

# **A COMMITMENT TO NEIGHBOURHOOD**

Base Ecclesial Communities in Global Perspective.

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## DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to

Fr José Marins

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# ABSTRACT

The thesis challenges a perceived disconnect between the faith community of Roman Catholics in the UK and the places and streets where they live. It argues that the neighbourhood should be the locus both for mission and community. It has a particular passion for the recent occurrence of city centre apartment living. The thesis firstly examines the global phenomenon of Base Ecclesial Communities in the Catholic tradition from the South. Starting in Latin America and exploring their unique contribution, it then reviews the experiences of Africa and Asia, before drawing conclusions from the different contexts. The thesis is motivated and inspired by the commitment and insights of the faith communities of the South and finds enthusiastic dialogue partners in the West, not from religious but from secular sources. Together they interrogate the Church at home about the opportunity presented by the world of atomised and anonymous urban residents, to model for them an alternative reality of a humanised city built around a communitarian vision.

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## CHAPTER ONE

### INTRODUCTION

The first recorded question asked of Jesus in the gospel of St John was the simple ‘Where do you live?’ to which it is said he replied ‘Come and see’ (Jn.1:38-39).<sup>1</sup> And the two disciples who asked the question went with him to a particular dwelling in a particular place somewhere in the neighbourhood of the River Jordan where they spent the rest of that day together it being about 4pm in the afternoon. We can assume that he was staying either in temporary accommodation hastily put up by the many pilgrims to the site or was lodging in someone else’s habitation for the duration of his stay in the area. It’s quite possible that the two disciples were offered hospitality for the night.<sup>2</sup> The question of where someone lives points to deeper issues of belonging and identity, it also speaks of the desire to locate someone, to have a place where an encounter can occur, where guests can be invited and welcomed, a space where conversation can be pursued over time, where the business of human relationships can be explored and the meaning of life can be investigated. One of those two disciples of John the Baptist that asked that question was Andrew<sup>3</sup> and the next day he brought his brother Peter to meet Jesus presumably to the same place. Simple beginnings gave rise to important consequences in the lives of those first disciples; and equally it might seem to some that focusing on the places where people live is a little simple and inconsequential. However my thesis will make the case for both

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<sup>1</sup> Carson D. A. (1991) *The Gospel according to John* Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press; Brodie T. L. (1993) *The Gospel according to John* Oxford: University Press. ‘This may be read simply as an inquiry about Jesus’ location ... it may also be seen as reflecting a quest for God’ 160; Brown R. (1966) *The Gospel according to John Vol 1* London: Geoffrey Chapman. ‘On the level of normal conversation *menein* can mean ‘to lodge’ ... but here the term also has theological overtones’ 75; Bultmann R. (1971) *The Gospel of John A Commentary* Oxford: Basil Blackwell, translates the Greek *menein* as ‘stay at an inn’ as in other NT usages, ‘And it is essential to know where Jesus lives for in the place where Jesus is at home the disciple will also receive his dwelling (14:2)’ 100; Haenchen E. (1984) *John 1 A Commentary on the Gospel of John ch1-6* Philadelphia: Fortress Press, discusses question of hotels and accommodation 158-159.

<sup>2</sup> *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary* (1989) London: Geoffrey Chapman.

<sup>3</sup> Jn 1:40-42

Church and society to place much greater significance on the local communities that people inhabit because there will be consequences if we don't.

Concretely in my case during the years of writing this thesis I have been living in the largest apartment complex within Liverpool's city centre, comprising 420 apartments distributed across 13 separate blocks. Along with other residents I had been involved in the organisation of a Residents Association in an attempt to bring improvements to the management of the estate. As a result of this work I was elected General Secretary of the Federation of Liverpool Waterfront Residents Associations and this role eventually led to the formation of Engage Liverpool which speaks on behalf of all leaseholders and residents in leasehold property across the city centre and waterfront and of which I am currently chair. It is estimated that about 32,000 people live in apartments in what is called the city centre, an area that stretches from the city centre to include waterfront apartments at the former Herculaneum Dock in the south to Waterloo Dock in the north.<sup>4</sup>

It is the reflection upon this work over the past decade and my previous experience with the involvement of the Catholic Church at neighbourhood level in the developing world through Base Ecclesial Communities (BECs) which will bring together two strands of my life, the ecclesial aspect of BECs with the secular aspect of city living. My thesis will contribute to the debate about the kind of ecclesiology being promoted in the Church, about the importance and nature of community both as a normative experience for everyone within the Church and as the accepted objective of the mission and identity of

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<sup>4</sup> Figure taken from Liverpool Residential Update, Quarter 2, 2012 by City Residential, Liverpool. [http://www.cityresidential.co.uk/images/cms\\_uploads/editor//Liverpool%20Resi%20Update%20Q2%202012.pdf](http://www.cityresidential.co.uk/images/cms_uploads/editor//Liverpool%20Resi%20Update%20Q2%202012.pdf) Accessed 10.09.2012.



the Church. It will speak to those who are making decisions about our cities and to our Churches who appear to lack a vision for the contribution Christians can make to the growth and indeed the humanisation of city centre living. This thesis argues that Christians have an understanding about neighbour and place that could easily become a motivating factor in the energising of individual believers and entire communities seeing the place that they inhabit becoming the locus where they live out the commitments of their discipleship.

The thesis will explore the importance of place as a crucial location where the encounter between gospel and lived realities can take place. More specifically I will focus on the neighbourhood as a smaller unit within either the rural or urban environment where people have set up homes and from where they live out their lives as peoples of faith. This is the context in which faith is lived and expressed for many people and it is the main location where they relate their faith to the reality of human existence. The direction travelled by this thesis follows the trajectory of my own life which has given form to the ideas that I shall be addressing. Without having spent time in Latin America I would not have been exposed to the phenomenon of BECs which ecclesial phenomenon will form the greater part of my research. Although the approach taken here flows from my own experience, the thesis is not an exercise in autobiography neither a research of self but it will be necessary in order to understand the approach I am taking to engage albeit briefly with a number of key influences that feed into this thesis. It also needs to be stated at the outset that I am an outsider especially when commenting upon base communities in other continents. My insights and understandings are therefore limited and conditional. I would not be capable of discerning the deeper cultural nuances and perspectives that only those from within a culture are truly able to appreciate. So I acknowledge in advance that

there will inevitably be misunderstandings and misinterpretations and therefore the research will to some extent be incomplete and inadequate.

