A NEW WAY OF BEING CHURCH: FABC TEACHINGS ON BASIC ECCLESIAL COMMUNITIES*

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ABSTRACT

Asian bishops and general AsIPA (Asian Integral Pastoral Approach) assemblies have always insisted that the Asian Church has to be participatory. This is realized through Basic Ecclesial Communities (BECs). BECs encourage lay participation in the life and mission of the Church, particularly in the parishes. BECs have brought a new dimension to the ministry of the Church. They have become a good platform to carry out new ministries. This article presents the teachings of the Asian bishops and the AsIPA in their final statements.

Introduction

Vatican II had a tangible effect on theological reflection and on the pastoral work of the Church in Asia. Following the example of the Latin American Bishops’ Conference after their assembly in Medellin, the Asian bishops were inspired to form a bishops’ conference in Asia where they could exercise their collegiality and meet together on a continental level. When Pope Paul VI visited the Asian bishops in Manila in 1970 for the first time, the idea of the Federation of Asian Bishops’ Conferences (FABC) was born. The FABC fosters solidarity and co-responsibility among the Asian bishops for the welfare of the Church and society in Asia. The establishment of the FABC is a landmark in the history of Christianity in Asia. The FABC helps Asian bishops exchange their experiences and deliberate jointly on common questions and problems facing the continent.

The Beginnings of Basic Christian Communities in Asia

The emergence of Basic Christian Communities (BCCs) was observed very significantly in Asian countries. During the Asian Colloquium held in Hong Kong from February 27 to March 6, 1977, the Asian bishops, having known BCCs in Latin America, became aware of the existence of BCCs in Asia in 1977, and they wanted to bring them under their supervision.

In some areas a form of Christian community living has developed which is termed the “Basic Christian Community.” It must be said that these small communities operating at a still lower level than the parish, allowing for even deeper human and Christian relationships, are the most fundamental ecclesial realities, provided they too are equipped with proportionate services and ministries, including the priestly ministry. This amounts to saying that,

while these communities need to be linked to the ministry of the bishop, they nevertheless embody the mystery of the Church in their own right; they are in a true sense “local Churches.” In reality, the closer to life, the more “local” the Church is. Incomplete therefore as Christian communities at the grass-roots level may be, they are nevertheless the most basic reality in the Church’s life. In this sense the term “basic communities” by which they are called is not without theological significance.\(^4\)

The Asian bishops spoke about the BCCs in their Colloquium on Ministries and the urgency of building BCCs in the Asian church was signaled by the participants.

In parts of Asia today the need for forming Basic Christian Communities is becoming more strongly felt. The people are expressing their need for some kind of basic social grouping whose members can express real interpersonal relationships and feel a sense of communal belonging. Many different forms are evolving leading to a fuller participation in Christian living. These groups are not the only way of participating in the life of the Church; still the Spirit seems to be moving the Church strongly in this direction.\(^5\)

The Asian bishops have understood the different needs and situations of the people where BCCs can serve as the best pastoral method. Surprisingly, even today the same situations exist in Asia. The Asian bishops state:

These Basic Christian Communities have arisen as a response to different needs and situations, such as:

i. Existing parish structures sometimes are not conducive to intensive Christian life. They can become inadequate to ministering to the growing needs of people.

ii. Our people are too many and too spread out for the number of priests available to minister to them.

iii. The people need a sense of belonging and support, especially in a non-Christian environment.

iv. People are taking more and more responsibility for their Church and are responding to new ministries to serve their small Christian communities.

\(^4\) FABC, “Asian Colloquium on Ministries in the Church: Conclusions” (March 5, 1977, Hong Kong), no. 40, in FAPA, vol. 1.

\(^5\) Ibid., no. 41.
v. There is growing urgency for genuine Christian witness in community among the ideological struggles taking place in Asia.6

The Asian bishops also comment on the nature and characteristics of the BCCs:

A group of people is described as a basic community when the number of members is such that they can really know one another, meet with one another and relate to one another. The members are not too far apart to come together fairly frequently. There is a certain degree of permanence among the members. There is also mutual caring, sharing and support. The community strives for common goals and concerns. There is unity and togetherness.7

The bishops also notice that the Basic Christian Community calls for a new participatory leadership style in the Church which they encouraged:

These Basic Christian Communities are raising questions about leadership styles in the Church. Bishops and priests must learn to listen to the voice of their people. The local Christian community leaders have also to develop a style of leadership that fits the culture, attitudes and values of their local situation. We believe that shared participative leadership can be promoted as a style for our Basic Christian Communities where there is consultation, dialogue and sharing. Thus the people will feel responsible for and part of the decision-making process in matters that affect the whole community.8

The bishops also mention the possible dangers of Basic Christian Communities. In order to avoid these dangers, BCCs have to be in communion with the local church and the universal Church:

There is the possible danger of their becoming too inward-looking and too exclusive. Hence, the need for a continuing reflection process on their lived experience within the larger community. They have to be linked to the local parish, diocese and the universal Church. Among other dangers there may be within the groups themselves situations of unrest and destruction that prevent the community from growing. There may also sometimes be rivalries and conflicts about leadership.9

6. Ibid., no. 42.
7. Ibid., no. 44.
8. Ibid., no. 46.
9. Ibid., no. 48.
The International Mission Congress in Manila, held in December 1979, also expresses its conviction about BCCs:

Authentic renewal and relevant service-presence to the world can be assured if we do all to facilitate the emergence and growth of BCCs and if they relate and grow into a diocesan-level, nation-level and world-wide fellowship. This in the long run will overcome clericalism, over-institutionalization and stifling legalism.¹⁰

**An Alternative Way of Being Church: Communion of Communities**

In the Fifth Plenary Assembly of the FABC held in Bandung, the bishops say that the alternative ways of being Church in the Asia of the 1990s have the following major dimensions:

8.1.1. 1) 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., neighborhood groups, Basic Ecclesial Communities and “covenant” communities). There, they pray and share together the Gospel of Jesus, living it in their daily lives as they support one another and work together, united as they are “in one mind and heart.”

