

# SCCs Responds to the Social Doctrine and Justice Issues in the Church and Society

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Some years ago a group of pastors had an animated discussion about the development of Small Christian Communities. Some said that we should not move further in promoting SCCs until we had a “more developed theology of SCCs especially a clearer ecclesiology.” But others took the view that in very many instances praxis is prior to theology and that the theology of SCCs should evolve out of people’s practical grassroots experience. So they had a basic difference about the starting point.

I propose that in reflecting on the “Theological and Pastoral foundation of the SCCs in India, we begin with the life, experiences and reflections of the people of God.

## 2. DISCERNING COMMUNITY THEMES

To begin this method of developing critical awareness, we start with a non-formal listening survey. One of the keys to discovering the deepest feelings of a local community is listening.

What are people

- |                  |                  |
|------------------|------------------|
| ❖ Worried about? | ❖ Angry about?   |
| ❖ Happy about?   | ❖ Fearful about? |
| ❖ Sad about?     | ❖ Hopeful about? |

3. **THE SCC PROGRAMME** is a foundational element of “the new way of being Church” and is the policy for the whole country, as also for the Asian continent. It is also desirable that, while keeping their proper identity, SCCs widen their horizons to become Basic Human Communities, embracing our sisters and brothers of all faiths, so as to become, ultimately, a powerful catalyst for national integration. The Gospel speaks of a God who cares for us, whose salvation is in our total human and spiritual development, which is to be sought for in communion with all people of good will. It is in community building and the setting up of COs, which are responsive to the social needs of even the least of the members of our society, that we will be able to allow maximum participation of the people in confronting the obstacles to their total human development. (Post Synodal Document – Archdiocese of Bombay 2001)

Today in India, the Small Christian Communities are a powerful pastoral tool in establishing the Kingdom of God on earth. Judging from the situation of our country and the global phenomenon, we need to move ahead with the formation of Small Christian Communities (SCC) through the application of the principles of community organizing (CO)

The SCC-CO evolved in recent years in different parts of the world from missionary and community development work led by the Church. Today it has grown into a movement integrating Christian faith and organized action. What sets SCC-CO apart from the Church's previous pastoral strategy is its clear and open stand for the people's struggle against all forms of oppression. It is in fact committed to giving back rights to the people.

The inherent power of this new movement comes from the fact that individuals, indeed whole communities, are willing to struggle and, if necessary, give their lives for their God-given rights. These communities are inspired by a book we ourselves swear by: the Holy Bible.

SCC-CO workers view their mission objectively within the context of gospel truths and the social realities under an unjust system:

While it is true that Christ proclaimed salvation to be for all, he also addressed himself to specific people suffering from specific ills -material, spiritual, and social. To them Christ's message of salvation came in very concrete terms: Good News to the poor and downtrodden, liberation to the captives and oppressed. (Mt. 11:45)

Thus, complete deliverance from the evils of hunger, poverty, persecution, oppression. In turn, the people, in faith, saw this deliverance and blessing as the saving action of God in human history.

More than just proclaim the good news, Christ identified with the poor, the downtrodden, the captives, and the oppressed. He even lived with them.

In India, what is the good news? What is good about it? For whom is it good?

To the poor, deprived and oppressed which comprise about 90 percent of the population-What is good news to a worker in a leather factory who eats only twice a day and breaks himself in eight hard hours to earn a measly salary? What is good news to a fisherman in Coastal areas controlled by big trawlers? Or to the tribal driven from their ancestral homes to give way to multinational companies in the name of progress? What does the Church have as Good News?

#### **4. THE CHURCH IN INDIA**

These questions have reverberated against the walls of the Church from Vatican II. At the same time, slowly, the Church began to step down from its ivory tower. A number of Church institutions talked of "social justice as the thrust, and social action as the mode." First came social welfare programs. Others moved on to community development projects. When all these fail to bring it closer to an agitated populace, community organizing becomes the last painful recourse.

Specific events within the Church hierarchy influenced these moves by the Church in the India. Vatican Council II (1962-65) upheld a new concept: the Church was no longer a pyramidal structure with its hierarchy in monopoly of power and authority, but rather a community of believers who, collectively, share in Christ's mission to proclaim the Good News.