## 1.1 PERSONAL CONTEXT

The methodological process followed by this thesis requires appropriate self-disclosure. Browning<sup>5</sup> has stated that the writer should begin by articulating the background, experiences and questions that have given shape to their concerns and presuppositions. Walkerdine comments that ‘If we adopt research techniques which place our own subjectivities more centre-stage in the research process perhaps far more may be gained than it is feared will be lost.’<sup>6</sup> One of the most powerful memories I have from my youth is walking through the streets of the Catholic neighbourhoods of Liverpool during the celebrations for the opening of the Metropolitan Cathedral in 1967 and being absolutely overwhelmed by the sense of community and identity that was on display during those days. I remember particularly the area known as the Bull Ring (St Andrew’s Gardens) in the shadow of the cathedral where the few Protestant families in the tenements had decorated their flats with orange bunting to complement the explosion of the papal colours, yellow and white. It was the moment when I first made the connection between the Church to which I belonged and its potential impact upon an actual neighbourhood in the city. Meanwhile as I grew up a vocation also grew to ministerial priesthood in the Roman Catholic tradition that even though I sensed deeply a missionary dimension within that call I also knew that I didn’t want to stray too far from the Pier Head and the River Mersey. I knew that the very geography of the city was part and parcel of whom I already

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<sup>5</sup> Browning D. S. (1991) *A Fundamental Practical Theology: Descriptive and Strategic Proposals* Minneapolis: Fortress

<sup>6</sup> Walkerdine V. (1997) *Daddy’s Girl: Young Girls and Popular Culture*. London: Macmillan Press Ltd 75.

was and who I would become. Diocesan priesthood as distinct from religious life is indeed a commitment to place and I expected to live out my life within a fairly restricted geographical boundary.

My research question arose in part because I have witnessed in my lifetime gradual erosion within the city itself of the significance of place and neighbourhood. This followed the wholesale demolition and destruction in the 1950s and 1960s by city planners of entire neighbourhoods, with their communities being uprooted, divided and moved to various out-of-town destinations.<sup>7</sup> Recently there has been a phenomenal explosion of apartment blocks across the waterfront and city centre during the past 20 years with little thought given to the question of community or neighbourhood.<sup>8</sup> The research question was also influenced in part by seeing a re-organisation of the parishes of the Archdiocese of Liverpool which has left many neighbourhoods without an ecclesial presence as parishes merge and some are suppressed, leaving presbyteries empty and churches being closed or demolished with apparently little debate or discussion, that I am aware of, about the importance of the streets and neighbourhoods left behind. This has raised significant questions for me about the locus of mission for local as well as national Roman Catholic leadership and its commitment both to place and to community.

The thesis will very much follow the lines and involvements of my own life and the different insights that have come to me as a direct result of having had the various and

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<sup>7</sup> Murden J. (2006) In: Belchem J. (ed) *Liverpool 800* Liverpool: Liverpool University Press 395-399. In 1954 Liverpool's Medical Officer of Health declared that 88,000 dwellings were unfit for human habitation. In the end 78,000 were demolished, 36% of the total housing stock and 70% of all the dwellings in the inner-city. 'Dispersal was undeniably traumatic, as long-standing, tightly knit communities were broken up...' 416.

<sup>8</sup> 32,000 people are said to reside in Liverpool's waterfront and city centre apartments. See previous footnote no.4.

varied experiences that have come my way. None of this would have been possible without the six years I spent as a LAMP (Liverpool Archdiocesan Missionary Project) missionary priest on loan to the Society of St James serving in Ecuador and Bolivia from 1985-1991.<sup>9</sup> This brought me into contact with an outstanding ecclesial encounter that was to mark me for the rest of my life. I personally had the good fortune to meet some of the most influential people of the Latin American Church during a critical period in its recent history. I took part in the Theology Summer Schools organised by Gustavo Gutierrez<sup>10</sup> in Lima, Peru, recognised as the father of Liberation Theology; I knew personally Mgr Leonidas Proano,<sup>11</sup> Bishop of Riobamba, Ecuador and known as the ‘Prophet of the People’. I attended workshops on Comunidades Eclesiales de Base (CEBs/BECs) run by the Marins Team (Fr. Jose Marins, Sr. Teolide Trevisan and others) in Bolivia. I spent time in Chile during the military coup of General Pinochet and witnessed the suffering of the people in the Santiago suburbs; I was in San Salvador and the University of Central America just a few weeks after the massacre of the six Jesuits and their housekeeper and her daughter.<sup>12</sup> During those missionary years I was thoroughly immersed in the life of a vibrant and courageous local Church and of course I was exposed not only to ecclesial currents in Latin America but also to the social and political movements that characterised life in the late 1980s; these were formative years for me and their influence will be clearly seen in both the content and direction of the thesis.

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<sup>9</sup> Archbishop Derek Worlock started the Liverpool Archdiocesan Missionary Project whose aim was to maintain 6 priests in Latin America, through the auspices of the Missionary Society of St James the Apostle based in Boston USA (<http://www.socstjames.com>) and working in the Andean countries of Ecuador, Peru and Bolivia.

<sup>10</sup> Gutierrez G. (1971) *Teologia de la Liberacion, Perspectivas* Lima, Peru: CEP.

<sup>11</sup> A collection of Bishop Proano’s writings was published entitled *El Profeta Del Pueblo* (1990) Ecuador: Fundacion Pueblo Indio del Ecuador.

<sup>12</sup> Carranza S. (1990) *Martires de la UCA 16 de Noviembre 1989* San Salvador: UCA Editores

I then returned to the Archdiocese upon completion of my missionary commitment and went to the Liverpool parish of St Margaret Mary which had in 1991 the largest Catholic population of any parish run by the diocesan clergy in the Archdiocese of Liverpool. It was seen by many as a big challenge, however, my immediate private and personal realisation was that in Liverpool I had responsibility for 6,500 Catholics and we were then three resident priests but I had left behind in Ecuador a parish of 65,000 Catholics with myself the only resident priest. I was to remain there as Parish Priest for 12 years during which time I attempted to re-structure the parish into smaller units or communities. This proved to be an extraordinarily challenging option and it wasn't until I went to work for four months with Archbishop Len Faulkner of Adelaide, South Australia, as a member of his Basic Ecclesial Communities Office<sup>13</sup> in September 1999 that I was able to significantly improve my pastoral organisation and planning which was something I had first been exposed to in South America.<sup>14</sup> This period in Australia will merit further exploration later in the thesis due to the major impact it had on my thinking and praxis. The thesis will also make reference to the work of trying to establish BECs in the Liverpool parish and the lessons that were learnt in the process.

