

HISTORICAL PROFILE OF SMALL CHRISTIAN COMMUNITIES

IN THE WORLD

(From Decade of the 1940s to the year 2000 B.C)

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Introduction

Like a melody that is passed along through the various sections of an orchestra, we have heard the music of the Trinity passed through Jesus to the church, the kingdom, on into time and away towards eternity. It reverberates through history, as we will now see.

Biblical and Pre-Modern Times

James O'Halloran SDB

Until the 1960s a hierarchical model of church prevailed in the world, but with Vatican II we entered a period of change. The council called on the church to be community as the Trinity is community (Vatican II, *Dogmatic Constitution on the Church*, No 4; see also 10, 11, 12; *The Church in the Modern World*, 46). In the intervening years we have found that one effective way of realizing this vision is through small Christian communities, which then combine into larger units to form a communion of communities.

The appearance of the groups was not a sudden phenomenon. Their history dates not merely from the 1940s and 1950s; it reaches much further back. And all of it is important. In the various countries where I work, I find that those involved in the groups are most curious to learn about similar experiences elsewhere, and about the origins of the small communities in the first place, which led to my elaborating this profile. Not that the ordinary people need all the details here recorded, yet having a general picture is most helpful.

This is so for a variety of reasons:

- When the members of communities know that they are not alone in their experience, it can be a great support.
- They get a sense of the Holy Spirit at work everywhere.
- They get a sense of the New Pentecost ushered in by John XXIII and the World Council of Churches.

- The power the groups have to communicate Christ and his good news also becomes obvious.
- And people are saved from having to reinvent the wheel or eternally repeat the mistakes of history.

Small Christian communities in the New Testament

'Who was the founder of the small Christian communities anyway? Was it you?' someone once asked me during a workshop on the subject.

'No,' I replied, mightily relieved at not having to shoulder that Messianic burden.

'Who was it then?'

'Well, actually, it was Jesus Christ.'

In a sense the communities are as new as the shopping mall, yet as old as the as the gospel. They have their origins in the itinerant community that trod the dusty roads of Palestine with Jesus, in the gathering of the early Christians which formed in Jerusalem after the first Pentecost (Acts 2:42-47; 4:32-37), and in all those groups that sprang up in the gentile world largely as a result of Paul's work.

If the reader would like to explore the life of those early Christian communities, there are a number of texts that would allow them to do so. Reflecting on them can tell us much about the joys and sorrows, sufferings and struggles of the early Christians. For the sake of convenience we list them here:

- Jerusalem: Luke 24:52-53; Acts 2:22-6:15; 7:54-8:4; 11:22; 11:27-30; 15:1-31; 21:7-20.
- Antioch: Acts 11:19-30; 13:1-3; 14:21-28; 15:1-35; Galatians 2:11.
- Ephesus: Acts 18:19-28; 19:1-41; 20:16-38; Ephesians 1:1-12; 6:21-24; 1 Corinthians 15:32; 16:8; 1 Timothy 1:3-4; Revelation 2:1-7.
- Philippi: Acts 16:11-24; Philippians 1:3-14; 2:25-30; 4:14-23; Thessalonians 2:2.
- Corinth: Acts 18:1-11; 19:1; 1 Corinthians 1:10-31; 3:3-9; 3:16-23; 4:17-21; 5:1-2; 6:5-11; 8:4-13; 9:1-7; 9:11-16; 10:14-22; 11:17-34; 12:4-31; 13:1-13; 14:1-33; 15:3-19; 16:10-12; 16:13-20; 2 Corinthians 1:12-24; 2:4.

There are those who believe that Christ left us a highly organised church, rather along the lines that we have experienced in modern times. Most scripture scholars would not agree. Raymond Brown, for example, has pointed out that even in New Testament times the church expressed itself in diverse forms.¹ They were as follows:

- The heritage that Paul leaves us in the pastoral epistles of Titus and 1 and 2 Timothy. This model emphasizes *church organisation*. Authority is important. The apostles have disappeared off the scene and that is a delicate moment for leadership. As a result the role of presbyter-priest is stressed. The model proposes a family approach.
- There is the type that considers the church as *Christ's body to be loved* which can be found in Colossians and Ephesians, and is also traced to Paul.
- From the gospel of Luke and the Acts we get a third Pauline mode, namely, *the church and the Spirit*. This highlights the presence and action of the Spirit.
- In 1 Peter we find the Petrine heritage of the church seen as *people of God*, a form that makes a person feel a strong sense of belonging.
- There is the tradition of John in the fourth gospel which shows people as a *community of disciples personally attached to Jesus*.
- John provides a further model in his epistles: a community of persons guided by the Paraclete-Spirit.
- And, finally, there is the heritage of Jewish-Gentile Christians in the gospel of Matthew, which stresses '*an authority that does not stifle Jesus*'.

In the foregoing models the church as community, or people of God, is strongly represented. Where authority is emphasized it is never intended to be dominating, rather is it to be understood as service. As Eduardo Hoornaert points out: 'Nothing could have been further from the spirit of primitive Christianity than the notion of a power or authority that would not be one of sisterly or brotherly service. The principle of a community of brothers and sisters forbade any arrogance of power and held up before the eyes of all the example of Christ:

Though he was in the form of God, he did not
deem equality with God something to be
grasped at.
Rather he emptied himself
and took on the form of a slave
(Philippians 2:6-7)²

It would be quite mistaken then to look back and read the history of the early Christians with spectacles tinted by our own times.

Paul's approach

For Paul the church is the body of Christ (1 Corinthians 12:27) and as such clearly a community. No doubt the words spoken by the Lord on the road to Damascus had branded themselves into his consciousness: 'Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?' (Acts 9:4). Paul would understand community, or being together in Christ, as:

- living as a single, united body, where the Spirit of God brings forth the fruits of the Spirit (Galatians 5:16-25);
- being able to discern matters for itself with the help of the Spirit (1 Corinthians 2:6-16; 4:6-7; 6:1-8; 7:10-12; 12:4-11);
- being responsible, or:
 - faithful to its call (Galatians 3:1-5; 5:1; 5:13-15,
 - capable of drawing others to Christ (1 Thessalonians 4:9-12,
 - being ready to get involved with the groaning of all creation (Romans 9:18-25).
- struggling with various issues, such as:
 - the fact that the kingdom of God is already existing, yet will only be fully realised in the world to come (1 Corinthians 15:12-28);
 - the delay in Jesus' Second Coming, or the Parousia (1 Thessalonians 5:1-11; 2 Thessalonians 4:13-18; 1 Corinthians 15:12-28);
 - morality and a false sense of security (1 Corinthians 3:18-23; 5:1-2; 5:8; 6:12-20; 8:1-13; 10:23-11:1; Romans 14:13-23; 15:1-6);
 - the conflict between Jewish and Gentile Christians (Galatians 2:1-3:14).³

In the Pauline communities, as indeed in all the early Christian groups, it is people who are important. Organisation and buildings are secondary. The faithful meet in homes; there are no churches. So in Acts 12:12 we read of their being gathered in the house of John Mark when Peter comes knocking at the door, and in Romans 16:5 Paul sends greetings to the church that meets in the house of Priscilla and Aquila (see also Romans 16:11 and 16:14-15). A significant fact emerges here: Christians met in homes and it was there that they got the experience of the intimate group.

But there was also the preoccupation of bringing the small communities together on occasions so as to get the equally important experience of being a communion

of communities. The Temple in Jerusalem was an early meeting point. And at Antioch later the Acts tell us of all the people being gathered together in one place by Paul and Barnabas, when they returned from what is known as Paul's first missionary journey (14:26-27).

Of course the communitarian thrust of the church was inspired by the example of Jesus. He formed a community of disciples, consisting of men and women, around himself, and as part of that community set about the task of preaching the good news. While growing up, he would have been aware of the many groups that were common in the Roman world: Scribes, Pharisees, Sadducees, Essenes, Epicureans, Stoics, Cynics and so forth. Each Sabbath he frequented the synagogue.

Nazareth was situated on a great trading route. All manner of people would have passed that way, including Jews from every part of the Roman Empire on their way to worship in Jerusalem. Furthermore, Nazareth was only five kilometres from Sepphoris which was rebuilt during the youth of Jesus as a Hellenistic, or culturally Greek, city. Capernaum, where he later lived, was a northern border town to the Decapolis region of ten Hellenistic cities. So Christ grew up in a Galilee that we could almost describe as multicultural.⁴ He must have come across wandering philosophers and gurus holding forth in the marketplace and undoubtedly learned from all his experiences (Luke 2.52). One of the lessons that he must have absorbed was the effectiveness of the group. It is not surprising then that we find him adopting the strategy of the small community in his ministry.

Sometimes there is the perception that all was smooth in the early Christian groups. By no means. And if we think our times are difficult, theirs were still more so. As we saw from the scriptural references given above, the fledgling church had to deal with a host of troubles. But the remarkable, and seemingly contradictory thing was that their unity was forged from the very struggle and suffering which they endured in common. This, surely, should be a source of encouragement for us in dealing with confrontation and conflict today.

Change with Constantine

With the coming of the Roman Emperor Constantine (274-337 CE), the church changed from a communitarian model to a hierarchical one. Though he was principally responsible for the change, it is only fair to say that small compromises

can be detected even in the New Testament. Thus in 1 Peter 2:18 we read: 'Servants be submissive to your masters with all respect, not only to the kind and gentle but also to the overbearing.' Here we see the church adapting to survive; the old patriarchal, or dominating, order is reasserting itself. 'Be good servants and you will be considered as having worth' was the message – a modification of the gospel, where our worth comes from being human persons, children of God and brothers and sisters in Christ. But at the particular time these words were written, patriarchy was being strongly affirmed right across the Roman Empire.

The sea change, however, came with the conversion of Constantine. The church ceased to be harassed and Christianity became the favoured religion of the Empire. It was fashionable to be a Christian and the church greatly increased in numbers, though it was not the case of a massive entry of pagans. Yet it lost the momentum of an entity that until then had been lean, persecuted and more committed; the edge of witness became blunted. 'Not only did he recognise the bishops as counsellors of state, but gradually he extended to them juridical rights. He gave legal force to their solution of civil suits in 318 (Cod Theod 1.27.1), permitted the emancipation of slaves in church (321), and recognized bequests to the church (ibid 16.2.4).'⁵ This gave birth to a church model that was both hierarchical and strongly institutional, a form that prevailed as the communitarian vision faded. The neighbourhood community, or house church (*oikos*), ceased to exist and the focus was placed on structures. With the departure of the house church a dimension that gave early Christianity much of its vitality was gone. And, truth to tell, the church has never been quite the same without it. Today the ordinary faithful are reclaiming their heritage, as small communities increase in numbers around the world. That Christians enjoy this heritage is not simply an optional extra. It is a right; it is a necessity. I hope these things have become clear in the course of this volume.

Though the vision of church as community faded, it was never entirely lost. It was preserved in a rarefied fashion by the religious orders. We owe a debt of gratitude to figures like Basil, Benedict, Scholastica, Dominic, Francis, Clare, Ignatius, Teresa, John Bosco and Mary of Mornese. The founders of religious orders and congregations were often charismatic figures who valued relationships above structures. Francis really lamented as Brother Elias boxed in his creativity, and Don Bosco was deeply distressed the day he saw his pupils being marshalled into lines to enter the classrooms. This had not been the practice and was not the family spirit that prevailed in the early days of his oratory. In short the religious orders that appeared on the scene as fresh and innovative often adapted to the pyramidal

church model, becoming little pyramids within the great pyramid. Nevertheless the founders must be credited with preserving a precious Christian memory. Is the torch now being passed to ordinary small communities within our mainstream churches? Just a question to ponder.

Interestingly in the sixteenth century the Huttererian Brethren of Moravia (Anabaptists) adopted a community of goods model of living. But the Anabaptist movement in general rejected the Catholic and Protestant churches and declared them to be false. This tended to marginalize them and their ideas. And with people of the sea small Christian communities flourished on board ship and on land, owing to the Bethel Movement, in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. So in some fashion the small communities have always been present since the first ones appeared following the resurrection of Christ.

Modern times

As already mentioned, small Christian communities are once again emerging among the baptized in our days. And it is happening worldwide. The accounts that follow are contributed by people from among the most informed in their regions. They were written in 2002, shortly after the turn of the millennium, so in historic terms that is practically nothing. However, where an introductory note helps to indicate a significant more recent development, I provide it.

* * *

1. Raymond E. Brown, *The Churches the Apostles Left Behind*, New York: Paulist Press, 1984, p 11.
2. Eduardo Hoornaert, *The Memory of a Christian People*, New York: Orbis Books, 1988, p 198.
3. Michele Connolly, Lecture, Paulian Centre, Sydney, Saturday, 14 November, 1992.
4. Bill Loader, *Colloquium*, 24/1, 1992, p 8.
5. *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, © The Catholic University of America, Washington DC, 1967, Palatine, Illinois: Jack Heraty & Associates Inc, 1981, p 227, (CodTheod, abbreviation for *Codex Theodosianus*, ed. T. Mommsen and P Meyer, 2 v. in 3, (Berlin, 1905).

North America (United States and Canada)

Rev Robert S. Pelton CSC

In the following pages, we record a major research project on small Christian communities carried out by the Institute of Ministry of Loyola University, New Orleans and directed by Fr Bernard J. Lee SM. As one would expect, a major concern of the North American church, since Robert Pelton wrote the following report, is considering the findings of the project and what to do about them.

In the Post-Synodal Exhortation *Ecclesia in America*, Pope John Paul II twice recognizes small Christian communities: once in the context of renewing parishes so that each might become a community of communities (41) and again when discussing the challenge of the sects, in which context the small communities are seen as especially capable of promoting interpersonal bonds of mutual support within the Catholic Church (73). Additionally, the institutional church recognizes small communities as ‘the primary cells of the church structure’ and praises them as ‘responsible for the richness of faith and its expansion as well as for the person and development’ (*Instrumentum Laboris* for the Synod of America, 64). These references strongly indicate that the Vatican is now relying upon small Christian communities to build solidarity within the church.

A prominent role

Many persons worldwide initially expressed surprise when they learned that the Holy Father envisions such a prominent role for North American and European small Christian communities as well as for their better-known counterparts in Africa, Asia, Latin America and Oceania. Large numbers of Canadian and US Catholics seem not to have previously recognized that small Christian communities have been flourishing in their homelands during the 1990s and 2000s – enjoying a strong and steady growth in their numbers, in their scope and in the significance of their contributions to God and to humanity. Those of us who have a keen interest in the small communities, however, see compelling evidence that the small Christian communities will not only fulfill the challenges the Vatican has offered them, but will also continue making great contributions in numerous other spheres as well.

There are approximately 37,000 such communities in the United States and about 7,500 in Canada.⁶ The combined membership of Canadian and US small Christian communities totals approximately one million church-going Catholics who have strong loyalties to their faith, who actively participate in the missions of their small communities and of the universal church, and who build their groups upon a foundation of prayer, faith sharing, scripture and concern for spirituality. Significantly, their rapid growth has occurred at a time when regular attendance at Sunday Mass was sharply declining from a previous high of 80 per cent of parish members to 32 per cent in the United States and 12 per cent in Canada.⁷

It seems clear, therefore, that the small Christian community phenomenon is achieving significant successes in helping large numbers of individuals to find the religious meaning of their Catholic faith, to relate their spirituality to daily life, to make living faith commitments, and to connect their 21st-century lives with the very early days of Christianity.

Well documented information

Until very recently, such conclusions could have been based only upon anecdotal observations and faith in the Holy Spirit. During the earliest years of the small Christian community movement in the US and Canada, there were few opportunities to conduct comprehensive empirical studies of the many thousands of grass-roots communities that were spreading rapidly throughout two of the world's larger nations. Nor was it possible to form systematic theological reflections based upon verified data that accurately reflects the current state of the small Christian community phenomenon.

During the past five years, however, several initiatives have produced a wealth of documented information. Monsignor Timothy O'Brien, a senior priest of St Mary's Parish in Los Gatos, California, spent a sabbatical year studying small Christian communities. He shared his findings in the book, *Why Small Christian Communities Work*.⁸ Another excellent overview is provided in James O'Halloran's *Small Christian Communities: A Pastoral Companion*.⁹

Latin American/North American Church Concerns (LANACC) of the Kellogg Institute actively promotes pastoral bonds between the churches of the Americas, a mission which includes sponsorship of conferences that study, assist and promote small

communities throughout the Americas. In 1990 LANACC convened a consultation that brought together representatives of the National Alliance of Parishes (which promotes the restructuring of parishes into small communities), The North American Forum for Small Christian Communities (which is composed of diocesan directors of small communities) and Buena Vista (which represents grass-roots communities which may or may not pertain to church structures). These organisations formed a joint task force at the University of Notre Dame, Indiana, to sponsor an ongoing series of national and international convocations. The 1991 International Consultation on Small Christian Communities at Notre Dame placed special emphasis upon comparing pastoral experiences. The 1996 Consultation, again at Notre Dame, provided the opportunity to delve more deeply into those theological dimensions that may influence our church in the new millennium. The 1999 Consultation in Cochabamba, Bolivia, took place in the context of the Synods of Bishops from five continents. Small Christian communities have played a prominent role in the discussions and documentation of all these synods.