8.1.2. 2) It is a participatory Church where the gifts that the Holy Spirit gives to all the faithful—lay, religious and cleric alike—are recognized and activated, so that the Church may be built up and its mission realized.

8.1.3. 3) Built in the hearts of people, it is a Church that faithfully and lovingly witnesses to the Risen Lord Jesus and reaches out to people of other faiths and persuasions in a dialogue of life toward the integral liberation of all.

8.1.4. 4) It is a leaven of transformation in this world and serves as a prophetic

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sign daring to point beyond this world to the ineffable Kingdom that is yet fully to come.\footnote{11}{FABC, “Journeying Together toward the Third Millennium,” Statement of the Fifth Plenary Assembly (July 27, 1990 Bandung, Indonesia), nos. 8.1.1.–8.1.4; in \textit{FAPA}, vol. 1.}

\textbf{Basic Human Communities: An Asian Pastoral Need}

In 1995, the Sixth General Assembly of the FABC in Manila commemorated the silver jubilee of the founding of the FABC and Radio Veritas Asia. The bishops reiterated the important key concepts that were discussed in the previous conferences, especially the threefold dialogue in Asia: dialogue with the many different faiths, many different cultures, and with the poor multitudes of Asia.\footnote{12}{See FABC, “Christian Discipleship in Asia Today: Service to Life,” Final Statement of the Sixth FABC Plenary Assembly (January 10–19, 1995, Manila, Philippines), nos. 1 and 3, in \textit{For All the Peoples of Asia: Federation of Asian Bishops’ Conferences Documents from 1992 to 1996}, vol. 2, ed. Franz-Josef Eilers (Quezon City: Claretian Publications, 1997). (From here on, \textit{FAPA}, vol. 2.)} It was in this assembly that Basic Ecclesial Communities and Basic Human Communities were mentioned as responses to the central pastoral need of the Church in Asia. The assembly states that “the overall thrust of activities in recent years has been to motivate the churches of Asia towards ‘a new way of being Church,’ a Church that is committed to becoming ‘a community of communities’ and a credible sign of salvation and liberation.”\footnote{13}{Ibid., no. 3.}

The mission of the Church in Asia can be realized only from the base or foundation of human life because in Asia people of various cultures, religions, and languages live together and have contact with one another in their everyday life. Hence, the Church in Asia needs not only the Basic Christian Communities, which have their identity from Scripture and from the tradition of the Church, but also Basic Human Communities. These Basic Human Communities serve not only as help for interreligious dialogue, but also as realization of human responsibility for creation and the world. From the Christian perspective, they help realize the values of the kingdom of God. The Asian bishops accept that forming and working with Basic Human Communities as an interreligious model is difficult, but they have started to bear fruits.\footnote{14}{See Weber and Fuchs, \textit{Gemeindetheologie Interkulturell}, 264–65.}
Fruits of Basic Christian Communities

In 2000, the Asian bishops gathered for their Seventh Plenary Assembly in Samphran, Thailand. They had gathered there already in 1982 for the Third Plenary Assembly, which called for the formation of Small Christian Communities for the first time in the FABC’s 30-year history. The final statement of the assembly of 2000 mentions eight movements toward a renewed Church in Asia. One of them is the formation of Basic Christian Communities. The Asian bishops observed that BCCs were an effective pastoral method in Asia and that there was a need to move towards Basic Human Communities, a movement toward an authentic community of faith. Fully rooted in the life of the Trinity, the Church in Asia has to be a communion of communities of authentic participation and co-responsibility, one with its pastors, and linked “to other communities of faith and to the one and universal communion” of the holy Church of the Lord. The movement in Asia toward Basic Ecclesial Communities expresses the deep desire to be such a community of faith, love and service and to be truly a “community of communities” and open to building up Basic Human Communities.15

Concerning Basic Christian Communities, the Asian bishops write:

Other effective means for our mission of love and service will continue to be the Basic Ecclesial Communities (BECs). . . . The vision of a “New Way of Being Church” (AsIPA), promoted by FABC, is proving to be a very good help to the growth and development of the BECs and deserves our attention and support. Ecclesial Movements, duly discerned by the local church along with its hierarchy, can also offer specific and creative contributions to the being and ministry of the Church.16

Archbishop Orlando Quevedo speaks about the “Basic Ecclesial Community, a Church Model for Asia” in which he finds several stages of growth: liturgical, developmental, and liberative or prophetic. BECs gather together for prayer and worship, which is the liturgical stage. Secondly, the


