

AsIPA GENERAL ASSEMBLY IV  
MARIA RANI CENTRE, TRIVANDRUM, INDIA / NOVEMBER 8–15, 2006

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SCCs/BCC's  
towards a Church of Communion

Small Christian Communities National Committee

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## HOMILY OF THE INAUGURAL MASS

●● Apostolic Nuncio

My Lord Archbishops and Bishops  
Reverend Fathers, Sisters, Brothers  
Distinguished guests and my dear people

I welcome all of you to this Holy Eucharist, with which we implore graces and blessings of our heavenly Father, and gifts of the Holy Spirit, on this General Assembly of the Asian Integral Pastoral Approach.

This is the 4th General Assembly in the 13 years of AsIPA. This Assembly will provide an occasion, not only for a reunion and sharing of common vision and concerns, but also to assess the implementation of the AsIPA vision and mission. The more than 300 delegates from about 20 countries gathered here will focus on the theme of reflection "SCCs/BCC's towards Church of Communion" I feel privileged to be in some little way part of this gathering of the Asian Church, and as I greet all of you in the Lord Jesus Christ, I wish that my presence as Apostolic Nuncio be considered as a sign and pledge of the Communion of the Universal Church.

The theme you have chosen for this Assembly, "SCCs/BCC's towards a Church of Communion", is an all time vital theme for the Church of God. We see communion as an integral part of God's plan for the salvation of mankind, for, as Vatican II says, mankind will be saved, not as individuals, but as a people.

Jesus is obviously the nucleus of this Communion among the faithful. The Disciples' life with Jesus while he walked and worked with them in Galilee, could be seen as the very first manifestation of this communion among Small Christian Communities.

We heard a description of it in the second reading from the Acts of the Apostles. "The disciples remained faithful to the teaching of the apostles, to the brotherhood, to the breaking of bread and to the prayers ... They ... met in their houses for the breaking of bread; they shared their food gladly and generously; they praised God and were looked up to by everyone. Day by day the Lord added to their community those destined to be saved." And "the whole group of believers was united, heart and soul."(Acts)

The first thing we note here is the importance of the group. The disciples felt the need

not to be isolated but to gather in small groups. Groups play an important function in the development processes of people: they promote a sense of dialogue and sharing as well as a sense of co-responsibility. Christian groups are called to be an experience of community and a form of participation in ecclesial life. They find their goal and fullest manifestation in the more extended Eucharistic Community. Jesus says: "Where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I in their midst"(Mt. 18:20).

The Acts of the Apostles continues: "The whole group of believers was united heart and soul." These Christian communities experienced the realization of the gift of 'communion' among themselves, which is a fruit of the Holy spirit, and which is specifically the theme of this 4th General Assembly of AsIPA: 'Small Christian Communities Towards a Church of Communion.' 'Communion' expresses the profound nucleus between the universal Church and the particular Churches which make up the Christian community. It is realized and made visible in the rich variety of immediate Christian communities in which Christians are born into the faith. The Christian communities we are trying to build are simply the most local incarnation of the One, Holy, Catholic and apostolic Church. In them the Church takes on flesh and blood in the life situations of people. The faith of the believers will make them realize that to be authentic every community must live in union with the particular and the universal Church, in heartfelt communion with the Church's Pastors and the Magisterium, with a commitment to missionary outreach and without yielding to isolationism or ideological exploitation.

There is no clearer illustration or metaphor for this Communion than what Jesus tells us in today's Gospel. "I am the vine, you are the branches." It is the same life-giving sap that runs in the vine and in the branches. If this sap does not reach the branches, they wither and die, "for cut off from me you can do nothing", says Jesus. "Whoever remains in me with me in him", continues Jesus, "bears fruit in plenty." One might say that a conscious awareness and living of this 'Communion' with Jesus and with one another in his Church, should be the end result of every Small Christian Community, for "the heart of the Church is Communion."

My dear sisters and brothers, during these coming days of your Congress you will be reflecting on and praying over these and other aspects of the Small Christian Communities. These reflections will, I am sure, open up a deeper understanding of the Small Christian Communities for you, that they are not just another pious association, but affect the very structure of the Church, will affect our understanding of authority in the Church, and the sharing of this authority, our understanding of what it really means to be a 'participatory Church'. I pray that the Holy Spirit open up your hearts and minds to this new understanding, this new way of being Church, and may Mary, the Mother of the Church, accompany you constantly with her powerful intercession!

## ADDRESS OF THE APOSTOLIC NUNCIO

●● Apostolic Nuncio

My Lord Cardinals, Archbishops and Bishops,  
Reverend Fathers, Sisters, Brothers,  
Distinguished guests and my dear people,

It is my privilege and pleasure to officially inaugurate this 4th General Assembly of the Asian Integral Pastoral Approach, known in short as AsIPA.

One of the reasons that prompted Pope John XXIII to convoke an Ecumenical Council was, without doubt, to gather into the bosom of the Church the various ways in which the Holy Spirit had been active in the daily life of the grass root Church. Throughout the world, the Spirit had been inspiring ordinary Christians to return to the roots of their faith and find nourishment in the example of the early Christians. What started as sporadic attempts by small groups in various parts of the world, swelled into a movement that swept the entire Church. Two enduring fruits of this movement have now crystallized into the Catholic Charismatic Movement, and the Basic Christian communities or the Small Ecclesial Communities, as “luminous signs of the beauty of Christ and of the Church, his Bride”. These Ecclesial Communities are, as Pope John Paul II said, “a sign of vitality within the Church, an instrument of formation and evangelization and a solid starting point for a new society based on a ‘civilization of love’”

Though the Basic Christian Communities (BCCs) had their origin in the Latin American countries, it was only natural that the movement would find its echo in the hearts of the Asian people as well, for the two have very many similarities. Under the leadership of their Bishops the Asian people took this challenging mission quite seriously, and 13 years ago in Malaysia they prepared the basic structure for promoting this “New Way of Being Church”. They had an ambitious mission of “renewing and transforming all the parishes in Asia into a communion of small evangelizing communities” where the laity, clergy and religious live and collaborate with each other as brothers and sisters, evangelized by the Word of God and enlightened by the teachings of the Church, and discerning the plan of God for them to reach out in service for the total transformation of their lives, their neighbourhood and society at large.

This is the 4th General Assembly in the 13 years of AsIPA(Asian Integral Pastoral Approach). And this Assembly will provide an occasion, not only for a reunion and sharing of common vision and concerns, but also to assess the implementation of the AsIPA vision and mission. The more that 300 delegates from about 20 countries gathered here will focus on the theme of reflection “SCCs/BCC’s towards Church of Communion”. I feel privileged to be in some little way part of this gathering of the Asian Church, and as I greet all of you in the Lord Jesus Christ, I wish that my presence as Apostolic Nuncio be considered as a sign and pledge of the Communion of the universal Church.

There have been of late some gloomy predictions about the demise of religion and religious beliefs. But a recent, 10-nation study by the Forum on Religion and Public Life, released in America last month, says that these ecclesial movements are among the fastest-growing sectors of global Christianity. According to the study, around a quarter of the World’s estimated 2 billion Christians are thought to be members of charismatic groups or Small Christian Communities which emphasize the active role of the Holy Spirit in their daily lives. This shows that the talk of ‘secularization’ and of a ‘post religious’ society has given way to a renewed recognition of religion’s influence in people’s social and political lives.

The source of this movement is obviously the love that radiates from the heart of Jesus, of which we all partake, and which binds us all in communion.

As I said, Asian Integral Pastoral Approach (AsIPA) has its origin, we could say, in the hearts of the Bishops and faithful of Asia, from where they launched the movement of Small Christian Communities in their dioceses and parishes as a sure means for promoting a “New Way of Being Church” in Asia. This “new way of being Church” was expressed by the Asian Bishops in their ‘vision’ of the Church as “a communion of Small Communities, where the laity, clergy and religious live and collaborate with each other as brothers and sisters, evangelized by the Word of God and enlightened by the Holy Spirit and the teachings of the Church, and reaching out in service for the total transformation of society.” This is indeed the vision that the Second Vatican Council proposed for the Church in the modern world. That the Hierarchy and the faithful of Asia have enthusiastically responded to this vision is evident from the increasing response to the General Assemblies of AsIPA held so far: from around 40 participants from 6 countries at the First General Assembly in 1996, the participation has increased to 300 delegates from 20 countries at the present General Assembly.

Through the determined and concerted efforts of the Bishops and the committed faithful of Asia great strides have already been made in bringing the Church to the homes and daily life of the people. This Congress is a precious occasion to take stock of the journey already traveled, to highlight the impact that the Small Christian Communities(SCC’s) have

already made in the faith life of the parishes and dioceses, and to underscore the constant commitment to witness to Christian faith in public life, through the spirituality of communion. It is also, obviously an occasion to look forward to the future with an ardent desire to respond with ever greater generosity to the mission that the Small Christian Communities are called upon to carry out in our times.

The theme for your present General Assembly - "SCC's/BCC's towards Church of Communion"-is, and indeed must be, a theme close to the heart of all Pastors of God's people. The preservation of the unity of faith in the diversity of its cultural expressions is a valuable service that is asked of all the pastors of the Church. This requires that they be united with the flock, and that the flock always walk united with their Pastors, after the enduring image Jesus himself proposes of the vine being united with its branches. "I am the vine, you are the branches. Whoever remains in me, with me in him, bears fruit in plenty; for cut off from me you can do nothing"(Jn. 15,5). This also means that they firmly and courageously avoid divisions, especially when they are due to ethnic or social or cultural causes. Indeed, divisions undermine the unity of the faith and weaken the proclamation and witness of the Gospel of Christ, who came into the world to make the whole of humanity a holy people and one family in which God is the Father of all. Divisions, in short, undermine the very purpose of this gathering: to work for a Church of Communion.

I recall the words that the Holy Father, Pope Benedict XVI, spoke recently to the newly ordained Bishops gathered in Rome for their formation programme. A good number of these Bishops were from the Asian countries. The Pope extended his affectionate thoughts to the young and enthusiastic diocesan Communities entrusted to their pastoral care, where evangelization is showing promising signs of development, despite the sometimes difficult and demanding context. The same thoughts of encouragement and support are in my heart now, as I wish that these days of your General Assembly, days of brotherly togetherness and prayerful reflection and planning, be fruitful for all in the pastoral mission at the service of the people that the Lord has entrusted to you. This mission is, on the one hand, to encourage the faith of believers, which is a great treasure, and on the other, to reach out with the proclamation of the faith to all who are sincerely seeking a satisfying response to their existential questions.

The search for a response to these existential questions, especially from the cry of the poor, is what launched the Small Christian Communities in the first place in the 1960's. These cries of the poor are all the more strident and poignant today with the spectre of globalization looming large over the horizon of the Asian countries, threatening to render millions of the poor into dehumanizing living and working condition. The Church cannot remain neutral here. Neutrality would only help to serve the interests of the forces of

Oppression. If the Church did not side with the poor in their struggle, it would not be a Church of the God of the Scriptures who is identified with and liberates the poor, it would not be a Church of Jesus Christ who preached the 'Beatitudes', who identified with the hungry, the naked, the sick and the 'least ones'. Through the Small Christian Communities the poor of Yahweh seek to live out their commitment to the unity of prayer and action on behalf of establishing the justice of the Kingdom of God. The Small Christian Communities is the positive, hope filled protest of the poor against oppression and injustice of all sorts.

But this is a protest with a difference. Here the means and 'weapon' of protest are not the "hammer and sickle", not the violence, not the fight of classes, but the "double edged sword" of the Word of God, the witnessing of his love for everybody without distinction. Reading and praying over the Word of God within a context of oppression, the poor come to see the Bible as a source of empowerment and liberation. With its affirmation of the goodness of creation and of God's universal love for humankind, the Bible stands in judgment over the dehumanizing conditions under which the poor live, and empowers them to work for that justice which is God's will. Thus enriched by the Word of God, the Eucharistic liturgy too becomes more real as the poor see their own brokenness assumed in Christ's body that was broken for them; and their own sufferings been assumed by Christ in the cross. Assured of their inherent dignity as children of God, through the Word of God and the Eucharistic liturgy, the poor and the oppressed are empowered to work for justice. Thus these Small Christian Communities hold immense potential for being catalysts for change in our Church and our society at large.

Only if the pastors are impelled by the love of Christ can they bring to completion this apostolic task which demands the fearless zeal of men undaunted even by persecution and death for the Lord. For those who, like Jesus, make a preferential option for the poor, also arouse the love and full dedication to the poor.

I wish to thank the Archdiocese of Trivandrum for organizing, the first time in India, a General Assembly of AsIPA, and the Office of Laity of the Federation of Asian Bishop's Conference(FABC), Commission for Laity and Service Team for Small Christian Communities of the Catholic Bishop's Conference of India(CBCI) for their full and heartfelt collaboration. I encourage all of you to continue the fruitful work that you have undertaken up till now, to incarnate the Gospel of love in the daily affairs of your people. Upon all of you I invoke the motherly protection and powerful intercession of Mary Most Holy, Star of Evangelization.

Representing His Holiness Pope Benedict XVI, I am also pleased to convey to all in this Assembly his cordial greeting and prayerful support together with his Apostolic Blessing.

## WELCOME ADDRESS

●● His Grace Archbishop Soosa Pakiam M,

Faith is response to the word of God. Now our people are becoming more and more aware of the importance of the word of God and the urgency of giving a response to it. They express and experience this faith through their prayer life and active participation in the Liturgy. And this faith is translated into their daily activities through thousands of charitable activities carried out in the SCCs. This changed attitude of our people to be interested in others and to be concerned about the needs of others has assumed various dimensions and reached out new horizons. Just to cite one such instance: according to the list published by the Pontifical Mission Organizations, the Archdiocese of Trivandrum stands first in Kerala and has the fifth place among all the Dioceses in India with respect to the contribution given to these Pontifical Societies, last year. This Archdiocese is neither an affluent nor a rich Diocese in terms of material benefits, when compared to many other Dioceses in Kerala and in India. Yet their growing missionary spirit have prompted them perhaps to contribute just like the widow in the gospel whatever they had for the noble cause of Evangelization, joining hands with the Universal Church in their own humble way. And it is to this community of the Archdiocese of Trivandrum, which is now preparing to offer you the best possible results of the ‘immersion programmes’, I extend to all of you a Cordial Welcome.

As the Chairman of the Laity Commission of the Catholic Bishops’ Conference of India, it is my privilege again to welcome you to this ancient country, the cradle of many civilizations and cultures; and also to this state of Kerala, which is generally known as ‘God’s own Country’. One of the important areas, the CBCI Laity Commission was concentrating its attention all these years is the promotion of SCCs in all the Dioceses of this vast country. Following the exhortation of Pope John Paul-II of revered memory in ‘Ecclesia in Asia’, this Commission gives top priority to form SCCs in all the Dioceses of India in order “to help their members to live the gospel in a spirit of fraternal love and service”(EA #25).