Fr Bernard Lee SM has written: 'There is no more central question than what kind of community the church needs to be today, faithful to its origins and interdependently interactive in the world in which it lives.'¹⁰ It is our sincere hope that the fruit of the Notre Dame Consultations has contributed – and will continue to contribute – helpful responses to this crucial question.

Watershed Study

In 1999, a watershed study was conducted by the Institute for Ministry of Loyola University, New Orleans, and made possible by a generous grant from Lilly Endowment Inc. Directed by Bernard J. Lee SM - with assistance from a team of prominent theologians, researchers, consultants and representatives of many small Christian community networks – this study offered the first fully viable opportunity to conduct a complete census survey of small Christian communities, members, practices, attitudes, goals and concerns.

The study team identified three primary types of small Christian communities:

1. The general (GSC) type includes about 24,000 individual communities, or about 65 per cent of the small Christian communities identified in the study.

Most of these communities are parish-connected, and many of the members belong to national organisations.

2. Hispanic/Latino (H/L) communities number 7,500 at the minimum, and represent 20 per cent of small Christian communities. Nearly all are parish-connected, and the great majority stress family issues and family membership.
3. Charismatic communities (CHR) are minimally 4,500 in number, comprising 12 per cent of small Christian communities identified. While most members of charismatic communities are parish members, the communities themselves do not tend to be parish-connected.

Other small Christian community types, smaller in number, but often outstanding in commitment and achievement, include:

- Call to Action (CTA) communities and eucharistic central communities (ECC), which the study team grouped together because of their marked similarities. Numbering about 200 groups combined, CTA/ECC communities are the best educated and most affluent of all small Christian community types. They are both the most critical of the institutional church and the most responsive to the church's social teachings.
- College and university campus communities, about 1,100 in number, comprise about 3 per cent of small Christian communities. These communities have not yet been fully studied due to lack of information in at least one crucial area, but they will soon be included.
- Communities associated with religious orders, many of which have most of the characteristics of small Christian communities. Although an independent survey conducted by two Franciscan sisters indicates membership of at least 14,500, the study team learned of this network too late to complete full research.
- Women's groups who share feminist concerns undoubtedly exist, but the study team could not identify them or contact them in sufficient numbers to include them.

All-pervasive diversity

The diversity between the types is mirrored by the diversity within the types. Based upon two decades of active involvement with the small community phenomenon, Nora Petersen reports:

In Buena Vista we meet people who are members of various forms of small Christian community. The groups have varying life spans – from weeks to years. They are made up differently – meeting seasonally, weekly, biweekly and so forth. Some were begun by the official church as the action of a priest, pastor or other staff member. Others were organised by members at the grassroots to fill needs not met by the organised church. While a few extra parochial communities operate in the margins, the vast majority have some links to local parishes or are made up of active parish members ... Most small Christian communities in my acquaintance are word of God and/or study of church-related topics and who participate in the local parish celebration of the eucharist. Some communities are made up of members drawn from different parishes who come together as the groups described above to share their lives of faith, to support one another and reflect on scripture together. They worship at eucharist in their own local parishes. A few communities, while seeing themselves as Catholic, operate extra parochially and regularly include celebrations of the eucharist which is presided over by a visiting or member priest.

In summary, Mrs Petersen has discovered that her involvement with small Christian communities has empowered her 'to ride out some difficult times, grow in the faith, and become ever closer to the church. To be Catholic, it seems to me, means to remain connected to that universal network of church that includes the Catholic family. Sometimes I can only do that with the help of fellow Catholics who love the church as one loves family, warts and all, and who seek to grow in participation in the mission of Jesus.'¹¹

Exploring attitudes to church

The Institute for Ministry study team collaborated with the Research Center at the University of Maryland and with Dr William V. D'Antonio at Catholic University to explore the attitudes of small Christian community members regarding church, culture, loyalty, critical capacities and ideologies, and to determine what factors motivate individuals both as Catholics and as small Christian community members.¹² Their findings are summarised here.

In general, they found that small Christian community members tend to be active and highly committed Catholics. Except for Hispanic/Latino groups, many of whose members are recent immigrants who have not had adequate time to climb the socio-economic and educational ladders, members are better educated and more affluent than the general Catholic population. In the largest small Christian community group (GSC), which comprises two-thirds of small Christian communities, 33 per cent are college graduates and another 23 per cent have professional or advanced college degrees. CTA/ECCs are even more highly educated. They are an older group than the general population (53 to 76 per cent of each type are over age 40), and women members outnumber men by a two to one ratio in the three largest community types. Most small communities are not ethnically diverse: Hispanic/Latino communities are 98 per cent Hispanic, for example, while GSC communities are 92 per cent Caucasian.

In contrast to the small Christian communities of Latin America where members are predominantly the poorer members of the churches, Canadian and US small Christian community members are predominantly middle or upper middle class. A strong similarity, however, is that the US/Canadian middle class has become the most important power base for justice and social change, just as the poorer people in Latin American communities have long been the power base for issues of justice and conscience.

Participation in Sunday Eucharist is extremely high, with group participation rates of 93 per cent, 91 per cent, 78 per cent, 76 per cent, 61 percent and 33 per cent. Daily prayer is also the norm: the lowest group total was 46 per cent and most groups reported percentages in the 70s and 80s. It is impossible to determine whether the most active Catholics are more likely to join small Christian communities or whether small Christian community membership promotes participation and frequent prayer. Unquestionably, however, there is a clear correlation.

Small Christian community members of all groups want their voices heard in important decisions about church life and polity, most particularly in use of parish income, economic justice, welfare and, to a somewhat lesser extent, in selection of parish priests and in ordination of married men or of women.

In general, Catholics join small Christian communities to search for meaning in their daily lives. Opportunities to 'Learn about Religion, God'; 'Prayer, Praise, Worship'; and 'Spirituality' were the most cited reasons for joining.

Reasons for remaining members, and sources of greatest satisfaction from membership, seem to be of a more interpersonal nature. Here, 'Social Support', 'New Friends' and 'Community' were the predominant considerations. This contrast is probably more apparent than real, however, since self-reported narratives of community members make it clear that much of the interpersonal satisfaction arises from the communal character of Christian discipleship, communal discernment of scriptures and shared prayer. Thus, small Christian communities bring relief from cultural loneliness, social and familial fragmentation and widespread hunger for community. Small Christian communities must, of course, be more than mere support groups, but this function should not be summarily dismissed.

As Dr Craig Dykstra, Vice-President for Religion at Lilly Endowment Inc., recently observed: 'Just getting through life involves having to figure out what to do. The help most people really want is a community of people in whose company they can do their own 'figuring' ... What a gift it is to be able to find a home place, a community of people who have really figured out how to go about figuring things out and thus lead genuine lives.'¹³

Over three-quarters of all communities meet weekly or bi-weekly. Except for charismatic groups, who generally regard a parish meeting place as a ritual connection to the parish, most small Christian communities gather in members' homes – remain reminiscent of the house churches of Christianity's earliest times, when private homes were the normative church locations. Although Eucharistic Central Communities (ECCs) are larger, most communities include eight to twelve adult members. Such groups are small enough so members get to know each other well, and so all members have opportunities to actively participate at every gathering. Despite marked differences between community types, over three-quarters of all communities met weekly or biweekly.¹⁴

Most small Christian communities display strong resistance to traditional leadership models. Many have little or no formal structure, while others rely primarily on volunteerism to choose leaders. While this avoids authoritarianism, power struggles and other negatives, it may also deprive the communities of the many useful benefits of effective leadership.

Prayer, faith sharing and scripture reading are almost universal activities at all types of small Christian community gatherings. Spirituality, theological reflection, sharing visions and evangelization are also widely practiced. Small Christian communities

serve as welcoming places where individuals can bring their life experiences in the light of faith. Such dialogues between experience and faith frequently create and clarify meanings and reshape lives, and they provide a supportive community during the struggle for meaning and direction. If not for small Christian communities, many persons would have no place to talk about their faith and their relationships in the presence of others who care.

One of the study team's interpretative propositions is that Christian communities are both gathered and sent. As such, it was assumed that members would be concerned with both the welfare of the community's own members and also with the welfare of the world beyond the group's immediate membership (the reign of God) especially by providing resources and assistance. The team was 'a little dismayed' that only the CTA/ECC groups gave the highest priority to social justice issues, while all other types gave a clear preference to helping their fellow members. The study team concluded that 'support dynamics are clearly stronger than the dynamics of social concern' and that 'this area invites pastoral attention as the small Christian communities continue to develop'.¹⁵

Clearly, the facts unearthed in the Lilly/Loyola Institute for Ministry study paint a hopeful picture for the future of small Christian communities, yet it is one beleaguered by significant concerns. Although very real, the challenges the study has identified are far from insurmountable.

Foster need for communion

We must continue to foster the ever-present need for communion on every level of church life, and must foster changes of the very paradigm of the church by encouraging greater roles for the laity, better evangelisation and greater emphasis upon the powerful role of small Christian communities in the development of ecumenism. It is essential that we maintain a spirit of reasoned dialogue, unity and mutual trust with those bishops, priests and lay persons who, for whatever reason, may hold apathetic or even negative views of small Christian communities. We must explore how official church teaching looks at small communities in the larger sense of communion, and determine whether communion is to be understood in a structural sense or whether we need to encourage a broader theological understanding of communion. There is, additionally, a never-ending need both for stronger lay formation and for a stronger missionary sense. Similarly, we need to develop effective training programmes for small Christian community leaders to

ensure that small communities have access to the full richness of Catholic tradition and teaching.

Autonomy/solidarity connection

It is essential to find the optimal nexus between the essential autonomy of individual communities and their equally essential solidarity with each other and with the universal church.

A top priority should be given to heightening awareness of social justice, both at home and abroad, and strengthening the small communities' commitment to social outreach. Perhaps the key is simple recognition that most small Christian community members are well-educated and relatively affluent. It is hardly surprising, therefore, that they view contemporary society, the Bible and Catholic social teachings from a perspective of privilege, just as the marginalized tend to view the same society, Bible and teachings from the viewpoint of poverty and discrimination. It seems highly probable that we can free middle-class faith from its captivity by culture through exposing the communities to the social realities experienced daily by people who have far less power and far less resources. There is every reason to believe that middle-class Christians will heed Matthew 25:31 and will become powerful forces for social justice.

Similarly, we must encourage twinning across diocesan, national, racial and cultural barriers. Although each small community clearly derives its richness from its own cultural identity, they can become fully Catholic only by drawing from each other's strengths and sharing each other's weaknesses. Organisations such as Buena Vista and RENEW are already actively promoting twinning. We should support their endeavours and should develop similar endeavours at every level.

Prayer of the essence

Finally, and most importantly, we must pray fervently for these small communities, this nascent church, which is such a splendid example of the Holy Spirit working in the people of God, which has so rapidly become one of the most powerful forms of Christian witness in the post-Vatican II era and which has so much to offer our brothers and sisters, our church and our Lord.

Our quest is vast, but the opportunities are limitless. Our mission will be aided enormously by a very generous implementation grant from Lilly Endowment Inc,

which is supplying the financial and motivational resources needed to carry out many of the steps necessary to increase the effectiveness of small Christian communities.

Speaking with the wisdom garnered from thirty years' experience, Father José Marins told the delegates of the International Consultation on Small Christian Communities, Cochabamba 1999: 'The communities pose an alternative to a church closed to new expressions and ministries, but are committed to full communion. They are always in process and as such never finished products. They lie at the heart of the church and are not mere appendages. In the final analysis, they are not just one more activity but a priority.'

We enter the new millennium with further support for a theology of communion, and our steadfast dedication to small Christian communities will allow us to recapture the spirit of hope which we had as we finished the final session of Vatican Council II. At that time, speaking about a world to be built up, the council fathers looked to the moment when '... people all over the world will awaken to a lively hope (the gift of the Holy Spirit) that they will one day be admitted to the haven of surpassing peace and happiness radiant with the glory of the Lord' (Flannery, Austin (ed), *Vatican II: Conciliar and Post-Conciliar Documents, Gaudium et Spes*, 93, Dublin: Dominican Publications, 1975).

Let us awaken to the present moment of lively hope.

Robert S. Pelton, during his sixty years as a Holy Cross Priest, has served as Professor of Theology and as Chair of the Department of Theology at the University of Notre Dame; as a peritus (expert consultant) to Cardinal Leo Suenens at Vatican Council II; as founder and director of the Notre Dame Institute for Clergy Education; as chair of the Theological Institute; as Episcopal Vicar of the Archdiocese of Santiago, Chile; as director of the Institute for Church Life at Notre Dame; as editor of the International Papers in Pastoral Ministry; as Departmental Fellow of both the Helen Kellogg Institute for International Peace Studies; and as a representative of LANACC (Latin American/North American Church Concerns) of the Kellogg Institute. LANACC promotes pastoral bonds between the churches of the Americas. Part of this is through the annual Romero lectures, and the promotion of small Christian communities. Finally, he collaborated on a film entitled Romero: Por Su Voz to commemorate the thirtieth anniversary of the martyrdom of Archbishop Romero. It will have its premiere at Notre Dame on March 25, 2010. Eight years as a

missionary in Chile convinced Pelton of the enormous potential of small Christian communities to give flesh to the biblical image of the church as people of God.

* * *

6. *Small Christian Communities in the US Catholic Church: Snapshots of a Great Motion – Executive Summary*, Research conducted under a grant from the Lilley Endowment, Inc., to the Institute of Ministry, Loyola University, New Orleans, Bernard J. Lee SM, Projector Director, 1999.
7. *Informer: America del Norte*, Report on US/Canadian Small Christian Communities, presented to the International Consultation on Small Christian Communities, Cochabamba, Bolivia, November, 1999.
8. Monsignor Timothy O'Brien, *Why Small Christian Communities Work*, San Jose, CA: Resource Publications, 1996.
9. James O'Halloran SDB, *Small Christian Communities: A Pastoral Companion*, New York: Orbis Books, Dublin: Columba Press, 1996.
10. Bernard J. Lee SM, *The Future Church of 140 BCE*, Crossroads Herder, 1995.
11. Buena Vista, Ink, Arvada, CO, March-April, 1997.
12. *Small Christian Communities in the US Catholic Church, Snapshots of a Great Motion – Executive Summary*. Research conducted under a grant from the Lilly Endowment Inc., to the Institute of Ministry, Loyola University, New Orleans, Bernard J. Lee SM, Project Director, 1999.
13. *Initiatives in Religion*, Winter, 1998.
14. *Small Christian Communities in the US Catholic Church Snapshots of a Great Motion – Executive Summary*. Research conducted under a grant from the Lilly Endowment Inc., to the Institute of Ministry, Loyola University, New Orleans, Bernard J. Lee SM, Project Director, 1999.
15. Ibid.

LATIN AMERICA

José Marins

*Since José Marins wrote the following there has been the advisors of Latin Americans Basic Ecclesial Communities three-yearly gathering in Aguascalientes, Mexico 2004. At that meeting the members established that, despite statements to the contrary, the basic ecclesial communities in Latin America are a force to be reckoned with. The participants concluded, though, that they badly needed to put in place a networking system and open more effective lines of communication. In 2007, the CELAM (Latin American Bishops' Conference) meeting was held in Aparecida, Brazil. Those who looked to Vatican Council II, Medellin and Puebla as beacons for the Latin American church went there without any great expectations. Santo Domingo (1993) had proved disappointing. They were, however, pleasantly surprised by Aparecida. Bishop Alvaro Ramazzini, President of the Guatemalan Bishops' Conference, succinctly expressed the views of many: 'The traditional options of the church in Latin America – the preferential and evangelical option for the poor, the fight for justice and human rights, base Christian communities – are there [in the document]. Now it's up to us in our dioceses.'*¹⁶

I should like to make the following observations regarding the basic ecclesial, or church, community in Latin America.

1. It is something permanent, not passing, in the church; not just one more charism, but an essential element. It can of course, be embodied in varying church models about which issues can be raised.
2. It is by nature a Eucharistic and missionary community even when the expression of this identity is limited by pastoral and disciplinary concerns. This expression can vary depending on the historical context or church rite in which it is developing. Basic ecclesial community cannot be analysed from the outside, employing simply a historical, socio-political or institutional viewpoint. Nor is it merely a democracy. It is much more than that. It is a community animated by the Holy Spirit. Because of this, it is, and always will be, a source of surprises that confound human logic.