The SCC program of the 80s retained the traditional concept which said that each person can attain salvation only through faith, prayers and the sacraments. This pastoral strategy encouraged people to hold regular liturgical celebrations in their areas. The general call was to hold the Celebration of the Word of God every month, Bible sharing, the novena to the Mother of Perpetual Help, novenas before Parish celebrations, and other religious rites.

"Where two or three are gathered in My Name, I'm with them," became the slogan for encouraging people in India to hold their Celebration of the Word of God. To motivate the people, parish priests and their assistants (mainly religious women and lay catechists) visited areas in the parish. Seminars were organized in the dioceses to discuss the latest theological and pastoral development in the post Vatican II Church.

The training of lay leaders thus assumed importance. They underwent seminars on Vatican II documents, the Bible, the living traditions of the Church, and liturgy. The main objective was to build their confidence in their new role as liturgical allies and to deepen their understanding of the Church mission. In addition, volunteer catechists and youth groups were organized to provide support programs.

Lay leaders and catechists gradually began to have more important functions. They organized the seminars. Eventually they led in prayers and liturgical celebrations. The community depended on them to remind them of their religious obligations.

The religious orientation of the SCC program needs to change with the economic and social crisis that has hit the country at the turn of the last decade.

The Church showed its concern for "total human development" by setting up Social Action Centers (SAC) in most dioceses. These SACs went into such social services as housing, health and literacy programs; income-generating activities like handicrafts, skill training, piggyery, poultry, and agricultural production projects; organizing farmers, workers and youth for consumers and marketing cooperatives and credit unions. These projects soon became the concern of some SCCs.

These development-oriented SCCs, however, differed little from the earlier, liturgy-oriented communities. They still had for their aim the implementation of pastoral and developmental programs. Aside from leading in prayers and liturgies, the lay leaders also functioned as extension workers of the parish (Cells), acting as family life motivators, volunteer catechists, health workers, educators on cooperative building, etc.

Only a few SCCs went into socio-economic projects. The fact was that the liturgy-oriented SCCs had better success in their religious concern. Most of their developmental projects failed. The reasons were many: in some dioceses/parishes, the bishops and/or parish priests focused their SCC mainly on religious activities. Their resources were limited -only those communities subsidized by the SAC or government could afford to buy the needed inputs for these projects. Lay leaders felt they had neither the time nor the technical know-how to get involved in these projects. Moreover, most projects were characterized by poor planning and erratic management.

All the problems that beset the Church's attempt to meet the people's needs stemmed from a main error as later perceived by SCC-CO workers: the projects were mere palliatives which failed to strike directly at the root of the social ills.

Meanwhile, even as the Church's SCC program confined itself to the safety of the status quo, some Church persons in the rank-and-file began to see it as a potential catalyst for social change. Priests, nuns, and lay pastoral workers who lived among the people were the first to see that today there are bigger problems: the encroachment of transnational corporation in the countryside, the continuous and systematic violation of human rights by the powerful, and the worsening of the economic crisis. Progressive Catholics saw the urgency of raising the people's awareness; in other words, conscientization. For them, traditional social action programs had proven inadequate and ineffective for the purpose of conscientization. Struggling against the limitations imposed by Society, these progressive churchmen went to the people, immersed themselves in organizing the people and offered their services and resources.

**Why "SCC-CO? Why not stick to "SCC"? Or simply say "CO"?**

These questions have stirred a debate among Christian community organizers. Some argue that the concept of Small Christian Communities already implies community organizing. They see no need to expand the name of the program. Others emphasize the actual practice of community organizing and presumed its orientation and objectives. On the other hand, the people had to realize that it was wrong to see their suffering and deprivations as their assigned "fate". With the integration of SCC-CO, they discover that Christian responsibility is the basis of their actions. Moreover, they realize that only through unity could they fully understand and uphold their faith as individuals and as a community. The crucial question, "for whom and with whom?" finally became crystal clear for the community leaders: they would serve, first of all, the poor, deprived and oppressed.

## **5. FAITH AND ACTION FROM THE GRASSROOTS**

Among the advanced SCC-CO programs, a case of conscientization accomplished within a relatively short period of time is the Isabela experience in the Philippines.