BECs go beyond the prayer stage into social action in order to meet social and economic needs. This is called the developmental stage. Finally, the BECs might reach a prophetic stage, where they grapple with the root causes of social and economic problems. At all stages, prayerful reflection on the word of God is a necessary component. In these stages of growth, BECs use the Pastoral Spiral method, a method of community discernment, which begins with an analysis of the situation, moves on to a reflection in faith, followed by decision-making and planning the implementation of the decision. The pastoral spiral ends with action, i.e., the implementation of the decision and evaluation where their faith response is rooted both in prayer and in the actual situation. From his own experience with BECs, Archbishop Quevedo has found the following five transformational movements taking place in people and in communities:

a) From individualism to community – members of BECs gradually shed off individualistic attitudes regarding their faith and religion (God and I), and begin to understand that these have basic relationships with their neighbors (I-Thou-We-and-God).

b) From sacramentalism and ritualism to integral faith – members of BECs consider and practice their faith beyond the mere celebration of rituals and sacraments, and are deeply aware of the social implications of their faith on Christian mission and day-to-day living.

c) From non-involvement to co-responsibility and participation – in the BECs, church people are impelled by their faith to participate not only in their own intra-BEC activities, but also in the outward reach of Church mission into the socio-political community, as an imperative of co-responsibility in mission.

d) From corporal works of mercy to justice – BECs are very much aware of the importance of traditional works of charity, but their faith impels them to do more and, therefore, to act on behalf of justice and social transformation.

e) From clericalism to lay-centeredness – in the BECs a paradigm shift takes place regarding the role of clergy and religious and the role of lay people. The principles of co-responsibility and subsidiarity determine both the process and the level of decision-making. A process of “de-clericalization,” and a corresponding “lay empowerment,” takes place in BECs.¹⁸

Family: Fundamental Component of the BEC

The Eighth FABC Plenary Assembly was held on August 17 – 23, 2004, in Daejeon, Korea with the theme, “The Asian Family towards a Culture of Integral Life.” In Asian tradition, regardless of religion, marriage and family are very strong and family is at the very center of social life. Even today the family is referred to as the point of reference for social, political, economic, and religion-based ideal relationships. The social teaching of the Church has always accepted the family as the first basic cell and the first and fundamental structure for human ecology. The bishops state:

A truly positive development in Asia is the growing awareness of the place and role of the family in the building of Basic Ecclesial/Human Communities toward a new way of being Church. The family is the basic cell of society and the fundamental ecclesial community, the Church that is the home. In Asia today there is a growing realization that the family has to be the focus of integral evangelization and the essential building block of the BEC/BHC and even of the local Church as a whole. In other words, the Church begins in the home, not in the parish. In the light of this perspective a rethinking of pastoral programs has to be done. Already in many approaches to the building of small communities that make up the parish, much attention is given to the family and to clusters of families, such that all pastoral programs of parishes are aimed at building up family life.¹⁹

¹⁸. Ibid.
Asian families are confronted by massive poverty, divisions, conflicts, and exploitation. Economic and cultural globalization results in oppressive structures that are death-dealing. They threaten not only the quality of life but also the very survival of many Asian families. Even life itself is threatened by genetic developments. Certainly, casteism, patriarchy and gender inequality, poverty, child labor, land problems, ecological degradation, and social conflicts are major death-dealing forces that threaten and lead to the corruption of values. The pastoral situation in Asia affects life, unity, and harmony. The Asian bishops remembered what they had already said 20 years ago in the Fourth FABC Plenary Assembly, Tokyo in 1986.

Perhaps the greatest challenge to the Church in Asia is that posed by the Asian family. The Asian family is the cellular receptacle of all Asia’s problems, poverty, repression, exploitation and degradation, divisions and conflicts. The family is directly affected by the religious, political, economic, social and cultural problems of Asia, by the problems relating to women, health, work, business, education, etc.\(^{20}\)

The bishops of Japan, however, believe that in Japan it is not possible for the family to be the basic cell of the ecclesial community because they often find only one Catholic in so many families.\(^{21}\) But in other Asian countries, the families play a vital role in the development of BECs.

There is no doubt that the family as the domestic church has a central place in the pastoral thrust of building Basic Ecclesial Communities in Asia. The family is the most fundamental community component of the BEC. In most cases the BEC is made up of clusters of neighborhood families that come together regularly to pray, read and reflect on the Word of God, and apply it to their daily lives. In like manner clusters of inter-religious families in Basic Human Communities gather for inter-religious prayer, reflection, fellowship and common action for the good of the neighborhood.\(^{22}\)

The bishops insist that family should be the object, subject, and focal

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22. Ibid., no. 99.
point of evangelization and all parish pastoral programs should be also geared towards family. Therefore, the BEC is “a community of families” and the parish is “truly a community of communities.” The solidarity of families in all aspects of human life in the BECs as well as in the BHCs are “the micro-level response to the phenomenon of economic and cultural globalization” and in these communities the “globalization of charity and solidarity begins.” Hence, this requires “a renewal of parish structures and pastoral programs as well as a reorientation of priorities in ministry of the lay and the ordained. Faith formation in the family leading to family empowerment in the BEC/BHC mission toward a culture of life would become the overarching pastoral priority.”23 So, there is a need for an official decision for new community structures.

Basic Christian Communities: A Eucharistic Community

The Ninth Plenary Assembly of the FABC took place in Manila, Philippines, on August 6–10, 2009. The theme of the assembly was “Living the Eucharist in Asia.” The final document presents a useful guide in reflecting and acting on how the eucharist might be better understood, celebrated, and lived in the context of Asia.