In a document published in 1983, the Brazilian bishops applied Vatican II, *Lumen Gentium*, 26 to the basic ecclesial community; it declares that it is church and not just a sector or activity of the same. A document from fifteen Mexican archbishops and bishops followed suit on the 7 April 1989,

as did a further document from the Bolivian bishops in preparation for Santo Domingo, 1992 (no 259:1-13).

3. The basic ecclesial community does not have the same format as Catholic Action. We are not talking of a programme movement or apostolic activity. Nor is it a question of one pastoral approach among others. Similarities between basic ecclesial community and other Christian groups would be that they are all under the aegis of mother church – which provides a community dimension – refer to the Bible and give importance to spirituality. Differences between the basic ecclesial community and other phenomena (movements, programmes, pastoral approaches) is a question of essence or being. The various groups and movements are not opposed to basic ecclesial communities; they complement them. But the communities are essentially different. Maybe a metaphor would help, though all such comparisons limp somewhat. The difference would be similar to that between a seed of maize and a leaf on the maize plant itself.
4. Basic ecclesial community did not appear in the twentieth century in response to a socio-political situation – even though this did have an influence – but rather arose out of theological and pastoral needs. The basic ecclesial communities figured primarily as a restructuring of the church itself and not as a social or lay movement. They are a comprehensive expression of the church's mission. In an article in *Concilium* (April 1974), I outlined the significant Brazilian experiences that were influential for the beginning of basic ecclesial communities. These experiences belonged to the ordinary catechists in Barrada do Pirai and São Paulo do Potengi, working along the lines of the Movimento de Natal. Bishop Expedito Madeiros, who initiated this work and was pastor of those barrios at the time, is still alive and active. And there were other vital experiences. In Latin America one must not fail to mention the Presidents of the Christian Assembly in Santiago de los Caballeros, Dominican Republic; the Delegates of the word of God in Choluteca, Honduras, who have now spread throughout Central America; the communities on the outskirts of Panama City, in San Miguelito com o Pe Leo; and the groups of Corrientes, in Goya, Argentina, characterized by a deeply rooted popular piety. Also worthy of mention are the Chilean basic Christian communities – the terminology used at Medellin, 1968. Basic Christian communities in Chile were distinguished from basic ecclesial

communities, which for the Chileans would be more broadly based and institutional, incorporating a number of basic Christian communities.

5. The basic ecclesial communities arise to summon the baptised around the basic tenets of the faith – the word of God, works of charity, prayer and devotions. In Latin America, the Caribbean, Africa, the Philippines, India and so forth, they served from the beginning as small local churches and, because of this, they implicitly represent the church in an 'official' capacity as community/mission (sacrament). With the necessary permissions, the basic ecclesial communities may appropriately baptise, preach, receive new members into the church, and have ordained ministers in the line of the apostolic succession. These would of course be in communion with the bishop. All this and more is possible because we are speaking of the church as such, and not about a movement or some branch of Christian spirituality.

In some parts of Latin America (Columbia, Nicaragua ...) the basic ecclesial communities, denied official approval, called for the formation of groups that were sometimes parallel groups or groups in opposition to the hierarchy. This is something circumstantial, not pertaining to the essence of basic ecclesial community. The situation is not normal and cannot be countenanced in a coherent theology of church. In these circumstances we are not talking of real basic ecclesial communities, but of movements with much goodwill that find inspiration in the communities. On the other hand, we must recognise that in some situations, particularly in cities, basic ecclesial communities are still merely Bible-study, prayer, or socio-political groups. They have not as yet been able to realise their full ecclesial vocation to be the rallying-point for baptised members of the Catholic Church in their areas. Indeed from a theological perspective various expressions of church at the grass-roots that were highly controversial have always existed. Nowadays a 'refounding' of the church means implementing the theological-pastoral model of Vatican II. Its salient features would be the primacy of the kingdom of God, the church as sacrament, ecumenical openness, inter-religious dialogue, lay involvement, liturgy as sacrament and liberating mission. Like Vatican II, the general assembly of the Latin American bishops at Medellin, 1968, also produced a 'refounding'-of-the-church document. It was on the subject of Team Ministry (Pastoral de Conjunto) and was approved by Paul VI. This was clearly a founding text and not a mere pastoral suggestion. As such, it must be read as defining the

manner of being a communitarian church in the reality of Latin America at the historical moment following Vatican II.

6. The assembly at Puebla in 1979, following the line of Medellin, always sees the basic ecclesial communities in the contexts of parish and diocese. The basic ecclesial communities are the vantage point for seeing reality, the place where a theological foundation can be laid and pastoral strategies decided. This is how Puebla wrote its documents, using the see, judge, act dynamic. Significantly, the document of Puebla does not have a separate chapter on basic ecclesial community but it is integrated with contributions on parish and diocese. The basic ecclesial communities are not regarded as yet another movement; they are of the essence, they are church. Not part of something else, but complete in themselves.
7. The logic of the position taken by the bishops at Puebla regarding the basic ecclesial communities is that they get mentioned in all the principal documents. Being the basic building blocks of the new church model, they obviously have a bearing on catechesis, liturgy, justice, responsibilities of the laity, religious formation, seminaries and so on.
8. The militant socio-political commitment of a people's party in Nicaragua, Haiti and parts of El Salvador was strong and, indeed, a source of conflict. Sooner or later, a concern for social issues surfaced in all the basic ecclesial communities. Commitment to the poor was in fact present in the communities from the beginning; a commitment that sought not just assistance or promotion, but liberation.
9. Inter-church meetings first took place in Brazil; other countries only followed suit very slowly. Mexico was the first to imitate the Brazilian example then Argentina, but now the practice has spread to all parts. At present a national team, with a bishop representing the episcopal conference, accompanies the life of basic ecclesial communities in countries such as Argentina, Honduras, Chile and Bolivia. Brazil has opted for inter-church meetings, bringing together a larger gathering of participants in basic ecclesial communities, to coordinate the life and work of the groups.
10. An important aspect of the basic ecclesial communities is that they are part of church and pastoral structures. This fact is a source of tension. On the one hand the communities cannot be taken over by the parish, and on the

other they cannot be relegated to being a mere socio-political or spiritual movement.

No basic ecclesial community excludes clergy. On the contrary they want them to be present, not just as members or persons who accompany them, but more so because of their ministry. This is about presiding over the community of love, especially in the celebration of the eucharist. The majority of basic ecclesial communities were, after all, started by a priest or bishop.

11. Following the conference at Santo Domingo (1989), pressure was exercised to have the basic ecclesial communities classified as merely a type of movement. This favoured the position that they formed part of a general network of communities and movements, which, of course, created ambiguity. It seems that at Santo Domingo there was the intention to use generalised terms to facilitate the approval of the documents.
12. More recent papal documents approve the basic ecclesial communities and no longer warn them about good behaviour within the church – which they never did with movements, although some would have certainly deserved it! They even praise the basic communities. Nevertheless they do not favour the line that they be a fundamental church cell in which the baptised live their experience of community and mission. At the moment we can say that basic ecclesial communities are considered 'normal' provided they are spoken of as part of the parish network of communities and movements. This could well be providential insofar as it permits them to operate freely in church circles that were previously carefully guarded. Perhaps in this context the basic ecclesial communities will be enabled to show what they truly are. This is my hope, and I feel encouraged by the wise words of Gamaliel; 'Let them alone ... if this plan is of God, you will not be able to overthrow them' (Acts 5:34-39).
13. More and more the basic ecclesial communities are to be found in the world of the poor, and less in the overall church.
14. It is necessary to assert the ecclesial identity of the basic ecclesial communities through a comprehensive juridical statement that would recognize their theological make-up. This would afford them space irrespective of the likes or dislikes of members of the hierarchy or those

around them. They cannot just depend on the 'conversions' of members of the hierarchy, as was the case with Romero, Sandreli, Mendes Arceo and Bartolome Carrasco. Such a statute could rescue them from being considered as mere optional extras in the church, like movements or associations. And it need not limit their scope as basic ecclesial communities to be a base for experiment that is lithe and diverse.

15. I notice a lack of constant self-criticism on the part of the assessors and members of basic ecclesial communities. This is particularly so with regards to what is linked to their historical identity. I fear that in some circumstances we run the risk of becoming a hired vehicle that allows varied groups and tendencies which have something in common with the communities to come on board. This they do to take advantage of the strength of the communities, in order to communicate some message. The groups have a social clout that they themselves do not possess. It can also happen that we have preconceived, church-related ideas against groups, persons, movements, certain members of the hierarchy and so forth. Let us be open to any criticism that comes our way.

Seven points that emerge regarding basic ecclesial communities:

1. The basic ecclesial communities are not a parallel church, but they are an alternative model of church.
2. They are not a point of arrival, but of departure, because the destination is the kingdom of God not the church.
3. They are church, yet do not exhaust all the possibilities of church.
4. They are a process, not just a happening. Renewal comes from below, reform from above.
5. They are not simply an appendix in the church, but radical heart surgery that calls for a revision of roles, pastoral plans and ways of operating.
6. They are priorities and not simply activities.
7. They are not only for the poor, but with, from and like the poor, as was Jesus himself.

Fr José Marins was born in Brazil in 1931 and ordained as a Roman Catholic priest in 1956. He did his theological studies in the Gregorian University, Rome, and has been a member of the theological reflection team of CELAM (Latin American Bishops' Conference) since 1970. Fr Marins served as a theological expert at the Medellin Conference of 1968 and as a facilitator at the 1979 Puebla Conference. From 1973 to 1979 he was a consultant to the Pontifical Secretariat for Christian Unity. Author of many articles and books, he is the co-ordinator of an itinerant pastoral team serving the Churches of Latin America and the Caribbean for almost forty years. As co-ordinator of the team, he has promoted basic ecclesial communities, or small Christian communities, in different parts of the world, including Belgium, Spain, Italy, England, Australia, Asia and the United States.¹⁶

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16. V CONFERENCIA GENERAL, DEL EPISCOPADO LATINOAMERICANO Y DE EL CARIBE, APARECIDA, DOCUMENT FINAL, Brazil, *Latin American Bishops' Conference*), 2007.

AFRICA

James O'Halloran SDB

At the African Synod held in Rome, 1994, the bishops decided that Family Church articulated through small Christian communities was the model for Africa. And when you think of the myriad problems the continent has to cope with, you realise why this is the only pastoral strategy that makes sense in the situation. As the 1994 Synod progressed, it became clear to the participants that small Christian communities were not just one more pastoral phenomenon among others, but were at the heart of all they wished to accomplish. This is still the case – only more so. Not every place in Africa has the communities, but they are flourishing in many parts. Priests need to be helped to understand the vision and practicalities of these groups and animated to promote this obvious motion of the Holy Spirit. Africa may have many problems, yet, unlike some other parts of the world, it still values family and community. In this very important respect, it is a light to the world. This communal spirit tends to weaken once you get beyond the ethnic group and this is where I think Christianity can make an important contribution with the message that the spirit of community must extend beyond all our tribes – even to our enemies. The Preparatory Document (Instrumentum Laboris, no 19) for the current African Synod of Bishops in Rome, October 2009, states that in Africa: 'Small Christian communities have witnessed tremendous growth.' This augurs well for the continent and at the gathering issues of justice were, for example, notably to the fore.

During the 1971 Synod of Bishops in Rome, the Africans present noted that small Christian communities already existed in Africa. And quite independently of what had happened in Latin America. One cannot say for certain where the modern groups began. They sprang up spontaneously throughout the world at roughly the same historical period by spontaneous combustion of the Holy Spirit.¹⁷

When I first started to work with African communities in 1980, I noted two things that were often lacking. The first was that the members were not clear on a vision that accompanied the communities, and the second that there was no great urgency regarding justice. There was the mistaken notion that where you had a small number of people, there you had a small Christian community. Even among a reduced group you can find those who dominate, and this is definitely not community. Or some divided a parish up into zones as if the concept was about

territory rather than people. Needless to say, the vision has been clarified during the intervening years.

In 1980 most African countries had been independent for a relatively short period and for the first time in recent history had their own governments. People were happy with this new found freedom and not overly critical. However, with the passing years they have realised that not only colonisers oppress, but also your own politicians, when corrupt. Meanwhile the church has spoken out and acted in the cause of justice. Nelson Mandela in fact thanked the churches for the role they played in overcoming apartheid; South Africa had of course been politicized for decades on this issue. The Kenyan and Malawian bishops too have since been courageous in opposing oppression in their countries, and the valiant Archbishop Pius Ncube of Bulawayo has condemned abuses of power in Zimbabwe.¹⁸ We could give many more instances. Nor are prophetic documents wanting. The following are examples: *Seeking Gospel Justice in Africa*,¹⁹ *Centenary of Evangelisation in Kenya*,²⁰ *The African Synod*.²¹

The small Christian communities have also stood up on justice issues. According to animators in the field, the groups in Zambia played 'a considerable role' in that country's peaceful transition from one-party state to multi-party democracy. In Kenya too, during the 1993 elections, some ordinary community members surprised politicians by speaking out on what they felt was for the good of the country. In the past those politicians had been accustomed to dealing with the people through intermediaries such as pastors. One member of parliament even asked pointedly if the father was not present. The people answered no, but that they themselves would discuss the relevant issues.

Significant moments

The following proved encouraging landmarks for the promotion of small Christian communities in Africa, making it clear that they were a priority on the continent:

- Fifth AMECEA (Association of Member Episcopal Conferences of Eastern Africa) Plenary Conference, Nairobi, 1973.
- Sixth AMECEA Plenary Conference at Nairobi, 1976.
- Seventh AMECEA Plenary Conference at Zomba, Malawi, 1979.
- The Apostolic Visit to Kenya by Pope John Paul II, 1980.

- The SECAM (Symposium of Episcopal Conferences in Africa and Madagascar) Assemblies Yaounde, Cameroon, 1981, and Kinshasa, Zaire, 1984.
- First Plenary session of IMBISA (Inter-Regional Meeting of Bishops of Southern Africa), Chishawasha, Zimbabwe, 1984.
- The pastoral letter of the Kenyan Catholic bishops entitled *Centenary of the Evangelisation in Kenya*, 1989.
- Eleventh Assembly of the AMECEA bishops, Lusaka, Zambia, 1992 ('Small Christian communities are no longer merely an option,' the meeting declared; an expression of conviction rather than a pulling of rank by the prelates).
- The African Synod of Bishops, Rome, 1994. Here the notion of family church emerged and, consequently, the communities received wide support. Bishop Jodo Siloto of Mozambique, for example, 'saw these communities as an expression of African communitarianism, and the only true way of inculturation for the African church'. In fact, he said, any pastoral strategy that omitted small Christian communities would be creating a church without a future.²² And Monsignor Patient Kanyanachumbi of Zaire regarded the communities as 'schools' where we can learn what it means to be church, not just in theory, but in practice.²³
- The visit of Pope John Paul II to Cameroon, Kenya and South Africa in September 1995 to launch the document *Ecclesia in Africa (The Church in Africa)* which resulted from the Synod of the previous year. In no 63 of this Post-Synodal Exhortation the Holy Father reiterated the resolve of the gathering to implement family church. He then goes on to say: 'Right from the beginning, the Synod fathers recognized that the church as family cannot reach her full potential as church unless she is divided into communities small enough to foster close human relationships. The assembly described the characteristics of such communities as follows: primarily they should be places engaged in evangelizing themselves, so that subsequently they can bring the good news to others; they should moreover be communities which pray and listen to God's word, encourage the members themselves to take on responsibility, learn to live an ecclesial life, and reflect on different human problems in the light of the gospel. Above all, these communities are to be committed to living Christ's love for everybody, a love which transcends the limits of the natural solidarity of clans, tribes or other interest groups.'²⁴

I have heard a number of African bishops express sentiments similar to those of Bishop Jodo Siloto above. We can understand what they are saying if we consider the realities of their situation: immense difficulties of transportation and communication, areas of open hostility, volatile political scenes, famine, refugees, the precarious position of missionaries and even of local priests and religious life. What can be done in the face of all this but strive to implement small communities that are autonomous, yet linked through the communion of communities? The words of Tertullian are relevant here: 'Where there are three, a church exists, although they be laity' (*Exhortation to Chastity*, 7.3). And he was not being patronising. After all, through baptism we all become part of a priestly people and even ministerial priests would not make much sense outside of this context. To whom would they minister? For convenience, we speak of 'laity' and 'clergy'. I have to say I'm not comfortable with this terminology. I prefer 'priestly people'; some may not be ordained, others designated for specific ministries, but all share in the priesthood of Jesus.