Facing the Pacific Ocean east of the Sierra Madre Mountain in Isabela is a town that for many years has fattened the bank account of big logging concessioners. In a small site of this town live around 100 workers and their families, who since 1965 have suffered grave injustice from the logging firm they worked for.

In late 1976, a parish priest came to live among the people in the town. Some of the workers live there, and so had the chance to join prayer meetings and Bible reflections, which related their problems to Christ's life and his message of salvation. As they exchanged warm dialogues with the priest and other participants, they began to gain a new understanding of their oppression and of themselves. For some, the need to break away from their apathy and other negative attitudes came like a flash of recognition during these group reflections. Following Christ's path no longer meant merely asking God's forgiveness for one's sins. They began to see Christ's teachings as a challenge to action the pursuit of truth and justice.

The politicized workers, who eventually became labor leaders and Grassroots Pastoral Workers, shared their views with their fellow worker. Days before his death, Garsales had publicly expressed his willingness to sacrifice his life for the people.

In theory we endorse Small Christian Communities; in practice, its leaders continue to use these communities as an instrument for traditional spiritual activities of the parish.

With or without the Church, committed Christian community organizers go on their work, discovering for themselves that it is the people who will liberate themselves from their oppression. The challenge for many SCC-CO workers today is to support the people's organizations. The challenge for the Church is to recognize that to support the SCC-CO fully is to support the very people Christ exhorted to inherit this earth.

## **6. A Concrete example: THE BACKGROUND**

St. Jude's Parish was a conglomeration of slums. Most of Jerimeri's 400,000 people, including 2,500 Catholics, come from other states. Many work in textile mills and small companies for meagre wages. They lack basic amenities and are exploited by the slumlords. The women still experience discrimination in their families and work place.

The parish made a definite option to work for the marginalized (the Anawim) through

collective action. The pastoral priorities were focused on the marginalized. Hence we spent more time, money and energy on those who were exploited.

However, the approach to these sections of society was not one of welfare but of organizing people for their rights and to help them solve their problems. The Community Centre (Jagruti Kendra) which was officially inaugurated on 1st March 1989 has played a very important role.

The name of the Kendra suggests that the aim of the Centre was to mobilize and organize people and bring about qualitative and quantitative growth in all spheres of life. Ultimately, the marginalized people acquire political power for decision-making, to remake history and to redefine their place and presence in society.

## **7. METHODOLOGY**

Awareness, mass organization, mass Action and networking with other groups were our key methods.

### **Awareness**

St. Jude's Parish, Jerimeri, was one of the poorest parishes in Bombay in terms of Church income and physical structure. The church looked like a small-unauthorized factory in the slum. In 1988 the parish council decided to conduct a symposium for the parishioners on women's liberation as a closing ceremony of the Marian Year. We contacted a grassroots level organization, YUVA, to conduct the programme. On the feast of the Assumption and Independence Day, we had this special programme on Mary, a Liberated Woman. A chart was put up to create awareness among the people.

The church structure and liturgical preparations were made conducive to the involvement of the laity, especially women. Later on the process of awareness was taken up in all our activities. In the parish, creating awareness of the social problems and their oppressive structures were given top priority in the pastoral work. Different media were used to reach the message to people at the grassroots level. Seminarians who used to come for their pastoral work were oriented to the same thrust. They conducted discussions and role-plays on different topics at the meeting. Posters and charts were used whenever people met in the Basic Communities (BCs). Sessions were conducted in Tamil, Konkani and Hindi.

Awareness programmes on various social issues were later organized in a systematic way. Initially the Parish/JK organized workshops on ten Saturdays on various topics like the working of the Bombay Municipal Corporation, gender issues, the working of the Police Force and so on. Later on JK organized training sessions for Mahila Mandal leaders, who then formed a strong Mahila Council representing various areas.

Awareness was also created by reflecting on their experiences and learning from the mistakes and successes. The conscientization process still goes on as they discuss current topics like the economic policy of our country, the Beijing Conference on women, elections to the Lok Sabha and other bodies, etc.

As the work spread out in other slums in Bombay, JK conducted these programmes for their leaders so that they could be effective in their areas.