According to a survey conducted by Bishop Bosco Penha, Auxiliary Bishop of the Archdiocese of Bombay, in the beginning of 2003, 98 Dioceses in India have the SCCs and they have a total of 5539 parishes, out of which 3549 parishes have SCCs functioning well

and this is approximately 64.1%, which is a comfortable rating and a welcome indication. We are indeed happy and content to see the upward move of the SCCs with quite a lot of signs of hope, such as, increased participation in the decision-making process by all the members of the SCCs, increased sense of belongingness and greater bond of unity and fraternity, an increased awareness of what it means to be a Christian, deepening of once faith, meaningful participation in the Liturgy, genuine love for the word of God, greater concern for the poor and the needy, genuine interest in the well-being of one's neighbour and above all, greater willingness to forgive and get reconciled with the erring brethren. In spite of all these positive signs and encouraging symptoms, we are aware of our own limitations and shortcomings. Though the survey projects a quantitative increase in the number of SCCs, there is still a long way to go to make qualitative improvements on them. This General Assembly offers indeed an excellent opportunity for us to interact more closely with the strength and weakness of the Indian Church and to come out with concrete suggestions and action plans for strengthening and revitalizing the SCCs.

Finally as Chairman of the FABC Office of the Laity, I have to welcome you all to this General Assembly especially to this Inaugural Session. The theme of this General Assembly. "SCCs towards a church of Communion", shows that still we are marching towards our vision. (The fifth Plenary Session of FABC held at Bandung wanted to build up the church in Asia as a 'community of communities'. The question was how to promote this "New way of being the Church". For this a consultation meeting was held in Malaysia as early as in 1993 It was during this consultation meeting that a pastoral process for promoting a "Participatory church" in Asia was evolved and termed as AsIPA: Asian Integral Pastoral Approach) This is the fourth General Assembly of AsIPA. This is in fact an Assembly of trainers engaged in the promotion of SCCs all over Asia. Once in three years we gather together to learn from one another's experience, to relate to each other and to draw mutual encouragement and inspiration from one another.

In the Second General Assembly of AsIPA, there were 105 participant. In the 3rd General Assembly the number of participants has gone up to 123 now in this 4th General Assembly, 300 delegates are participating from all over Asia. This is a clear indication of the growing interest the various Dioceses in Asia have for the SCCs.

I should say that hectic preparations were on for quite sometime to set a proper stage for this International Conference. Most of the groundwork in organizing this General Assembly was done by Miss. Mateo Cora, Coordinator of AsIPA desk of the FABC Office of Laity. Together with Miss. Cora, and her team of helpers and together with a host of local organizers, I wish to extend a cordial welcome to you all the Archbishops and Bishops, Priests and Sisters, Distinguished Guests and delegates to this General Assembly.

My special welcome goes to His grace Archbishop Pedro Lopez Quintana, the Apostolic

Nuncio, who has graciously consented to inaugurate this August assembly. Everyone knows how tight is the schedule of an Apostolic Nuncio, especially in a country like India. Archbishop Pedro Lopez Quintana has always been magnanimous in heeding to our request. When I telephoned to His Grace the Apostolic Nuncio, and requested him to bless this very important International Meeting by his presence, His Grace has happily consented and accepted our invitation. But just yesterday, I was told of his indisposition due to slight physical ailment, but realizing the importance of this meeting and remembering his continuous predilection for this Latin Archdiocese, His Grace has re-confirmed his visit and he is with us here today. Your Grace the Apostolic Nuncio, while manifesting our filial love and devotion to the Holy Father, Pope Benedict the XVI, on behalf of all those assembled here, extend to Your Grace, a very warm welcome.

I am indeed happy to welcome His Excellency Bishop Gratian Mundadan, Vice president of CBCI who is presiding over this function. His Excellency is now the Apostolic Visitor, which shows the confidence the Holy Father has placed on him and the esteem the hierarchy in India entertains for him. While congratulating you, Bishop Gratia Mundadan on this noble, yet arduous mission, I extend a most cordial welcome to you to this august function.

We have with us Archbishop Stansilaus Fernandez, the dynamic Secretary General of the CBCI. Dear Archbishop, your presence is an inspiration for all of us. Everyone knows well of our earnest efforts to give a new face and a new vision to the CBCI and your efforts to revitalize its co-ordinating role of the activities of the Church in India. We are happy to have you with us today and I extend a cordial welcome to you.

Now I am happy to welcome a person whom I consider as my own brother and a close associate of the Latin Archdiocese of Trivandrum and he is none other than the dynamic and the gentle Bishop Joshua Mar Ignathios of the Syro-Malankara Archdiocese of Trivandrum. His presence is both vicarious and ordinary: he represents His Beatitude Major Archbishop and Catholicos Cyrill Mar Baselios, who, had been in good health, would have blessed us by his presence and enriched us by his scholarly message. In the name of all gathered here I extend to you Bishop Joshua Mar Ignathios a very cordial and affectionate welcome.

Prof. Abraham Arakal is a man well known to all in Kerala. Recently he has been elected as Vice President of the Catholic Council of India. His contribution towards the growth of the Latin Catholic Community in Kerala is laudable and his commitment and love for the Church is exemplary. It is fitting that such an eminent lay-person is called to address this conference which basically focuses its attention on the empowerment of the Laity. Dear Prof. Arakal, I extend a cordial welcome to you to this assembly.

And now I turn to you dear distinguished Delegates: you have come from far and wide; you have taken the trouble to travel long distance to come for this General Assembly. You form the fibre of this conference. You have come here with a lot of expectations. We have tried our best to put you at the comings and privations here and there. I hope that you will magnanimously put up with such inconveniences. To you whom we consider as our Guests of Honour, I extend a most cordial and sincere welcome to this inaugural function and to this General Assembly as well.

The success of any Conference depends not only on the scholarly papers presented and the erudite discussion held, but also on very many ingredients like the congenial atmosphere, serene environment, good food, comfortable stay, union of minds and hearts of the participants, and above all God's abundant blessings. I wish and pray that this conference will have all these components harmoniously blend in a magnificent manner.

Thank You, God Bless you!

## ABOUT AsIPA ASSEMBLIES

●● Ms. Cora Mateo  
Executive Secretary AsIPA Desk, FABC Office of Laity

The Apostolic Letter of the Holy Father for the New Millennium, makes a call for “commitment and planning on the part of the universal Church and the particular Churches: on the domain of Communion(koinonia) which embodies and reveals the very essence of the mystery of the Church,” (NMI no.42). He presents this as the “great challenge facing us in the millennium... to be faithful to God’s plan and respond to the world’s deepest yearnings” (NMI no. 43).

The Asian Integral Pastoral Approach (AsIPA) finds its very reason for existence in this “need to promote a spirituality of communion,”(ibid), which the Asian Bishops have expressed so many times. During FABC 5 they have declared it as the vision for “the new way of being Church”, “a communion o communities, where laity, religious and clergy recognize and accept each other as sisters and brothers”(FABC 5 no. 8.1.1).

With this inspiration the AsIPA Desk within the FABC Office of Laity and Family, was set up on November, 1993, with the aim of producing contextualized approaches and training materials to meet specific needs of particular churches to move towards the vision of communion and of a participatory and co-responsible Church.

Since 1991, workshops were organized. Our initial steps were with the Lumko Institute in South Africa, and especially accompanied by Bishop Oswald Hirmer who was then in the Lumko staff. With him and an initial Editorial Board, 4 series of booklets were produced on:

- Gospel Sharing (A series)
- Small Christian Communities (B series)
- Our Vision of Church: Participatory and Co-responsible (C Series)
- Training of Parish Teams: Pastoral planning, Awareness programs, Leadership (D Series)

The Library topics which deals with specific themes not within the 4 series, include:

Parenting, Family life, Socio-Economic concerns, Women's issues and Inter-religious Dialogue.

We started by giving AsIPA international training courses, both basic and advanced to help the participants to grasp better the AsIPA vision and the methodology. Those who were trained later became trainers in their own countries. After the translation of the texts, basic courses were given at national levels and international workshops focused on advanced training and exchange. In some countries, they included an immersion experience to learn from the localized approaches.

More texts have since been produced, following the above series and touching on topics like “Evangelization” and “Leadership”.

Our first General Assembly was held in 1996 (Baan Phu Wan Pastoral Training Center, Thailand) to “share endeavors in different Asian countries, evaluate their programmes and look to the future.” (Statement of the first AsIPA General Assembly #3). The participants came with enthusiasm to share how they saw communities becoming Gospel-inspired people.

This General Assembly was an experience of deepening on the AsIPA vision and basic approach. The Editorial Board was formally set up to continue the process of producing and publishing materials. In their conclusion they state: “We are fully aware that AsIPA is not the only way to make the Church a communion of communities as desired by the FABC Bandung Plenary Assembly in 1990. We feel, nonetheless, that it is a very useful instrument to propel the Church in this direction. It is our humble offering to the Churches in Asia... AsIPA properly understood and skillfully used, can be of great help in renewing the Church at the start of the third Millennium.” (ibid #10-11).

While the first one had less than 40 participants, the second General Assembly also held in Thailand (Baan Phu Wan Training and Pastoral Centre) on 12-21 October, 2000, gathered 105-bishops, priests, religious and lay leaders from 13 countries. The theme was: “A New of being Church in the New Millennium,” and it aimed at deepening the understanding of the AsIPA way towards becoming a Participatory Church. The dynamics included sharing experiences, examining together AsIPA modules and an attempt to organize structures for networking, coordination and exchanges. They affirmed what the Bishops declared during the 7th Plenary Assembly, on the AsIPA method: “proving to be a very good help to the growth and development of BECs... become the central tool in bringing about this communion marked by authentic participation and co-responsibility.” (Final Statement of FABC 7, III.7). This Assembly offered a venue to present new locally produced modules from different countries. The sharing of experiences on how the method has continued in places where it has been implemented for more than five years, show:

- The growth in the evangelizing mission of the Church through SCCs and with the active participation of families.
- Genuine participation of all, especially the least and the last, in the renewal process of the parish.
- The SCCs as a normal way of being one, holy, catholic and apostolic church in a miniature form in the neighborhood.
- SCCs pave the way for the incarnation of the faith in the cultural milieu of the place and in becoming agents of change.
- The new locally produced modules created a deep sense of hope as pastoral teams are empowered to respond to their own pastoral and social realities.
- Sharing of experiences gave a sense of solidarity and became a source of mutual encouragement. (ref. AsIPA Gen. Assembly 2 final statement).

these insights have also become challenges to move forward. They identified three main areas for further reflection and action:

- spirituality of the SCCs and the parish.
- harmony in the midst of diversity in the Asian way of life.
- new styles of collaborative leadership that animate and empower others for greater participation and lived communion

The 2nd General Assembly included 8 recommendations for the people and for the leadership in the Church so that all “may have life and have it in abundance.”(Jh. 10:10)

As agreed upon, the third AsIPA assembly took place, after 3 years, on 2–9 September, 2003, with the Korean teams as host, at the Hanmaum Education and Retreat Center of Seoul Archdiocese. Our theme was “SCCs/BECs: empowering people to serve.” Its inspiring thought came from the Apostolic Exhortation *Ecclesia in Asia* by Pope John Paul II, written after the Synod on Asia: “BECs aim to help their members to live the Gospel in a spirit of fraternal love and service, and are therefore a solid starting point for a new society, the expression of a civilization of love.” (EA #25)

This General Assembly celebrated the 10th anniversary of the founding of AsIPA as an Asian approach for the renewal of parishes. Holding it in Korea gave us a privileged occasion for immersion in the SCC project in South Korea and learn from their experiences. We were offered a 4 days immersion programme before the start of SCCs (for those interested) and visits to SCCs to be with the SCCs one evening during the

General Assembly.

The 123 participants reflected on this theme with a keynote address and with sub-topics to deal with: ministry, leadership, family and spirituality. The keynote talk started with the pastoral challenges in Asia caused by globalization and the need for adequate formation to respond to them. Separate sessions were dedicated to the sub-topics and to evaluate the Gospel sharing methods, especially the 7 steps.

The participating bishops had their gathering to discuss what they perceived as pastoral needs that should be addressed in the programmes of the AsIPA Desk and how these issues can be integrated into the future plans.

Like previous two General Assemblies, we were privileged to have with us Bishop Oswald Hirmer. His presence and interventions in key areas have made the sessions an occasion to further deepen in our understanding of the vision and the basic methodology. He put emphasis on the 3 STARS to guide us in our effort to prepare more contextualized training materials:

Put Christ in the center

Build community

Continue Christ's mission in the world

Apart from the insights and learning, the final statement acknowledges clearly the difficulties encountered in the process of animating SCCs in different countries: resistance and indifference from some church leaders, specially priests, the inadequate knowledge of the Bible and faith doctrines among our people, lack of coordination of the programmes in the parishes and the leadership styles that dominate and prevent participation and co-responsibility.

The final statement further affirmed:

- the centrality of the Word of God in SCC gatherings and to prepare for Sunday Eucharist,
- the need to encourage greater participation in the evangelizing task of SCCs and to be agents for social transformation,
- the need to offer a course on SCCs/BECs in seminaries and training house of Religious for the training of future church leaders with this vision and the necessary spirituality and attitudes.

After this General Assembly, the Editorial Board became the AsIPA resource Team(ART)

with nine members from 6 countries. Their first meeting in Taipei(February, 2004) identified the new competencies and responsibilities the team need to serve better the local Churches in Asia.

During the second meeting of ART in Trivandrum, the theme for the 4th General Assembly: “SCCs/BECs Towards a Church of Communion”, was decided and more participative decision were made since then.

We look forward to having the 4th General Assembly in Trivandrum where SCCs have existed even before the AsIPA method was conceived. Their long experiences in building SCCs offer us an abundant source of learning. It has the added dimension of seeing how AsIPA can be integrated with existing methods and processes of community building and how to move towards a more consolidated vision.

We hope that in this General Assembly, we can reflect on and deepen the very vision of “communion of communities” that has inspired AsIPA as a method to renew parishes. In so doing may we enable local Churches in responding to the “great challenge of the new millennium” as cited in Pope John Paul II’s apostolic exhortation.

# How the integral pastoral approaches can strengthen the Church as communion : SCCs paving the way in today's context

●● Bishop Fritz Lobinger

Our integral pastoral approach is part of an enormous change process in the Church. For a long time it seemed clear what a parish is and what a parish community is, but this is undergoing a radical change.

## **A door has been opened towards a Church of Communion and Participation**

Church historians can explain the change in detail. They remind us that the term “parish” is not a biblical term but is something that was invented a bit later. They also shows us how the community aspect gradually weakened and became distorted in many ways, for a very long time.

Just imagine what a parish was like in the feudal times. A feudal Land Lord looked for workers on his large fields. So a big number of workers settled in the territory of a feudal Lord. He felt the need to ensure some religious discipline and religious services and so he looked for somebody who knew a few Latin words and whom the bishop could quickly ordain as priest for his farm workers. A strange idea of a parish community and of ministry, but large parts of the Church followed for long times such a distorted pattern of “community” and of “ministry”

Or think of the huge parishes founded by the monasteries around the central monastery. The people were guided and instructed by the monks. They looked up to the huge monastery as the centre of their lives. They were a religious “community”, but in a very different sense.

Or think of the long times of parish benefices. Priests competed among themselves for being put in charge of the richest parishes with the best income. In other areas there was rather a scramble for what one might call “status parishes” or the parishes with the most powerful relics of Saints. It was the income what mattered, or the status, while the people were just objects of the parish system.

It is a very long history with many negative aspects. It led to canon law decreeing that the priest of the parish was “immovable”. His immovability was central, not the community spirit among the people.