Pastoral centres

By training animators, pastoral centres have done much to promote the groups throughout Africa. Kenema in Sierra Leone, Gaba in Kenya and Lumko in Southern Africa are instances of this. Lumko's outreach programme *Call to Serve* would be a good example of this endeavour. But nowadays many dioceses have their own pastoral centres which also do admirable work in the field. For example, Ave Maria Pastoral Centre, Tzaneen, South Africa does sterling educational programmes.

Also noteworthy is that the CUEA Institute in Nairobi now offers a Postgraduate Diploma in Forming Small Christian Communities. This is encouraging. Such courses need to be at the heart of third-level curricula in church-related institutes.

At a conservative estimate there are reckoned to be 10,000 small Christian communities in East Africa.²⁵ It is true that some of them would be prayer groups at the moment rather than communities, yet they are moving in the direction of becoming family church. Before the troubles there were an estimated 300 cells in Sierra Leone, and in South Africa 70% of the parishes are working towards their establishment either directly or having been

inspired by the RENEW programme. On a visit to Zimbabwe a few years ago I was told in one diocese that they had 600 groupings. Unfortunately there are no exact statistics for the continent; hence the sporadic nature of the foregoing. However, one can safely say that there are thousands and thousands of small communities and that their number continues to grow.*

Integration in the mainstream

An interesting feature of the African small Christian communities is that they are well integrated into the mainstream church. It is true that the original inspiration came from the bishops rather than the grass-roots, and some would consider this a weakness. However, we all belong to the family church and, such being the case, does it really matter where the inspiration comes from? The question is whether the people make it their own. My experience leads me to answer yes to this question. This is good, because though reform may come from 'above', renewal can only come from the grass-roots. Indeed I feel that it was a pity our missionaries did not go to Africa with a communitarian model of church in the first instance, because traditionally there was a great sense of family and community there even before we arrived. Indeed their strong sense of family and community is the special gift of the African groups to the rest of the world. That communal instinct is under intense pressure nowadays from both within and without the continent; from without there comes an ethos of individualism and economic exploitation, from within the ills mentioned above together with the dire menace of AIDS. Nevertheless the family and the community are still holding fast. As already mentioned, this sense of solidarity often breaks down beyond the level of ethnic group, and here is where Christianity can make a significant contribution. Love extends even to enemies.

Generally speaking the communities throughout the world have remained within the mainstream churches. Some are situated at the heart of these churches, as in Africa, others in the margins. Many feel that the life is to be found in the margins and it is there we must look for renewal. There is the fear that, if the groups are mainstream, they can be absorbed into the institution and manipulated. I doubt it. I have seen many places where the communities are now thriving, yet initially they

**Fr Joseph M. Healey, in a recent doctorate gives the following statistics:
Nairobi 700 SCCs, The AMECEA surrounding region – 110,000 SCCs.*

were warily received by the clergy. The decisive factor was the enthusiasm of the laity. We are entering upon the age of the laity and it is they who will largely shape the church of the future. As already noted, priests are in short supply. 'After all,' I once heard an African bishop say, 'many of our people are lucky if they see a priest once a year'. Furthermore not only are the small communities a manifestation of a fresh communitarian model of church, they can also be powerful instruments for creating it. Once the members take the Bible in their hands, reflect on the word of God and take responsibility to act upon it, things can never be the same again.

So who is to say whether salvation is in the margins or the mainstream? I don't think we can confine the Holy Spirit to the one or the other. Very likely renewal will come in a variety of ways.

Problems

Finally, the African groups are not without their problems. We have seen something of this already. These are the main issues that preoccupy them:

- The difficulty of involving men.
- How to integrate youth.
- How women are to play their full part.
- Problems in finding appropriate leaders.
- Finding practical ways to animate the communities.
- Wrangles over money.
- What to do about non-sacramental Christians.
- Deciding a suitable agenda for meetings.
- A whole plethora of issues surrounding culture (e.g. tribal divisions, superstition, and so forth).
- More and more the overwhelming problem not only for small Christian communities, but for everyone, is the fact of war and violence, leading to dislocation and death.
- The AIDS pandemic that menaces Africa's very existence; it is the leprosy of modern times that afflicts, not only Africa, but the whole world.

We already noted that the small Christian communities are providing a counter-cultural alternative that can lead to a regeneration of Africa. I found them adamant that despite efforts being made to deal with the issue of AIDS, the only adequate answer lay in marriage fidelity and self-discipline among young people.

More than a strategy

Problems notwithstanding, small Christian communities are at the top of the Agenda in Africa. In the African Synod document *Report at the Beginning*, no 12, Cardinal Thiandoum refers to the small Christian communities as 'a well-known African experience'. In *What Happened at the African Synod*, Cecil McGarry notes, however, that there were many parts of the continent where they had not taken root. And where they did exist, they were often seen only as an important pastoral strategy. He goes on to say:

After the Synod they must be understood to be much more – not just a strategy but a way of becoming church that is communion, the family of God in Africa. This is reflected in the growing centrality of the small Christian communities in the minds of the fathers and in the documents of the synod. As was seen they only featured in passing in the Outline; by the end of the synod they were understood to be essential if the synod is to take root in the local churches and thus be effective and produce fruit.²⁶

So at the African Synod of 1994 we saw the bishops of a whole continent opt for the communitarian vision of church proposed by Vatican II and, as noted above, the growth of small Christian communities since has been phenomenal. Hopefully we will soon see the episcopal conferences of all continents follow the example of Africa.

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17. Dr Ian M. Fraser, Address at the World Consultation on Small Christian Communities, Cochabamba, Bolivia, 1999.

18. *The Tablet*, 17 June, 2000, p 835.

19. *Seeking Gospel Justice in Africa*, Eldoret, Kenya: Gaba Publications, 1981.

20. AFER, *Centenary of the Evangelisation in Kenya*, Eldoret, Kenya: Gaba Publications, vol 32, no 4, August 1990, pp 186-191.

21. *The African Synod*, Kenya: The Daughters of St Paul, 1994.

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23. Synod Bulletin of the Holy See Press Office, No 22.

24. John Paul II, Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation, *Ecclesia in Africa (Church in Africa)*, Nairobi: Daughters of St Paul, par 89, p 69.

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ASIA

Bishop Thomas Dabre

On a visit to India in 2007 James O'Halloran was impressed at the growing conviction and enthusiasm with which the church was promoting small Christian communities. Virtually all the bishops are behind the endeavour. Another development that I found exciting was the emergence of small human communities, composed of members from all religions and none, who come together and in small but significant ways (providing a village toilet, or an underground water tank to preserve water for the dry season) build a better world together. The Indians have their own small human communities. Are not these promoting a more humane world, or, if you like, the kingdom of God? The beneficial implications for ecumenism are obvious. India has seven great religions: Hindu, Buddhist, Sikh, Jain, Parsee, Islam and Christian. In this context, inter-religious dialogue is crucial and is, thankfully, a growing phenomenon. Indeed the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences (FABC) shares these Indian enthusiasms. The Philippines of course have long fostered small Christian communities. The country is predominantly Christian, committed to justice and is developing an interesting theology of struggle and – not surprisingly – of the cross.

I attended the International Consultation on Small Christian Communities in Bolivia, 1999. January 2000 found me at the Seventh Plenary Assembly of the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences (FABC), held in Bangkok, and at the General Assembly of the Asian Integral Pastoral Approach (AsIPA) at the same venue in October 2000. From the deliberations of these assemblies it is clear that since the 1970s systematic efforts have been made in different parts of the Asian continent to set up small Christian communities (variously called basic Christian communities, basic ecclesial communities, neighbourhood communities).

Already in 1990, the Asian bishops had declared:

The church in Asia will have to be a communion of communities, where laity, religious and clergy recognise and accept each other as sisters and brothers. They are called together by the word of God which, regarded as a quasi-sacramental presence of the risen Lord, leads them to form small Christian communities (e.g. neighbourhood groups, Basic Ecclesial Communities and 'Covenant' Communities). 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'. (FABC – Bandung Conference, 1990).

In his post-synodal apostolic exhortation *Ecclesia in Asia*, Pope John Paul II says:

Drawing on their pastoral experience, the Synod Fathers underlined the value of basic ecclesial communities as an effective way of promoting communion and participation in parishes and dioceses, and as a genuine force for evangelization. These small groups help the faithful to live as believing, praying and loving communities like the early Christians (Acts 2:44-47; 4:32-35). They aim to help their members to live the gospel in a spirit of fraternal love and service, and are therefore a solid starting point for building a new society, the expression of a civilization of love. With the Synod, I encourage the church in Asia, where possible, to consider these basic communities as a positive feature of the church's evangelizing activity (N.25).

From the Holy Father's words it is quite clear that the small Christian communities are:

- an effective means for living the Christian life,
- a way of promoting communion and participation in the parishes and dioceses, and
- a force for evangelisation.

The FABC has been promoting the renewal of the church in Asia for over thirty years. Indeed the Final Statement of the Seventh FABC Plenary Assembly, Samphran, Thailand, 3 January 2000, summarises their intentions well:

In the Asian church there is 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 (small Christian communities) expresses the deep desire to be such a community of faith, love and service and to be truly a communion of communities open to building up Basic Human Communities.

Noteworthy here is the expectation that the influence of the communities is expected to extend beyond the purely religious sphere. The bishops continue their statement:

An effective means for our mission of love and service, will continue to be the Basic Ecclesial Communities, small gospel-based communities and ecclesial movements. The vision of a new way of being church, promoted by the FABC, is proving to be a great help in the growth and development

of the Basic Ecclesial Communities and deserves our attention and support. Ecclesial movements, duly discerned by the local church with its hierarchy can also offer specific and creative contributions to the being and ministry of the church.

The FABC has been promoting the small Christian community through AsIPA (Asian Integral Pastoral Approach) which seeks to further a participatory church on the continent. The terms of the process we explain as follows:

- *Asian:* This involves implementing the Asian bishops' vision and helping Christians of the continent to face Asian life in the light of the gospel. The universal church realises itself through local churches. These are characterised by their own circumstances and cultures. In order to provide the fullness of life that Jesus Christ imparts, the local situations and customs must be taken seriously and responded to appropriately. The small Christian communities in Asia must tune into the concrete realities of that continent.
- *Integral:* This means that a balance be maintained between the spiritual and the social, the individual and the community, between hierarchical leadership and the co-responsibility of the laity. In the groups all the sections of the church, namely, bishops, clergy, religious and laity fully participate. This ensures the involvement of all, which is expected in the common mission of the church. Because of lay involvement in the working of small communities, the social dimension of the mission is better taken care of, as the teaching of the church consistently demands.
- *Pastoral:* The laity receive training for their pastoral mission in church and world. The bishops along with the clergy are responsible for the pastoral life. They must exercise their authority with the collaboration of the faithful who are also required to be actively engaged in the mission of the church. The laity too are endowed with the charisms of the Holy Spirit and should, therefore, be given appropriate formation so as to develop the skills and gifts, which they use in furthering the kingdom of God.
- *Approach:* AsIPA texts are centered on Christ and community. The method inspires people to develop and experience the new way of being church in which all sections work for the mission in a participatory and co-responsible manner. Life in small communities is rooted in sacred scripture. The people discover the meaning of God's word in their lives, and the priests and lay animators inspire the communities to live up to their calling and potential. This approach is not selfish or dictatorial, but communitarian and participatory.

AsIPA Survey

As a result of systematic and sustained efforts small Christian communities have been formed in different parts of Asia. The AsIPA Desk of the FABC has conducted a survey of the situation and the following were the responses given from various nations:

- 'People have started to use the Bible ... The small Christian communities have common tasks in the neighbourhood, for example, repairing houses, cleaning roads, constructing buildings ...' *(Sri Lanka)*
- They listen to the word of God more carefully. On account of cultural homogeneity the working of the small Christian communities is smooth in Myanmar. In general our people have a close relationship with one another in accordance with their culture and tradition, and this makes it easier to introduce the groups. Neighbours already living in harmony with one another are a great help when gathering for gospel sharing and helping those who are in need. They feel united because socially, economically and politically they are in the same situation.' *(Myanmar)*
- 'The word of God has become dear and meaningful to them; they have started to pray spontaneously.' *(India)*
- 'Participation of the people in liturgy and in other church matters has increased. Folk take more responsibility as members of the parish.' *(Bangladesh)*
- 'Through a short evaluation during a workshop and a longer one afterwards, we have been able to share our experience, make constructive improvements in both preparation and general presentation, and spot potential leaders and activities in each parish. We have been able to learn from, and feel that we need, each other, both for support and in carrying out this program. A sense of comradeship has grown among us, so that our lay members are open and critical with our clerical participants in a sense of common mission. All have found working as a team to be an enriching and challenging experience.' *(Indonesia)*
- There is a concern for each other as members of the same community, especially in times of sorrow. Some small Christian communities are involved in inter-religious and inter-racial movements. Their members are more approachable and willing to share and open their houses.' *(Malaysia)*
- 'There is unity, cooperation and concern for others.' *(Philippines)*

The Philippines

Small Christian communities in the Philippines are of course helped by the fact that most people are Christian. Among others, they readily take up socio-political and

economic issues. Indeed they have many success stories to tell about their social struggle (FABC Papers, No 921, p 2). Not least of these would be the part they played in bringing down the corrupt Marcos regime (1986). In recent history their problems have been like those of Latin America: oppression, cultural alienation, sexual exploitation (the work of Fr Shay Cullen to combat this is well known) environmental abuse and a desperate need for land reform. They are elaborating an appropriate theology for their situation, not a theology of liberation, but a theology of struggle, accompanied by a Good Friday spirituality of the cross. One of the significant factors in the proliferation of the communities throughout the land has been the presence everywhere of valiant religious sisters some of whom did not hesitate to lie in the path of oncoming tanks in the overthrow of Marcos. Mindanao, Infanta, Quezon and Nueva Segovia would be places strongly associated with the communities, and some prominent names in their development would be Bishop Labayan of Quezon, Bishop Escaler of Ipel, Bishop Francisco Claver SJ former bishop of Malaybalay, and Archbishop Quevedo of Nueva Segovia.

Korea

During the AsIPA Programme, Bangkok, October 2000, the South Korean participants spoke of the pain of separation felt by the people on both sides of the 38th Parallel. They also related the joyful stories about the reconciliation and reunification of the fortunate few. In such a situation they are promoting concern, interaction and a spirit of harmony between the two Koreas, North and South, through small Christian communities.

The retired Archbishop of Seoul, Stephan Cardinal Kim, has said: 'A great number of newly baptised members of the church will leave again unless they find a spiritual home in small communities.' Acceptance and fellowship are characteristic features of the communities. These afford new converts the support and sense of belonging they need in their changed situation

India

In my own diocese of Vasai, I have set up a special office for the promotion of small Christian communities, and I visited large numbers of them. These have brought the church closer to the people, resulting in greater harmony among the faithful. The liturgy has become more active, and all participate. It is such a joy to see our young people engaged in organising the celebrations. Catechesis too evokes a better response in small communities. And the same holds true of dealing with

local needs, such as cleanliness in neighbourhoods, protection of the environment and of civic facilities and so forth.

The town of Vasai was once a peaceful, scenic locality. On account of growing industrialization and domestic migration the population grew tenfold in a short span. Due to lack of a proper infrastructure, the ecology has been badly damaged and people are forced to live in unhygienic conditions. To protest against the growing ecological degradation and demand suitable civic amenities, a community movement was launched. The organisers went to villages and small communities where they conscientised the people at the grass-roots on the need to organise and struggle for the values at stake. A systematic plan was made in order to prepare the people. There was an amazing response. From a town of 700,000 people, over 100,000 assembled for a protest rally. For years now the agitation has continued, with some success.

In the meantime I found that people of other faiths were also mobilized and actively engaged in the community programme. The fellowship which I noticed there was a moving experience of inter-religious harmony.

There are about eight thousand tribal folk in the diocese, who eke out a meager existence and are neglected and marginalized. I conducted a training session in which we interacted and celebrated with them. Overcoming their shyness and feelings of insecurity they warmly participated in the session with a certain degree of self-confidence. Some of these tribal people contributed out of their poverty to diocesan development projects; I wept as I received their humble, yet high-minded, offerings.

Vasai of course is not alone in encouraging small Christian communities. Many dioceses have introduced them. Foremost among them would be those of Bombay, Kottar, Tuticorin, Trivandrum, Alleppey, Mangalore, Pune, Patna, Guntur and Hyderabad. Among many others, Bishop Bosco Penha of Bombay and Fr Edwin of Kottar have contributed much to the birth of the groups in our country.

