

AsIPA 4th General Assembly
Maria Rani Centre, Trivandrum, India
8-15th November, 2006

"SCCs/BECs Towards a Church of Communion"
Final Statement

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 charism 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 co-operation 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 charisms 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-à-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 nurturing 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.