The BECs gather not only around the word of God but also around the altar as one community for eucharistic celebration. In Asia, the eucharistic celebrations are prepared by BECs in a meaningful way. Having this in mind, the Asian bishops recommend sustaining the eucharistic life as a gathering of God’s children.

Living the Eucharist involves a new way of coming together as a family because it is God who gathers. We commend and support small Christian communities, basic human communities, ecclesial movements, religious communities, parishes, dioceses and other committed people that sustain the Eucharistic life of gathering God’s children in situations of fragmentation.24

The bishops call for stewardship towards creation as the core of Christian spirituality and discipleship. They believe that BECs can create an

23. Ibid., no. 100.
awareness in caring for the earth, another aspect of living the eucharist.

Basic ecclesial communities should work together to provide formation in stewardship of creation as constitutive of Christian discipleship. The way we deal with creation influences our dealings with human beings too. There is much to learn from the wisdom and practice of other faiths with regard to caring for the earth.  

The bishops offer some pastoral recommendations in order to live the eucharist meaningfully. Programs of integral catechesis, faith formation, and liturgical formation on the eucharist and its implications for daily living should be conducted at the diocesan, parish, and BEC levels. Basic Ecclesial Communities or Small Christian Communities should be formed as eucharistic communities that share with one another in the wider community in a service of transforming love.

Asian Integral Pastoral Approach (AsIPA)

To realize the vision of the FABC, the AsIPA Desk of the FABC Office of Laity was set up to promote and train all member conferences of the FABC towards their vision of a participatory Church, a communion of communities. AsIPA means Asian, Integral, Pastoral Approach which offers contextualized methods to foster a participatory process in the building and maintaining of Basic Ecclesial Communities/Small Christian Communities. So far, six AsIPA general assemblies have evaluated the growth of the Basic Christian Communities in the Asian continent. Observations indicate not only a gradual growth of the number of participants, but also its significant impact on the Christian communities. The important themes discussed in the six general assemblies are as follows.

First AsIPA General Assembly

In the Fifth Plenary Assembly of the FABC in Bandung in 1990, the bishops called for “alternative ways of being Church” in Asia. This vision of a participatory Church emerged during a gathering at Baan Phu Waan Pastoral Center, Bangkok, on November 5–15, 1996 for its first AsIPA General Assembly.

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25. Ibid., no. 7.i.
26. See ibid., no. 7.g.
Assembly. Both Bishop Fritz Lobinger and Fr. Oswald Hirmer, the originators of the Lumko, South Africa pastoral training programs, participated and accompanied Asian churches in the process of the development of Small Christian Communities by helping them adapt Lumko materials to the local situation.

The participants shared their experience that AsIPA is a simple but profound way of bringing Our Lord Jesus into the lives of ordinary people in a way that builds and strengthens community. They also found that it is helpful in reaching out to others through a common Christian mission. In gospel sharing, people experience real conversion, trust, and cooperation. They come forward to share their joys and sorrows and are able to reach out to the wider community. Both clerics and lay felt that the AsIPA approach helped them in their pastoral work to discover and exercise their leadership more meaningfully and more consistently, with greater participation of all the faithful in carrying on Christ’s mission together.

The assembly appealed to all sectors of the Church (laity, religious, priests, and bishops) to study the AsIPA method carefully and utilize its power to energize the parishes because they considered AsIPA not only a way to make the Church a communion of communities, but also a very useful instrument to propel the Church in this direction.

Second AsIPA General Assembly

The Second AsIPA General Assembly was in Baan Phu Waan Pastoral Center, Samphran in Thailand, on October 12–21, 2000. This time the theme was “A New Way of Being Church in the New Millennium,” which aimed at a deeper understanding of the AsIPA towards becoming a participatory Church – a Church that is a “Communion of Communities” (Ecclesia in Asia, 25).

The assembly rightly pointed out that the restructuring of the parishes as “a community of small communities” is the renewal of the local church.

27. Lumko is the pastoral institute of South African Catholic Bishops’ Conference (SACBC) at Germiston, Gauteng. It offers pastoral and mission research, training through workshops, seminars, and courses, and produces audio-visual and printed materials for the Church in Southern Africa and beyond. It promotes a transforming vision of a community church based on Vatican II and the visions of SACBC’s Pastoral Plan.


29. See AsIPA GA I, nos. 5–7.

30. See ibid., no. 10.

31. Ibid., no. 1.1.
The FABC declared that the AsIPA methodology has proved helpful to the growth and development of BECs. The AsIPA methodology facilitates the genuine participation of all members in the process of renewal and, through the centrality of the word of God, helps them to take an active part in the actual discovery of God’s message. The word of God and the celebration of the eucharist move SCCs to express their faith in Jesus through serving humanity which in turn builds and strengthens a life of communion.

The aspects of the Catholic Church (one, holy, catholic, and apostolic) are present in SCCs in a miniature form. The members experience the presence of the Risen Lord by their sharing and caring. SCCs go through a gradual process that requires greater attention and nourishment in its initial stages of growth. Many countries, dioceses, and parishes are making committed efforts to become a new way of being Church through SCCs. The SCCs provide a way to carry on the mission of Christ not only in the Church, but also in families, in society, and in the world at large.