A door had indeed to be opened out of this long history with its wonderful start of *koinonia* and with its many distortions that followed. Vatican II did open a door out of this long history. We are most grateful that the Second Vatican Council revived the theology of the local community. The Council formulated that theology but with regard to the concrete shape of those local community it could only sense that there was something beyond that open door. The Council could not yet tell in detail in what concrete from the Church could live as local communities. This is our task.

AsIPA was not the first one to take up that task. The first concrete steps were taken in Latin America. The CELAM conferences of Medellin and of Puebla did not just theorize how essential it was that the Church must be experienced as a community and that it has to liberate the people. These conferences said that we should live as Basic Ecclesial Communities, that we should take the bible into our hands to discover how God can liberate us out of unjust structures. Look at the Puebla conference statements and you read again and again how the word “community” was always linked with the word “participation”. Look at the powerful headings: “If God is himself community and participation, then we, too, must live in community and participation”. How can “community and participation” be lived in a poor neighbourhood? It became clear that those two terms could not be separated. Community and Participation belong together and they will bring about liberation.

That term “liberation” appeared hurtful to some and it was new in our Church vocabulary. Pope Paul VI listened carefully to the synod of 1974 and then issued that wonderful encyclical “evangelization in the modern world” where he showed in brief, simple language how evangelization and liberation belong together.

I briefly mention these steps to remind ourselves that AsIPA was the follow-up to all these steps that happened in many parts of the world. In Africa the bishops also looked for simple, concrete ways of moving through that open door. They became fascinated by a formula that had always been rejected by the Church but which could now be filled with new spirit and new life. It was the Three-Selves-Formula which said that the Christian communities should be self-ministering, self-reliant, and self-propagation. For many years all Catholic theologians and bishops had rejected that formula because it seemed to say that the local community should not depend on the Universal Church. We Catholics stated that a parish or any Catholic community should not be independent. Therefore, especially in China, the formula was regarded as government propaganda and as protestant theology, as something totally un-Catholic. But after Vatican II the bishops of East Africa looked

again at that formula and said that now, with this VaticanII theology of the Universal Church consisting of a multitude of Local Churches, and with this new emphasis on everybody using his and her charisma, that formula now had acquired a Catholic spirit. They boldly stated:

“We are convinced that... it is time for the Church to become really ‘local’, that is: self-ministering, self-propagating and self-supporting. Our planning is aimed at building such local Churches for the coming years.”

It is also important to recall that during those decades of change after VaticanII one could observe that the best results were achieved where the deep ideas were pursued with simple means. The great ideas contained in thick books touched few people, but the same great ideas put into simple tools helped millions.

In Latin American one of these simple things was the chapel. The Brazilians had always had chapels but they were not the place where you gather on Sundays. If the priest would ever come to an area he would go to a larger church and all people went to those larger churches. To meet in the local chapel on a Sunday without a priest was considered protestant. “When there is no priest, pray at home”, they had always been advised. Now, however, they were told to gather in their chapel as the local community, to take the bible and conduct a service themselves. It was the birth of Basic Ecclesial Communities.

Reading the Bible together in an easy way was another one of those simple key components of community building. Then the bible was no longer a book for the priest alone. To open the bible together, to discover together how it throws light on our situation, that binds a group together and enables it to act together. – Short, easy Bible courses was another of these simple means, training for lay ministries again another one.

Gospel sharing is one of these highly successful, simple, small steps. It deserves special mention. It is like a tiny seed which contains the whole of the new vision of being Church together. It encapsulates that great vision of a New Way of Being Church. When I sit in the gospel sharing group, God speaks to me, to you, to this group, in this neighbourhood where we fight for survival, where we suffer, where we help each other. God touches me and those next to me. We feel we are not just friends, we are the Church, the Church of this neighbourhood. There is a great dignity about a gospel sharing group. Each one can respond, even the illiterate. Those who had never said a single word in the big parish church they now experience that they, too, can contribute to interpreting what God is saying to our situation. God speaks and we respond. It is all so simple and yet so deep and great. Further down we will come to the obvious limitations of this gospel sharing, but for the moment we should remember that this little, simple event has been a great step ahead.

There are other small but powerful instruments. Take you acronym AsIPA. Without that term you would have to make many words when explaining what you plan, what your task is, what you have to offer. It is not the name of an institute but of an approach. If it had been the name of an institute, then the Asian Bishops Conferences could not have promoted it explicitly. It is a simple acronym for something big. Dioceses in Europe who wanted to come and study this new approach did not have to make long explanations but were simply invited to a study of “ASIPA”. Never mind that these few letters are unable to pinpoint exactly what it is all about and to say in detail what is entailed. In any case, no other short word or expression could do that. I think it was a wise step to devise that name “ASIPA”.

### Moving forward in today's context

In this conference we are discussing how, from this starting point, we can move forward, in the context in which we find ourselves. What is this context?

First of all we must say that in pur days, people are still moved by those same hopes and aspirations which brought about the opening of the door we mentioned above. That longing for communion, for participation, for integral liberation, is as strong as it was a few decades ago. This is still the Sings of the Times that was discerned in VaticanII and the decades that followed.

We are now looking a bit more critically at the steps we have taken and especially the steps we wish to take.

We should be aware that the SCCs and BECs find themselves in roughly two ecclesial situations. In spite of the danger of an over-simplification we can say these are the two situations where the priest is either mainly absent or where the priest is mainly present. In both situations we are using the same term “SCC” or “BEC” but their scope and task differs greatly according to these two situations. I will try to illustrate this through diagrams.

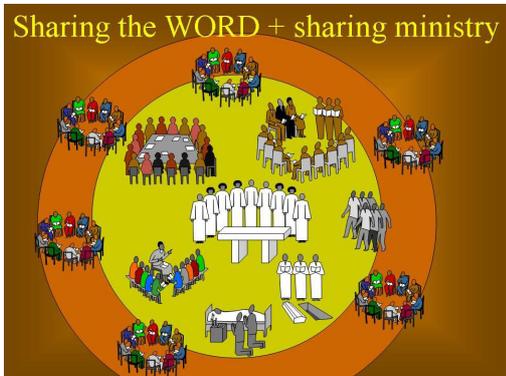


A large number of the SCCs are SCCs in self-ministering communities. This is the type we find in the most areas of the Young Churches where there is great shortage of priests and where therefore one priest always serves ten, twenty and more widely scattered sub-parishes or “out stations”. These are small or medium-size congregations who have no resident priest. Their life is centered on a



difficult to give the SCCs a central role, so that, as some beautiful examples of such parishes have put it “everything starts in the SCCs and everything ends there.” In this situation where the priest is always present this is still possible but more difficult.

Where it has been achieved, we always find that the gospel sharing groups elect the



parish councillors so that the voice of the small communities can always be heard. We also find that the priest will in this case institute lay ministries of several kinds, even more than absolutely necessary. He will introduce team-conducted liturgies, whereby all liturgies are no longer conducted by the priest alone but together with a few lay leaders. This is a great help towards becoming a real community of communities. The community is sharing the WORD

but is also sharing in the ministry as far as possible. All this can be done even where there is no pressing need, where there is no priest shortage. Without priest shortage this step demands much more conviction from the priests and from the people.



Because this situation demands much more conviction from the priest and from the parishioners, the more common picture is this sad one, that of SCCs on the fringe of priest-centered parishes. The diagram does not show a whole network of SCCs that surrounds and carries the life of the parish but rather one lonely SCC with a question mark. It reminds us that those who come together for a

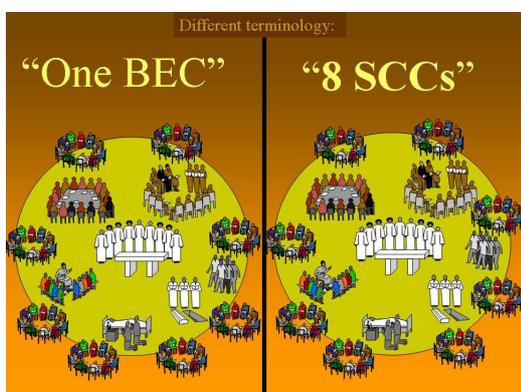
community meeting and for gospel sharing often ask themselves what their role is in the parish. The members of that gospel sharing group may be excellent Catholics but they feel “on the fringe of the life of the parish”. Their gospel sharing may strengthen and inspire them for their private life and for individual tasks they fulfil in the parish, but as a community they have very little role.



The sad situation of SCCs existing “on the fringe” of parish life is not only found in areas where there is a sufficient number of priests, but is also found among the admirable self-ministering communities. Even there we can unfortunately find priests who exclusively concentrate on the more technical tasks such as training local leaders and planning the vast network of twenty or more scattered communities.

The priests may say they have no time for introducing gospel sharing and SCC-spirit. Or they fail to see the value of having SCCs, or they say that community spirit is sufficiently happening through the sharing of practical tasks, or they just neglect the existing SCCs and give them no scope... It all ends up with this sad picture of SCCs on the fringe of self-ministering communities.

All this existing context we have to take into account when we, too easily, make demands on the SCCs and demand e.g. “the SCCs must work for the transformation of society”, or “the SCCs must bring about a new style of leadership”. The demand is correct, but the individual SCCs cannot achieve such demanding changes. What is needed is a larger network of a greater number of communities.



For a networking between more communities, we must take into account a difference in terminology, of the different way of using the term “BEC”. Let me illustrate it again with a diagram. It shows two identical communities, with the same number of gospel sharing groups and the same level of involvement in several types of ministry. What is different is the terminology. Some call this community “ONE BEC”, while others would in the

very same case speak of “eight SCCs”. At a first glance this difference in terminology seems to be a minor matter. It does, however, have some important consequences. Those areas that understand by “BEC” the one, whole network of the sub-parish with its periodic bible circles, have several advantages. They are able to take into account that their parishioners are not able to meet the whole year through, week after week, in their neighbourhoods. That they find too demanding. They therefore expect them only to meet weekly during Lent and Advent, the two “strong times” (sometimes they add a third one), while during the rest of the year the BEC is not considered to have “died” because its other functions continue throughout the year. Things are different where the term “SCC” is used for the individual small neighbourhood community, so that the same size of sub-parish will have eight, ten, twenty or more SCCs where the BEC terminology speaks of only “one BEC”. We immediately see the consequences: when these SCCs get spiritually tired after Lent is over and their weekly meetings are weaker or stop, everybody will say “the SCCs have died down”. Another difference become apparent when these BEC communities send their leaders to a national meeting. By “a BEC leader” they mean the best leader of large communities, while by “SCC leader” is usually understood the less powerful leader of a very small neighbourhood.

This difference also had consequences for social action which we so much desire. When

the BEC terminology speaks of “the social action of the BECs” they mean the action of the whole sub-parish which is naturally much stronger than if we speak of “the duty of the SCCs to transform society”. It is of course not possible to change the terminology which an area has introduced. It will not be possible to introduce new terminology but it is certainly possible to introduce a networking structure.

The examples and diagram also remind us how multi-faceted and unclear the beautiful term “A communion of communities” is. It means a different thing in different situations. It is always a challenge, but in a different way in different places.

The above examples also help us to understand the wider ecclesial context, the ecclesial cross-currents in which we find ourselves. We are dealing with more than backwardness, more than the selfishness of some individuals. We are dealing with major changes in the vision we have of what a Christian community should be. The conflicting visions are like cross currents. We are like a ship that has to navigate strong cross-currents. The currents try to pull us in different directions. It makes it quite difficult to maintain our direction. What do I mean by these cross currents?

It happens again and again that, when presenting our ideal of a new, communitarian way of being the Church, somebody says “but Rome does not want this. It tells us the opposite”. It is true that there are contradictory rules given, but we must see all this in a realistic way. It is true that most Bishop’ Conferences of the South have issued and still issue the directive “when there is no Holy Mass in your church on Sunday, do not take your car to go to a neighbouring town to get Mass but rather assemble in your local church for a Service of the Word”, while at the same time we get directions from Roman authorities that in this case those who can should rather travel to the neighbouring parish for Holy Mass...and there are other examples of such conflicting rules. For instance we are told by authorities in Rome we should have only few lay funeral leaders and should avoid having them at all, while we in the Dioceses of the South say the opposite.

My view is that such contradictions are unavoidable uncertainties, unavoidable growth pains. We are dealing with a major adjustment in our target vision for parish life. This is why I reminded ourselves in the beginning that for many centuries we had a different idea of what a parish should be. The picture of one shepherd looking after a great crowd of helpless sheep was in our minds in an exaggerated way. For bishops to say that our target picture must now be the self-ministering community, this surely means a major change. A change of this magnitude cannot proceed without tensions and cross-currents. We cannot expect a cardinal in Rome to see things in the same way as a cardinal in Indonesia or in Peru. These ideas of sharing the WORD and of sharing ministry need concrete experience. They cannot be grasped theoretically. They must be experienced. Those who have never personally experienced gospel sharing and ministry sharing will find

it difficult to trust these developments. But this does not mean that we should sit idle and wait until one day the directives from Rome will be completely identical with our views. We the dioceses and parishes must pioneer the way and while we do this pioneering task they have to endure a dialog with the central authorities of the Church. We need the central authority, we need unity, and we need the often painful dialog between us. Our task is to devise and try out new ways of being the Church that fit our context. Our task is to make sure that these are of high quality and follow the gospel. Then our central offices will one day make these new ways of being the Church the rules for the whole Church.

### **Some of our tasks for today**

The list of tasks for ASIPA and for other community builders of today is large. Let us pick out some of the most important ones:

Gospel sharing remains a key component. It remains our task to keep it well integrated as the heart of our approach. This is where we meet Christ personally. This is where we hear HIS WORD in a direct and simple way. Moreover gospel sharing encapsulates the whole vision of what faith and Church is. It gives everybody immediate experience of being the Church. It is symbol and reality at the same time. Its small face meetings outbalance our huge parish structures. Its powerful experience of equality in the Church balances in a healthy way the unavoidable differences created by our ministry structure. In many places we cannot yet start with a fully integrated approach but gospel sharing may be the realistic starting point.

It is our task to integrate community building with ministry formation. Community and ministry belong together. Community building must not remain isolated from ministry formation. SCCs/BECs must ensure that it takes place. To become a communion of communities includes both, the life of the small communities plus the ministry exercised for the cluster of communities. The sharing in many forms of ministry enriches the sharing of the Word in gospel sharing. An “integrated approach” will have to integrate these two tasks.

Small faith sharing groups should not be the only channel for social action. Again, an integrated approach will be necessary. The networking of small communities needs other structures that work with the SCCs. The local church council and the Parish Council are the obvious point where the social action of the SCCs can be stimulated and coordinated. The SCCs should be helped to use other gospel reflection methods, over and above the Seven-Step Method. A healthy balance should be found between macro and micro projects

of social action.

Another unending task is that we must keep on explaining to others why we do what we are doing. There are several groups who do not yet understand why community building, and especially SCCs/BECs are important. Some sodalities do not yet understand. Some priests do not understand.

Finally we have to mention a task which is a long-term task. It is that we must overcome having communities where the altar remains empty on most Sundays. We may not be able to solve this problem just now, certainly not at this meeting. It cannot be right for Catholic communities to meet on Sundays without the Eucharist. We are in danger of getting used to it. This defect must be rectified. Catholic community building must include the Eucharist. It is not a task for this meeting, but for future ones.