I left the parish in May 2003 and Fr. Marins invited me to join his team as their first English member and I spent 2004 delivering workshops and seminars on BECs in many Latin American countries and also to Hispanic communities throughout the United States of America. Marins had already worked in Adelaide, South Australia and had visited Liverpool on three separate occasions to deliver training and workshops to the Catholic community in the parish. This generous invitation gave me unparalleled and unique

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<sup>13</sup> Cathy Whewell and Fr Bob Wilkinson were my hosts and colleagues during the visit and exhibited profound enthusiasm for BEC work which radically impacted on my own understanding of Church.

<sup>14</sup> Cabello M. (1987) Espinoza E, Gomez J, *Manual de Planificacion Pastoral – una experiencia latinoamericano*. Caracas: Ediciones Paulinas.

access to the world's leading expert on BECs and the various communications we have subsequently shared over the years continued to assist in my development and understanding as I became a member of Marins' mailing list which consists of an invited group of theologians and BEC practitioners who share unpublished material, reflections and comment among the group for peer evaluation. It was during the year working with Marins that he suggested to me that I should consider becoming acquainted with the BEC experience in other continents so as to have a much broader experience of the phenomenon within the Catholic Church. Being fluent in English and Spanish as well as being a European who had lived intimately the Latin American reality proved to be a real advantage in my visits to Africa and Asia.

This was to take me on my first journey to Africa which followed advice I had received from the Executive Secretary of the AsIPA Desk (Asian Integral Pastoral Approach)<sup>15</sup> at the Federation of Asian Bishops Conferences (FABC) Office of Laity and Family who had said that in order to understand the BECs of Asia I would have to go to Lumko<sup>16</sup> in South Africa to complete their training programme as that was the foundation and model used for the spread of BECs throughout much of Asia. And so in 2005 I enrolled on the four-week International Pastoral Ministry Course held in Germiston, Johannesburg. It was there that I became familiar with the BEC experience particularly in South Africa but also through conversations and research with BECs/SCCs in East Africa.

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<sup>15</sup> Ms Cora Mateo. AsIPA is the Asian Integral Pastoral Approach and is the body charged by the Asian Catholic bishops with assisting the development of BECs throughout the region.

<sup>16</sup> Lumko is the Pastoral Institute of the Southern African Catholic Bishops Conference. <http://www.sacbc.org.za/about-us/associate-bodies/lumko-institute/> Accessed 04.09.2012.

That ensured that I was ready and prepared to attend the AsIPA 4th General Assembly in the Maria Rani Centre, Trivandrum, India from November 8th - 15th 2006. I spent a further month travelling the length and breadth of India visiting BEC practitioners and their communities, something I was able to do on a further three occasions in the following three years. During 2008 I had arranged for the Marins Team to re-visit Asia, this time with myself as a member, and we delivered training and workshops in India, Sri Lanka, Singapore and South Korea. I then attended the 5th General Assembly of AsIPA which was held in the Philippines, at the Regional Major Seminary, Davao from October 20th - 28th 2009. These AsIPA gatherings brought together Catholic BEC practitioners from across Asia, where they evaluated progress, celebrated achievements and made plans for the future.

## **1.2 METHODOLOGICAL CONTEXT**

The methodology that I have already started using in this Introduction is following the principles of Practical Theology<sup>17</sup> which is based on the interplay between experience, reflection and action. Schleiermacher<sup>18</sup> considered to be one of the founders of the discipline in the 18th century when he published his work *Brief Outline of the Study of Theology*,<sup>19</sup> divided theology into three fields: philosophical, historical and practical; the latter addressing the practice of church leadership. So for almost two hundred years in Europe the field of practical theology was limited to the work and spiritual leadership of ministers in the Church. Under the influence of social studies in recent decades practical

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<sup>17</sup> Browning D. S. (1991) *A Fundamental Practical Theology: Descriptive and Strategic Proposals*. Minneapolis: Fortress; Ballard and Pritchard (1996) *Practical Theology in Action: Christian Thinking in the Service of Church and Society*. London: SPCK; Woodward and Pattison (2000) *The Blackwell Reader in Pastoral and Practical Theology*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing.

<sup>18</sup> Dingemans G. (1996) 'Practical Theology in the Academy' *The Journal of Religion* 76:1 82.

<sup>19</sup> Schleiermacher F. (1811) *Kurze Darstellung des Theologischen Studiums*. Berlin.

theologians worldwide have agreed on starting their investigations in practice itself; making therefore the self-understanding of a particular religious tradition the centre of any reflection undertaken by the theologians. This approach moves, therefore, from practice to theory and then back to practice.<sup>20</sup> Browning asserts that practical theology should begin with an articulation of the experiences, situations and questions that shape the concerns and presuppositions of the writer because that is what they will bring with them to the discipline of theological reflection. This is precisely the method that I am following. Since practical theology has been accepted as an academic discipline that studies the practice of a religious tradition, the debate has focused on four principle issues: a) establishing with precision the field of this discipline; b) its academic status; c) the methodology of the discipline; d) its normative background.<sup>21</sup>

Initially the field of practical theology was limited to the clerical leadership of the Church, but by the second half of the 20th century the emphasis had shifted to the functions of the Church as a whole. For many practical theologians, ecclesiology and church development have become the foundational sub-disciplines of practical theology.<sup>22</sup> Both ecclesiology and church development feature largely in the research that this thesis covers. Dingemans states that at the present time the majority of academic practical theologians seem to consider ‘the functioning of the Church in the perspective of the coming Kingdom of God in the world’ as the actual field of practical theology.<sup>23</sup> This perspective governs the research I have undertaken. I will be examining an aspect of ecclesial life that is indeed a

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<sup>20</sup> Browning (1991) 5-6.

<sup>21</sup> Dingemans (1996) 83.

<sup>22</sup> Proponents of this approach are: Haendler O. (1957) *Grundriß der Praktischen Theologie*; Arnold F. X. (1964) *Handbuch der Pastoraltheologie*. Freiburg, Basel and Vienna: Herder; Muller A. D. (1950) *Grundriß der Praktischen Theologie*; Josuttis M. (1980) *Praxis des Evangeliums zwischen Politik und Religion*. Munich: Kaiser; Bohren R. (1971) *Predigtlehre* Munich: Kaiser; Hopewell J. (1987) *Congregation, Stories and Structure*. Philadelphia: Fortress; Dingemans (1996) 84.