SCCs explore ways of building human communities and incarnating the Church in the cultural milieu of the place. The AsIPA is an effective instrument for the emergence of a community of co-responsible brothers and sisters in the mission of Christ. AsIPA texts have created a deep sense of hope that the participants are empowered to respond to their own pastoral and social realities by developing new training programs. In the process of sharing experiences of achievements and struggles, SCCs enhance solidarity and mutual encouragement.

The assembly proclaimed that SCCs are the seedbed of inculturation, rebirthing, and recreating the local church. Through Small Christian Communities, Jesus, the living Word is reborn, reinterpreted, and incarnated. By sharing God’s Word, celebrating life’s joys and pains, reaching out and serving others, and getting involved in life issues in one’s particular context, SCCs make Jesus alive in the world. SCCs are the leaven for social and spiritual transformation. As agents of change, networking, and action, SCCs in a parish setting become a potent force for spiritual and societal change to express

32. See ibid., no. 1.4.
34. See AsIPA GA II, nos. 2.2.–2.4.
35. See ibid., nos. 2.5.–2.7.
solidarity with the poor, weak, and suffering. SCCs bring harmony, an Asian value, in the midst of diversity in the Asian Church which has many cultures, religions, races, economic and political backgrounds.\textsuperscript{36} A new way of being Church needs collaborative style of leadership. All pastoral leaders are called upon to actively involve and renew themselves through participation in the life of SCCs.\textsuperscript{37}

In their recommendations, the Second AsIPA General Assembly encouraged the exchange of experiences and materials to carry on this faith journey, which is deeply rooted in the word of God and eucharist in building and sustaining the Small Christian Communities. The assembly encouraged all Christ’s faithful to exercise their baptismal calling by participating actively in Small Christian Communities. The assembly hoped that all Asian bishops would lead the Church in the process of renewal at the grassroots level. It also invited all to grow in the awareness of a participatory and co-responsible Church as a way to live out the Vatican II vision of the Church as the people of God.

As a practical recommendation the assembly encouraged the use of different forms of communication to share the experiences of members of Small Christian Communities and to convene the AsIPA assembly once again in three years.

\textit{Third AsIPA General Assembly}

The Third AsIPA Assembly was held at the Hanmaum Education and Retreat Center of Seoul Archdiocese, Korea, on September 2–9, 2003, with the theme, “Empowering Our People in SCCs to Serve.” There were 123 participants, lay trainers, priests, and religious from 13 Asian countries, including 15 bishops from Asia and one from South Africa, as well as teams from Papua New Guinea and Germany.\textsuperscript{38}

In the keynote address the following pastoral concerns of SCCs were mentioned:

(i) The process of economic and cultural globalization which has severely affected several countries in Asia, eroding deep religious sensibilities, family values and ecology; and

\textsuperscript{36} See ibid., nos. 3.1.–3.3.
\textsuperscript{37} See ibid., no. 3.4.
\textsuperscript{38} See Asia Desk, “SCCs/BECS: Empowering People to Serve,” Final Statement of the Third AsIPA Assembly (September 2–9, 2003, South Korea), in \textit{Communio}, Asia Desk ed. (Sri Lanka: Lanka Publishing House, 2012), no. 1.3. (Hereafter, AsIPA GA III.)
Discrimination, ethnic conflicts and political divisions that require a response from the Church which can be through the SCCs when they are empowered to serve. Empowerment would involve a new method of faith formation and evangelization in the SCC/BEC, following Jesus’s way of leading.  

The assembly also reflected on and discussed “Family Life and SCCs” and concluded that the SCC has the potential to assist families and helps them pray with the word of God in their homes and to come together at the service of others. This strengthens the role of the family as a domestic Church. The assembly helped the participants to discover their ministries in faithfulness to Jesus’s call and mission. Hence, there is a need for formation, training, and structures to animate and support ministries in SCCs to carry on the mission of Christ at the very local level.

The Asian bishops in the Fifth FABC Plenary in Bandung agreed that the spirituality for SCCs in “The New Way of Being Church Journeying Together toward the Third Millennium” consists of the following: (i) The centrality of the Word of God; (ii) The prophetic role of SCCs in witnessing to faith in the social, political, and economic situations of life; (iii) The need for a deep trust in God with the simplicity and humility of the gospel and love for the poor. Keeping in mind the teeming millions who walk along other religious paths to God, our communities must be more consciously involved in the process of building religious harmony.

The assembly mentioned the impact of the SCCs in many local churches, namely:

- A gradual transformation towards a new style of leadership, a servant leadership, where there is no domination (Mk 10: 43, 45);

- Restructuring of parishes in several dioceses of Asia based on SCCs where the members of parish pastoral councils and diocesan pastoral councils are drawn from these communities;

39. AsIPA GA III, no. 2.1.
40. See ibid., no. 2.2.
41. See ibid., no. 2.3.
42. See ibid., no 2.4.
• Increasing participation of the laity in pastoral planning, liturgy and sharing the faith and in social and charitable services and actions.\textsuperscript{43}

The AsIPA assembly pointed out some factors that inhibit the growth of SCCs. These are resistance, indifference, and apathy from church leaders, especially priests, and on the part of the faithful, the inadequate knowledge of the Bible and deficient faith commitment. At the level of dioceses and parishes, they cited lack of coordination and harmonization of various programs, activities, associations, and movements.