As though to copper-fasten all the statements they have made regarding the communities, the bishops of India had this to say in their latest pronouncement:

Since the small Christian communities ensure a participatory, active, vibrant and evangelizing church, they should become a pastoral priority for the entire church of India, as mentioned time

and again, especially by the recent National Assembly of Yesu Kirst Jayanti, Bangalore, 2000. While recognizing the important place that ecclesial movements and associations have in the church, they are called to a fuller understanding of their collaborative role in relation to small Christian communities ... In the Indian multi-cultural, multi-religious contexts, small Christian communities, while preserving their ecclesial identity, should network with all people to promote and nurture small human/neighbourhood communities that usher in a society based on love, justice, peace and harmony. (XIII Plenary Assembly of the Conference of Catholic Bishops of India, 2001).

China

The story of the communities in China, as related by Raymond Fung,²⁷ is amazing. We might have thought that everything Christian was destroyed by the persecution of Mao. Not so. When he died and the situation eased somewhat, house churches, animated by lay people, surfaced in that great country – house churches whose faith was all the deeper for the untold hardships they had endured for long bitter years.

The situation of the Catholic Church on mainland China is somewhat fraught at the moment. There is the official church recognized by the regime, and an underground church that is at odds with it. Though both of these have suffered persecution, the underground one feels that the others have sold the pass. Pope Benedict XVI is urging unity between the two. Most of the bishops in the official church are in fact recognized by Rome. But a real problem is that there is a lay government official who oversees the bishops and the official church community. This is not theologically acceptable. The hope is that these problems will eventually be resolved, as the Beijing regime opens up more. But everyone acknowledges that it is going to take time.

And Hong Kong? The British lease of Hong Kong expired in 1997 and it was repossessed by China. Not knowing what was going to happen when that occurred, the Catholic diocese of Hong Kong, from 1989, made an option for small Christian communities as the best strategy to survive under what might possibly be a hostile communist regime. There was a push to initiate small Christian communities from that time. But mainland China did not overwhelm Hong Kong. It was too useful to the government economically as it stood, so they have operated 'a one China two systems' policy since 1987. The result was that the campaign to establish small Christian communities lost impetus. From reading the literature of the time, despite

much good will, one notes a certain lack of clarity regarding the vision and practicalities of small communities. Nevertheless some groups have survived since that time. And on a visit to Hong Kong – November/December 2008 – Fr James O'Halloran sensed a renewed enthusiasm to establish the groups. It also seemed to him that the original reason to foster them still pertains.

Other nations

Besides the countries already mentioned, the communities are to be found in East Timor, Japan, Laos and Pakistan. So the groups are widespread on the continent of Asia.

Further key meetings

In the course of this contribution on Asia, we have mentioned recent international gatherings. Here we add some earlier ones. Conscious that the church was essentially 'communion-*koinonia*, a people made one with the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit,'²⁸ Asian bishops encouraged small Christian communities in a number of assemblies:

- The Asian Colloquium on Ministries in the Church, Hong Kong, 1977.
- International Mission Congress, Manila, 1979.
- The Second Bishops' Institute for Missionary Apostolate of the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences, Ponmudi, Trivandrum, 1980 (limited to the countries of South East Asia: Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and India).
- The Bangalore Seminar on Basic Christian Communities, 1981.
- The Third Plenary Assembly of the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences, Samphran, Thailand, 1982.

In general the cause of the small community has been furthered by pastoral centres. In this context it is worth mentioning the East Asian Pastoral Centre in Manila which has done much to propagate the idea.

It is clear, then, from the Asian experience that small Christian communities lead to a church where there is participation, a church that makes Jesus known, and a church which is vibrant. As John Paul II states, they help create a society based on love, justice, peace and harmony (*Ecclesia in Asia*, 25).

Networking

In Asia the Christians are a mere blip on the radar screen. Hardly 3.5 per cent of the 3.2 billion population. Many are the faiths and cultures in the vast continent, which is also beset with enormous social, economic, political and cultural problems. Given this situation, for an effective Christian life, the small Christian communities must

network with all people and organisations that strive for social reconstruction and renewal. This regardless of creed. As we know from the troubles in many parts of Asia – India, Sri Lanka, Pakistan, the Holy Land, Indonesia and the Islamic nations of the Middle East – fanaticism, fundamentalism and tribalism are growing. It would be disastrous for Christians to live and work in isolation from others. To overcome these problems collaboration is vital.

Small human communities

In a globalized world, Asian countries too are becoming increasingly multi-religious and multi-cultural. Numerically, as we have said, Christians are insignificant. In such an overwhelmingly non-Christian context the faithful are called to be the light of the world and salt of the earth. This is why in Asia the small Christian communities must be seen to be small human communities who strive and hope to project themselves as worthy human communities in different parts of the continent. While being faithful to Christian revelation and the mission of the church, these people interrelate and interact with those of non-Christian faiths and disparate cultures round about them. With these they form small human communities. In these communities they live in solidarity with all people, sharing their joys and sorrows, concerns and aspirations. Together they work for justice and peace. They also engage in inter-religious dialogue with a view to promoting respect for different faiths and cultures while, at the same time, witnessing to their own creed. Though Christians participate in them, the small human communities are a distinct experience from small Christian communities. In a climate of growing religious violence and tribalism, such human communities do much to foster the religious tolerance and harmony so badly needed in the situation.

Inculturation

Ever since Vatican Council II, the church has been insisting on the need for inculturation. This would mean making the gospel flesh and blood in the areas in which we find ourselves. John Paul II has clearly stated that, though Jesus was born on Asian soil, he is perceived as Western in Asia. The spreading of the good news has had its limitations and failings, because we lacked respect for native Asian cultures and did not sufficiently inculturate Christianity. To make matters worse, globalization has undermined and endangered local ways of life. The small Christian communities promote an ongoing dialogue with folk of other cultures, especially with the poor and marginalised. Such a dialogue is sure to facilitate the inculturation of the Christian faith in Asia and manifest other aspects of the one

universal church, making her mission more meaningful as suggested by the Holy Father in his post-synodal exhortation.

The normal way

On account of their relevance and effectiveness, the small Christian communities are regarded more and more as the normal way of being church today. The large parish set-up will surely continue, but it has to be complemented by the communities if it is to succeed in its mission. Through such groups pastors and others engaged in ministry are in direct contact with persons and localities that would otherwise be in danger of neglect in the traditional organisation. In contemporary society, which seems to grow ever more individualistic and materialistic, many suffer from isolation, stress and loneliness, leading often to spiritual emptiness and psychological disorders. This happens not only where there is poverty, but also in the midst of affluence. Obviously the small Christian communities can offer the solace, support and spiritual nourishment that this situation calls for.

Formation in the faith

To remain firmly grounded in the faith in a highly secularised, indifferent and relativistic society, proper formation in one's religion is necessary. Effective catechesis and the opportunity to experience the Christian way of life can be adequately provided by the communities.

Scientific and technological progress have, unfortunately, led to much immorality. There is violation of human rights, degradation of human dignity and a culture of death in the form of abortion, euthanasia, oppression and terrorism. The church's social and ethical teachings are vitally important in society at present. The relevant knowledge can best be provided and social consciences formed through small human communities.

Church personnel, therefore, should work through the small Christian communities as a normal way of performing their ministry. And the faithful should also be ready to welcome the small communities together with the parish set-up.

Working together

The various organisations, associations and the movements in the parishes will obviously have to continue, as these are making a precious contribution to the growth and vitality of the church. But they should not work in isolation from the

small Christian communities and small human communities. Nor should they ignore them. It is becoming clear that all these must work in harmony and co-ordinate their efforts to build the kingdom of God.

Leadership

The small Christian communities require a new style of leadership. They are cells of the church which shift the perspective from the traditional parish to the lives of people at the grass-roots in their concrete circumstances. The leadership of pastors and all their collaborators has to synchronise with the needs of the small communities. There must be active involvement with the lives and issues of the people. Leaders cannot maintain their distance from those they serve. They are animators who respect and trust persons as responsible partners in the mission of the church; they are ever mindful of the baptismal dignity and Christian vocation of the faithful. Domination is not their way, rather do they enable folk to live up to their Christian calling and potential. The leader is, then, a facilitator and not the one who knows everything and, consequently, dictates and commands, conscious in a self-centered manner of his juridical authority.

In virtue of baptism and confirmation, every Christian is a member of the mystical body of Christ. As members of this body, all are endowed with fundamental equality, though their functions are different. Nevertheless everyone is called to build the one body of Christ, and each has an active role in promoting the kingdom. The small Christian communities are an effective means in achieving all of this.

For a sound pastoral ministry a narrowly spiritual approach or mere good intentions are not enough. The world is fast changing, so training and planning for ministry are crucial.

Since Vatican II, parish councils have been set up worldwide. The trend in various parts of Asia is to elect animators and pastoral agents from the small communities to parish councils. These folk are able to present a valid picture of the situation in the parish, which helps in the planning process and, especially, in deciding upon priorities. Implementation at the grass-roots is also more likely in such a scenario.

Conclusion

There is a new dynamism in the Asian church because of small Christian communities. Pastors are more people-oriented, and the laity are becoming increasingly aware of their Christian calling. The results are that charisms are being released, problems addressed and a spirit of joy and fellowship prevails in the

church. The model of communion of communities is also taking shape, a communion that cherishes a vision of a better life for all people regardless of face or creed, a communion in which all are missionaries.

Dr Thomas Dabre was formerly Bishop of Vasai (a diocese carved out of the Bombay Archdiocese) and Secretary General of the Conference of Catholic Bishops of India. In 2009 he was appointed Bishop of Poona. He is a member of the conference's Doctrinal Commission and chairperson of its Committee for Inculturation (Western Region). Bishop Thomas was formerly professor at the Papal Atheneum, Pune, and is a Marathai scholar. While at Vasai, he zealously promoted small Christian communities. The diocese has a committee of thirty-five animators (laity, religious and priests), representing most of the parishes, which plans and reviews the work of small communities. A permanent office for the promotion of the groups with a full-time director and secretary has been organised at the diocesan centre. A bulletin on the groups is published regularly and has run into ten volumes, while a book on the functioning of small Christian communities in Vasai has also been produced. As bishop, Dabre undertook visits to towns and rural and tribal areas to encourage the groups. There is a growing recognition that being church means being part of a Eucharistic community. In 2008 Bishop Dabre was appointed to the Pontifical Council for Inter Religious Dialogue by Pope Benedict XVI and, as already mentioned, he is now Bishop of Poona.

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27. Raymond Fung, *Household of God on China's Soil*, New York: Orbis Books, 1983.

28. Joseph Prasad Pinto OFM Cap, *Inculturation through Basic Communities*, Bangalore: Asian Trading Corporation 1985, p 176.

OCEANIA

Paul O'Bryan

Regarding Oceania, the authors of 'Small Christian Communities Today: Capturing the New Moment', Healey and Hinton, observe: 'The new moment is not static; the journey continues. The SCCs are here to stay for the long haul.' When I visited Australia in 1992, I could have written those very words regarding the situation back then. I suppose that this denotes steady and persevering progress. I have to say that I was saddened to see the magazine Communities Australia go. In the course of his contribution below, Paul O'Bryan refers to the incalculable good it did on behalf of the small communities. However, it may well indicate that a wider constituency are now sharing the burdens. That too is definitely progress. A considerable plus for the Australian groups is that they have always been ecumenically minded.

The region of Oceania encompasses the territorial areas of Australia, Melanesia, Micronesia and Polynesia and countries such as New Zealand, Papua New Guinea, Tonga, Samoa, Fiji, the Solomon Islands and Guam, to mention a few of the island nations.

Among the people who call Oceania home are the Aboriginal people of Australia, who are the direct descendants of the oldest surviving civilization on earth. It is also home to the descendants of indigenous people who took to the seas and settled islands that were some of the last regions of the world to be populated. Today, Oceania is home to a diverse multicultural mix of peoples: indigenous peoples, descendants of the European colonisation of the Oceania region and people who have emigrated to Oceania from all other parts of the world. Geographically, the region is as diverse as its peoples: small tropical islands and coral atolls surrounded by thousands of square miles of ocean; mountain ranges so rugged and dense with jungle that only narrow walking trails connect isolated tribal villages; modern industrial cities and coastal settlements; snow-covered mountain ranges; large areas of rural and farming land; vast inland deserts and salt lakes; tropical rain forests; wetlands and native bush lands.

A new way of being church

It is in these diverse settings – across the whole of Oceania – that people gather together to experience a new way of being church, as members of small Christian communities (SCCs). For some, the opportunity to join a small Christian community is new, while for others, the small community experience has been one they have

lived for over three decades. In some places, it is the mainstream churches that are facilitating the establishment of SCCs, while in others, people are beginning to seek a more meaningful and relevant experience of church by gathering in small communities and house churches.

The greatest challenge that I have experienced in writing this profile has been deciding what to include and what not to include. There is not just one Oceania story. There are many different stories and all I can hope to do is open a small window into a selection of those stories, knowing full well that the majority are being left untold. They are stories that come from many countries and different settings. Stories that have been shaped in the experiences and carried in the memories of people of different races, cultures and denominations. They are the stories of individual communities, parishes and, in some cases, entire dioceses. Each one is unique. Each one is a treasure in itself, and to my mind, each little story is an essential part of the telling of the whole.

In 1999 a lengthy 'BEC Poem' was written in the Archdiocese of Adelaide (Australia). A small part of that poem captures, for me, the spirit of the small Christian community phenomenon in Oceania:

That calls us out to the others,
Especially those who are struggling,
That community is the richest experience of life
And that we are missing out on this great treasure
Because we don't know our people
Except we do.
They are our partners
Our children
Our sisters
Our brothers
Our friends
Our neighbours
Cathy Whewell and Susan Holoubek

Different models and methods

Small Christian communities have had an enormous impact in the recent history of the Catholic Church in some parts of Oceania for thirty years, whereas in other parts, the SCC vision has yet to be promoted or discovered. Small Christian

communities have emerged in different locations under a variety of titles such as: small church communities (SCCs), basic ecclesial communities (BECs), neighbourhood communities, house churches, small faith communities, small island communities and so on, and their growth has been influenced by many different sources of information, different models and methods and a variety of people who have travelled through Australia and Oceania. In particular, the Marin's International Team, Rev Arthur Baranowski, the South African Lumko Institute, the Movement for a Better World, Rev Jim O'Halloran SDB, Bernard Lee SM and Michael Cowan, Dr Ian Frasser and Jeanne Hinton. In some parts of Oceania, SCCs are an essential part of mainstream churches, while in others, SCCs are viewed with wariness. Various forms of SCC have emerged in different Christian denominations and also in the margins of the mainstream churches. (This term was used and explained by Terry Veling in his 1996 book, *Living in the Margins*.) In addition, a broad network of house churches also exists across some parts of Oceania and is networked through the Oikos Network. However, without a detailed study or survey of SCCs across the Oceania region, it is impossible to accurately describe the scope of SCC development throughout the area, or the exact nature of many existing groups.

The data that I am able to include in this section are available as a result of a broad consultation that I conducted prior to attending an International SCC Consultation in Bolivia in November 1999. The following paragraphs provide concrete information about some of the Oceania stories that can be told.

Tonga, Cook Islands, Samoa, New Zealand, Papua New Guinea

From Tonga, Bishop Soane Foliaki writes (28.7.99) 'In our diocese small Christian communities have been in existence for at least 20-25 years. They came into being soon after Vatican II in the efforts to build up a sense of community, to enable and empower each baptised person to live out their baptismal gifts and to give people a sense of ownership of the church. Each of the small communities has an evangelisation team who visit homes and have Bible sharing and prayer with some of the families who come together in one of the homes. They also have teams for education in Christian living and they provide adult education and catechesis for the children. In most parishes, the small Christian communities are flourishing. Much depends on the parish priest and the community leaders.'

From the diocese of Rarotonga in the Cook Islands, Bishop Stuart O'Connell SM writes (3.8.99): 'The diocese is made up of fifteen island parishes. The majority of

our parishes would come under the description of a small church community. We have six priests for these fifteen parishes, three of whom are over 70 years old. Travel to the isolated islands is infrequent, erratic and expensive. Some parishes see a priest only once every one or two years. Each island or atoll is organised by a caechist and his wife and these people organise the Christian community – the small island community.'

From Samoa-Apia, Cardinal Pio Taofinu'u writes (12.7.99): 'Ecclesial communities in a parish are divided into basic Christian communities. Each village, under the leadership of married catechists, becomes a basic Christian community.'

In New Zealand there are various indications that people have endeavoured to build SCCs based on the Lumko and Movement for Better World models for many years; however, without detailed information, I am unable to offer specific examples of these. New Zealand is a country of about 3.5 million people with six Catholic dioceses. Patrick Dunn, Bishop of Auckland (11.3.99), describes a network of over twenty 'Samoan' communities comprising 50 to 100 families and, in Auckland itself, St Benedict's Parish, under Fr Paul Rankin OP and Sr Mary Anna Biard OP, has successfully developed a network of small groups as a basis for their SCCs.