# Small Christian Communities Towards the Church of Communion

●● Presidential Address Bishop Thomas Dabre  
Chairman of the National Service Team for Small Christian Communities  
of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of India – C.B.C.I.,

**Your Eminence, dear Archbishops, Bishops and delegates,**

As Chairman of the National Service Team for Small Christian Communities of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of India–C.B.C.I., it is my privilege to welcome you all for the 4th AsIPA General Assembly. I wish you all a very happy and fruitful stay during the 8 days of our convention. I regret my inability to welcome you all in person, since I have to be in Rome for the meeting of the national delegates in preparation for the 49th International Eucharistic Congress. However, I will be joining you shortly.

## **Communion**

The 4th AsIPA General Assembly will reflect on the theme of Small Christian Communities (SCCs) or BECs(Basic Ecclesial Communities) towards the Church of Communion. This indeed is a very significant theme both from the perspective of the faith and the peculiar situation of the countries of Asia in their unique richness. The Triune God we believe in is a God of communion. The Holy Trinity is the source and pattern of the communion in the Church. Each of the three persons is distinct, equal and lives in perfect unity, interaction and communion with one another. They share their life with one another, they interrelate with one another and in their unique richness they co-operate with one another in the work of creation and salvation.

## **The Early Church**

The apostolic Church lives and carries out its mission following the model of the Holy Trinity. “And, they devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers... many wonders and signs were done through the apostles. And all who believed were together and had all things in common; and they sold their possessions and goods and distributed them to all, as any had need.”(Acts 2:42-47) “Now the company of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one said that any of the things which he possessed was his own, but they had everything in

common. And with great power the apostles gave their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all. There was not a needy person among them, for as many as were possessors of lands or houses sold them, and brought the proceeds of what was sold and laid it at the apostles' feet; and distribution was made to each as any had need."(Acts 4:32-35)

"In the Church all members in virtue of the sacrament of Baptism are endowed with equal dignity as children of God, and brothers and sisters among themselves." "You are all sons of God, through faith. For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus."(Gal. 3: 26-28)

This basic equality of all the baptized co-exists with the hierarchical order. The Pope and the Bishops exercise authority in the Church. Thus within the Church there are different roles which are for building the Church. With such distinctive roles in all sectors of the Church, the clergy, the religious and the laity must live, function and carry out their mission in authentic communion, based on and rooted in the Holy Trinity. "To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good", "All these are inspired by one and the same Spirit, who apportions to each one individually as he wills."- 1Cor. 12:7,11

## **John Paul II**

**"So that all parishes of this kind may be truly communities of Christians, local ecclesial authorities ought to foster ... small basic or so-called 'living' communities where the faithful can communicate the Word of God and express it in service and love to one another; these communities are true expressions of ecclesial communion and centers of evangelization, in communion with their pastors."- Christifideles Laici (1988-No.26)**

Pope John Paul II recognized that the small Christian communities promote vitality, communion and missionary spirit in the people. A rapidly growing phenomenon in the young Churches - one sometimes fostered by the Bishops and their Conferences as a pastoral priority - is that of "ecclesial basic communities"(also known by other names) which are proving to be good centers for Christian formation and missionary outreach. ...these communities are a sign of vitality within the Church, an instrument of formation and evangelization, and a solid starting point for a new society based on a "civilization of love" ... Within them, the individual Christian experiences community. At the same time, by being imbued with Christ's love, they also show how divisions, tribalism and racism can be overcome.

"Because the Church is communion, the new 'basic communities', if they truly live in unity with the Church, are a true experience of communion and a means for the

construction of a more profound communion. They are thus cause for great hope for the life of the Church” ‘Redemptoris Missio’,n.51.

Pope John Paul II encouraged us to appreciate the importance of these communities for promoting love, service and communion.

“They aim to help their members to live the Gospel in a spirit of fraternal love and service, and are therefore a solid starting point for building a new society, the expression of a civilization of love. ...”

I encourage the Church in Asia, where possible, to consider these basic communities as a positive feature of the Church’s evangelizing activity.” ‘Ecclesia in Asia’, 25

### **Bishops of Asia**

Such being the importance of the small communities efforts are being made in different parts of the world to promote these small communities. In several countries of Asia the formation of small Christian communities has been adopted as a pastoral priority. The Bandung Conference in 1990 declared that for a renewed and relevant Church in Asia the pattern of small Christian communities should be adopted in our pastoral life. “The Church in Asia will have to be a communion of communities, where laity, religious and clergy recognize and accept each other as sisters and brothers. They are called together by the Word of God which, regarded as a quasi-sacramental presence of the Risen Lord, leads them to form Small Christian Communities”(e.g. neighbourhood groups, Basic Ecclesial Communities and ‘covenant’ communities) - **[FABC - Bandung Conference - 1990]**.

The Catholic Bishops’ Conference of India has in its resolutions emphasized the need for small Christian communities in the dioceses. “In the process we saw that the building of Small Christian Communities, flowing from our celebration of the Eucharist (Acts. 4,32-37), is pastorally desirable.” The model for the Church is “a communion of communities”- **[CBCI - Trivandrum - 1996]**.

The national assembly for the celebration of the grand jubilee 2000 organized by the Bishops of India underlined the need for Small Christian Communities for the strengthening and for the renewal of the church and to realize the new way of being Church in the present day world circumstances. The Bishops have recognized that the model of small communities facilitates the realization of a participatory Church. “In order to make Jesus’ vision a reality, we recommend very strongly that the basic structure of the Church in India is to be a communion of communities and for this, Small / Basic Christian Communities must be formed in every parish”- **[National Assembly, Yesu Krist Jayanti-Bangalore-September 2000]**.

### **Fruits of small Christian communities**

The small Christian Communities effectively help to concretize and manifest the Church's nature as communion. The Small Christian Communities offer space and opportunities for interaction, collaboration, reflections and for praying together on the Word of God. In Small Christian Communities every person is taken seriously. As a result there is trust, understanding, mutual knowledge and acceptance of the faithful in the small communities. This leads to bonding and fellowship. In Small Christian Communities the people's distinctive qualities, skills and talents are recognized. They offer services in the communities in accordance with their talents and skills. That brings about a sense of fulfillment and contentment in all. In the ecclesial communion all are able to play their appropriate role, take initiatives in their own way and spheres and to provide leadership. It is precisely because of the Small Christian Communities that many lay people; men, women and youth in particular have become quite dynamic, both in the Church and in the society. Thus Small Christian Communities do offer space and opportunities to reflect the Trinitarian Communion, which is the pattern of the Church. I am inclined to think that we in Asia have a better sense of the community than of personal individuality. This characteristic community spirit of the Asians is of immense help for the promotion of small Christian communities.

### **Challenges from the present situation**

In today's world **faith formation, evangelization and inter-religious dialogue** should be our major concerns. Materialism, pursuit of worldly pleasures and happiness, consumerism and secularization are on the increase. Enthusiasm for proclaiming and sharing the faith is on the decline. Religious terrorism, violence, fanaticism, fundamentalism and communalism are on the increase.

In such a challenging situation we can hardly over emphasize the significance and the necessity of the small communities. On account of the frenzied chase for material progress and prosperity and the fast pace of life, personal and emotional needs of people are not properly attended to. In Small Christian Communities this can be done with greater facility. In the rising tide of materialism, secularization and indifference to the matters of God, we need to strengthen the faith. In small communities, centrality of the Word of God and the Holy Eucharist, the faithful can receive a continuing faith formation. This will help to face the threats emanating from some of the present day trends. The Second Vatican Council endorsed the need for inter-religious dialogue. Today, there is a growing threat from religious fundamentalism, terrorism, communalism and fanaticism. As a result world peace and prosperity of nations are at risk. Therefore all the more we need to take inter-religious dialogue very seriously. Through inter-religious dialogue we can promote peace, trust, harmony, mutual respect and collaboration among people of different faiths

and religions. The Small Christian Communities offer good help to promote inter-religious dialogue. In most Asian countries the Christians are living among those of other faiths as their neighbours. This should be taken as an opportunity for the witness of the faith and for inter-religious dialogue.

**Jesus in the one unique Saviour of the world.** This good news we have to share with all. This is evangelization. We all need to take evangelization ever more seriously. We cannot deprive people of the good news of Jesus. As John Paul II has said, the Small Christian Communities can become agents of evangelization. The Small Christian Communities enable the faithful to intensely experience the good news of salvation and encourage the sharing of this joyful experience of the good news to the people of other religions around us. Thus the faithful can become authentic witnesses of the faith. And thus they expand the Church communion to include those of other religions. This way also the small Christian communities can become **small human communities**.

#### **Conclusion :**

I have been personally associated with the Small Christian Communities for the last 16 years. I have seen how the many people who take the Small Christian Communities seriously have found joy in their faith and have become active both in the Church and society. As a result the Church too has become vibrant and revitalized. Personally, I have grown in my appreciation of the role of the laity in the Church because of my close association with the work for the promotion of the small communities. In the midst of our ministerial activities and organizational responsibilities we have to have cordial bonds with people. These, I feel in the light of my constant experience, are facilitated in the setting of the small communities.

I pray that our convention will enable us all to deepen our understanding and appreciation of the small communities and as result to commit ourselves to promote the small communities in our Asian continent. Thus may we all realize the nature of the Church as communion and live up to it with joy and enthusiasm. May the Holy Trinity bestow on the Church in Asia the gift of communion through our pursuit of Small Christian Communities.

## The Eucharist as the Theological Foundation of SCCs

●● Bishop Bosco Penha

1. The parable of the married couple Ritualism
  2. All the seven sacraments are in danger of ritualism.  
Examples : baptism, confirmation, penance, marriage.
  3. Historical reflections. Hangover of the protestant reformation and protestant / catholic debate.
  4. In a way, the greatest tragedy is the Eucharist.  
The question is, do we merely celebrate the Eucharist or live it?
- a) **“The Great Divide”** The parish church was packed to capacity with worshippers around the Eucharistic table. They prayed aloud, sang religious hymns in unison. They listened to the celebrant as he challenged them with the Gospel. They partook of the Eucharistic bread. “Go in peace to love and serve the Lord.”

Like rabbits they hurriedly scampered to their respective warrens, the poor to the squalor and the inconvenience of their huts and chawls, the well-to-do to the comfort of their bungalows and flats.

The gap that divided the ‘praying parish community’ was as wide as day and night.

### **Buzz**

- b) Christianity as it is lived today by many Christians unfortunately leaves much to be desired. “Being a Christian”, laments Antonio Perez-Esclarin, “has been reduced to carrying out a set of superficial, hollow practices ... We have turned religion into a cultural act, into the repetition of empty words and formulas.”

Alas! In this crisis of the Christian religion the most unfortunate casualty has been the Eucharist, the sign of God’s love for man, the sacrament for the liberation of the oppressed.

Ironically this gift of God, Himself, has suffered and suffered sadly at the hands of the so-called good Christians. They are the upright, honest, devout church-goers. They never

miss Mass on a Sunday or a day of obligation. They live a rich internal life liberally larded with devotions and novenas' to saints, one per day of the week. And only this.

And what have they done to the Eucharist? They have reified it, stripped it bare of the quality of an event, placed it in an imposing Gothic cathedral, surrounded it with all the trappings of middle class respectability—carpets, rugs, silks, gold and silverware, imported marble, all these far, far removed from the sweat, tears, pain, hunger, thirst, death of the God Man of Galilee.

Celebrating the Eucharist has meant mere social convention. At times they have even summoned the Eucharist to lend respectability to a social occasion as on an anniversary, birthday, jubilee, wedding. And, oh, the celebration that followed! The noticeable over-indulgence in food and drink is hardly becoming of the sacrament of unity and sharing just celebrated.

Again, while participating in soul-stirring liturgical services, they have simultaneously oppressed the poor, driven hard bargains against the weak, taking advantage of their weakness to enhance themselves and amass wealth.

To be even more devastatingly precise, bourgeoisie, middle class Christianity has spiritualized, de-politicized and ahistoricized the broken bread and the poured out wine to such an extent that hardly any one of the participants recalls the true significance of the sacrifice of Jesus. Hardly any one ever realizes that the broken bread and the poured out wine is given to express solidarity, especially with the poor and the oppressed and to build a more fraternal and just society.

In short, the caricature of a Eucharist the bourgeoisie middle class Christianity has conjured for itself, comforts but does not challenge, consoles but does not shatter crass callousness.

We need, therefore, to rescue the sacrament from being a mere superficial, anaemic observance removed from the reality of a life situation in which the bread is broken and the cup shared. (Rebello Cedric : The Other Eucharist, pages 11 to 12)

5. The celebration of the Eucharist implies the care of all our people. Various categories needing care : poor, staving, sick, aged, lonely, orphans, widows, drug addicts, alcoholics, homeless, unemployed, delinquents, children needing help in studies, physically handicapped, mentally disabled, confused, etc. Who will care for these people? The care of ALL can only be ensured by ALL together.

Survey of people leaving the church.

Eighty percent of parishioners dormant / not involved.

Can this one way traffic continue?

6. SCCs are an answer to the problem. Unfortunately, many do not get involved because it calls for a change of functioning for all sectors in the church.
7. The Eucharist is a mission to world transformation.

We cannot leave Jesus in the church : He is the Lord of history and the Universe.

The transformed neighbourhood becomes the model / microcosm of a new world. The church is a sign, sacrament and instrument of unity.

8. From Small Christian Communities to Small Human Communities to national integration.
9. Hence the Eucharist is the theological foundation for SCCs.

Will we take the Eucharist seriously and implement it or are we to continue to merely celebrate it?

#### **Questions :**

1. What struck you most in this exposition?
2. At the present moment we seem to celebrate the Eucharist without really trying to live it. Discuss.
3. The SCCs are an answer to the problem of people leaving the church. Do you agree? Comment.
4. The Small Christian Communities become a model / microcosm of a new world of caring, sharing and mutual concern. Discuss.

# Living The Sacraments in SCCs

## Initiation into The Sacraments and The Role of SCCs

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In the traditional theology and catechesis “sacraments are efficacious signs of grace, instituted by Christ and entrusted to the Church by which divine life is dispensed to us”<sup>1</sup>. Maintaining still the validity of this definition, it is necessary to consider the sacraments from a deeper Christological and ecclesiological perspective. They are actions of Christ who continues his redemptive mission in the world until his second coming as we proclaim in every Eucharistic celebration. They make the Church visible as a community of disciples in the world and they enable the Church to bear witness to God’s plan of salvation for the world. It is here that we find the relationship between the sacraments and the small Christian communities. Taking for granted that the small Christian communities are a new way of being Church today, we ask in what way are the sacraments related to the SCCs.

### **1. Sacraments and Community building.**

The Church is a community of faith, that is, of those who believe in the death and resurrection of Christ as the fulfillment of the plan of God for the salvation of humankind and express this faith through the sacrament of Baptism, Confirmation and Eucharist.<sup>2</sup> We can spell out the shape of the Church which is made visible in the world by the sacraments along the following lines:

- a) It is mystery of communion between God and human beings and among human beings themselves.
- b) It is a sign and instrument of the transformation of society through an involvement of communion.
- c) It is socially embodied in communities of communion.

