ground of being’ and our origins and realize that we are communal beings within a communal creation and we have to discover ourselves more and more from within these relationships. Even for scientists today their study has moved from fragmentation and competition to community and collaboration. Nature is relational and it is for us to recognize the deeper spiritual ‘communio’ to which we are called as a people on our way together. A parish pastor who lives within the ‘Reality is Communal’ model knows that the lives of his people will be rooted in the Trinity of love if he encourages them to uncover more and more the beauty and power of communion. His work is to awaken in the laity the realization of their calling as one people, to love, mercy and service. The enemies are individualism and distrust. Those who believe in Christ and gather in his name will be able to evangelize each other and their neighbours in ways we could never previously imagine.

#### **Conclusion**

To be called a small Christian Community the members should understand themselves as a gathering of believers who have been brought together in the name of Jesus as neighbours and companions. They share the Gospel regularly, they recognize that they have been called to be witnesses of community in a special way and finally they realize that they have a mission to accomplish as a community. Their leaders emerge according to the tasks in hand and with continuous formation, new needs will be met with new solutions and renewed faith. The ideal is always easy to describe but the steps along the way are messy and never linear. This however is not a reason for not starting the journey.