Don Brebner of Tauranga, in the diocese of Hamilton, writes (6.4.99): 'Our Pastoral Plan calls for a major effort in all parishes – in fact, in all dioceses – to launch a small groups program in 1999/2000 to be named Renew 2000 and to use this, hopefully, as a major launching pad for SCCs thereafter.' Perhaps we can look to a broader and more systematic approach to the establishment of SCCs across the dioceses of New Zealand sometime in the near future.

In an informative and practical book entitled *Community: Give It A Go!* Pauline O'Regan and Teresa O'Connor tell of what was done by a small group of community workers in a city suburb; this is a story set within the wider context of a network of small Christian communities within the parish of North East Christchurch, New Zealand. And casting their glance even further afield, the writers note correctly the connection between what their group is doing, and the work of such secular bodies as the Picot Committees, Maori Access and area health boards. These initiatives they would undoubtedly support.

Gayle and Geoff Stevens have long been involved with the Kodesh Community in Auckland and, more recently, with the Orama Fellowship on Great Barrier Island, which has set about an important rebuilding process.

In Papua New Guinea the development of a SCC vision, at both parish and diocesan levels, has been an essential part of the growth of many dioceses over the last three decades. In November 1978 representatives of many of the eighteen dioceses of Papua New Guinea gathered in Goroka for a broad-ranging Consultation on Basic Christian Communities. In an eight-page concluding document, the building of small Christian communities was spelt out as the pastoral priority for the church of Melanesia at that time. Part Three of this document describes the essential qualities of the small Christian community:

A Small Church Community has all the characteristics which belong to any human community. It is small enough to allow social interaction on a face-to-face basis. Its members realise that they depend on each other in a spirit of trust and sharing. It is a people-centered community in which everyone can be responsible. It analyses its needs, plans for activity, and finds its own ministers to meet these needs. Conscious of its Christian mission, it is a community which is opened out in service to all other communities. Its common prayer life is nourished on the word of God and expressed in the Eucharistic liturgy.

As a result of the SCC Consultation, a broad range of SCC initiatives has been developed and tested throughout Papua New Guinea and the Solomon Islands. The major influences for these initiatives seem to have come from the missionary priests and religious, the Philippines, the Lumko Institute in South Africa and the Movement for a Better World. The Movement for a Better World, through its Community Animation Service (CAS), offers the Project for Renewal of the Parish (PRP) and the Project for Renewal of the Diocese (PRD). Both of these projects have been widely adopted by dioceses and parishes of Papua New Guinea – particularly in the dioceses of Daru/Kiunga, Mount Hagen, Wewak, Gizo, Madang and Kundiwa. The diocese of Alotau has worked for many years using the Lumko approach and in Port Moresby, the establishment of small Christian communities and the training of their leaders is supported through the Port Moresby Pastoral Centre.

Stephen Reichert OFM Cap, Bishop of Mendi, writes: 'There was a time when we tried to introduce basic Christian communities in a more traditional sense, small groups of fifteen or twenty individuals within the various outstations themselves. These groups were to pray together, hold discussions about the needs of the community and church and so forth. This approach never really caught on except in the sense of being small prayer groups. Here, real concerns of life are dealt with at the village community level by all the members of the community and to break that natural unit up is to try to impose something artificial. So now we think of the whole Christian community of an outstation as being a basic Christian community unit, even if that community numbers in the hundreds. Many of these communities are in the 50 to 150 range including children.

Each community has various lay ministers providing leadership and pastoral care for the Christian community. They may also exert a certain amount of influence in the wider community. There is the catechist who acts as a teacher and pastor of the group. There are prayer leaders, ministers to the sick, church committees, youth leaders and worship leaders. All of these lay ministers make up the pastoral team, which is charged with the care of the whole Christian community. In this sense, the pastoral team is a basic Christian community or small Christian community, within the larger basic Christian community, or small Christian community of the outstation.

Fr Salvator Dougherty OFM Conv, at St Martin's Pastoral Centre in Aitape, did trojan work to promote small Christian communities. Even as he was dying of a brain tumour, he did not stop working. Together with his religious and lay collaborators this courageous priest formed hundreds of animators of small Christian communities down the years. Sal, who has since died, received training himself at the Kenema Pastoral Centre in Sierra Leone, while trying to convince all his friends there regarding the invincibility of the All Blacks on the rugby field! Fr Eduardo and Sr Quentin, both missionaries, carried on the good work for some years. It is now in capable local hands. The area was deeply affected by a tidal-wave disaster a few years ago.

Australia

In Australia there have been some very significant efforts to promote and establish small Christian communities, but these are generally more recent than in other parts of Oceania. The trend towards a small Christian community or 'small church' experience is not huge, but amongst a range of different trends that have been

experienced by the traditional churches, the move is significant. The desire for small church has inspired the emergence of many individual communities, both residential and non-residential, across all Christian denominations. It has inspired people to gather in communities in the margins of the mainstream churches. It has inspired the formation of small Christian community networks and it has inspired the development organisations and projects that have been specifically created to foster and support the establishment of small Christian communities under a diverse range of titles such as, small church communities, basic ecclesial communities, small groups, cell churches and so on. Some of these include:

- The Movement for a Better World: The MBW has spread throughout Australia over the last 20 years or so. Currently, there are 24 parishes ranging over eight dioceses that are involved in the Project for the Renewal of the Parish, which envisions the establishment of basic Christian communities as an end goal to the endeavour.
- *Communities Australia* was a Christian community networking newsletter founded by Rev Jim Cranswick in 1987 following a two-day workshop in SCCs that he conducted in Melbourne. In October 1989 the first National Gathering on Small Christian Communities was held in Sydney and was sponsored by *Communities Australia* and the Paulian Association. Terry Veling was instrumental in the organisation of this gathering. This was the first assembly of its kind anywhere in Australia. It brought together about 250 people from all over the country in an ecumenical setting and was led by Doctor Michael Cowan – co-author of *Dangerous Memories – House Churches and our American Story*. From that point on, a small editorial team led by Jim Cranswick of Melbourne promoted the *Communities Australia* vision until it became a national and international movement by:
 - telling stories about Australian communities and people's efforts to establish them,
 - helping to connect people across a diverse range of community-based movements and facilitating conversations;
 - sharing information about SCC initiatives and developments – both in Australia and around the world;
 - providing good theological articles and a forum for dialogue on community issues;
 - giving publicity to SCC gatherings and community-based workshops, consultations and conferences;
 - sponsoring overseas visits from key SCC people.

The significance of *Communities Australia* – the magazine and the movement bearing the same name – for the development of SCCs in Australia can never be underestimated. For a while different movements and organisations began to develop and promote SCCs in a systematic way, *Communities Australia* always held the ground where anyone could pitch a tent and tell their story, regardless of their denomination or connection to mainstream church.

In 1997, the Paulian Association of Sydney took over the publication of the *Communities Australia* newsletter and in 1998 sponsored a Second National Gathering in Sydney, which was based around a storytelling theme. The book, *A Story Book of Australian Small Christian Communities*, was published in conjunction with this gathering.

- Oikos is an instrument for networking that seeks to provide a means of support, communication and information sharing for a diverse range of small communities and house churches which exist across Australia. This ministry is focused through the *Oikos newsletter*, which had its origins in Melbourne in 1991, under the inspiration of Bessie Pereira. Bessie continues to edit the newsletter with the help of a support team and continues to promote house churches by visiting them and supporting their establishment and ongoing growth. Since 1991, there have been three National Gatherings of House Churches in Australia.
- The Australian Small Groups Network (ASGN) grew out of the extraordinary vision and networking efforts of John Mallison, who is the author of the well-known book, *The Small Group Leader*. The network is supported by a national committee and state committees, which co-ordinate its efforts to actively promote and support a small group approach to church: community groups, ministerial groups, recovery groups, cell church groups, youth groups and so on. The ASGN supports small group initiatives across all Christian denominations. State committees co-ordinate a networking facility among affiliated members, publish regular newsletters and conduct conferences for small group development and leadership training.
- The Melbourne SCC Steering Committee currently functions to promote, foster and support the establishment of small church communities throughout the Catholic Archdiocese of Melbourne and across Australia in general. The Steering Committee comprises priests, religious and lay people, who are committed to the development of SCCs and is representative of all four regions of the Archdiocese of Melbourne. It supports the development of a wide range of SCC models and methods and this approach evolved from the work that was

developed by Sr Joan Power PBVM and Paul O'Bryan at the Catholic Pastoral Formation Centre (CPFC) of the Archdiocese of Melbourne. During the 1990s CPFC sponsored a project for the establishment of small church communities in the Catholic parishes of Melbourne and had a significant impact on the development of SCCs across Australia. Nearly forty of the 235 parishes of Melbourne either have SCCs, or are moving towards their establishment. The work that began through CPFC is now being carried forward by the Melbourne SCC Steering Committee and Southern Cross Communities, a resource and training centre for SCC development, established by Paul O'Bryan in 1997.

- The Basic Ecclesial Community Office of the Archbishop of Adelaide: (We recall here that basic ecclesial community, or BEC, is an alternative form of SCC.) In 1998, following the Adelaide Diocesan Pastoral Renewal program, Archbishop Leonard Faulkner issued a statement to the priests of the diocese in which he presented his vision of leadership for the people of the local church. In that statement, he named small Christian communities as a central part of the strategy of leadership formation in the diocese. This development emerged from a strong tradition of Cardijn-inspired movements like YCW and YCS and the Adelaide-based Christian Life Movement, which supported over 100 groups across a wide range of parishes. The office for 'Community for the World' was opened round 1990 to develop and implement a diocesan pastoral plan based on the establishment of basic ecclesial communities. The implementation of this vision proceeded through various stages of development under the direction of Fr Bob Wilkinson and Sr Ruth Egar RSM. Critical to these developments was the challenge to find a way to engage all Catholics in the parish.

What has emerged is a unique model of BEC development, based on the regrouping of the parish into smaller geographical zones consisting of 100 to 150 Catholic households. This zone constitutes the BEC. The growth dynamic of the BEC resides in the hands of a neighbourhood pastoral team and home visitors who animate people toward social interaction, faith development, a sense of neighbourliness and the growth of communal involvement. The Marins International Team has been instrumental in helping to develop this vision and the support of Archbishop Faulkner is reflected in his active involvement in the project and his pastoral teaching on BECs, for example, his pastoral letter of October 1994, titled *Basic Ecclesial Communities*.

The BEC Office of the Archdiocese of Adelaide is co-ordinated by Cathy Whewell and it continues to be an important influence for the development of BECs around Australia and into the Oceania region. Fr Bob Wilkinson continues as

chaplain to the BECs. Of the seventy-five parishes in the Archdiocese of Adelaide, thirty-four are developing the BEC vision.

- Various other Catholic dioceses, apart from those already mentioned, have pastoral teams that are actively encouraging the formation of SCCs. This is the case in Brisbane, Bunbury, Perth, Rockhampton and Townsville. The Canberra team is in fact ecumenical. Bishop Benjamin of Townsville in Queensland has set forth a similar vision to that of Archbishop Faulkner for the people of his own diocese. It is called The Townsville Experiment.
- The establishment of Cells of Evangelisation, based on the work of Don Pigi Perini of San Eustorgio of Milan, have begun to emerge in some parishes – particularly of the Diocese of Sale in Victoria. A number of other parishes in other dioceses are beginning to explore this methodology of forming cell churches.
- The Paulian Association is based in Sydney and has been promoting, developing and networking SCCs in Sydney and around Australia for over ten years. Rather than pushing programmes for transforming parishes through SCCs, the Paulian Association has sought to work through the grass-roots, listening and talking to people who are interested, slowly building awareness of the nature and value of SCCs. As previously stated, the Paulian Association has always had a close connection to *Communities Australia* and in 1997 took on sponsorship of *Communities Australia*.
Currently, there are a handful of 'Paulian Groups' which have been going for many years and some SCCs, which have grown out of Paulian initiatives. The Association has created a number of resources to facilitate the starting and running of SCCs and supports the growth of SCCs by sponsoring workshops and seminars for their development.
- Southern Cross Communities is an Australian Resource Centre for SCCs and opened in 1997. Paul O'Bryan has written a series of SCC resources and offers these resources together with consultancy and training to support the establishment and ongoing growth and development of SCCs across Australia. [sccobryn@ozemail.au].

A profound difference

These examples describe some of the SCC/BEC initiatives that have emerged in Australia over the last two decades, but really only scratch the surface as far as telling the full story of the historical development of small Christian communities in Australia. There are many other individuals and communities that could have been mentioned in this profile and there are many other movements and organisations

that work tirelessly for the promotion and establishment of small Christian communities. Each community has its own story to tell and all stories are important. There is no doubt in my mind that one community makes a profound difference in a local neighbourhood or parish. One SCC/BEC parish makes a profound difference in a diocese. And, one diocese, committed to the SCC/BEC vision, serves the whole region as a leaven for the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Paul O'Bryan currently lives in Melbourne. He is married to Debbie and has three children: Damian, Emily and Joshua. Formerly Paul served in the Melbourne Archdiocese for nine years. Beginning in 1990 he co-ordinated a project for the establishment of small church communities in the parishes of Melbourne and was SCC co-ordinator in his own area of Belgravia. In 1995, he was awarded a Masters Degree in Theology for a thesis exploring the theological, ecclesial and pastoral implications of the establishment of SCCs in parishes. In 1997, Paul established Southern Cross Communities as a Resource Centre for SCCs and today utilizes Southern Cross Communities as a resource, training and consultancy base for the support of SCCs around Australia. In November 1999, he led the team representing Oceania at the International SCC Consultation in Bolivia. Finally, until recently, he served on the Diocesan Pastoral Council of the Newcastle-Matiland Diocese in New South Wales.

EUROPE

Ian M. Fraser: A Personal Report

The most significant recent development is that the European Collective has phased itself out in an orderly fashion. I believe it has done its work. Unlike elsewhere, the church in Europe is almost two thousand years old and doesn't find change as easy as younger churches. It can be wary of 'new things' (rerum novarum), feeling that they will undermine its authority and is slower to accept them. The small Christian communities on the other hand were equally wary of being swallowed by the institution. But I feel all this is changing. I met some young members of the communities in Eastern Europe who are appreciative of the fresh air they breathe in the groups, yet are anxious to maintain their links with the wider body. The development is good for the simple reason that cutting oneself off from the main body, despite the warts it may display, is not theologically viable. It is a time for coming together while respecting one another's rightful positions. We must not forget that early Christianity was grafted on to Judaism of the Diaspora; it provided a framework that the new phenomenon could latch on to and grow. Mainstream churches today can fulfill the same role for the small Christian communities. They can provide a non-suffocating framework that will allow the new plants to creep skywards and stretch their limbs. They can be the trellis that sustains the new foliage. And the benefits will be two-way: the verdure will be supported and the framework too will be firmed up and given an appealing aspect by the fresh growth. Again one of the positives, of the new groups in Europe is that, from the beginning, they have been quite ecumenically minded.

A gathering on the island of Iona, Scotland, In August 1999 could provide an introduction to the development of these small communities on the European continent.

First, why Iona? An unlikely place to assemble eighteen Central and Eastern Europeans with a slightly larger number of British and Irish representatives. Present in the assembly also from both East and West were members of the European Collective – of which more later – who were conversant with the situation of small Christian communities on mainland Western Europe. But, we repeat, why Iona? A tiny dot of an island on the edge of Europe, not at all accessible! Sure, it was of special historical and religious significance. There St Columba, a missionary from Ireland, had established his monastic community in 563 CE, whose influence eventually spread the length of Russia. But in that century the sea was like a

motorway. The centre of Scotland was difficult territory, with mountains and bogs to daunt any traveller. Iona was not that remote.

Modern Iona

That important heritage has been built on. In 1938 the Iona community was founded, with the island as its base. Its leader was Dr George F. MacLeod. I myself have been a member since 1941. For one thing the enterprise stressed from the start that the church needed to reshape its life as a community of communities. For another it put two things in place which anticipated the character of the later development of small Christian communities:

1. Members worked out a discipline of personal devotion and engagement in the world, to which they committed themselves.
2. They met in small family groups as well as plenaries, finding they could go deep into the faith and get deep with one another if two or three (actually eight or ten) were gathered, with Christ in their midst. From the earliest days they thought of themselves as a 'John the Baptist sign', the precursor of a significant advent, no more, no less.