<sup>23</sup> Dingemans (1996) 85.



fairly recent phenomenon (BECs) as it impacts upon the world of today and understand it very much as a sign of the in-breaking of the Kingdom of God inaugurated by Jesus. Another understanding of the reach of Practical Theology is given by Pattison and Woodward who describe it as ‘A place where religious belief, tradition and practice meets contemporary experiences, questions and actions and conducts a dialogue that is mutually enriching, intellectually critical and practically transforming.’<sup>24</sup> We shall be looking at BECs as an example of Church organisation and practice and we shall be investigating in detail the contemporary experience of BECs across much of the developing world and the questions they raise and allow this phenomenon to dialogue with the reality of religious belief, tradition and practice in the developed western world. Given that practical theology is understood as a science of action<sup>25</sup> and something that is transformational, this fits in well with my approach to this recent occurrence in the Catholic Church. One of the foremost protagonists of Practical Theology in the UK, Stephen Pattison wrote:

I have never ceased to think of myself as a practical theologian – a critical inhabitant of an action-guiding worldview (Christianity) who attempts to correlate and bring into dialogue aspects of the Christian tradition with contemporary experience and understandings of humanity that emanate from other disciplines for the purpose of change and transformation.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Woodward and Pattison (2000) 7.

<sup>25</sup> This shift has been influenced mainly by some American theologians: Boisen A. T. (1946) *Problems in Religion and Life: A Manual for Pastors*. New York: Harper and Row; Hiltner S. (1947) *Religion and Health*. New York: Harper and Row; Clinebell Jr H. (1966) *Basic Types of Pastoral Counseling*. Nashville: Abingdon; Dingemans (1996) 87.

<sup>26</sup> Pattison S. (2007) 20.

While this research will listen to voices from other disciplines it will also listen to voices from other cultures and backgrounds in the receiving Churches of the southern hemisphere in the hope that what will result will be change and transformation from within the sending Church of the northern hemisphere. This missionary-inspired language understands that I was originally sent from one place and people while being received by another place(s) and people(s) and this event is not without its consequences and repercussions for all parties involved.

Moving on to the second issue about Practical Theology's academic status, Dingemans understands there to be three different approaches to the discipline which in today's environment are increasingly being combined. They are firstly the empirical-analytical; secondly the hermeneutical; and thirdly the critical-political. Some practical theological scholars<sup>27</sup> prefer the first model as it is highly influenced by the practice and methodology of the social sciences. J. A. Van der Ven calls this 'empirical theology'<sup>28</sup> in which practical theology gathers facts and knowledge that others can check and verify about religious practices. However there are others<sup>29</sup> who prefer the second model and I find myself among them. These theologians feel that not only religious reality, but reality as such, can be opened up in a more appropriate way within the framework of language.

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<sup>27</sup> In Germany: Bastian H. D. (1969) *Theologie der Frage*. Munich: Kaiser; Schröer H. (1964) 'Theologia Applicata' *Pastoraltheologie* 53 389-407; Daiber K. F. (1977) *Grundriß der Praktischen Theologie als Handlungswissenschaft*. Munich: Kaiser. In the Netherlands: Nijmegen research group of Van der Ven J. A. and Heitink G. (1993) *Praktische Theologie: Geschiedenis, theorie, handelingsvelden*. Kampen: Kok.

<sup>28</sup> Van der Ven J. A. (1993) *Practical Theology: An Empirical Approach*. Kampen: Kok Pharos translated by Schultz B. from the original *Entwurf einer Empirischen Theologie* (1990).

<sup>29</sup> In the USA: Scheiter R. (1985) *Constructing Local Theologies*. New York: Orbis; Gerkin C. (1984) *The Living Human Document: Re-visioning Pastoral Counseling in a Hermeneutical Mode*. Nashville: Abingdon; Gerkin C. (1986) *Widening the Horizons: Pastoral Responses to a Fragmented Society*. Philadelphia: Westminster; Poling J. and Miller D. (1985) *Foundations for a Practical Theology of Ministry*. Nashville: Abingdon; Browning D. S. (1991). In the UK: Pattison S. (2007) *The Challenge of Practical Theology*. London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers; Sweeney J, Symonds G, Lonsdale D. (2010) *Keeping Faith in Practice: Aspects of Catholic Pastoral Theology*. London: SCM Press.

They cite a number of influences on their work<sup>30</sup> and describe their analysis of reality differently from and in contrast with the analysis emerging from the descriptions of empirical research.<sup>31</sup> This hermeneutical approach is widely followed and though it might not provide as clear and detailed a picture as the empirical method it nonetheless draws upon the history and background of the Churches and also gives an insight into the values and norms of the different ecclesial communities. I have followed this approach in exploring the origins of BECs in three quite different geographical locations, namely Latin America, Africa and Asia. I discounted using the third model as although I will be looking extensively at the Latin American reality I will not be focusing on Liberation Theology as such, which is the core of the critical-political approach to practical theology. This will be mainly because it has been extensively and exhaustively studied elsewhere. Any serious research into Liberation Theology at the continental and global level would inevitably divert attention away from the 'local' issues of place and neighbourhood that will be the focus of this study. Liberation Theology is profoundly polemical as far as the magisterium of the Roman Catholic Church is concerned, with their historic allegations of Marxist influence<sup>32</sup> upon and corruption of theology and praxis.

The third issue of the methodology of the discipline is addressed by Dingemans when he suggests that, 'the most important debate in practical theology in recent years has been on methodology and the most important word was interdisciplinarity.'<sup>33</sup> Van der Ven

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<sup>30</sup> Literature: Ferdinand de Saussure, Roman Jakobson, Umberto Eco. Philosophy: Hans-Georg Gadamer, Paul Ricoeur. Cultural anthropology: Clifford Geertz, Victor Turner. Dingemans (1996) 89.

<sup>31</sup> Dingemans (1996) 89.

<sup>32</sup> [http://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc\\_con\\_cfaith\\_doc\\_19840806\\_theology-liberation\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_19840806_theology-liberation_en.html) *Instruction on Certain Aspects of the 'Theology of Liberation'* (1984). Accessed 06.09.2012. Also the response:

[http://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc\\_con\\_cfaith\\_doc\\_19860322\\_freedom-liberation\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_19860322_freedom-liberation_en.html) *Instruction on Christian Freedom and Liberation* (1986) Accessed 06.09.2012.