There is a common word that is found in all these three above expressions of the Church. That is ‘communion’. When the believers in Christ translate their faith into love we have communion. When this communion is articulated in life we have communities. The word used in the Scriptures for communion is ‘koinonia’, which signifies sharing in

something with others<sup>3</sup>. The Church is a community in which the members are in communion with God and with one another, in communion with the world around it and in communion with other communities in a network of relationship. All these characteristics of the Church community has its foundation in its faith in Jesus Christ, the Word Incarnate, dead and risen and present in its midst, which in its turn has its source in the love of God for the world. “The foundation of the ecclesial community is God who loves the world and sends His Son to be a sign of His love. The Son sends the disciples to be the sign of his love in the world, that is, to be the Church. By living their lives as signs of love they transform the world into a magnificent expression of divine love i.e. the kingdom of God”<sup>4</sup>. We can say that the Church is a community whose norm of life is love and style of life is sharing, as we find it expressed in the early Church: “Now the whole group of those who believed were of one heart and soul...and everything they owned was held in common... There was not a needy person among them”(Acts 4,32-34).

In the celebration of the sacraments the Church expresses herself as a community of faith, living in *koinonia*. The sacraments therefore are not mere ritual actions that commemorate the past events, but they are expressions of the life of the believing community as we have described above. They are meant for building up th Christian community and through it the Kingdom of God in the world. We can distinguish the following elements in their celebrations:

- a) They bring together the community of believers with their life situation.(The Introductory Rites)
- b) They proclaim in word and deed the presence of the risen Lord in the midst of the community – This is the Word of the Lord. This is the Body of the Lord “He is present in his word since it is he himself who speaks when the Holy Scriptures are read in the Church<sup>5</sup>. By his power he is present in the sacraments so that when anybody baptizes it is really Christ himself who baptizes”<sup>6</sup> “For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes”(1Cor. 11,26). :
- c) They interpret the life of the celebrating community in the light of the Mystery.
- d) They challenge the community to contribute its share to build up the Kingdom of God of which the Mystery that is celebrated in symbol.

They celebration of the sacraments in our parishes today have become mere rituals for the production of grace for next life or spiritual activities meant for obtaining favours. They are cultic activities that bring back nostalgic memories of the past events or celebrations that glorify God. The main concern in the celebration of the sacraments was that they are ritually valid actions, producing spiritual effects in the hearts of the faithful. The community building and kingdom thrusts are not present with sufficient emphasis. It is

true that with the liturgical renewal of Vatican II, the sacramental celebrations acquired a community character; but their impact on building the community and promoting the Kingdom of God is not evident in the ordinary parish celebrations of the sacraments. For most of our people active participation in the celebration of the sacraments consist mainly in answering the prayers and taking part in the singing or in ritual actions. These celebrations do not make them realize that participation means to be an organic part of the organism with the consequent involvement in its life.

The celebrations of the sacraments are celebrations of faith. Genuine faith is not mere acceptance of truths. Believing makes people belong to one another. Belonging in turn deepens believing. Faith is a gift of God. When we say that we believe in God, what we really say is that we recognize God as relating Himself to us. This act of recognition makes us experience sonship or daughterhood. When we recognize the others as sons and daughters of God we build up a community of faith. The catechumenal period which followed the initial evangelization consisted in arriving at this recognition. When we translate our faith in God in terms of a community of relationship, we have the Church. The sacraments are the signs which express the membership in the Church as a community of relationship. Evidently this relationship being a relationship with God has to be an ever expanding one. Evangelization or Kingdom-building action consists in building up this network of relationships that encompass the whole human community and cosmos. The sacraments are an important means for this in as much they enable us to express our faith in relationship in a variety of ways. The mandate of Jesus to build up the Kingdom of God through baptism (Mt. 28,18) must be understood in the light of John 17,18-21: "As you have sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world. And for their sakes I sanctify myself, so that they also may be sanctified in truth. I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word that they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me". The sanctification that sacraments effect in us must become an evangelizing force by making us becoming communities of love and sharing. "The experience of Christian discipleship was sacramental of Christ's presence. If one was a Christian, one could, along with the other members of the community, 'sense' the presence of the risen Lord whenever the community assembled (for example, for the breaking of the bread), and this awareness could then extend to the whole of life. Whoever came into contact with one of these believing communities was truly in contact with the presence of the risen Lord. And if this person could then accept in faith the reality of this presence, the community was effectively acting as a sacrament of the risen Christ"<sup>7</sup>. The parishes that we have today, as we have seen above, do not project this image of the sacramental communities. We need another way of being Church in order to bring out the real meaning of the sacraments as well as to manifest the Church as

sacramental. The Small Christian communities seem to be an answer to this.

## 2. Small Christian Communities and Sacraments

If faith is understood primarily as relationship, both between God and human person and among human persons themselves, the Church as a community of faith should be formed in such a way that the members should be able to express and experience these relationships. This is possible only in small groups where people can relate to one another personally as well as communicate and inter-act with each other. The Small Christian Community, therefore, is more suited to express faith as relationship. The community building power of the sacraments appears more convincingly and forcefully in such communities. Here belief is translated into belonging; relationships are translated into communion and communion is translated into communication or evangelization.

**A. Sacraments and SCCs.** The sacraments give identity and vitality to the SCCs. The christian character of the community comes from the fact that it is a community of believers in the death and resurrection of Christ. When they celebrate the sacrament this characteristic of the community is expressed symbolically, experienced in their life of communion and made visible in their life of witnessing.

- a) The heart of SCCs is the experience of the risen Christ shared by a group of believers. We need not only to know and formulate our faith in the risen Christ, but we need to experience it and share our experience with others. Since every experience is unique, the Christian experience of each will be different, even though it is the same reality, the Paschal reality, which is experienced. Thus there will be communion in differences. That is why the Liturgical Constitution says, “The liturgy daily builds up those who are in the Church, making them a holy temple of the Lord, a dwelling place for God in Spirit, to the mature measure of the fullness of Christ”<sup>8</sup>
- b) The celebration of the sacraments in the SCC enables the members to express their faith in terms of love and sharing. What constitute the believers into a community are not laws and regulations, but the love that they have for one another. In the celebration of the sacraments, they express in symbols the love which they have for one another as members of the body of Christ accepting each member in his or her individuality. The Christian community thus becomes “a sign lifted up among the nations”<sup>9</sup>.
- c) The celebration of the sacraments in the SCCs increases the witnessing power of the Christian community. The experience of the risen Lord through the sacraments fills the believers with the Spirit who makes them witnesses of the Kingdom in the world. The small Christian communities living in close contact with their neighbourhood in

need of redemption and experiencing the redemptive power of the Paschal Mystery in their lives become evangelizers of their neighbourhood. Leavened by the power of the Gospel experienced through the symbols of word and sacrament they become “a powerful expression of the Kingdom on earth and an effective instrument for promoting it”<sup>10</sup>. The celebration of the sacraments in the SCCs enables the members of these communities to interpret their lives in terms of the people in need and leads them to a life of apostolic involvement in the neighbourhood. In the celebration of the sacraments the SCC experiences the sacramentalization of the death and resurrection of Christ, in the context of a world that is groaning and struggling for liberation. To some extent, we may say, that this community sacramentalizes also the life situation of the human community in the midst of which it is called to be the witness of the Kingdom of God.

**B. SCCs and Sacraments.** The celebration of the sacraments in small Christian communities not only keeps alive its authenticity of life and mission, but also gives a new understanding of the sacraments and creates a new style in its pastoral practice. Some of the characteristics of the sacraments which were lost in the course of time, due to institutionalization and ritualization will be restored. We shall briefly reflect on the impact of the sacramental practice in SCCs on the sacramental theology and praxis of the Church.

- a) We will have a new insight into the rituals of the sacraments. In the traditional understanding, the rituals were considered as the essential matter and form which, when placed with the correct intention and in their ritualistic precision produced the grace; in other words, they became effective *ex opere operato*. The stress was on *opus*. Although the need of the *opus* is not denied, it has a much wider role in the sacramental action. The ritual is a symbol that expresses the personal involvement of the participants in the sacramental action. This is very clear in the Eucharist: the bread and wine brought to the altar is not mere material bread and wine, but the bread and wine that stand for the community that brings them to the altar. Similarly, the water of Baptism is not simply the material water, but the symbol of the Church. In fact the Fathers of the Church see the water as the maternal womb of the Church, sanctified by the action of the Holy Spirit, from which new members are born. “At the new birth of each one of us the baptismal water becomes the mother’s womb. For the same Holy Spirit which filled the Virgin fills the font as well, so that sin, which in her case was eliminated by her sacred conception, is here blotted out by a mystical washing”<sup>11</sup>. This maternal womb stands for the Church because through the action of the Holy Spirit, the Church becomes capable of regenerating children in the baptismal font as we pray on Holy Saturday during the blessing of the water: “Father, look now with love upon your Church and unseal for it the fountain of baptism”<sup>12</sup>. Baptismal ritual as a personal act on the part of the Church becomes

more evident in the Small Christian Community where the Church as a community is present in a spirit of personal relationship. Here the symbolic meaning of the Baptismal Rite is brought out more clearly than in a big congregation of the parish where the Rite appears very much as the action of the priest in his capacity as the official of the institutional Church.

- b) Believing should lead to belonging. Christian faith should have its expression in Christian belonging. This was how the early Christians expressed their faith as we have seen above. The celebration of the sacrament should become the symbol of this belonging. But in many of our big parishes, this sense of belonging through the participation in the sacraments, which are official expressions of faith, is not very clear. I would even add that it is not very easy to express this sense of belonging in such communities. Instead in the Small Christian Communities, this sense of belonging can have a better expression. The sacraments as community actions, as envisaged by Vatican II appear with greater clarity when they are celebrated in the context of the SCCs. What makes an action communitarian is not merely the presence of a crowd, but a group of people with sense of belonging to one another, which is more evident in Small Christian Communities.
- c) Another characteristic of Christian sacraments is that they transform the believers into witnesses and apostles. The Church as *koinonia* must become the Church as *diakonia*. Otherwise it will become a ghetto. In its relationship with others she will be proselytizing and not evangelizing. “Reborn as sons of God, the baptized must profess before men the faith they have received from God through the Church and participate in the apostolic and missionary activity of the people of God”<sup>13</sup> The sacraments celebrated in SCCs will be able to manifest better the transition from *koinonia* to *diakonia* than in bigger parish communities. In fact, one of the weak points of our sacramental pastoral action in the pre-Vatican II period was precisely this lack of connection between apostolic activities and the sacraments. The sacraments celebrated in SCCs can help the Church remedy this drawback, by giving the sacramental celebrations an apostolic thrust.

### **3. The Sacraments of Initiation in Small Christian Communities**

After having seen the relationship between the Sacraments and Small Christian Communities in general we shall reflect on some of the sacraments in particular in order to show they can be celebrated in the small Christian communities or in the spirit of the Small Christian Communities.

**A. Sacraments of Initiation:** With this expression we intend the Sacraments of Baptism, Confirmation and Eucharist. In the whole theological tradition of the Church these three

sacraments are considered together, even though in their liturgical celebration there have been and there are differences in the East and West. St. Augustine describes the process of Christian initiation these in beautiful words “Remember, you did not exist, and you were created; you were carried to the Lord’s threshing floor… When you were set aside as catechumens you were stored in his barn. You gave in your names; you began to be ground with fasting and exorcism. After that you came to the water, were moistened and made one. You were cooked then, when the ardour of the Holy Spirit came near, and now have been made the Lord’s bread”<sup>14</sup> We use the word ‘initiation’ to show that these are not mere rites performed to indicate a change of religion or an act of belonging to an association. They are acts by which the person who has already believed in Christ acquires an organic belonging to the community of Christ. This belonging can be spelt out in three ways: belonging to Christ by entering into world of the risen Christ (Gal. 2,19-20), by being initiated into the life according to the Spirit, belonging to the community of faith, by being initiated into a life of fraternal charity and by belonging to the Trinitarian family, by being initiated to the Kingdom of God, where the Spirit of God is active and challenging the believer to contribute towards the building up of the new earth and heaven; one becomes a member of the total Trinitarian family of God where all will be in God and God will be in all. This is a process which has to take place by getting initiated into the Small Christian Communities which is the living cell of the wider Christian community and of the universal Kingdom of God. The candidate for Baptism must experience this sense of belonging starting from the SCCs. Hence the catechumenal process of instruction, conversion of heart and prayer experience should be done in the SCCs. The SCCs have an important role to play in the initiation of the believer in Christ into the community of faith as well as into the community of the Kingdom. The catechumens must experience the love of God and express it in their relationship with others. They must be also initiated into the apostolic activity by getting involved in the neighbourhood. It is the duty of the SCCs to initiate them into the wider community of the Church: parish, Diocese and the Universal Church. But it should be done in such a way that they must realize that they are not joining a multinational organization, but that they are becoming organic members of the body of Christ. They should be made to relate to the wider bodies by creating a sense of belonging and not merely through a legal bond.

It is necessary that the sacrament of Confirmation be presented to them in terms of the same sense of belonging. The Holy Spirit not only makes them experience the love of God and enable them to express this love within the community, but he makes this love the source of apostolic activities: “Out of the believers’ heart shall flow rivers of living water. Now he said this about the Spirit, which believers in him were to receive, for as yet there was no Spirit, because Jesus was not yet glorified”(John 7,38-39). The spirit also confers on the believer charisms for building up the Kingdom of God. The SCC should facilitate the

discernment of these charisms and channel them in the right direction for the building up of the Kingdom of God in the neighbourhood. The catechumens should be initiated to respond to the Spirit in the correct way. Unfortunately today in our charismatic movement the Spirit who is present in our believing communities is constrained to act within certain parameters that are not always contributing towards the building up of the communities and towards the growth of the Kingdom; they consist in mere pious exercises and manifestation of exoteric activities. The catechumens should be warned about these dangers. They should be taught to exercise these gifts for the real purpose for which the Spirit conferred these gifts on them.

The celebration of the Eucharist is the climax of Christian initiation. I do not deal with it here, since there is another paper dealing with it more explicitly. However, it is important to make the catechumens know the role that Eucharist plays in the whole process of initiation. They should realize that they are fully Christians only when they actively participate in the Eucharist and are initiated into the Eucharistic life of communion and sharing in a spirit of self gift. Hence it is necessary that SCCs take care to offer the candidates a proper catechesis which will enable them participate in the Eucharist properly and give them an adequate initiation to live the implications of their Eucharistic participation in the daily life.

The celebration of the sacraments of initiation will take place in the parish church. It is necessary that the SCCs gradually introduce the catechumen to the wider community of the parish and the diocese during the period of preparation. They must be also taught the implications of belonging to the wider communities so that their Christian belonging may not be reduced to a ghetto mentality and attitude. This can take place by enabling the catechumens to participate in the various rites of the Christian Initiation of Adults in the parish, although some of them may be conducted with greater effectiveness in the SCCs themselves. We do not go into details regarding this because these need to be studied by the SCCs and the parish taking into account the particular situation in which they find themselves. The final celebration of Christian initiation will take place in the parish. The SCCs should present their members to the parish on this occasion. They are the living cells of the parish and they have now come to the wider community of the parish together with the new members to strengthen and enrich their sense of belonging.

After the celebration of the Sacraments of Initiation, there is a time of deepening of Initiation called Mystagogical period. During this time the new members are made to exercise their Christian responsibility of building the community and working for the Kingdom of God in their neighbourhood. It is better that the SCCs take full responsibility of this initiation. It can be spelt out in general along the following lines: In the first place, there should be frequent meeting of the SCCs together with the newly initiated during

which the symbols of Christian initiation will be understood better, with their implications for life and ministry; secondly the bonds between the new members and the community should be deepened through personal contacts so that the sense of belonging is strengthened; the new members should be made to get involved in some apostolic projects according to their charisms. If necessary, the community should offer opportunities for the member to develop these charisms so that they can function more effectively; the new members should be made to keep alive their link with the wider parish community through their active participation in the Sunday liturgy of the parish.