Hungary

The Hungarians who took part in the Iona August 1999 gathering came not only from Hungary itself but from countries around Hungary. Before my wife Margaret died we had twice been in Hungary, trying unsuccessfully to make contacts. The communists were in occupation at the time, the early 1980s. We knew that there were small Christian groups in the underground – as an astronomer knows there is a planet on which he cannot get a telescope focused. The disturbance in the sky around, caused by pulls of gravity, is a sure sign. But we had to be very sensitive in our approaches, otherwise we might have unwittingly led the Secret Police to the small communities. A third visit in 1987, three months after Margaret's death, again seemed to be getting nowhere – when a secretary at a church headquarters intervened quietly. She said she knew the link-person for the communities and could see if he was free. He met me, and I was hooked into 6,000 small communities which had persisted as a church of the underground, about 5,000 of them were Roman Catholic and 1,000 Protestant.

After the fall of communism in 1989, I was able to be present at a conference in Budapest where, now established in five networks (one of which, Bokor, went back to 1948), the small Christian communities met. They did so to discern the political and social responsibilities which pertained to the faith which could not have been fulfilled under communism. The groups now number around 10,000. Jim

O'Halloran, from the Salesian House in Dublin (we have worked closely together for over two decades), is one of those who have kept open vital links through visits.

Czechs and Slovaks

In 1991, at a conference in Brno, I made contact with Czechs and Slovaks. They had endured severe persecution, but had met in small Christian communities as 'The Church of Silence'. The Vatican gave them a certain freedom to manage their life as far as that was possible under communism, once the contact with Rome was definitively severed. Jesus said of fruit-bearing Christians that the Father prunes them that they might bear more fruit. The Czech/Slovak church (at that time the countries were not divided) pruned back its life to essentials and survived all through that traumatic time. Jesus Christ remained at the centre of their fellowship. The scriptures sustained them. Prayer and eucharist kept them firm about gospel priorities. Bishop Fridolin, who had been jailed for six years, said, 'You must never invite persecution. But if God gives gifts at a time of persecution, you don't jettison them once the persecution is lifted.' So, when the communists' grip was removed, he and others once again invested in the parish churches; but, with others, he refused to jettison the small Christian communities, as traditionalists had wanted him to do. There were of course other communities apart from those represented by Bishop Fridolin, which also had to operate in secrecy. Representatives from both the Czech Republic and Slovakia took part in the Iona gathering. The Church of Silence spoke perceptively.

Poland

The European communities had wanted contact with small communities whom they heard were found throughout Poland in Warsaw, Lodz, Katowice, Ustron and a few other cities. Two Dutch representatives were appointed to accompany Margaret and me to visit Poland in 1986. One of the two Polish delegates on Iona provided testimony to the continuing development of the small Polish communities; her companion was one especially well informed on the relationship of Polish communities to the broader European context in the life of the churches.

Yugoslavia, the Ukraine, Transylvania, Lithuania

Yugoslavia, the Ukraine and Transylvania participated and contributed. Lithuanian representation was secured through the Craighead Institute. When this pioneering enterprise first made contact, they found that communist influence had dumbed down people, so that they followed routines without establishing relationships.

Teachers in the same school would not know one another's names, would be afraid to step out of line. It was the Craighead approach of working with them in small groups which gave them confidence to break out. Iona was a place to discover other communities on the European continent and set up relationships with them. It proved to be a freeing experience.

Ireland, England, Scotland

Fr Jim O'Halloran was present from Ireland, where constructive groups of all kinds, both religious and civil, have according to a recent survey been proliferating. A report is pending which bears this out, but O'Halloran has been reliably informed of the foregoing by Aileen Walsh,²⁹ a member of the survey team. Some of these are already small Christian communities, while many of the religious groups ('prayer', 'faith-sharing' and so on) are moving in that direction. These groupings at the grass-roots are, at the moment, low-key and mostly unconnected – maybe it is a case of relishing space in a country where the institutional church has been traditionally dominant. The survey team felt they were seeing the seeds of a new church.

Representatives from the small Welsh communities were unable to accept our invitation, yet some participants were knowledgeable about them. England had established a co-ordinating body 'New Way of Being Church' – this entity, Family Groups and several independent communities were drawn into the Iona consultation. Scotland was represented by the Iona Community itself, family groups, and some others.

Western Europe

While Christians in small communities in Eastern and Central Europe had particular problems to face under communist occupation, those in Western Europe went from strength to strength. In my judgement there was a significant expansion in 1968. The riots and near-revolutions of that year gave traditionalists in the Vatican opportunity to argue that Vatican Council II had loosened up the structures of authority dangerously. It was time to retrench. The response of those who found the work of the council liberating was expressed through a proliferation of small Christian communities, bent on church renewal. Since the very beginning, fresh forms of worship, prayer and a great variety of struggles for justice went hand in hand.

Over the second half of the last century, the development of West European small Christian communities has been impressive. Principal Grainger, then of St Andrew's

College, Selly Oak, Birmingham, England, found it so when he spent some days examining the interviews of 300 communities available in the Baker Library, Scottish Churches House, Dunblane. They derived from every continent. He had been principal of a Baptist College in Brazil and was in a position to compare the Latin American development with the West European situation. His personal conclusion was that the latter provided more pointers to what the Catholic church could become in the future. The West European experience was not too closely bound to hierarchy; it won more space for new venturing.

Italy drew on the insights of Vatican II. In 1984 a team of eleven representatives from British churches spent sixteen days visiting small Christian communities from Turin in the north to Naples in the south. They were particularly struck by the attempt made to forge an understanding of church which differentiated the church 'born from below' from 'the church of power'. The following words stuck in the mind: 'The people of God must be self-convened before the Living-Word-In-Christ, without human masters.'

It was the fear of a restoration of domination by 'human masters' that held up the *French* development in the early years. Members had suffered greatly from dominating structures in the institutional church. Because of this, attempts to provide regional co-ordination for small Christian communities, for example in Lyon, were resisted. The fear was that new centres of power might be produced and play a dominating role once more. Over time it became clear that light structures provided means for sharing insights and experiences without the return of church paternalism. Members eventually accepted regional meetings and then even moved forward to benefit from national gatherings.

Great integrity was shown in the search for truthful ways of living. *Dutch* groups asked themselves what was the essence of Christian discipleship. This in view of the fact that even the word of God and the Mass could be used by clerics as means of control. So where did the essence of Christian discipleship lie? In establishing justice on earth, they concluded. But before too long, they came back to where they had started. 'We don't know what justice is without the Bible. And we are not nourished for struggles without the sacrament,' they said. The courage to question traditions that seemed to founder and yet not lose sight of them, in case there was more to them than they had at first realised, led to a joyful discovery. This was the relation between the quest for justice and Bible and sacrament.

In *Austria* a somewhat similar discovery concerned who were to be companions-of-the-road. When it became clear that Christians needed to meet in small communities, those concerned invited people who seemed to be compatible. It did not work; maybe it was too cosy. Only when members were sought because they were on a search to live authentically – however diverse, even awkward they might be in their different outlooks – were creative small Christian communities established.

The groups in the Oporto area of *Portugal* were marked by a gift for sharing. Spare keys were cut so that no one who needed a bed should be short of one. If a member became unemployed the others reduced their own incomes to the point where these could make up the income lost. In Spain Fr Juan Nieto spoke of the great gift given to the small group who dared to assemble in the underground during Franco's dictatorship, namely, his own imprisonment. It meant that the group had to develop its life as priestless church. In Louvain-la-Neuve, *Belgium* fourth-world small communities developed strongly among those who were at the very bottom of the social heap. *Swiss* communities came from well-off backgrounds, yet were equally imaginative.

European co-ordination

The first co-ordinating action on a European scale was taken by the Dutch who, in 1983, set up the first Congress of Small Christian Communities in Amsterdam and surrounding areas. At the end of the Congress the need for continuing contact on the European scene resulted in the formation of the 'European Collective', a body with representation from various parts of the continent. Margaret and I were asked to represent Britain on it. Its job was to assess European congresses or seminars and plan forward in the light of experience. Congresses were large gatherings that could exceed a thousand; seminars were more cohesive meetings of a couple of hundred. Besides representation from Scotland, England, Ireland and Wales, the following are also participants in the Collective: Austria, Belgium (French and Flemish speaking), Spain – Basque territory – France, Italy, Netherlands, Portugal, Switzerland (German and Romande-speaking). At first, following the watershed year of 1989, Hungarians and Czechs were a bit dubious about joining the Collective – their experience under communism had been so different from that of West Europeans. But now they are very much part of this co-ordinating body.

Vatican II and the World Council of Churches

I think it should be said that the coming into being of the World Council of Churches and the work of Vatican II had provided space in which the small Christian communities could take root and grow. The whole development is ecumenical in character. My own roots are in the Reformed tradition, yet I have been accepted by and worked with Roman Catholics all over the world. In November 1999 an International Consultation on Small Christian Communities was held in Cochabamba, Bolivia. It was sponsored by the Institute for International Studies, Notre Dame University, Indiana and The Maryknoll Missionary Institute, New York. Fr Jim O'Halloran was asked to bring a delegation from Europe. He found it natural to make a team to accompany him, of one Roman Catholic, one Anglican and one Reformed. The small Christian communities are instinctively ecumenical. They appreciate the tradition from which they have sprung. Yet they have a wider vision of church.

Interestingly, at the Cochabamba Consultation it emerged that in the *Instrumentum Laboris* (Working Document) for the European Synod of Bishops 1999, which overlapped somewhat with the Consultation, the communitarian model of church put forward by Vatican II was again proposed as the way forward (see nos 33, 34, 45, 46, 48, 73 for this and closely related issues).

Noteworthy too, from a European perspective, was a most encouraging statement made by Cardinal Cormac Murphy O'Connor of Westminster in his keynote address to the National Conference of Priests in Leeds, England, on 5 September 2001:

Then there are the communities of our parishes and in particular our need for small communities. It seems to me, and I do not think I exaggerate, that most Catholics in the future, apart from their Sunday Mass, will need to belong to some form of small community ... I often think that these small communities are the secret for the future of the church.³⁰

Spontaneous combustion

In 1980 I was able to visit communities in Mexico, Guatemala, El Salvador, Nicaragua, Panama and Venezuela. In two of these countries I was asked, 'We hear that there are thousands of small Christian communities also in Europe. How can there be in affluent Europe?' By the time the question was asked, I had got to know the development in the country concerned. Instead of answering in the abstract, I

gave stories of small Christian communities that resonated with their own. 'That is astonishing,' came the reply. 'They have a different context of life from ours. They don't have death squads trying to eliminate their young folk. They don't have Molotov cocktails thrown against their back doors or through their windows. But, allowing for the different situation, they are our kin. We are on the same search to live the Christian life, to establish justice. How can this be? We didn't spark them off, they didn't spark us off. The broad Atlantic lies between us!'

In no time we came to this conclusion. We put down the whole proliferation of small Christian communities to spontaneous combustion by the Holy Spirit.

Ian M. Fraser is an ordained minister of the Church of Scotland and a BD, MA, PhD of Edinburgh University. He became a member of the Iona Community in 1941 and in 1942 went into industry as a labourer/pastor. Later work included twelve years as a parish minister in Rosyth; the establishing of Scottish Churches House in Dunblane as a house of the churches together; working for the World Council of Churches on Laity and Studies and the Participation in Change programme (while here he collaborated with some of the work of Vatican II); and service as Dean and Head of the Department of Mission in Selly Oak Colleges, Birmingham. His pride and joy is his family – wife Margaret (died 1987), three children and nine grandchildren.

Addendum: Recently Dr Fraser noted that at the last meeting of the European Congress of Small Christian Communities, held in Edinburgh in 2003, the gathering discerned that such meetings had reached the point of closure, though they had served the pioneers of small Christian communities in Europe well. It was up to the rising generations in Europe and the world to discern if such gatherings had a future. Dr Fraser believes he found an answer at the Delhi Global Summit of House Churches 2009, where he encountered 'a movement of youthful vitality and immense power'. So moved was he that he exclaims: 'People, look East. The time is near ...'³¹

* * *

29. Interview, Milltown Park, Dublin, 5 October 2011.

30. *The Tablet*, London, 15 September, 2001, p 1316.

31. In a Christian letter to the author.

MARITIME MISSION

Roald Kvendal

*The most significant recent contribution to the relevance of small Christian communities for maritime mission has been Roald Kvendal's book *The Way of the Sea: The Changing Shape of Mission in the Seafaring World*. This volume covers the new issues of recent years such as the further developments of seafarers' rights, including the Geneva Accord of 2001 p 49. Modern-day piracy has of course also become a cause of great concern. Worth noting too was the IASMM's Sixth International Conference in the port of New Ross, South-East Ireland in the summer of 2012 [IASMM: International Association for the Study of Maritime Mission]. I was invited to the conference and shared thoughts on the importance of small Christian communities for people of the sea.³² Present at the sessions were Rev Dr Jonah Won Jong Choi of Korea, Rev Dr David Chul Han Jun and Rev Dr Paul G. Mooney of Ireland. These three men had recently done doctorates related related to maritime mission and were agreed regarding one point, they proposed: 'a new ship-based paradigm, prioritizing the role of seafarers themselves, ministering in solidarity with fellow seafarers as primary agents of contextual ministry among their peers'.³³ Dr Won Jon Choi specifically advocates Maritime Shalom Communities. 'These he defines as shipboard Christian communities incarnating a maritime application of the holistic biblical concept of shalom (peace).' Furthermore he proposed the training of co-ordinators for these communities, a strategy that he had successfully tested.³⁴*

A philosopher in ancient times was once asked: 'How many living people are there compared with those who are dead?' The venerable sage is said to have answered: 'First you will have to tell me where I am to place seafarers – among the living or the dead?' Traces of that thinking have continued through the centuries. Seafarers have all too often been seen as separate beings from the rest of the human race. But seafarers are people just like the rest of us, so they must have our deep concern. They have physical, emotional and spiritual needs like other human beings. The only difference is seafarers follow an incredibly hard, hazardous yet vital, vocation.

Who are seafarers?

Precisely who are seafarers in today's world? In Pope John Paul II's 1997 *Apostolic Letter on the Maritime Apostolate*, the subject identified as 'People of the Sea'. These consist of three categories:

1. Seafarers as such, or those actually on board merchant ships or fishing vessels. The inclusive term is used rather than 'seamen'.
2. Maritime personnel who, in addition to seafarers, also include seafarers in training or retirement, as well as port and oil rig workers.
3. People of the 'sea' who comprise not only seafarers and other maritime personnel but also their dependents ashore as well as all regular maritime mission workers.

The word 'sea' is in this case taken in the very broadest sense, including not only seas and oceans but also inland water, like lakes, rivers and canals. Of some 15 million seafarers worldwide, currently up to 1.5 million are merchant seafarers, some 13.5 million fishers. Of these, 5 million are industrial fishers, the rest traditional fishers serving in coastal or inland waters. With other seafarers's and port workers' dependants, the total number of 'People of the Sea' worldwide is close to 300 million.

Why should Christians bother about people of the sea? The answer is simple: Because the Christ whom Christians claim to follow did! He did so implicitly, through two major directives to his followers everywhere. In Christ's Great Commandment (Matthew 22:37-39) his call to love one's neighbor as oneself clearly applied to all fellow-humans, however unlovable (Matthew 25:31-46); Luke 10:25-37). There was not the slightest hint of any exception for seafarers. Neither was the universal scope of Christ's Great Commission (Matthew 28:18-20) ever at issue. His call to go make disciples of all people made no exception for people of the sea. In his global plan of salvation all were included (Mark 16:15; Acts 1:8).

Christ gave them a unique role

Nor could Christ have been more explicit in his choice to head his global mission enterprise. By the shores of the Sea of Galilee it was a small band of seafarers he called to be his first followers, and eventually go with his gospel to the waiting world. It seems noteworthy that Christ not only based his missionary methodology on the cell group model, but by making that model a maritime small community, he specifically singled out seafarers. Why? Two sociological factors seem relevant – seafarers' traditional marginality and inherent mobility.

Selecting precisely such a marginalised group was in perfect harmony with Christ's own stated policy. In Luke 4:16-21 we hear how he publicly proclaimed his primary concern for the poor and disadvantaged (Matthew 25:35). Christ's intentional choice of society's so-called 'losers' lies at the very core of his gospel of grace (1

Corinthians 1:26-31; Luke 1:46-55). This is reinforced by Matthew's emphasis on the ethnic origin of those first followers. They were not only seafarers. They were Galilean seafarers, handpicked from the region the religious elite despised as that low-grade 'Galilee of the Gentiles'. By such a shocking choice of messengers Christ reveals the heart of his mission: cross every boundary and accept the unacceptable – bar none! (1 Corinthians 1:28; Galatians 3:28).