<sup>33</sup> Dingemans (1996) 91.

describes the following changes that have come about within practical theology in recent decades: monodisciplinarity where ecclesial dogmas, doctrines and documents provided the prescriptions for the practice of religious action; multidisciplinarity where social scientists began to make contributions but theologians still felt bound to reserve to themselves the last word; interdisciplinarity where room is created for a real discussion between theology and social sciences. Going further than Dingemans, Van der Ven proposes another term intradisciplinarity where theologians become proficient themselves in the social sciences so as to raise theological issues within the terms familiar to social scientists. In my final chapter I will be drawing upon the work of a number of professionals within the social sciences to take further my thesis in an interdisciplinary way.

It is important to answer the question what is the particular methodology employed by practical theologians? There are four stages in the methodology agreed upon by most practical theologians:<sup>34</sup> (i) research begins with an interdisciplinary description of the practice or analysis. Methods may vary in the research but my approach will be to follow a hermeneutical, historical and linguistic approach issuing in the type of description as described by Browning;<sup>35</sup> (ii) the next step is to seek an explanation of the situation by drafting a hypothesis that can be verified (or falsified) and as my approach will be the hermeneutical model I will do this through a broad narrative description that covers reality at large; (iii) the third stage or normative phase, will be to examine the praxis itself to find if there is any normative background within the tradition or anything normative within the ideas of the believing people. Through a revision of church documents and the

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<sup>34</sup> Dingemans (1996) 92.

<sup>35</sup> Dingemans (1996) 89.

reflections of people on the ground an interpretation will be attempted that achieves an understanding of the vision, meanings and values that lie behind the actions of the Church. Practical theologians are warned to have a critical awareness of their own theological and social preferences and other interests that might be involved;<sup>36</sup> (iv) finally all practical theological work aims toward making suggestions and recommendations in order to improve and transform existing practice.

The methodological process outlined here has been followed closely throughout the gestation of the thesis and will be evident in the structure of the thesis as a whole. I decided to place the thesis into a geographical context that creates dialogue partners of the two-thirds world and the one-third world, in other words, a conversation will ensue between the southern hemisphere where faith and Church is flourishing and the northern hemisphere where faith and church attendance is declining. More precisely in chapters 2-4 which examine the BEC phenomenon on three continents of the south I shall be using stages (i) and (ii) of the methodology that will both describe and analyse the practice of BECs as well as seeking an explanation for this ecclesial reality widely experienced throughout Latin America, Africa and Asia. In chapter 5 I will present research material and reflections on neighbourhood from the western experience of Europe and North America, while concluding the BEC analysis with a visit to Adelaide, South Australia. The conclusion to the thesis will unite stages (iii) and (iv) in presenting what I consider to be the normative elements from the research as well as offering ideas and suggestions that might shed light upon present praxis and encourage change for the future.

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<sup>36</sup> Poling J. and Miller D. (1985) *Foundations for a Practical Theology of Ministry*. Nashville: Abingdon.

The final issue debated by practical theology is the question of normativity. In this narrative vision of the Church that I will be developing I shall be drawing upon the idea of memory<sup>37</sup> or the internal history of the Church in which the narratives of the past (that are called ‘tradition’) and the experiences of the people and their Church community today (tradition working itself out in the present) are brought together and examined. In this thesis the ecclesial reader especially will be confronted by their past (both recent and distant) with the hope of finding new ways of interpreting the past and opening up the future. Gerkin speaks of ‘widening the horizons’<sup>38</sup> of persons and communities in order to bring them face to face with the normative ground of their foundational stories in a new process of interpretation. It is certainly my aim to expand the horizons of my fellow co-religionists with this thesis and to contribute to a debate about the nature of Church and the future of mission in England and Wales today.

Of course it really could be quite arrogant of me to aim to expand the horizons of anyone if it wasn’t for the fact that my own limited ways of seeing and understanding have been challenged especially through my cross-cultural experiences but also through the research process of these latter years. Before concluding this Introduction I want to comment on the work of Martyn Percy whose ideas I have found to be particularly helpful. He reflects upon the kind of research that I am involved in and states:

This encounter-based approach is far riskier, since it virtually anticipates change on the side of the inquirer. To truly listen will mean being open to the possibility of

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<sup>37</sup> The concept of ‘memory’ is found in the writing of Browning, see footnote 5, and also of Hough Jr J. and Cobb Jr J. (1985) *Christian Identity and Theological Education* California: Scholars Press 50.

<sup>38</sup> Quoted in Dingemans (1996) 96.

change... Moreover, I hold that it is precisely this kind of challenge that should, and could, help shape the discipline and practice of ecclesiology.<sup>39</sup>

His approach to practical theology firmly situates it as a listening and reflective discipline that means that it is rooted in a determined form of research that often begins by learning to listen deeply and well. He says that research in religion is often about re-searching, about looking at things again, from a different angle, with a new light, going over old ground perhaps but with fresh enthusiasm and renewed vision. 'Re-searching, retelling and reconstructing are critical, related yet distinct stages within the overall penumbra of research.'<sup>40</sup> This is further enhanced by the work of Poling and Miller:

Practical theology is a critical and constructive reflection within a living community about human experience and interaction, involving a correlation of the Christian story and other perspectives, leading to an interpretation of meaning and value, and resulting in everyday guidelines and skills for the formation of persons and communities.<sup>41</sup>

Percy clearly encapsulates what I seek to achieve by my research; he states that research is ultimately a review, a re-consideration and a return – perhaps leading to a revolution. He argues that the key to successful research lies in establishing that the knowledge we have is inadequate and insufficient, despite appearances to the contrary. Therefore, the

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<sup>39</sup> Percy M. (2005) *Engaging with Contemporary Culture: Christianity, Theology and the Concrete Church*. Aldershot: Ashgate 7.

<sup>40</sup> Percy (2005) 9.

<sup>41</sup> Poling J. and Miller D. (1985) 62.

research must help to identify new knowledge or at least reinterpret that knowledge so that the way we look at some specific topic might be challenged and changed. ‘Finally,’ he argues, ‘it leads us into a situation where we can begin to say something entirely new about the apparently familiar.’<sup>42</sup> The research will challenge the perceptions of people in the Church about BECs being a phenomenon that we in the West can treat as irrelevant to our ecclesial journey. The thesis will demonstrate that the apparently familiar concepts of neighbour and neighbourhood are in need of a radical overhaul. Inspiration will come from the BEC voices of the southern hemisphere and some secular voices of the northern hemisphere.