What we have said up to now concerns adult Baptism. What about Child Baptism and the role of SCCs in its celebration? It must be kept in mind that the only reason that justifies Child Baptism is the fact that the child shares in the faith of the parents. In fact according to Canon Law one of the conditions for baptizing the infant is that there is “a well-founded hope that the child will be brought up in the Catholic religion. If such hope is truly lacking, the baptism is, in accordance with the provisions of particular law, to be deferred and the parents advised of the reason for this”<sup>15</sup>. According to another Canon: “the parents of a child who is to be baptized, and those who are to undertake the office of sponsors, are to be suitably instructed on the meaning of this sacrament and the obligations attaching to it”<sup>16</sup> This points to the faith formation of the parents and sponsors. “The parish priest is to see that either he or others duly prepare the parents, by means of pastoral advice and indeed by prayer together; a number of families might be brought together for this purpose and, where possible, each family visited”<sup>17</sup> ... Again describing the role of the sponsors the Code says: “In the case of an adult baptism, the sponsor’s role is to assist the person in Christian initiation. In the case of an infant baptism, the role is, together with the parents, to present the child for baptism and to help it to live a Christian life befitting the baptized and faithfully to fulfill the duties inherent in baptism.”<sup>18</sup> The Catechism of the Catholic Church considers the sponsors as representatives of the local Church. “Their task is truly ecclesial function. The whole ecclesial community bears some responsibility for the development and safeguarding of the grace given at Baptism”<sup>19</sup>. From all these texts that we have quoted from the official documents of the Church it is clear that the parents and god-parents play an important role in the baptism of infants. They will be able to fulfill their role adequately and more effectively through the SCCs than through the parishes. The SCC, being a collection of families, is a group that can be coscientized better; the families will be helped to fulfill their role as animators of their children within the concrete life-situations in which they find themselves. The SCC can organize special programmes for the parents and sponsors. The SCC members can visit the families and prepare the parents for the baptism of their children more fruitfully. It is necessary to organize the activities of the SCC taking into account this important area of the life of the community. When the real celebration of

Baptism takes place, the SCCs can present the children to the parish together with the parents and sponsors. The same can be done for the sacrament of Confirmation. The small Christian Communities will give apostolic training to the candidates for Confirmation by providing them with exposure programmes in the neighbourhood, where they will be living their Christian life. The practical way of doing it will depend on each SCC. The same can be said of the preparation of children for first Holy Communion. It should be presented by the SCC not only as a religious liturgical act in which they take part for the first time, but as a moment in which they become fully integrated into the community accepting certain responsibilities in accordance with their charism. The preparation for first Holy Communion should appear as a fuller initiation into SCC and through the SCC into the wider community of the parish.

**B. Sacraments of Healing.** In the Christian economy healing has a community dimension. This has not been sufficiently stressed in our pastoral practice. The power to forgive sins and the power to heal given to the Apostles have a community character. The forgiveness of sins is explained in terms binding and loosening (Mt. 8,18). Binding figuratively expresses the act of the head of the synagogue who closes the door and keeps people from entering the community, while loosening is the act by which the door was opened and the people are allowed to enter the community. In the same way with regard to the sacrament of Anointing, it is said that the presbyter, that is the head of the community, should go to the sick persons who have been away from the community due to illness and anointing them so that they may be healed and join again the community (James. 5,14-15). Unfortunately the community character of both these sacraments has been lost in the course of time. The effect of the sacraments was reduced to the spiritual sphere. The Post-Vatican II renewal has re-instated the community celebration in the celebration of these sacraments. But it has not yet entered into the consciousness of the people. It is not easy to make people realize the changed perspective of these sacraments in big parishes where people cannot experience personal relationship and as a consequence are not aware of the alienations that exist in our communities. Instead in SCCs this new awareness can be created and thus make these sacraments truly sacraments of reconciliation and healing of relationships.

**i) Sacrament of penance.** The sacrament of penance should be called sacrament of reconciliation because the forgiveness of God has already been given. What is not yet realized is the horizontal expression of this divine forgiveness. The Church sacramentalizes the forgiveness which God has unconditionally given to humankind through the sacrament of reconciliation when the absolution is given by the priest and the alienated person is integrated into the community. The ministry of reconciliation makes present, sacramentalizes the divine forgiveness granted through the death and resurrection of Christ and helps the believer to overcome the antagonisms that separate people from one

another; “it is one of helping people to forgive those who trespass against us. The human reconciliation that occurs here is the very heart of the sacrament of reconciliation”<sup>20</sup>.

The community character of the sacrament is very evident. In order that reconciliation may truly become heart of the sacrament, it is necessary that this sacrament be situated in a real community context. When it is celebrated in the confessional situated in the various corners of the church building, this aspect does not appear with clarity; people who approach this sacrament do not become aware of the reconciling aspect of the sacrament; they only think of this sacrament as an act of purification and forgiveness received from God. In the Small Christian Community where experience of God is constantly translated into personal relationship among the members, it is easier to bring the people into the awareness of the reconciling and communitarian dimension of Christian life. There they constantly listen to the Word of God as a challenge to their Christian life and mission and become aware of their shortcoming in responding to this challenge in a concrete and realistic manner. There they are made to confront the persons from whom they experience alienation. When the Christians are confronted with the real life situations calling for reconciliation, the sacrament of penance will become fully operative for building up the communities of salvation and communities that are agents for building up the Kingdom of God. “The celebration of reconciliation done in Small Christian Communities can not only lead to concrete expressions of peace-making among themselves in addition to reconciling with God, but also can help to identify as a community the causes for division at micro and macro levels and do something about them”<sup>21</sup>.

**ii) Sacrament of Anointing of the sick.** As we have already seen, this sacrament has a community building orientation. The sickness has alienated the Christians from the community. Now the community with its leader comes to them with a healing act and raises them up so that they can once again join the community. The Council by changing the name of the sacrament from Extreme Unction to Anointing of the sick projected this new image of the sacrament. In order to make it really effective, it is necessary to bring the community dimension in its actual celebration. In order to show that this is a real ecclesial act, it is necessary that the community be involved in it, not only in its ritual celebration, but in its ministry towards the sick. This will call for a community in which the members know one another and live together in a spirit of inter-personal relationship, through communication and sharing. This is possible only in the Small Christian Communities. The members of the community should try to take away the isolation and loneliness which the sick people in the community experience. The sacramental celebration should come as the culminating point of the healing ministry understood in terms of this communication and concern with the sick members of the community. The concern for the sick should not be limited to the sacrament, but also in other signs of human relationship. One practical instance is to bring Holy Communion to the sick in the community every

Sunday in order to show our solidarity with them. The members of the small Christian communities should take special care in doing this. I would like to conclude this section on the Sacrament of the anointing of the sick in small Christian Communities with the following experience of a group of patients in a hospital: “The patients seemed awed and grateful, thrilled because the Church had come to see them, to console them, to care deeply about all they had endured and were going through. It made them feel less alone, less forgotten. The new rite did heal; it did help”<sup>22</sup>.

**C. Sacrament of Matrimony.** The community building action has its foundation in human love purified of its selfishness and shared in life-giving self-gift. This is the role of the sacrament of Matrimony in the Church. The foundation of the sacrament of matrimony is in genuine human love. “God is working salvifically in all situations of genuine love, for it is our consciousness of being loved both humanly and divinely that must lead us to that full personhood that is our destiny”<sup>23</sup>. In the sacrament of Matrimony, this personhood is exchanged by two people in such a way that they give themselves to one another unselfishly in order to give life to others. Thus the creative work of God is continued. The Small Christian Communities should prepare people to make their love fruitful through self-gift. There should be special cells in the SCCs entrusted with the task of preparing couples for marriage. Since the families are the foundation stones on which the SCCs are built, the concern for building up healthy families in the SCCs is matter of life or death for them. It is important to give these couples who are preparing for their marriage an apostolic orientation by which they will remain always ready to serve the poorer and needy families of the locality. Although the present ecclesiastical legislation does not encourage the celebration of the marriage outside the parish church or in a secular context, the SCC members can do something during the official celebration in the parish by presenting its members to the parish community during the rite, thus highlighting the sense of belonging which exists between the and their SCC and through the SCC to the parish community. The SCCs should also take care to follow-up the newly married with their encouragement, catechesis and loving concern for them.

**Conclusion.** The SCC are the result of an effort to live Christian discipleship as authentically and as fruitfully as possible in today’s context. During his public life Jesus was trying to convince the Jews outside the circle of his disciples that he was the Messiah. The disciples did not have a very big problem in accept it. They believed in Jesus, even if they did not fully understand his teaching and mission. With regard to the disciples, however, the main concern of Jesus was to keep them together as one community with all the differences that characterized each one of them. In other words his main concern with the disciples was community building. This should also be the main concern of the Church today. But unfortunately the Church is more interested in building institutions than communities. The emergence of the SCCs is the action of the Spirit in the

Church in order to giveback the community dimension to the Church. But, if these communities are not imbued with the Spirit of Christ, they will not be able to maintain their identity in the world. The two signs which show that they are Spirit-filled and Spirit-led are the Eucharist and the life of sharing, in other words, sacraments and sharing. The early Christians recognized the Lord in the breaking of the bread and they were recognized as disciples in te sharing of the bread. Sacraments, therefore, play a key role in maintaining the Christian identity and effectiveness of the SCCs. Without them these communities may be reduced to mere human groups or associations I like-minded people. Just as the SCCs can renew the Church by giving back the community dimension of the Church, they can also renew the identity of the sacraments as community building and Kingdom promoting actions.

# ‘SCCs/BECs Towards a Church of Communion’

## 1. Introduction

AsIPA (Asian Integral Pastoral Approach), committed to the vision of a participatory Church, brought together the People of God (laity, religious, priests and bishops) from 14 countries, for the 4th General Assembly, in Trivandrum, India, from 8th to 15th November, 2006. The theme was “SCCs/BECs Towards a Church of Communion”, with the objectives: (i) deepening our ecclesiology of communion, (ii) reviewing the implications of integral and pastoral approach through SCCs (Small Christian Communities)/BECs (Basic Ecclesial Communities), (iii) discovering existing and innovative structures to initiate and nurture SCCs/BECs, and (iv) planning for exchange and sharing of resources. The meeting was jointly organized by the AsIPA Desk of the FABC Office of Laity & Family, the Catholic Bishops’ Conference of India (CBCI) Commission for Laity, the CBCI National Service Team for Small Christian Communities and the Latin Archdiocese of Trivandrum. The Assembly was enriched by the presence of delegates from Europe and South Africa.

## 2. Church: A Communion of Communities

2.1 The Church, which is rooted in a Trinitarian God of communion, is a living organism and constantly undergoing transformation. In the course of her pilgrim journey through history towards the realization of her full identity as a communion of communities (Jn 17: 21), she is challenged by the world and its rapidly changing value systems. Fully anchored in the gospel she encounters the human communities living in varying cultural contexts and strives to be a reconciler of humankind and builder of communities. One of the greatest achievements of the Second Vatican Council was to re-project the image of the Church as a communion of communities by affirming her local character built on faith, and translated into human relationships centred in Christ. This can be achieved through the establishment of many neighborhood communities in each parish. These are not just private groups. Since they comprise all Catholics of a given area, we are convinced that they are the most local incarnation of the One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church. They are A New Way of Being Church as affirmed by the Bishops of Asia. These communities gathered around the gospel in the power of the Spirit, are challenged by the Word of God to commit

themselves to build the Kingdom of God. Every member of the community becomes aware of the charisma with which the Spirit has empowered them. They fulfill a ministry where the good news is manifested in signs that indicate the advent of the Kingdom of God in their locality. (Acts 4:34)

2.2 Strengthened by the Sacraments: Another expression of the Church as the continued presence of Christ in the world, is the celebration of sacraments. They are the expressions of the faith of the community. They transform belief into belonging. When the members of the SCC/BEC live out their sacramental life by forgiving one another, by caring for the sick, by building and strengthening the Domestic Church, by using their gifts for service and by exercising a liberating leadership, they work towards the coming of the Kingdom of God. The members of the community will become aware of the fact that they are celebrating their relationship with Christ and with one another and not merely performing a set of rituals for obtaining some favors, be they spiritual or material. By living them in SCCs/BECs, the sacraments themselves will be renewed, and the communitarian and liberating dimension will be focused upon in very concrete ways.

2.3 Nourished by the Eucharist: The Small Christian Community nourished by the Word of God and enriched by the various ministries, becomes Church in the neighbourhood according to the mind and heart of Jesus Christ. In the Sunday liturgy, it experiences the Risen Lord in the breaking of the Word and this experience reaches its culmination in the breaking of the bread. The broken bread and the poured out wine express solidarity especially with the poor and the oppressed, and a commitment to build a more compassionate and just society. Unfortunately some of our communities lack these basic characteristics which marked the celebration of the Eucharist of the early Church. We have quite often reduced our Sunday Eucharist to a mere cultic act. The celebration of the Eucharist for our SCCs/BECs becomes an experience of communion and liberation, and a challenge to live it.

### **3. Our Journey so far:**

3.1 This General Assembly gave us an opportunity to review our efforts in our journey towards a communion of communities. The sharing of experiences showed that:

- The focus of SCCs/BECs is on neighborhood help, especially to the poor.
- There is a gradual change in leadership structure of the Parish Pastoral Council as well as in leadership style.
- Priests have experienced a transformation towards non-dominating leadership.
- There is an increasing number of religious sisters getting involved in the SCCs/BECs.

- The participation of women in SCCs/BECs has helped towards their empowerment and is bringing in gradual change towards equal partnership. It has facilitated women's participation in local government in some cases.
- Men and women from disadvantaged backgrounds have been enabled to participate in local elections through their involvement in SCCs/BECs.
- The gospel sharing experiences are extremely positive in helping people live out their Christian life and mission.
- There is a growing shift towards social change e.g. actions taken to organize co-op credit, protection of the environment and attempts at inter-religious outreach.

3.2 Although the vision of a New Way of Being Church has been articulated at all levels of the Church in Asia, this vision has not been fully understood and owned by all. A dominating style of leadership still hinders the promotion of a participatory Church in some places. In spite of all the efforts to integrate the work of Catholic associations and movements into the SCCs/BECs, more still remains to be done. A serious concern is the new work culture and materialistic values prevalent today that deter people's participation in the SCCs/BECs.

3.3 The AsIPA texts and modules have been translated into more than 25 Asian languages and have been a means of transforming parishes for better understanding of Church and her mission, and for greater co-responsibility through SCCs/BECs.

#### **4. Experience of SCCs/BECs – Trivandrum**

We had the opportunity to have a first hand experience of the working of SCCs/BECs in the different parishes in the Latin Archdiocese of Trivandrum.

- We observed that the flourishing of the SCCs/BECs was facilitated by a commonly shared vision in the Archdiocese.
- All people in the parish participate actively and have clear roles and responsibilities.
- The cooperation of clergy, religious and lay people was impressive.
- The non-dominating, animating style of leadership of the parish priest was clearly seen as facilitating the process.
- We realized that the dynamics in the SCC/BEC help to sensitize people about the problems of neighbors and is therefore an important support for families.
- Gospel sharing links the Word of God with life and thereby motivates people in their evangelizing mission.