## **8. MASS ORGANIZATION**

Once the awareness was created, the process of mass organization became quite easy. Many more communities showed interest in starting their own women's groups. It was becoming too tedious to animate the BCs at night and women's groups during the day.

Besides as the Parish showed our openness, many problems were being referred to us. Moreover, the local women showed their interest in leadership roles. This was the key stage when the Parish sent 5 women from the slums for an Animators' Training Programme in Bandra for six months. These women belonged to different religions. On completion of their training, JK employed them to animate the different groups working on various issues like Women, Environment, Housing and other basic amenities. In order to co-ordinate all these activities a community centre was necessary. With minimum facilities offered from the parish, the 'Jagruti Kendra' was inaugurated. Today it has become one of the leading NGOs in Bombay for grassroots involvement.

The parish was involved in the struggles of the people and it gave more importance to the community centre which functioned as the main organ of the witnessing Church. Gradually, JK employed a few professional social workers as work was increasing and spreading to new areas. Jagruti Kendra (KJ) soon established its mass base in the slums with the emergence of Jerimeri Residents Association, youth groups, children's groups and women's groups. All these groups met once a month in their own communities with their own animators. The youth and women's groups worked on issues pertaining to each area.

These groups welcomed members of different faiths. When the Parish/JK took up issues like scarcity of water, land disputes, tenants' rights, negotiation with the Bombay Municipal Corporation for the removal of garbage and the cleaning of drainages, people participated regardless of their religion. If the Parish/JK took up an issue of wife battering or the plight of women, it was addressed to women of all the religions and language groups. This is the reason why the communities in Jerimeri are known as 'Basic Communities,' not restricting themselves only to Christians. These communities came together to celebrate feasts such as Muharram, Diwali, Navrathri, Christmas, and Id, as well as to commit themselves to bringing social transformation.

Bottom-level Empowerment in the Parish: The Parish was restructured so that every family could belong to a small community formed in their locality. No one was neglected or left uncared, for the leaders of every community were members of the parish council and they shared all the problems of the community during the monthly meetings.

Since the main focus of the parish was the Basic Community, all the programmes and activities were planned at the community level. The Sisters (Helpers of Mary) too carried out their apostolate community wise. Our main approach was through the methods of community organization with the children, youth, women and senior citizens. Initially some of those who were holding on to the ideology of individualism resisted joining the groups, But seeing the harmony, unity and peace among the members, they too participated in community building.

The whole parish was divided into 36 small communities. According to the geographical areas, these 36 communities were organized into five different zones. Each of these zones functioned as a mini parish in the larger parish. The mini parish formed its own parish council. The members of this parish council were the leaders, their assistants and the treasurers of each small community. Every mini parish had its own president and secretary, who would closely relate with the sisters, seminarians or priests who were their animators. Any function in the parish was decided and planned at the mini parish level. All the financial affairs were channeled through each small community. Every mini parish had its own service groups for liturgy, cultural programmes, justice and peace and care for the poor and the needy. A term of two

years was fixed for the leaders and a person would not continue, at a stretch, for more than two terms; this meant that many parishioners got a chance to come into the parish council.

Meetings were conducted in Hindi since it is the common language. Dissemination of information was very well done through the parish council, at the zonal or mini parish level or small communities level. Faith-Formation sessions were conducted in the parish council and the members went back conducted it in their own communities. As most of the communities also had women's groups, youth groups and children's groups, all of them participated when any issue was to be tackled. Thus adequate co-ordination and harmony was created.

## **9. MASS ACTION**

Awareness and mass organization had to lead to action. Otherwise people could easily get discouraged. Action was taken on different levels. At the beginning we took up a very simple issue like the cleaning of a gutter. The first Mahila Mandal took up this problem and found a solution. Experiencing success is important in social transformation. This gives confidence to the marginalized groups.

Later on we focused on larger issues. For instance, when a handicapped woman was raped in the Jerimeri slums, women from various areas organized themselves and put pressure on the police to arrest the culprit. Women have also stopped corruption in the ration shop. They stood near the shops and saw that the shopkeepers did not cheat the customers.