### **1.3 STRUCTURE OF THE THESIS**

Following the Introduction which has situated this research in the context of Practical Theology and examined the methodology that will be employed, using personal experience and history to delineate the lines of research, there will be three chapters focusing on three continents which are delivering BECs.<sup>43</sup> Each chapter will commence with an exploration of the history of BECs in the area and will attempt to deliver a definitive history, challenging some of the incomplete ideas circulating about origins and influences within the wider BEC and research communities. Chapter 2 commences the journey in Latin America, and takes a unique approach to BECs there by using as a dialogue partner Fr José Marins who is widely acknowledged to be the world’s leading authority on BECs. Mine will not be an uncritical assessment of the contribution BECs

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<sup>42</sup> Poling and Miller (1985) 10.

<sup>43</sup> A BEC is basically a small gathering of Catholics who meet regularly in their homes, bringing their faith and their lives together by reflecting upon life and the needs of their neighbours in the light of the gospel and acting together to transform that reality with the values of the kingdom of God. They model an experience of community for those around them and maintain bonds of communion with the wider Church. They choose one or more from their number to facilitate the meetings and they discern together how to develop ministries that will enable them to be of service to the neighbourhood.



have made to the Church; but it will attempt to lay out some of the insights that I argue have a wider significance than presently acknowledged. Chapter 3 will deal with BECs in Africa. I have amassed a body of literature that is unrivalled in the United Kingdom in bringing together for the first time much of the written literature about BECs in East Africa. The chapter will critique the experience that will both celebrate the African BECs achievements and learn from their perceived shortcomings. Chapter 4 will move on to Asia where the influences of both Africa and Latin America can be traced today. However it has a context unlike any of the previous locations and therefore has developed significant insights unique to its pluralistic religious identity. These will be added to the reflections from Africa and Latin America in order to enter into dialogue with aspects of the reality of the United Kingdom in particular and Europe and North America in general. What will be explored in chapter 5 with the assistance of a number of secular authors will be the context common to all three continents, the location for our base communities namely the neighbourhood; as well as the desire to live community in that urban context. Chapter 5 will also present research findings about BECs in South Australia that will raise questions about their ability to flourish in a post-industrial and post-modern westernised urban context. The Conclusion of the final chapter will bring everything together and in conformity with the principles of the methodology being followed will examine present practice with a view to making suggestions for renewal and reform.

## CHAPTER TWO

### LATIN AMERICA: OTRA IGLESIA ES POSIBLE<sup>44</sup>

It is widely recognised that the countries of South and Central America as well as Mexico and the Caribbean were the location for the emergence of Comunidades Eclesiales de Base (CEBs)<sup>45</sup> or Base Ecclesial Communities (BECs) in English. They gave rise to an unprecedented ecclesial moment with far reaching consequences for the local practitioners as well as for Catholic people living in other parts of the developing world. This chapter will reflect on the origins, history and development of the CEBs through the prism of one of their greatest exponents, Fr José Marins, a Brazilian Catholic priest of the Archdiocese of Botucatu, Sao Paulo. Despite being recognised by practitioners of CEBs in every continent as the world's leading expert his contribution has been commented upon, but not subjected to detailed analysis until now. Access to material which circulates privately amongst a small group of mostly Latin American theologians has enabled this study to develop accurate insights into and a deeper understanding of the process and thinking which has accompanied CEB development for over 50 years. It is indeed an original contribution to knowledge of this important development in the Catholic Church.

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<sup>44</sup> 'Otro mundo es posible' is the theme of the highly successful World Social Forum which started in Porto Alegre, Brazil in 2001 [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/World\\_Social\\_Forum](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/World_Social_Forum) Accessed 25.09.2012 and which I attended in 2005, so I have used the same idea for this chapter heading which means 'Another Church is Possible' or as it is also sometimes translated in English 'A Different Church is Possible'. See also an article by Richard P. (2007) 'Será Posible Ahora Construir un Nuevo Modelo de Iglesia' *Aparecida: Renacer de una Esperanza*, Fundacion Amerindia, digital book, 93-98. [http://www.hechoreligioso.net/Proyectos/VCELAM/docuVCELAM/206\\_AmerindiaAparecidaLibroVirtual.pdf](http://www.hechoreligioso.net/Proyectos/VCELAM/docuVCELAM/206_AmerindiaAparecidaLibroVirtual.pdf) Accessed 20.06.2012.

<sup>45</sup> Out of respect for the peoples of Latin America I will use the acronym CEB throughout this chapter.

This chapter will also examine the new theological and ecclesiological emphases that arose from the base communities. It will not, however, focus on the many ecclesio-political questions and issues arising from Liberation Theology even though in many respects they developed alongside each other. The intention, rather, is to present that which is unique to CEBs in their Latin American incarnation, which will involve looking at the theology that surrounded and grew out of the communities while not becoming a hostage to fortune with the much wider and exhaustively debated Liberation Theology. We shall explore the theological method favoured in the CEBs and look at other influences that played a significant part in the theological and methodological processes. The chapter will then look at the serious question of ecclesial conflict through an analysis of the recent CELAM V General Assembly in Aparecida, Brazil and finally will attempt to comment on where the CEBs in Latin America are today as well as reflect on their contribution to the wider world.

It is appropriate to seek to understand the historic evolution of CEBs through the lens of Fr José Marins as they both have their beginnings on Brazilian soil. When trying to identify and speak about the various aspects of CEBs commentators often make reference to Marins as in this case: 'It is a Brazilian priest, José Marins, who has most clearly articulated these, and who is the leading authority in Latin America on the CEBs.'<sup>46</sup> Within Protestant circles Marins' role is acknowledged as the leader of CEBs on the continent: '...Fr José Marins, Latin American coordinator of the movement ...'<sup>47</sup> In this wide-ranging article Cook attaches an extensive bibliography for the time, which contains no less than 11 references to books and articles written by Marins and his team, way

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<sup>46</sup> Kirby P. (1979) 'Basic Ecclesial Communities' *Doctrine and Life* 29:9 586.

<sup>47</sup> Cook W. (1980) 'Base Ecclesial Communities: A Study of Re-evangelisation and Growth in the Brazilian Catholic Church' *Occasional Bulletin of Missionary Research* 4:3 114. Though I consider it is inappropriate to refer to CEBs as a 'movement'.

beyond the output of any other author. In an article in 1980 we find: 'José Marins, a specialist on BCCs in Latin America ...'<sup>48</sup> He is of course recognised as an authority on base communities within Brazil: 'José Marins, a colleague of the Boffs, has summarised what the CEBs mean to the Brazilian theologians ...'<sup>49</sup> Whatever the context Marins is recognised by all authors as the person with most experience and who has contributed most to the development and understanding of CEBs.