- The active presence of children and the involvement of youth in the SCCs/BECs were inspiring.
- Faith formation programme for all students up to the graduate level as well as for all age groupings, was very edifying.
- There is a systematic reporting and documentation that gives them a sense of history.

The unity, love and hospitality of the SCCs/BECs, were deeply appreciated.

## **5. Challenges**

5.1 All the faithful share in the common responsibility in building a community of communion. The roles differ but they are complementary since the aim is one and the same, namely growing as a participatory co-responsible Church where all live up to their full potential.

5.2 As leaders of the Local Church, the bishops are the chief promoters of the SCCs/BECs which are the most localized expression of being Church. The SCC/BEC should be the clear priority in the diocesan pastoral vision. Their primary task is to motivate the priests who are their direct collaborators in shouldering this responsibility at the parish level. When bishops and priests take an active interest in SCCs/BECs there is a perceptive growth and flourishing of communities. (CL #26)

5.3 A non-dominating and enabling style of leadership is crucial in the building of SCCs/BECs. This style of leadership, expressed in loving all as their brothers and sisters in the Lord, will take the SCCs/BECs a long way with a firm foundation. The priest enables the leaders in the community and inspires them to work relentlessly to build and sustain small communities. Seminary formation should necessarily include an orientation to and training on SCCs/BECs, and several opportunities for reflective and guided learning through immersion in SCCs/BECs.

5.4 Religious congregations of men and women are called to put their charismas and energies at the service of the Church. Religious sisters need to see themselves as important partners in building SCCs/BECs. In places where they are actively involved in the animation of SCCs/BECs, they have contributed significantly towards its growth and their understanding of religious life vis-a-vis the community, thus transforming their lifestyle. Similarly, religious men too can contribute greatly to enhance the promotion of SCCs/BECs.

5.5 Though efforts have been made to empower lay leaders, they are yet to take their rightful place in decision-making bodies in the parish and diocese. A paradigm shift in the

understanding of leadership and structure is necessary on the part of church leaders to accept and acknowledge the potential and charism of the laity, especially of women, towards a more collaborative ministry. The Church needs to be more enthusiastic in the empowerment of lay people in different ministries.

5.6 In situations where a priest takes care of many parishes, the SCCs/BECs have been instrumental in unrtiring and strengthening the faith community. SCCs/BECs assist the priests so the Local Church can become self-ministering, self-sustaining and self-propagating.

5.7 Continuous training or formation programs at the diocesan, deanery, parish and SCCs/BECs levels are very important to sustain SCCs/BECs. The Word of God has to become a living Word through gospel sharing, so that it can permeate all areas of life. The bishops, priests, religious and lay animators should aim at a New Way of Being Church in their own personal relationship with others and their associates.

## **6. Our hope and dreams**

The Church in Asia is entering into a new phase of her existence. A new era of being and acting as the Disciples of Christ, has begun with its challenges. Here in Asia the Ecclesial community has to be a leaven in the midst of an enormous mass of dough. Every Christian becomes a person enlightened by the gospel, empowered by the sacraments especially the Eucharist, and emboldened to proclaim the good news. Towards this dream we recommend the following:

- On-going contextualized formation and training for all sectors of the parish community in order to enable them to share and own the common vision.
- The use of AsIPA texts for deepening the understanding and spirituality of a participatory Church.
- More sustained efforts need to be fostered and encouraged in building inter-religious understanding and harmony, and ecumenism.
- Opportunities to be provided for bishops and priests to live and learn as a community.
- Conscious efforts need to be made to integrate men, children and youth into the mainstream of the SCCs/BECs.
- Ensure emerging and rotating leadership and teamwork in SCCs/BECs and other church structures to bring about qualitative growth.

## **7. Conclusion**

The 4th AsIPA General Assembly has deepened our appreciation of small communities as a way to build the Church as a communion in spite of the many hurdles and obstacles. We thank and praise God for all the blessings and graces showered on the Church through SCCs/BECs. We believe that God is speaking to the Churches in Asia through the signs of the times. Inspired by the Holy Spirit, the Churches in Asia will fulfill their mission and live up to their vocation through SCCs/BECs.

We would like to express our deep gratitude to the organizers and the local host, the Archdiocese of Trivandrum, for their welcome and hospitality that helped towards the success of this General Assembly.

May the triune God of communion be with us all. We pray that Mary who accompanied the early Christian communities, accompany us in our journey towards fulfilling the mission of Jesus in Asia.

## The DIPPA Vision and Methodology

●● Fr. Thomas Vijay SAC

Director, Pallottine Animation Centre, Nagur

### From AsIPA To DIPPA

Fr. Oswald Hirmer(now bishop of Umtata, South Africa), the pioneering visionary of AsIPA project, developed a training kit called 'AsIPA'(Asian Integral Pastoral Approach) in 1993 and initiated a training process in different Asian countries which still goes on and has spread out into more than 17 Asian countries. This programme and method was brought to India in January 1995 and since then several workshops held to spread this vision of the Asian bishops for Asia.

As this vision took shape in India, it also gradually put on Indian characteristics. Several lessons were adapted to Indian situations and people. we developed new texts suited for the formation needs of the Indian Church. In our September (11-15) 2001 national coordination meeting the AsIPA-India was christened with an Indian acronym 'DIIPA', It stands for '**Developing Indian Integral Pastoral Approach**'. The word 'DIIPA' in many Indian languages means light. Indeed, we desire that the DIIPA programme become a light for the Church in India. The term 'DIIPA' has certain theological, pastoral and spiritual implications.

**Developing** > We speak of '**Developing**' because we want to remind ourselves and the pastoral workers in India that no pastoral programme is final. It is always developing and adapting to the changing situations and needs of the people in different places and times, as the living Spirit of the Lord continues to reveal himself and make his presence felt in new ways in these changing circumstances.

**Indian** > We place the vision given by the Asian Bishops in the Indian situation. We want to empower the people o India to respond to this vision together as a people from within their life context. In this way they make this vision their own and take the responsibility to realize it in their life.

**Integral** > We seek the integral growth of the whole person, integrating body and soul, secular and sacred, faith and life, clergy and laity into one body.

**Pastoral** > Our concern is to enable our people to re-dream the dream of Jesus in their life context and respond together to in their neighbourhood. In this way they become instrumental in God revealing the Indian face of Jesus among the people of India.

**Approach** > DIIPA is an approach, one way to serve the Kingdom plan of God, but a very effective and biblical way. This approach has certain characteristics:

- i) **It is Christ-centred.** We emphasize on Gospel Sharing as the way the community discerns God's will for them in their life situations and act according to it. All our lessons are rooted in the Word of God and help the participants to use the Word of God as a source of life and light for their lives.
- ii) **It is community-centred.** We want move away from the 'expert-centred' approach to pastoral programmes to 'the community-centred' pastoral programmes. Here, the expert sits with the people and listens to the people and let them participate with him in making the kind of programmes they want to have. In this way we affirm that "the Church is the People of God". The so-called expert is a servant of the community.
- iii) **It is Mission-oriented.** It helps the community to feel committed and responsible for its mission in the neighbourhood. The Church teaches that by Baptism and Confirmation Christians are called to participate together, both individually and communally, in the task of witnessing to the Gospel and making Christ present everywhere. There cannot be, therefore, a non-servant, non-participating member of Church anywhere. The Church (believers) are by nature missionary and the Church (community) exists for this.
- iv) **Leaders are servants.** In the future Church, as the Asian Bishops said, **the experts and leaders are not dominating leaders.** They are not the focal point; Jesus and the community are. It is the community which will work together and evangelize the neighbourhood to make the Kingdom of God present there. The leaders and pastoral experts are servants and animators of the community.

### DIIPA Workshop Modules

Our experience taught us that we could not train a skilled animator in one workshop. The Lumko text no. 10 titled 'Non-dominating Leadership' states that **formation is to be given stage by stage in a cyclic process**, not all at once and that it must be practice oriented. Over the years we developed several modules of formation which is a stage by stage approach to building a skilled SCC animator. These modules are:

1. **DIIPA Introductory Workshop** > basically an awareness building programme.
2. **DIIPA Team Training** > programme to train team members.
3. **DIIPA Deepening workshop** > to deepen the spirit and commitment to the new way.
4. **DIIPA Immersion Program** > a programme to learn by observing many SCCs.
5. **DIIPA Theology Course** > a 40 days pastoral-theological deepening programme.

#### **Theme-based Workshops:**

1. **SCCs and Adult Catechesis** (Introduction to Our Journey Together)
2. **SCCs are Instruments of Evangelization.**
3. **New Way of being Church** > a deep insight into the AsIPA Vision.
4. **Building Emerging Leadership** > reflections on the process of building SCC leadership.
5. **New Wine in New Wineskins** > DIIPA Guidelines for Diocesan and Parish Pastoral Councils.
6. **SCC are Eucharistic Communities**
7. **SCCs and Families – They nurture each other.**

#### **Method in Formation**

The FABC Bandung statement says that this New Vision of the Church must lead our community to that **‘authentic spirituality’** which is **“nothing more and nothing less than a following of Jesus-in-mission, an authentic discipleship in the context of Asia”(9.1)**. Communities must be transformed from passive Christianity to **“little missionary local Churches”**, witnessing to their faith together in their neighbourhood. It is very important that people choose to be **‘Jesus-communities-in-mission’** freely and that our formation approach treats people as adults and invite/challenge them to be radical and faithful to their calling. We believe that the formation method is the message. Community is being transformed as the formation process is in progress.

Therefore we use a facilitative, non-dominating, team approach in formation. This approach is an integral part of our formation. We do not provide room for one-man/woman-show precisely because our team way of training is a witness to the common dignity of all believers in the Church and what we believe co-responsibility means. There are no ignorant, incompetent people in the Church. All carry a measure of faith and have some experience and competence in building the community in their place

and in their cultural milieu and that role is indispensable for the building of that community to which he/she belongs even when he/she is poor or illiterate.

We train our animators to accompany communities as humble servants as Jesus told us in the parable of the servants. It is the Spirit of Jesus who will transform people. We accompany them in spirit and in love, inviting, affirming, encouraging, discerning and empowering people to act the Kingdom way.

### **Net-Working**

The Pallottine Animation Centre at Nagpur functions as the animating body for DIIPA programming. Over the years we have built up a national core team. The DIIPA Core Team is made up of the most experienced persons in our process. They are volunteers who offer their service out of their personal interest in the process and commitment to the New Way. This team is involved in all the major planning and evaluation, finalizing of new texts and in running workshops all over the country. These team members are committed and trained animators and make themselves available as and when needed.

In order that the vision is carried on and the communities are organized according to the New Way, dioceses and parishes need animation teams and continuous assistance. Hence we focus on training regional and diocesan teams who then will take care of building parish teams. We have set up teams in many regions and dioceses. We keep in touch with them through training programmes organized and planning and evaluation meetings.

### **Preparing Training Materials**

In order that training is carried on and communities are guided, new contextualized training programmes need to be prepared. Pallottine Animation Centre is involved in the work of preparing and publishing new training materials for the use of the local Church. Some of these materials have been translated into 13 Indian languages. Some of the training materials we have prepared are:

1. DIIPA Introductory workshop. (English and Hindi)
2. DIIPA Team Training Manual. (English and Hindi)
3. SCCs are Instruments of Evangelization. (English and Hindi)
4. DIIPA Swaranjali - a hymnal for SCC use.
5. New Wine in New Wineskins: DIIPA Guidelines for Diocesan and Parish Pastoral Councils. (English and Hindi)

6. Teaching of the Church on SCCs. (English)
7. In the Path of the New Way : SCC Story Book. (English)
8. Theology of Gospel Sharing by Bishop Oswald Hirmer. (English)
9. Our Journey Together.
10. FABC Bandung Statement 1990.

We wish and hope that we can continue to assist local Churches to continue their journey to renew the Church according to the FABC Bandung vision 1990. We have come a long way since then in providing support for the local Churches.

## AsIPA National Team of Germany

Report on Development of AsIPA in Germany and the German speaking countries

●● Dieter Tewes Spokesman  
AsIPA national team Germany

Since missio Germany (missio-Aachen and missio-Munich) supported financially the efforts of the Asian church to develop the Asian Integral Pastoral Approach, missio was always monitoring this process and was very interested in the results.

In the year 2000 the national missio campaign towards the World Mission Sunday was focussing on the topic of Small Christian Communities and AsIPA. Guests from India and Sri Lanka were invited to give information about this new way of being church to almost all German dioceses. As a result some people took courage to try and introduce it in their parishes and to start building Small Christian Communities here.

The information about AsIPA comes to a situation of the German Catholic church which many people would consider a crisis. There was a time when the church in Germany had a lot of priests and a lot of financial resources. We built many churches; new parishes were erected and in almost every parish there was a parish priest and a pastoral worker, paid by the dioceses. But since some years the number of the practising faithful dropped down drastically in Germany. Now less people come to church on Sundays and the number of vocations and ordinations went down dramatically. So there is more and more lack of priests and now also of financial means. The way the bishops in Germany tried to solve this problem is by combining two to four parishes to one big parish or “pastoral area” led by only one priest. We realize that this is not a good way to implement the VaticanII ecclesiology of the Church as the People of God. We have active and responsible people in the parishes; but most parishioners still have the expectation of being provided by the priest and full time pastoral workers. We realize that this will not solve our problem of passive laity. The German church is very well organized, but there is not enough participation of the people at the grass root level.

So in 2001 missio invited people who were responsible for the pastoral planning in the German dioceses for a visit to India and Sri Lanka. Five diocese participated in that journey and came back highly motivated to start building Small Christian Communities in their dioceses. But introducing it in parishes faced with stiff resistance and it took a long

process of listening to people and finding ways to help them see the reason for this way of renewing the Church. We worked very hard to learn how to raise the awareness of the people. Then the dioceses of Hambur, Osnabruck, Rottenburg–Stuttgart, Trier and Aachen made the first steps. In 2004 a second journey was organized by missio and the representatives of seven German dioceses travelled to Malaysia and Singapore to learn about AsIPA.

In February 2004 we organized in Osnabruck the first meeting of those dioceses interested in SCCs in the German speaking region. In December 2004 a second similar meeting followed during which we set up a national team who took the responsibility for the development of AsIPA in Germany. Today we have 16 dioceses in Germany and three dioceses in Switzerland, which are on the way to develop Small Christian Communities and adapt AsIPA to the German context.

The North of Germany where Catholic percentage is less and where the process of secularisation in the society is faster than in the south of Germany, we could make limited successful experiences with AsIPA.

For the AsIPA-development in Germany it was very important, that we could participate in the experiences of Asia. Different AsIPA experts from Asia like Fr.Thomas Vijay, Sister Agnes Chawadi, Wendy Louis and Cora Mateo came to Germany to animate workshops. Fr.Thomas Vijay was very much involved in the process of AsIPA development here in Germany.

On the other hand some interested pastoral workers and priests came to Asia and especially to India to learn about AsIPA.

In the process when we tried to convince priests and parish people to start SCCs in their parishes we saw, that it takes a long time to understand what AsIPA means. We learned and realized that it is a spiritual process and that we need the support of the Holy Spirit for everything we are doing in this direction. God gave us this spiritual support. So in the dioceses of Hamburg, Hildesheim and Osnabruck (in north Germany) in wurzburg diocese (in south Germany) a few groups began to grow as SCCs.