The assembly passed the following resolutions and recommendations. The centrality of the word of God that deepens the understanding of the faithful is vital in SCCs and the practice of gospel sharing is central to their faith communities. Through this the members of SCCs evangelize one another and become evangelizers in their neighborhood. It is good to realize, to understand, and to develop all the gifts of the laity, especially in the area of servant leadership. The assembly called on SCCs to be instruments of social transformation and play their prophetic role. Church leaders should help them by providing ongoing training and formation. Family life and marriage can be enriched and strengthened through SCCs. The importance of catechesis for the entire family was underlined. The AsIPA is ready to assist the commissions, administration, associations, and movements of the dioceses, and to strengthen the parish and the SCCs as the basic structure for the Church to carry out its mission in the world today.\textsuperscript{44}

The assembly recommended providing training and formation for parish priests and an ongoing formation institute for priests in their ministry to SCCs. It also mentioned training for bishops on SCCs and the possibility of exchange of experiences because of their vital role in promoting SCCs. A course on SCCs as part of the ecclesiology of communion has to be included in the curriculum of seminaries and religious houses. Finally, there is a need to improve national networks for the growth of SCCs for better communication and exchange of news and resources at the national and international levels and to promote unity and exchange among dioceses.\textsuperscript{45}

\textsuperscript{43} See ibid., nos. 2.5–2.10.
\textsuperscript{44} See ibid., nos. 3.1–3.7.
\textsuperscript{45} See ibid., nos. 3.8–3.11.
Fourth AsIPA General Assembly

The AsIPA brought together the people of God (laity, religious, priests, and bishops) from 14 countries for the Fourth General Assembly in Maria Rani Centre, Trivandrum, India, on November 8–15, 2006. The theme was “SCCs/ BECs towards a Church of Communion” with the following objectives: (i) deepening our ecclesiology of communion; (ii) reviewing the implications of integral and pastoral approach through SCCs (Small Christian Communities); (iii) discovering existing and innovative structures to initiate and nurture SCCs; 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 following insights were obtained from the Fourth Assembly. The assembly affirmed that the Church is a communion of communities which is strengthened by the sacraments and nourished by the eucharist. The Trinitarian God of communion is the source of the Church, a living organism that undergoes constant transformation. In the course of her pilgrim journey through history towards the realization of her full identity as a communion of communities, she is challenged by the world and its rapidly changing value systems. The Second Vatican Council has re-projected the image of the Church as a communion of communities which can be achieved through the establishment of many neighborhood communities in each parish. Since they comprise all Catholics of a given area, they are not just private groups, but the most local incarnation of the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic Church and “a new way of being Church” as affirmed by the bishops of Asia.

The Church is the expression of the continued presence of Christ in the world realized in the celebration of the sacraments. These celebrations are genuine when the members of the SCCs learn to forgive one another, care for the sick, build and strengthen the domestic Church, use their gifts for service, exercise a liberating leadership, and work towards the coming of the kingdom of God. Hence, in SCCs, the communitarian and liberating dimensions of the sacraments are expressed in very concrete ways. The Small Christian

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47. See AsIPA GA IV, no. 2.1.
48. See ibid., no. 2.2.
Community is nourished by the Word of God and enriched by the various ministries; it becomes Church in the neighborhood according to the mind and heart of Jesus Christ. The community experiences the Risen Lord in the breaking of the word and this reaches its culmination in the breaking of the bread, expressed in solidarity with the poor and the oppressed.

The general assembly shared the efforts of SCCs in the journey towards a communion of communities. It mentions the following effects in the Church:

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 are an increasing number of religious sisters getting involved in the SCCs. The participation of women in SCCs 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. 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.\(^{49}\)

The assembly indicated areas of challenges for the development and growth of SCCs in Asia. First, it mentioned the challenges for bishops and priests. All faithful share in the common responsibility of building a community of communion, a participatory co-responsible Church, where the bishops are the chief promoters and all play a complementary role. Since SCCs are the most localized expression of being Church, SCCs should be the clear priority in the diocesan pastoral vision. Hence, the bishop has to motivate the priests who are his direct collaborators in shouldering this responsibility at the parish level. Moreover, the bishops and priests need to take an active interest in the growth of communities through SCCs. A non-dominating and enabling style of leadership is crucial in the building of SCCs. The priest enables the leaders in the community and inspires them to work relentlessly to build and sustain small communities. Therefore, seminary formation should necessarily include an orientation to and training to work with SCCs as well as opportunities for reflective and guided learning through immersion in SCCs.\(^{50}\)

\(^{49}\) Ibid., no. 3.1.