Issues like changing the policy on housing at the central level and contribution to the debates on women's policy at the state level were some of the other actions taken by our groups.

## **10. NETWORKING WITH OTHERS**

The Parish believed that Unity is Strength. By ourselves, the Parish could be easily drowned in the vast ocean of powers hostile to the weaker sections of society. We joined hands with other secular groups and organizations that had similar perspectives and action programmes. Thus the Parish took part in joint programmes on Women's Day, Human Rights, etc. JK is also member of the Federation of Community Centres formed by the Justice and Peace Commission of the Archdiocese of Bombay and the committee for Rights to Housing.

Networking helped the people to learn from others and join hands with people of all faiths in the transformation of society. They developed links with the Narmada Bachao Andolan, the Anti-liquor Movement, the Harit Vasai Saurakshan Samiti, the Committee for Rights to Housing, the Action Committee for Rationing Issues and several women's organizations as part of larger solidarity groups. This support system is essential because we always learn from one another. CORO, an organization for adult literacy, trained many people on literacy, and these gradually took up the education of the adults. Adults from many. Communities attended the classes in Hindi and Marathi.

## **11. KNOWLEDGE IS POWER**

With this view in mind Jagruti Kendra started a small centre for Research and Documentation. Two main researches completed were:

Assessing the Eco-health of a Settlement in Bombay.

Community-based drug demand reduction.

In 1992 we produced a videocassette titled "From Prayer to People". After the communal riots in 1992, the community centre took up a new project on "Communal harmony" in which 23 NGOs met to discuss the issue and evolve an action plan. A videocassette -"Rainbow People" -was produced to spread the message of harmony and peace.

## **12. FAITH LINKED TO JUSTICE**

The theology was closely linked to life. We started from issues in the light of God's Word and His challenge and call to us today. Theology and Bible classes for adults were conducted regularly. Faith formation programmes were organized in Konkani and Tamil especially designed for 'area-helpers'. Besides, various training programmes were conducted in secular matters too. At that time it was hoped to have at least 300 lay animators equipped to carry on the work in the years to come.

As Aloysius Pieris S.J. says, "A Theology is valid if it originates, develops and culminates in the praxis / process of liberation...the same praxis of liberation that makes a theology valid also creates the indigenous identity of the local Church that co-originate with the theology... a liberation theology begins to be formulated when a given Christian Community begins to be drawn into the local people's struggle for full humanity and through that struggle begins to sink its roots into the life and culture of these people.

## **13. COLLABORATIVE SPIRITUALITY**

In general, the Parish worked as a team regularly, planning certain programmes and assisting each other. Besides, the parish had a pastoral team comprising lay people, sisters, seminarians and priests. This collaborative action also pervaded other decisions made together with the lay people. Special mention has to be made of the effective working relationship between the Priests and the Congregation of the Helpers of Mary. Another important point to be noted is the total support and cooperation the Parish received from Auxiliary Bishop Bosco Penha.

All these would mean that the parish was viewed as offering great possibilities to be open not only to religious and spiritual issues but also to the local, social, economic, political and cultural concerns. The parish is not merely a territory but a community. It is a spirited family committed to the values of the Kingdom at a given moment of history. The parish community as such cannot and should not exist for itself. If it does, it is a sect and not a community of Jesus' followers. It must rather struggle to break down the barriers that separate it from its surrounding areas and culture and peoples.<sup>5</sup>

## **14. BUILDING A PEOPLE'S MOVEMENT: JERIMERI RAHIVASI SANGH (JMRS)**

Though women formed a key force for mobilizing people and taking up local issues, it was important that work in the area grew to a people's movement, not just a women's movement. Moreover, when collective action had to be taken to deal with local issues, it was clear that it is not JK which should take the initiative but the people themselves. With this in mind, several rounds of meetings were held in different parts of Jerimeri which in 1989-90 culminated in the formation of the Jerimeri Rahivasi Sangh (Jerimeri Resident's Association) consisting of all the youth and adults of Jerimeri area. It was an open forum for people to participate. There even if a woman was not a member of a MM, she could participate in the activities of the



JMRS if the issue was of interest to her. Prakash Kamble, a local resident, was the person who took the initiative to form the JMRS. .