Again, the basic mobility of seafarers may well have been another important consideration. In an age when modern media were unthinkable, the role of seafarers was indispensable to any form of international communication. Without such 'nautical nomads' there was no way the good news could be conveyed to where it was meant to go – literally to the ends of the earth! (Acts 1:8; Romans 10:15). Not only the marginality but also the mobility of seafarers would be crucial to any plan of salvation socially and geographically inclusive enough to be truly universal.

Highlights from History:

Biblical beginnings (Initiation: c.30-60)

The conclusion is clear. Seafarers did not later on become the beneficiaries of a segment of Christian mission known as 'maritime mission'. It was seafarers Christ called to launch all Christian mission, including maritime mission! The New Testament is replete with maritime references. Not only from Jesus' ministry, but also from that of his apostles, not least Peter, 'the Big Fisherman'. Among the apostles, the role of Paul 'the Great Missionary', was remarkable given the opportunities his many sea travels offered to share the gospel with seafarers. This is graphically illustrated in chapter 27 of the Acts of the Apostles where Paul's ministry on a storm-tossed grain-ship bound for Rome around the year 60 CE makes him the first on biblical record to fill the role of a ship's chaplain.

A puzzling pause (Improvisation: c.60-1779)

Why did nearly seventeen centuries roll by before the church of Christ began developing any specialized organizational structure to reach seafarers of the world with the gospel? Despite that puzzling pause, significant sporadic efforts, however improvised and inadequate, were nevertheless made by the Mediaeval Roman Catholic Church during this period. There were seagoing priests and monks and special Masses for those deceased or in peril at sea. Later, the Protestant Reformation resulted in a flurry of devotional literature for seafarers, as well as other measures. Still, it was not till the turn of the nineteenth century that

seafarers of the world would come into their own, in terms of an organised mission of the Christian church.

The Bethel Movement (Formation: 1779-1864)

When it finally happened, it did not begin by bureaucratic action of the institutional church but by seafarers themselves. Nurtured by the burgeoning Bible Society Movement that emerged in both Britain and America in the late 1700s, seafarers spontaneously formed a widening network of worshipping and witnessing cell groups at sea. As the Spirit again 'moved upon the waters' (Genesis 1:2), the 'Seafarers' Mission Movement' first took the shape of maritime small Christian communities, a typical case of a self-empowering, grass-roots 'mission from below'.

Let us emphasise the significance of this. What we are really saying is that the small Christian communities, which are beginning to prove so significant in the modern church, were already to be found among seafarers in the 1700s!

It was the British wartime navy that saw the first signs of this movement. Scriptures came from the non-denominational Naval and Military Bible Society, founded in London in 1779. This date is now seen as the start of organised maritime mission. It was seasoned 'veterans' of this 'Naval Awakening' who helped ignite a similar cell group movement in Britain's post-Napoleonic wars merchant fleet.

In 1817, while anchored in London's Thames River, some of these veterans hoisted their own emblem as a signal for lay-led worship on board. They called it the Bethel Flag (Hebrew for 'House of God'). The effect was electric. In just five years, committed captains and crews carried both the Bethel Flag and the Bethel Movement across the seven seas, leading eventually to maritime mission initiatives on every continent. As one committed sailor put it, simply yet forcefully, 'I cannot go to heaven alone!'

From sail to steam (Transition: 1864-1920)

The year 1864 marks the beginning of a distinct geographic expansion from a solely British-American enterprise. That year the Norwegian Seaman's Mission was founded in Bergen, Norway, and was soon succeeded by similar Lutheran-linked organisations in the other Nordic nations. The Germans and Dutch followed with Lutheran-Reformed and Dutch-Reformed organisations in 1886 and 1893, respectively.

Perhaps the most vivid evidence of the advent of a new era was in the means of marine transportation. By the mid-1860s the transition from sail to steam had begun in earnest. Meanwhile, this technological transition, combined with the mid-Victorian theological shift toward stronger social concern, generated a new model of maritime mission. Improvised worship facilities called 'Bethels' were replaced by purpose-built 'Seamen's Institutes', offering a wide range of welfare services.

Dealing with disunity (Co-operation: 1920-1974)

Another era in maritime history began in 1920. That year in Glasgow, Scotland, three Catholic laymen initiated what would become the worldwide Apostleship of the Sea (AOS), destined to see remarkable global growth during the decades that followed. With few exceptions, organised maritime mission in the nineteenth century had been virtually a Protestant enterprise. From now on, how could Catholics and non-Catholics avoid 'fracturing the face of Christ on the waterfront?'

First Protestants would need to get their own house in order. In Philadelphia in 1932 there finally emerged a North American Maritime Ministry Association (NAMMA). With the co-operative climate resulting from Vatican Council II, NAMMA in 1969 invited the AOS to join non-Catholic agencies to form an International Christian Maritime Association (ICMA). Since then, ICMA has made church history, linking maritime ministry in no less than one thousand seaports worldwide.

The institute-based welfare model of maritime mission that emerged during the transition from sail to steam managed to survive the ordeals of two world wars and continue up to the 1970s. Nevertheless, the 'Maritime Christian Fellowship Movement', with its seafarer-centred model of 'mission from below', remained virtually marginalised during the whole of this period – quite a change from the heyday of the Bethel Movement. Its basic concept was simply at odds with the prevailing 'top down' agency-centred institute model. The result was a patronizing view of seafarers as passive objects of mission, rather than active subjects of mission, thereby robbing Christian maritime mission of its most powerful potential partner – the Christian seafarer!

But as so often happens, it was darkest before dawn. A new day for the seagoing small Christian community phenomenon – and for maritime mission as a whole – arrived in the last quarter of the twentieth century. It resulted from the combined effect of the post-World War II global economy and the so-called 'Maritime

Industrial Revolution'. But that story belongs to the awesome challenge confronting current-day maritime mission.

The shape of today's challenge

In 1974 the exclusively Western-world monopoly in maritime mission ended with the founding of the first indigenous non-Western maritime mission agency: Korea Harbour Evangelism in Seoul. Moreover, in the mid-1970s it became clear that maritime mission must now deal with global change in the shipping industry which was more radical than ever before.

The dual challenge

Since World War II the tremendous technological break-throughs in the design and operation of ships have led shipping companies to cut soaring costs by hiring their crews from the low-cost labour markets of the world's developing countries. This has confronted modern-day maritime mission with two compelling theological issues:

1. Since seafarers typically have little or no union representation, they have all too often become the vulnerable victims of blatant human rights abuse.
2. Because so many of these seafarers now come from Asia, they are (with the exception of Filipinos) mostly from a non-Christian religious background, deprived of any truly authentic offer of the gospel.

A dual response

1. In 1982 an Anglican-affiliated Center for Seafarers' Rights was founded in New York to work for justice in the name of Christ in the maritime world, with Anglican and Catholic associates later in London and Barcelona respectively.
2. Beginning in the late 1970s, American Catholics, Baptists and Lutherans, also (from 1982) the indigenous Pusan-based Korea International Maritime Mission, launched programmes for Maritime Follow-up Ministry. In doing so, they have already seen the growth of many hundreds of Asian small Christian communities at sea, reminiscent of the original Bethel Movement – surely a great sign of hope!

How can small Christian communities at sea make a difference?

As virtual 'maritime-base communities', seagoing small Christian communities can now offer hope for self-empowerment wherever they encounter dehumanizing conditions at sea. Also, through their daily walk of faith and Christian community on

board ship, they offer a non-coercive gospel alternative to non-Christian fellow seafarers. Otherwise these might well be denied their most basic human right – the freedom to choose their own ultimate destiny. Instead, some might even return with a new-found faith to home communities in countries closed to conventional mission.

However, if today's Christian seafarers are to fulfill the mission potential pictured by Christ it will require a fundamental reorientation. While shore-based centres still need to play an important supportive role, recent research in the International Association for the Study of Maritime Mission affirms that the wave of the future belongs to ship-based, seafarer-centred maritime mission. 'Without commitment to seafaring disciples as the primary agents of mission in the seafaring world, maritime mission will remain only at the level of welfare services to seafarers.' (Paul G. Mooney)

Is a New Bethel Movement, articulated through small Christian communities, underway? Given the fact that most of the earth's surface is covered by the sea, without the people of the sea as active co-workers, how else can the earth one day be 'filled with the knowledge of the Lord, as the waters cover the sea' (Habakkuk 2:14)? In short, how can the church universal ever become the church triumphant, without the church maritime - and therefore its key component, the seafaring disciple?

Roald Kverndal comes from a Norwegian background and was educated in England. He holds a doctorate from the University of Oslo. Before entering ministry he worked as a merchant seafarer and marine lawyer. Since entering, he has served as seafarers' chaplain in seafarers' centres in many parts of the world. He is President and Co-founder of the International Association for the Study of Maritime (IASMM), former Executive Secretary of the North American Maritime Ministry Association (NAMMA), former Maritime Ministry Consultant for the Lutheran World Federation and the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA), Co-founder and Board Member of the Lutheran Association for Maritime Ministry, Associate Member of the National Catholic Association for Seafarers, and Consultant for the Tacoma Seafarers' Center, co-ordinating agency of the international, non-denominational Ministering Seafarers' Program. He has had a particular concern for justice in the seafaring world and in the younger indigenous churches of Asia and Africa. Roald lives in Seattle with his wife Ruth. They have four children and eight grandchildren. In 2008, he produced a comprehensive study of maritime mission entitled The Way

of the Sea. A seminal book, it provides three different approaches: an updated history of maritime mission, a theoretical and the strategic study and diverse perspectives from various experts.

Universal Declarations

James O'Halloran

Where small communities are concerned, there have of course been statements of a universal nature. We take note of the following:

- Vatican Council II 1962-65 launched the vision of a fresh communitarian model of church (*Dogmatic Constitution on the Church*, nos 4, 10, 11, 12, 26: *The Church in the Modern World*, 45).
- Interest of the World Council of Churches' Uppsala Assembly (1968) in creative church initiatives led eventually to a worldwide contact with small Christian communities. As a result, community experiences were recorded by Dr Ian M. Fraser and his late wife Margaret and are to be found in a Resource Centre at the Scottish Churches' House in Dunblane. A compendium of these experiences now exists in book form, entitled *Reinventing Church*. Enquiries regarding it could be made at Scottish Churches' House.
- The International Catechetical Congress held in Rome, 1971, cited the small community as a particularly suitable environment for passing on the faith and confirmed this in a follow-up document, *General Catechetical Directory*, no 93, 1971.
- *The Evangelisation of Peoples* of Paul VI, 1975 has an entire section (no 58) on the communities. Paul sees them as offering hope to the whole church provided they are faithful to its teaching, united to the local and universal churches and avoid thinking themselves superior to other groups and movements. He also urges the members to grow as missionaries in their awareness, fervour and zeal. And he makes the important point that the small Christian community is an authentic cell of the church – in other words it is of the essence.
- In his Address to the Brazilian Basic Ecclesial Communities, 1980, John Paul II repeats that the small communities are church and insists on the need for their lay animators to be in communion with their pastors, prepared in the faith and of exemplary life.³⁵

- John Paul's *Redemptoris Missio*, 51, describes small Christian communities as a 'sign of vitality within the church, and instrument for formation and evangelisation, and a solid starting point for a new society based on a "civilization of love".'
- Finally, in his Exhortation: Vocation and Mission of the Lay Faithful, no 28, 1988, John Paul again affirms small groups.
- The latest and most encouraging words have come from Pope Francis himself. In the first direct message from a Pope to the Small Christian Communities, he contacted the thirteenth meeting of 4,000 delegates of Brazilian communities at Juazeiro do Norte to say that theirs "was the most important role in the Church's evangelizing mission." He then went on to quote his *Evangelii Guadium*: "Base Communities bring to the Church a new enthusiasm for evangelization and a capacity for dialogue with the world that renew the Church," provided that they maintain links with the parish and diocese. To quote Bishop Classen, "the base communities have never had a more powerful ally". There were representatives from Argentina, El Salvador, Mexico, Paraguay and Peru also present. (The Tablet, 2014, pp 13-14).

And so ends our historical profile. In the course of it we noted some of the key meetings held and official statements made on the subject of small Christian communities. Such events are, I believe, a sign that something important is happening among the people of God. Real history takes place at the grass-roots. As mentioned earlier, reform comes from above, renewal from below.

Question

Do you think the history of small Christian communities is important? Why?

Suggested Bible passage: Acts 1:15-26.

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32. Roald Kverndal, *The Way of the Sea: The Changing Face of Mission in the Seafaring World*, Pasadena, California: William Carry Library, p 352.

33. Ibid., p 173.

34. Ibid., p 173.

35. *The Tablet*, London, 9 August 1980.

CONCLUSION

With the foregoing historical profile ends our treatment of the vision and practice of small Christian communities. It is a story of a torrent of love emanating from the Blessed Trinity and channeled to creation through Jesus, the Word made flesh; a torrent that seeps into the mind of the theologian and the arm of the missionary.

An anecdote that I tell has somehow endeared itself to many people, and, because of its relevance, I repeat it here:

In the early 1960s Pearl, a frail little lady in her seventies, was demonstrating outside the White House against racism. She was arrested and tried.

‘My goodness,’ said the judge, ‘you are such a frail little lady, I don’t know what to do with you, even though you have been breaking the law.’

You must do what your conscience tells you,’ retorted Pearl feistily, ‘just as I do what my conscience tells me.’

Well, the judge did what his conscience told him, and sent her for a stint in prison.

While in prison she had a heart attack and was being driven in an ambulance with flashing blue lights and wailing siren to the nearest hospital. She came to and asked what had happened. The attendants told her.

‘What hospital are you taking me to?’ she enquired.

They named the hospital.

‘Does it admit Americans of African origin?’

No, it was for whites only.

Despite her condition she stubbornly refused to go, and the ambulance driver, swearing profusely, had to turn his vehicle round and speed to a hospital at a much greater distance that accepted folk of all races. And having survived the prison and the heart attack, back she went – to demonstrate in front of the White House.

Twenty years later, I met Pearl at a meeting protesting the nuclear threat. To me she seemed a most experienced, wise and holy person, so I thought I would put an important question, perhaps the most important question, to her. ‘Pearl’, I asked, what is happiness?’

Without hesitation, out of her long experience and great wisdom, she replied, ‘Happiness is belonging.’

‘Doesn’t that say it all?’

Laughter and the love of Friends

As we have seen, the spirituality of the Small Christian Community might be graphically stated as *befriending one another in God, Three in One*. It's about intimacy – and tenderness. That love and relationships are of the essence has sometimes been expressed more vitally by secular rather than spiritual authors. Hilaire Belloc, for example, surely touches 'the burthen of the mystery' when he writes (in O'Halloran, 2010 p. 63):

From quiet homes and first beginning,
Out to the undiscovered ends,
There's nothing like the wear of winning,
But laughter and the love of friends.
(Dedicatory Ode).³⁶

Raymond Carver too, while dying young after a difficult life – a life in which he tasted love at the end – penned these poignant lines (Carver 1989:122):

And did you get what
You wanted from life even so?
I did.
And what did you want?
To call myself beloved, to feel myself
Beloved on the earth.
(Late Fragment)³⁷

Only if we have loved, have we lived. Laughter and the love of friends, to feel myself beloved, tasting the sweetness of togetherness – these are the seeming trivia of everyday life. Only they are not trivia. Their origins are to be found deep within the core of the Blessed Trinity. They are an expression of 'the burthen of the mystery'. And this expression of Wordsworth is a timely reminder that love embraces all creation (Wordsworth, 1948: 50).³⁸ It's all about love. If we might paraphrase what Keats says about 'Beauty' in 'Ode on a Grecian Urn' and apply the statement to 'Love', it would most certainly be true:

Love is truth, truth love, --- that is all
Ye know on earth
And all ye need to know.

At the end of all these endeavours, I would tend to summarise my vision in the light of the kingdom like this. I start with Small Christian Communities. If one is to reach out successfully, you must be sure of your identity, so within my own Church I would be fostering the Small Communities and other helpful groups. Beyond it, I would encourage small groups of all kinds, whether religious or civic, that are doing anything to build a better world, or the kingdom. And I would have them ALL support one another in any way they can while not neglecting their own work in so doing. Here Thomas Merton's statement that 'we are all one' becomes relevant, and that our differences, though serious enough and demanding attention, are not to be compared to this overall unity. All humans emerged from the same valley in Tanzania, Africa. This provides a way of building up creation, motivated by Small Community and Group together with the spirituality that inspires them. As for the depths of the spirituality and love that underlies this vision, I feel at a loss for words to describe it.

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36. Belloc, Hilaire, *Dedicating Ode : Verses*, 1910.

37. Carver, Raymond, *Late Fragment, Path to the Waterfall*, Atlantic Month Press, 1989.

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