\(^{50}\) See ibid., nos. 5.1–5.3.
Secondly, religious congregations of men and women are called to put their charisms and energies at the service of the Church because they are also important partners in building SCCs. Religious sisters have contributed significantly towards the growth of SCCs, although in some places like Guatemala, no religious sisters were involved in SCCs. By and large, religious men actively promote SCCs.51

Thirdly, lay leaders have to take their rightful place in decision-making bodies in the parish and diocese. Hence, there is a need for a paradigm shift in the understanding of leadership and structure. On the part of church leaders, there is a need to acknowledge the potential and charism of the laity, especially of women, towards a more collaborative ministry. Continuous training programs at the diocesan, deanery, parish, and SCCs levels are very important to sustain SCCs. The bishops, priests, religious, and lay animators should aim at “a new way of being Church” in their personal relationship with others.52

As the Church in Asia enters into a new phase, the ecclesial community has to be a leaven in the midst of an enormous mass of dough. Therefore, every Christian becomes a person enlightened by the gospel, empowered by the sacraments especially the eucharist, and emboldened to proclaim the good news. To achieve this, the assembly recommends the following:

- Ongoing 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 in building interreligious understanding, harmony, and ecumenism;

- Opportunities to be provided for bishops and priests to live and learn as a community;

- Conscious efforts to integrate men, children, and youth into the mainstream of the SCCs and join women who are already active there;

51. See ibid., no. 5.4.
52. See ibid., nos. 5.5–5.7.
• Ensure emerging and rotating leadership and teamwork in SCCs and other church structures to bring about qualitative growth.  

Fifth AsIPA General Assembly

The Fifth AsIPA General Assembly met at the Regional Major Seminary in Davao City, Philippines, on October 20–28, 2009, with 225 participants from 17 countries. This is where some 40 years ago the seeds of SCCs were first sown. As the continuation of the fourth assembly in Trivandrum which discussed the sacraments in SCCs, the Ninth FABC Plenary Assembly on “Living the Eucharist in Asia” and the Synod on the “Word of God” in Rome, the Fifth AsIPA assembly chose the theme, “Do This in Memory of Me (Lk.22:19): Bread Broken and Word Shared in SCCs.”

The participants shared Asian realities in SCCs which brought about many changes in the Church and in society. The following are some of the effects of SCCs in Asia:

• One of the tangible results of SCCs is the interest in the word of God (members owning a Bible and making efforts to know the Bible better).

• One of the most visible fruits of SCCs, sharing and living the word is the growing sense of belonging in these communities.

• There is a growing commitment to reach out to those in need in the neighborhood. Members are enabled to read the “signs of the times” and to respond in the light of the gospel.

• In many countries, SCCs have become centers for daily catechesis and contextualized faith formation according to what Pope John Paul II states in Redemptoris Missio (RM, 51).

• Participation in eucharistic celebrations has increased because of active involvement in SCCs.

53. Ibid., no. 6.
54. See Asia Desk, “Bread Broken and Word Shared in SCCs/BECs,” Final Statement of the Fifth AsIPA Assembly (October 20–28, 2009, Davao, Philippines), in Communio, Asia Desk ed. (Sri Lanka: Lanka Publishing House, 2012), nos. 1.1–1.2. (Hereafter, AsIPA GA V.)
• The experience of gospel sharing (“sharing the word”) has shown that the word of God is as important as the “breaking of bread” in leading SCCs to a Christ experience. The participants also acknowledged the various other methods and approaches used in different Asian countries to share the word of God in SCCs.

• The experience of the various Gospel Sharing methods and the eucharistic celebrations during this assembly made the participants aware of the social and political realities in the region and how the SCCs are a sign of hope.55

The following theological insights of the assembly are drawn from the theme, “Do this in Memory of Me: Bread Broken and Word Shared in SCCs”:

• The eucharist is the source of life and remains an integral part of the memory of Jesus. SCCs celebrate the memory of Jesus in the eucharist and keep it alive in their communities.

• SCCs gather regularly to share the word of God. The community is strengthened by listening to the Word of God which nourishes the faith, deepens the bond of communion, and builds up the community.

• The eucharist effects invisible communion with God in Jesus and the Spirit and visible communion of the faithful. Eucharistic celebration deepens and fosters communion manifested in the spirit of unity, participation, and sharing in the SCCs.

• The eucharist inspires the SCCs to share all the diverse charisms and gifts of the Spirit and use them to build up the body of Christ and carry out their mission in the world.56

As usual, the assembly presented some of the challenges of SCCs in Asia and made some recommendations for their growth. From an ecclesiastical

55. AsIPA GA V, nos. 2.1.–2.8.
56. Ibid., nos. 3.1.–3.4.
perspective, the passive and un-churched members in the parishes are a great challenge to the SCCs. The Church has to face the reality of finding ways and means of making the eucharist an integral part of the life of the community. The eucharist, the source of unity and reconciliation, also challenges the members to integrate faith and daily life. The “new way of being Church” demands SCC and other church leaders to exercise a non-dominating and facilitative style of leadership. From the socio-economic perspective, problems due to migration, poverty, and cultural upheavals in Asia are affecting family life. Therefore, the SCCs are called to respond to these realities in the light of the gospel. The Word of God calls for involvement in the social transformation of oppressive structures, based on the values of the kingdom.57

Sixth AsIPA General Assembly

The Sixth AsIPA General Assembly came together at Chintana Center, Nainamadama in Sri Lanka, from October 18–24, 2012, to share experiences, deepen communion, and reflect on the theme, “Go, You Are Sent Forth: Following Jesus in Mission: Small Christian Communities Serving and Ministering.” The sixth assembly gathered on the eve of the 50th year of Vatican II, the 20th year of the Catechism of the Catholic Church, the Year of Faith, the Synod of Bishops on the New Evangelization for the Transmission of Faith, and the 40th anniversary of the FABC. The theme of the AsIPA assembly coincided with events of the universal Church. Therefore, the assembly hoped to contribute to the renewal happening in the universal Church.