## **15. EXPERIENCES**

One of the experiences at this time was that sometimes it was easier to work with Hindu and Muslim families than with certain Catholics; who were unduly interested in prayer and rituals. Hence it was necessary to reach out to them through prayer and rituals by linking faith with justice. Catholics now realize that justice issues too are very important in the parish, and so they now take interest and action.

## **16. CONCLUSION**

I conclude by stating that we tried to make our own the pastoral imperatives inculcated by FABC. These include:

- The necessity for Christian mission to keep Christ at the Centre of its proclamation.
- The imperative of considering with the utmost concern and sensitivity the relationship and interaction between mission and pastoral thrust of the Church keeping in mind the pluralism of Asian societies.
- The imperative of empowering people for mission, ministry and the task of integral liberation.
- The need to encourage, initiate and facilitate micro-level initiatives with ripple effects especially at the grassroots level.
- The exigency of the Church in Asia to be credible in its life-style, proclamation, and involvement in justice and human rights issues.
- The imperative of re-envisioning and re-planning formation processes, with particular attention to cultural values and structural factors.

Archbishop Raphael Ndingi Mwana's Nzeki of Nairobi Archdiocese, Kenya states: "In East Africa a new approach to ecclesiology is evolving. It is based on the concept of the church as a communion of communities, a two-way sharing between communities." This communion of communities focus is closely related to the African values of sharing and solidarity and the emerging ecclesiology of "Church as Family." This new approach contrasts the old model of church on the local level (the "Service Station or Pipe Line Theory Model") with the new model (the "Small Christian Community Model of Church") –a new SCC-centered ecclesiology as contrasted with the traditional parish-centered ecclesiology. Small Christian Communities are not a program or a project. They are a way of life, a spirituality. SCCs are places where many Christians can experience ecclesial communion and fraternal solidarity. SCCs are the most local expression of being church. SCCs are the local church in action. Lay people believe and live out that "We are the Church" on the grassroots level.

Reflections in the SCCs treat real burning issues on the grassroots level – AIDS, broken relationship, death, discrimination, fear, inequality, injustice, oppression, poverty, racism, sickness, war and witchcraft. But these reflections also sing a positive, inspiring song of children, community, development quality, family, hope, justice, life, joy, peace, prayer and solidarity. This is grassroots theology, a theology from below, from the underside of history, from the lived experience of the local people. This is participatory theology.

The experience of those in the Small Christian Communities who have seen the insight and power arising from the reflections of the people upon their experience and the Scriptures has prompted making the community itself the prime author of theology in local contexts. The Holy Spirit, working in and through the believing community, gives shape and expression to

Christian experience.

SCCs often use the process of the “pastoral spiral”. SCCs’ praxis is really the result of theory-laden action. SCC members further reflect on their action and develop new theological understandings that are their contextual theology that then further guides their action leading to further reflection.

## **17. LOOKING FORWARD**

However, Christian community building has often been seen from the limited perspective of ensuring smooth inter-personal relationships, active participation in the liturgy and ongoing Bible study. Since total human development is the goal of evangelization, SCC-CO-BC (Small Christian Communities – Community Organization – Basic Community) promotes the method of community organizing as promoting a religious consciousness, which will allow maximum participation of the people in confronting the obstacles to total human development.

However, since the population of India is 1.21 billion (2011 Census) and of these majority belong to other religions and since 70% are living in villages, very much oppressed by various kinds of slavery and in the context of poverty (270/350 million are living below poverty line), slavery, bribery, oppression, atrocities of all sorts, Jerry Rosario, a Jesuit Pastor feels that we in India should have our own model of SCCs. SCC should not consist simply of Christians alone but enlist people of other faiths too: Basic Communities (BC). BC should grow, nourished as it is with the local tradition and culture and thus be strengthened. B.C should be organized with the purpose of arousing the awareness of the Indian society, to live with self-respect, reliance and self-administration.

## **18. CONCLUSION**

The emergence of SCCs within parishes affects structure and style of church life. Let us be committed to the development of parish-based SCCs / BCs, not as one of many activities but as a way to call, affirm, and form people as disciples of Jesus.

### **Resources:**

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