Marins was born in Prata de Botucatu (now called Pratania) on Wednesday 25th May in 1932 to Joaquin Marins Peixoto and Isabel Ferrari Marins, his father's family tracing their ancestry back at least five generations within the São Paulo region, while his mother's family were immigrants from the Veneto region of Italy. In September 1952 he was sent to Rome for theological studies at the Pontifical Gregorian University and on 25th February 1956 was ordained priest at the Basilica of St Paul outside the Walls. During his years studying theology he also managed to find time to enrol at the recently founded International University for Social Studies Pro-Deo<sup>50</sup> where he did a two year course specialising in the Methodology of Public Opinion. Shortly after completing studies in Rome he went to Belgium for a brief internship<sup>51</sup> before returning to Rome for a further five months, which he spent at the International Centre of the Movement for a Better World (MBW) at their Roca di Papa headquarters, where he met the founder, mystic and prophet of renewal Fr Ricardo Lombardi SJ. During this time Marins was encountering ideas and people that were to have a transforming effect on his young life. He returned to

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<sup>48</sup> Deelen G. (1980) 'The Church on its way to the people: BCCs in Brazil' *Pro Mundi Vita Bulletin* 81 3.

<sup>49</sup> Blowers L. (1989) 'Ecclesiogenesis: Birth of the Church or Birth of Utopia?' *Missiology* 17:4 410.

<sup>50</sup> The Istituto di Studi Superiori Pro Deo, was founded by Fr Félix Andrew Morlion and Monseñor Antonio de Angelis in 1946 and in 1948 it became the Università Internazionale degli Studi Sociali "Pro Deo".

<sup>51</sup> This was with the Young Christian Workers, where Marins spent time with Joseph Cardijn (before he became Cardinal) and was exposed to the Cardijn methodology of see/judge/act.

Brazil in 1957 where in the March he was sent to the parish of Ourinhos, São Paulo where he was to remain until November 1959.

## 2.1 CEBs TRACING THE ROOTS

Meanwhile powerful developments were taking place within Brazil itself, especially in the rural areas and within the Church. It seems that at the level of the Church an important moment was the 1st General Assembly of CELAM<sup>52</sup> held in 1955 in Rio de Janeiro where the bishops from across Latin America came together and reflected upon the impact Protestant groups were having upon the Catholic faithful. Present as an advisor was Fr Agnelo Rossi,<sup>53</sup> who by the following year was made Bishop of Barra do Pirai. The story has often been repeated about the old woman who spoke to Rossi during a pastoral visitation at Christmas. She told him about her distress at finding that the three Protestant churches were 'lit up and crowded' while the Catholic chapel 'is closed and in darkness' because no priest was able to be present.<sup>54</sup> This provoked a response from the bishop and by the end of 1957 the diocese had 372 people's catechists who had been formed and trained as community leaders. Their task was to gather together their local Catholic community, with the approval and in the name of the bishop, for the purposes of enabling the faithful to pray and read the bible together. This was an attempt at keeping alive their sense of ecclesial consciousness and helping to develop an identity as a community of Catholic people. This missionary movement, as it has been called, situates

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<sup>52</sup> CELAM: Conferencia Episcopal Latinamericano or the Episcopal Conference of Latin America.

<sup>53</sup> He moved from Barra do Pirai to become Cardinal Archbishop of Sao Paulo 1964-1970 before moving to Rome as President of the Congregation for the Evangelisation of the Peoples (Propaganda Fide) 1970-1984. He died 21.05 1995.

<sup>54</sup> Marins J. (1979) 'Basic Ecclesial Communities in Latin America' *International Review of Mission* 271 237. Libanio J. B (1980) 'Experiences with the Base Ecclesial Communities in Brazil' *Missiology* 8:3 321. Deelen G. (1980) 4. Dias Z. (1984) 'Resistance and Submission – The Kingdom of the Powerless' *International Review of Mission* 292 409. Padilla R. (1987) 'A New Ecclesiology in Latin America' *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 11:4 156.

very firmly the emerging CEBs within an ecclesial context of an evangelisation without sufficient priests, of an attempt to animate the Catholic faith in the face of an avalanche of Protestant missionaries who were having remarkable success amongst the poorly educated and frequently un-evangelised Catholic community. It was also a lay-led liturgical movement in that the people were learning to celebrate their faith even in the absence of the priest.

This experience, though a rough model nonetheless provided a beginning from which CEBs would emerge, more refined and honed but with some of the original spirit still intact. Especially that of the people growing from being objects of the efforts of others to evangelise and instruct them, to becoming subjects in their own right as they took on responsibility for the tasks of catechising, liturgical leadership, and community organising, leading to their gradual transformation as they began forming small communities of faith. Though its beginnings were in a movement that was struggling to make up for the absence of an ordained priesthood it was still the germ of an experience where the Church had begun to trust the laity to perform some pastoral, catechetical and liturgical tasks on behalf of their community, albeit in a controlled and limited way.

That was one ingredient in the process of forming CEBs but it was happening alongside another remarkable social initiative of education for the masses through the medium of radio schools, begun in Natal, Rio Grande do Norte, around 1959 under the inspiration of Bishop Eugenio de Araujo Sales.<sup>55</sup> This was indeed an extraordinary development which began as a response to the immense social and economic problems encountered by the

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<sup>55</sup> He ended up being Cardinal Archbishop of Rio de Janeiro 1968-2001 and died 09.07.2012.

majority poor population of that part of Brazil. They suffered from all the consequences of extreme poverty – malnutrition, endemic illness, illiteracy, exploitation and injustice of all kinds. The Church had, in an attempt to respond to this demanding situation, started some years earlier by opening welfare centres and schools. However as a result of that initiative and the reflection and analysis it provoked it became clear that more was needed and so the *Movimiento de Educación de Base*<sup>56</sup> was formed. Properly translated into English this should read the ‘Movement for the Education of those at the Base’ (MEB) not the oft-translated Movement for Basic Education.

The MEB took the form of radio schools, which were vehicles for an education for change programme. Small groups or communities were formed around the radio reflecting upon their reality as they participated in an education programme that attempted to reach out to the poor masses. The movement quickly spread from Natal to the whole of the North East and further afield. Similar initiatives were taking place in other parts of Latin America too; indeed this one was inspired by Radio Sutatenza of Columbia. The radio schools of Natal lasted for over 20 years and significantly influenced the formation of the CEBs because they brought into the equation one of the most significant thinkers of the 20th century, Brazilian educationalist and influential theorist of critical pedagogy Paulo Freire. At the time Freire was working and living in Recife, the capital of Pernambuco state in the North East of Brazil, where he was Director of Education and Culture. We will return later in the chapter to reflect upon his contribution to the development of CEBs.