The assembly went through the research done by the AsIPA-FABC Resource Team (ART) and the East Asian Pastoral Institute (EAPI) on SCCs/BECs in five parishes from five dioceses in five Asian countries that have been using AsIPA to build up a participatory Church.58 The result of research has shown that people are growing in their faith and life of discipleship, in their relationships within the family, in the neighborhood, in their involvement in parish life and especially in their participation in eucharistic celebrations. They see this growth as a direct result of their regular sharing on the Word of God and the constant effort to live the Christian faith. In designing the survey, AsIPA felt the need to emphasize the area of mission; however, the result shows

57. See ibid., nos. 4.1–4.8.
58. The aim of the research was to “evaluate qualitatively the effectiveness of SCCs/BECs that have been using the AsIPA method in five countries (Korea, Sri Lanka, South India, the Philippines, and Thailand) from the point of view of bishops, priests, religious, and lay people from five SCC/BEC groups.” Wendy Louis, “The Asia Process in SCC Building: Introduction to the Research Project,” East Asian Pastoral Review 48, nos. 1–2 (2011): 5–10, at 5.
that “the growth in spiritual life achieved in the SCCs/BECs has yet to sufficiently flow into active mission towards the needy, marginalized, oppressed and people of other faiths.”

The research findings in five countries indicate the new initiatives taken in the SCCs/BECs, the effects of gospel sharing, formation and awareness programs for clergy and laity, training for new parish formation teams and diocesan teams, new areas of ministry, restructuring parish life, parish pastoral councils, and leadership systems to serve the Church in the neighborhood.

The assembly also reflected on mission and SCC/BEC and reminded that God calls people not as individuals but as a community (LG, 9). Through baptism, the Lord invites and commissions all the faithful to be at the service of the Church and humanity (see 1 Pt 2:9; LG, 31; AA, 3). SCCs/BECs are a force for mission and evangelization in the Church and are an effective means of promoting communion and participation (RM, 51; EA, 24, 25). They are “solid starting points of a new society based on a civilization of love” (RM, 51). They help one live, share, witness, and proclaim one’s faith. Therefore, SCCs/BECs are not just programs and activities but are to be experienced as a participatory Church in daily life. In the Asian context, SCC/BEC activities need to bring its members closer to people of other faiths. By loving our neighbors, SCCs/BECs become salt and light to the world (see Mt 5:13–16).

The communion aspect of the Church needs to be reflected in her mission and ministries through participation and co-responsibility of the people of God. Ministry is always contextual and therefore SCCs/BECs have to evolve new forms of ministries. The assembly named some contextual ministries in Asia, like empowering abandoned women, fighting against nuclear power, creating new opportunities for the unemployed, fighting against corruption. It encouraged lay people to take up these contextual ministries. National and diocesan SCC/BEC teams should enable more networking with other SCCs/BECs within the local church and with other agencies working for the same cause. Since new ministries emerge as a response to the needs of the time and place, the SCCs/BECs need to avoid individual domination and leadership parallel to that of ordained ministries. In order to make new ministries possible for many, they have to be exercised on a rotating basis; new ministries demand


60. See AsIPA GA VI, nos. 2.4.–2.6.

61. See ibid., nos. 3.1.–3.3.
The pastors have to play the role of enablers of new lay ministries for a participatory Church. These servant and enabling leadership skills have to be integrated in the formation of seminarians during their formation.

The following ten recommendations were made for the journey towards a participatory Church in Asia.63

1. SCCs are called upon to become homes for migrants and displaced persons.

2. SCCs are to fight against the values brought about by globalization and are called to embrace the people who are affected by it and work hard to bring them into the civilization of love.

3. SCCs have the duty to form good social and political leaders with Christian values and vision.

4. SCCs are called to work for Christian unity (ecumenism) and be agents of interfaith dialogue within families and in the neighborhood in the context of religious pluralism.

5. SCCs have to facilitate a deeper ownership of the vision of a participatory Church and co-responsibility.

6. SCCs need to recognize the gifts and talents of all to build up the body of Christ by exercising an enabling leadership style.

7. SCCs have to motivate the participation of non-active members especially men and youth.

8. SCC/BEC members and leaders are to be given theological and pastoral formation to promote and strengthen the \textit{sensus fidelium}.

62. See ibid., nos. 4.1.–4.5.

63. Ibid., nos. 5.1.–5.10.
9. SCCs have to work hard to deepen the faith of their members through catechesis.

10. SCCs make use of the Group Response Gospel Sharing method and the Amos programs to become real prophetic communities.

Conclusion

Identifying alternative ways of being Church in Asia was the dream envisioned by the Asian bishops in their Fifth Plenary Assembly held in Bandung in 1990. This was realized through the formation of Basic Ecclesial Communities in all the parishes. Basic Ecclesial Communities have brought liveliness in the parishes. After the formation of the BECs, there has been a renewal in the liturgical celebrations and peoples’ participation in the liturgy. People not only participate in the liturgy but also prepare the Sunday liturgy and encourage the whole community to participate actively. BECs have created the thirst for the word of God and the willingness to share the word of God with others. BECs have enhanced the lay participation in the parish pastoral administration through the parish pastoral council. In many parishes, the parish pastoral council members are elected from the BECs; thus, the parish pastoral council is a council of the BEC representatives who plan and execute the pastoral activities in the parish with the parish priest. BECs are the source of new ministries and minister to the Church.
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