At first we made a mistake in emphasising too much on gospel sharing and nothing else. We started gospel sharing groups, not SCCs. These groups had problems to do step 6 properly. But now we know, that in the starting process we have to introduce the whole program of AsIPA and not only gospel sharing.

The traditional way of being church is still very strong in Germany. A lot of parish councillors and priests don't understand the meaning of AsIPA and a participatory church. But they feel and see that the interest of the people in the church and even their faith is

weakening rapidly. I think that there is no answer for us in this situation, other than AsIPA.

In the year 2005 and 2006 up to now we tried to promote the AsIPA program in writing articles in pastoral magazines and creating a web site which is called: [www.asipa.de]

Even after 6 years of work we are still in the very beginning to live the new way of being church in Germany. But the interest is growing. And we are learning especially now by doing our own workshops, by translating the AsIPA booklets not only to the German language but also into the German context. we now realize that in order to do this effectively, we need a lot more praxis, theological and methodical reflection on what is happening and needs to happen in these groups and the ability to discern the will of God for us in our situation.

It will take some more years to realize the new way of being church in Germany; but we feel strongly that we made a good start. Our anxieties have been replaced with renewed hope and enthusiasm to continue our efforts even when we are not so successful. We see the hand of God in the energy we find and in the increasing number of people who show interest in SCCs. In December this year the AsIPA national team has planned to organize a pastoral symposium to help people to reflect on the importance of the new way of being Church in Germany. We are expecting about 100 participants. Also in December we will have the next general assembly of the dioceses in the German speaking countries which are on the AsIPA-way. This to come, 3 dioceses from Switzerland and interested people from Austria, Luxemburg, Belgium and the Netherlands. We look to the continuing guidance of the Holy Spirit in taking us to new paths in renewing the Church in Germany.

We are very happy to have the contact with the FABC AsIPA desk and that we can learn so lot from Asia.

## Church of Sri Lank Using AsIPA Methodology to build Small Christian Communities

●● Fr.Rohan Dominic  
National SCC coordinator

Diocese	Parishes	SCCs
Jaffna	50	320
Mannar	28	1020
Nuradapura	15	10
Chilaw	44	512
Kurunegala	28	450
Kandy	23	120
Badulla	18	150
Trinco/Batti	36	50
Galle	11	-
Ratnapura	26	-
Colombo	123	178
<b>Total</b>	<b>402</b>	<b>2810</b>

### Important Land marks

- 1995 First AsIPA National Workshop  
Rev. Oswald Hirmer & Team
  
- 1996 Srilanka Bishops joint pastoral letter Declaring AsIPA as the pastoral programme  
for Sri Lanka
  
- 2000 Joint Pastoral Letter for the new Millenium and Bishops stressing the need of  
Building a Participatory Church using AsIPA methodology
  
- 2004 Get together of all the Leaders of the Church of Sri Lanka (Bishops, Vicar  
Generals, All Major Religious superiors, Rectors of the Seminaries, National  
Commission Directors) Evaluation and recommitment to build SCCs to move  
towards a participatory

## **SCC are the agents of peace and Reconciliation**

The theme of the year 2007

2005 Joint Pastoral Letter of Sri Lankan Bishops on Small Christian Communities

### **Feast of Christ the King**

**National SCC day**

**National SCC Coordinating Secretariat**

**(AsIPA National)**

**coordinates all efforts of building SCCs**

### **We do it by**

1. Offering Training, Formation and Animation All the Basic Training Programmes conducted at Diocesan Level, by Diocesan AsIPA Team.

Advanced Programmes & Team Training Programmes conducted at National level by the National team

Forming of Sri Lankan, National Resource Team on the cards

2007, 1st National Assembly of SCC Animators Programme for the Semanarians and Training and Exposure for Deacons—Annual feature Regular, Annual Programmes at National Level Twice a year

2. Awareness Building and Outreach Production of Posters, Phamplets, Organizing Meetings

3. Translating, Printing & publishing All AsIPA materials translated

4. Administration and networking, National Office Colombo, Networking with AsIPA Desk-FABC And other Countries.

## AsIPA Switzerland

●● Mr. Thomas Philipp Ebnetter

The Catholic Church in Switzerland—maybe like in all Europe—is facing a sea of change. Religion is more and more a private issue although the religious phenomenon does influence the public realm of life. Human beings even in secular environment are still looking for spirituality and fulfillment. There is a big “market” of religion which answers the quest for meaning of life. But these approaches are focused more on individual happiness and religion as a personal affair and much less on its community sense and social responsibility.

Through the German agency of Missio, the Pontifical Mission Societies, AsIPA arrived in Germany and Switzerland. The missionaries of Bethlehem Mission Immensee (BMI), especially Daniel Amman and Brigitte Fischer, who made concrete experiences in Small Christian Communities abroad, became partners of “the Project AsIPA” in the Swiss context. In 2003, 10 Swiss pastoral workers joined a journey to the Philippines and saw how AsIPA is practiced in a real context. Nowadays the following organizations BMI, Missio, Swiss Lenten Fund, Missionskonferenz and the diocese of Basel (Switzerland) work together in the Swiss AsIPA project.

‘asipa.ch’, as the Swiss coordination of AsIPA calls itself, tries not to lose the essential link between spirituality (and happiness) and responsibility for others or between contemplation and action. asipa.ch invites all to dialogue, active participation and cooperation among all members of the church. By being and action together individuals become community. The translation, adaptation and use of AsIPA method open interesting perspectives for the life of Christians and the pastoral care of the church.

asipa.ch does not solve all problems of the church. We realize that the Church has to change in many ways. One such concern is some reformation of the practice within ecclesiastical structure. Such realization is a good beginning and gives us new hope. asipa.ch tries to set believers free from the status of ‘cared people’ to people who participate in an active way.

The main goal is to find ways to implant AsIPA in our local parishes. The first experiences since 004 show that AsIPA method can help us to learn the process of

implementation. asipa.ch is in vital contact with those communities.

Until now there are no partners of the Evangelical Church in this project. But we think that it is important in Switzerland to work together with other Churches in an ecumenical spirit.

asipa.ch does different things. We run a web site with a portrait, information about our activities, a schedule of meetings and educational program. We try to offer regularly seminars to help people to know what AsIPA is about and its methods. The asipa.ch group holds a meeting every three months to share experiences and ideas. Of course we also organize the up-coming events, like an annual meeting to inform and train people, new-comers and those who work already with AsIPA since the last three years. The asipa.ch participates also in the annual coordination meeting of the AsIPA project for the German speaking world.

## AsIPA Report from Thailand

●● Bro. Michael Thinaratana Komkris fsg.  
National Coordinator

### 1. Statistics

The following table is a Thai Catholic Statistics of 2004, which shows a total of 463 parishes in 10 dioceses.

**Thai Catholic Statistics**

Dioceses	Prov	Sq.Km	Population	Catholics	Priests	Rel.Pr.	Bros	Sisters	Parish	BECs
1. Ach Bangkok	11	18,831	12,471,646	86,493	135	86	71	504	67	2
2. Ratchaburi	4	31,362	2,281,014	15,730	59	13	6	93	33	3
3. Chantaburi	8	34,000	4,333,797	38,880	85	14	16	200	40	-
4. Chiangmai	8	89,483	5,824,935	41,944	19	46	11	73	31	-
5. Nokomsawan	13	93,547	9,036,800	11,251	14	22	4	46	28	4
6. Surattani	15	76,562	8,904,385	6,682	7	36	2	101	39	2
7. Arch Tha-rae	4	25,447.8	3,157,780	50,008	56	2	2	129	74	74
8. Ubon	7	53,917	7,841,117	25,571	33	11	2	161	55	2
9. Nakornratcha	3	41,148	5,198,400	5,464	14	13	4	32	30	2
10. Udon	5	50,049	5,354,391	16,294	14	31	3	100	66	1
<b>Total</b>	<b>75</b>	<b>514,346.8</b>	<b>64,404,265</b>	<b>298,317</b>	<b>436</b>	<b>274</b>	<b>121</b>	<b>1439</b>	<b>463</b>	<b>90</b>

There have been isolated attempts among the 10 dioceses in Thailand to build up BEC in parishes. These attempts existed for 2-3 decades by individuals, but no formal organization of the effort ever been concretized. The CBCT's (Catholic Bishops' Conference of Thailand) National Pastoral Plan 2000-2010 specifies the comprehensive renewal of Christian life through strengthening local communities in parishes and promoting more lay participation, and yet we feel that we have a long way to go to achieve this goal.

We record between 10-20 local animators who have attended AsIPA training sessions since 1991. Since 2002, many groups of laity, religious and priests (totaling over 200) had visited neighboring countries to see how BEC have been organized. Four from Thailand

have attended the first Session of the theology of SCCs in Nagpur early 2006. A national coordination team has been set up for the past 2 years, and presently a number of pilot parishes attempt to build BECs that suit their particular settings thus:

2parishes in Bangkok archdiocese;	74parishes in Tharae archdiocese;
4parishes in Nakornsawan diocese;	3parishes in Ratchaburi diocese;
2parishes in Nakornratchasima diocese;	2parishes in Ubon diocese;
2parishes in Suratthani diocese;	1parish in Udon diocese

No record in 2 dioceses. Apart from these, there are many informal groups in a number of parishes.

## **2. Parish Pastoral Councils**

Generally, the leaders of BECs are members of PPC. They are not representing BECs, but rather taking care of BECs out of their interest. Specifically they promote daily individual and family bible readings, enthronement of bible in the family, etc. In some parishes, the leaders of BECs prepare monthly meetings with the parish priests one week before BEC meetings.

## **3. Mission of BECs**

Since we think that we are still beginners, we can hardly say anything substantial about BEC development following the third AsIPA Assembly in Korea. Rather we are trying to bring about a paradigm shift in the parish's pastoral care style from the priest-centered approach to a participatory parish community. We aim at conscientizing BEC members about their integral role as Christians, in being re-evangelized themselves first and then share the Good News in whatever work or role they have in their own profession.

### **3.1 Evangelization in the neighborhood**

- In one parish(having 12 BECs) the parish's internal communication system(loud speaker) is used to proclaim daily the word of God to families. In the group sharing, community problems are identified and concrete solutions sought for.
- BEC members go out to meet the Buddhists in the neighborhood, be they teachers, students or next-door neighbor.
- In another parish, BEC members go out to meet and invite the Buddhists to take part in our activities or celebrations.

### 3.2 Leadership style

- Our prime concern now is to train and empower lay leaders for BEC. In order to achieve this, priests need to become animators rather than sole actors in the parish as in the past. With this objective in mind we organize training sessions, firstly in the understanding of 'Why BEC?' and then we go to the question of 'How', dealing with the skills in community building.
- Last year we held two national BEC consultations.
- National coordinating team meets every 2 months.

### 3.3 Strengthening family

- Attempts have been made to coordinate family ministries with BEC in the New Way of Being Church. In Tharua archdiocese, CFC has paved the ground before introducing BEC in all parishes.
- The sharing during BEC meetings bring about better family atmosphere and relationships. This is seen as a new beginning and we are very much encouraged to proceed in this path of the 'NWBC' (New Way of Being Church).

### 3.4 The integration of NWBC in all areas of life

- Creating an awareness about NWBC is our approach before starting new BECs. Often BEC is understood as pious gospel sharing groups only. Others see BEC as another additional "association" in the parish organization. It is not so easy for us to correct these wrong understandings about BECs. A basic manual of NWBC has been published in Thai since July 2006 which helps to create correct image of BECs. Starting at the PPC, parish or diocesan level, the vision of local church as a communion of communities is being introduced along with the concept of an 'Integral Pastoral Approach' which goes beyond the traditional way of pastoral care in the parishes to the work of community evangelization, inter-religious dialogue and concern for the poor.

## 4. Experiences to share

### 4.1 Preparation of Religious animators

- In Thailand, all major superiors of religious Sisters' congregations from a conference having certain joint ventures. About 5-6 major congregations who are interested in BEC had many of the members exposed to BEC in Malaysia and Singapore. After having a meeting with BEC national annual consultation, one congregation prepared their

members to be BEC animators by having a series of monthly meeting manual prepared for 2006 on the theme: Evangelization. They make use of this among their collaborators and students in schools to build up the sense of Christian togetherness as community through the gospel sharing method of Look-Listen-Love.

- Another congregation planned their strategy through the use of gospel sharing and the caring for one another within the same zone. They learn NWBC by living it out first among themselves, and transforming their role in their institutions and parishes they live and work as community animators. Thus, both the mission of witnessing to the Good News and pastoral work are integrated through their new approach of “learning by doing”. They also visit families, the poor and people of other faiths wherever possible in their surrounding.
- As animators, they accompany BEC group’s leaders in preparing monthly meeting, producing needed BEC materials, etc. Periodically, when they come together to review what has been done, they were full of joy (as did Christ’s 72 disciples) as they share how their lives have become more meaningful by caring for people and families they meet. This has led to building up better relationships within the parish community. The laity are becoming more conscious of their evangelizing role. The Sisters learn to be patient in building up Christian community little by little, while putting more effort to study and learn more about BEC & NWBC from whatever sources available. Their goal is to be BEC animators, walking together with the pastor and the people within the parish community, transforming it into a living Church as the early Christians did.

#### 4.2 Whole diocesan Policy

- Having a clear policy on renewing the diocese through NWBC is significant. Many dioceses are hesitant to make their priests involved in this NWBC, due to their accustomed way of running the parish. Participatory church is still something they talk about and its actualization is still a long way off. The PPC they have is more to strengthen the parish as an organization or institution rather than to make it a living, active and evangelizing community.
- At least one archdiocese decided to embark on the NWBC by making it their pastoral policy. It took about a year to prepare all priests, religious and PPC in the whole archdiocese to learn and understand “the What, the Why and the How” of BEC. This came about not without previous experimentation at individual level during the past decades. We conducted several awareness programs for the animators as well as the parishioners at large. We set October 2006, the month of the Holy Rosary, as the auspicious time to launch the NWBC. Over 5000 people came on 30th September from all 74 parishes of the archdiocese to inaugurate BEC at the cathedral church. The

BEC leaders were sworn in during the Eucharistic celebration to renew his/her parish in collaboration with the parish priest and all the faithful. A banner of the Good Shepherd was given to each parish to remind them of going forward in this quest. The only fear we have is perhaps how to equip the BEC leaders with needed skills in the years to come. An investment has been made; now they have to move forward. We feel good and we are hopeful.

## **5. Lessons and Insights**

A number of insights came along as we move on, e.g.,

- It is very important to organize a committed team for building up NWBC at different levels, viz., (national, diocesan and parish)
- It is necessary to create proper understanding of the true nature of BEC/NWBC among the clergy.
- We realize that it is not so easy to correct the misconception of BEC as only a pious Bible sharing group or another association.
- It is very important to make the PPC and Associations aware of their roles within the context of building up their parish together as a living & active faith community through open discussions and awareness program.

## **6. Plans in the immediate future**

- Translating and writing simple BEC materials that suit local needs.
- Training skills for lay leaders in pilot parishes and dioceses.
- More efficient organization of national and diocesan teams.
- More net-working with 'would be BEC animators'.
- Insertion and coordination with related Episcopal catholic commissions in the over-all pastoral plan.