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<sup>56</sup> Officially set up in 1961 by Presidential Decree from an agreement between the National Conference of Bishops (CNBB) and the Brazilian Ministry of Education and Culture, Libanio J. B. (1980) 322.

The term 'Comunidades Eclesiales de Base' had yet to be invented, but the expression 'de Base' was already in use in 1959 associated with the radio schools and here it means clearly those at the base of society, the ones at the bottom, the majority grouping in society and always characterised by their poverty, social exclusion and oppression. The English term 'basic' does no justice to the origins of the Spanish word, and unfortunately though the English word 'base' has a similar sense it confusingly also has other meanings too. However when the time came to name the ecclesial phenomenon of small communities it was logical to use a term already in use which perfectly described the nature of those groups as being from and at the base, the grass-roots of society.<sup>57</sup>

These two strands emerging in Brazil a few years apart were to heavily influence one another in the next decade and provide a very fruitful exchange of practice and methodology; the more intra-ecclesial concept from Barra do Pirai bringing the evangelical experience of pastoral, catechetical and liturgical communities while the more outward-looking and educative experience from Natal bringing with it a liberating pedagogy and a consciousness-raising methodology. In many places it was the people who had gathered around their radios for the literacy programmes that became the ones who later formed their groups into CEBs. A unique contribution given by the Latin Americans to our understanding of CEBs is their use of Freirean methodology. This aspect is little recognised or appreciated and seldom replicated by practitioners of the various incarnations of CEBs in Africa and Asia. When travelling with the Marins Team in India for example it was clear that the methodology they used there for the formation of

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<sup>57</sup> '...they were given their name *comunidades eclesiales de base* because they are communities primarily composed of lower-class, grassroots people, the base of society' Boff L. (1990) *Church: Charism and Power*. New York: Crossroad 125. 'The spirit of our church community has expanded into a vast flowering of Christian communities, base communities, from the base of society and from the base of the Church...' Casaldaliga P. and Vigil J. M. (1994) *The Spirituality of Liberation*. Kent, UK: Burns & Oates Ltd 187.



base communities was the old colonial education process referred to by Freire as the 'Banking system' which he had so devastatingly critiqued. Indeed it had been an immense gift to the peoples of Latin America that many of the poorest have had the opportunity through the CEBs to participate in a process that was both liberating and transforming. They have learnt how to reflect and analyse, and also to base their actions upon a sound grasp of reality. This is not true everywhere.

## **2.2 MARINS' PATHWAY TO CEBs**

During this time Fr Marins was working in his parish where he had an experience that influenced him for the mission he was to be given later. He had already taken part in one of the international training workshops of the MBW with Fr Ricardo Lombardi and was aware of the importance of renewing the Church by a conversion of consciences, relationships and structures. Using these ideas Marins was able to critique the way the Church was traditionally run and organised and he realised that a new approach was necessary. He was one of two priests in the parish of Ourinhos and despite immense pastoral efforts it was clear to him that they couldn't reach even 20% of their 50,000 parishioners. This reality is replicated across not only Latin America but also in many countries throughout the world; there are very few baptised Catholics that manage to develop a relationship with their parishes in any regular and active way. That means that they are unlikely ever to experience the most basic aspect of the faith namely the chance to live their discipleship in a communitarian and missionary context. The parish was in need of a structural reappraisal that would make it possible to deliver what in effect is the right of every baptised person - to experience and live their Catholic faith.

From 1960 Marins became full-time coordinator of the MBW national team which was functioning as a service of the National Conference of Bishops.<sup>58</sup> MBW placed a great emphasis upon the need for effective pastoral planning following serious and comprehensive dialogue with all parties concerned. It was this work across the whole country that led in 1962 to the Emergency Plan of the National Bishops Conference (CNBB) which included as its main points renewal of the clergy and of Catholic schools, and the transformation of the parish into co-ordinated small communities of faith, worship and love. The fruits of this action plan were harvested in 1965 by the First National General Pastoral Plan which was to be in force for 5 years. The Plan proposed as the first goal of action ‘to get the parishes to create and build up basic communities, ensuring their coordination.’<sup>59</sup> The Bishops also promulgated ideas that had come fresh from the first document of the Second Vatican Council in 1963, The Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy (Sacrosanctum Concilium), when they recommended in their Plan that the base communities should become liturgical assemblies ‘with the active participation of all their members according to their functions...’<sup>60</sup> But remarkably the Plan had a new vision for the parish that it described thus:

Our present parishes are or should be composed of various local or base communities, because of their extension, density of population and percentage of baptised who by rights belong to them. It will therefore be of great importance to undertake parochial

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<sup>58</sup> The national team had 15 members (priests, religious and laity) who travelled the country for 5 years delivering 1,800 courses as part of a general pastoral renewal campaign. This approach using MBW methodology and ideas was responsible for the emergence of an atmosphere of inquiry, communal reform, and pastoral planning. The unity of the church was stressed throughout; Marins J. (1979) 239.

<sup>59</sup> Marins (1979) 239.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*

renewal, by creating or promoting these base communities. They should be developed in the parishes as far as possible...<sup>61</sup>

The Brazilian Bishops had in 1962 identified that some of the problems facing the Church could be resolved by making sure the clergy received better theological training and pastoral formation and so Marins was appointed also to address this by being given responsibility for all the clergy of Brazil, a post he held for 7 years. During this time it became clear to many that a better approach would be to begin at the base, to start from the bottom and work upwards; completely reversing the logical approach of the hierarchy which is usually top-down. This meant that any programme should take its starting point from the people, from those who form the majority in any parish, the laity. This reversal coincided with one of the main themes emerging from the work of the Second Vatican Council,<sup>62</sup> that of the People of God.<sup>63</sup> It is a sign of the increasing importance of Marins to the Bishops and also a measure of the confidence that they had in him that he was named their peritos to the Council and accompanied them to three of the sessions.<sup>64</sup> Noteworthy here is the farsighted attitude of the Brazilian hierarchy who, in their documentary orientation, made it clear that each should be thinking already about how they would respond to the Council once its business was concluded in Rome. Throughout the Council Marins was also working in the Secretariat of the Brazilian Bishops Conference from 1961-1967.

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<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>62</sup> 'Documents do not change structures. Fr José Comblin many times warned us that the Second Vatican Council had profoundly changed our theological vision of the Church, but had not changed its structures.' Richard (2007) 95. Translations from Spanish sources are unless otherwise stated my own. [http://www.hechoreligioso.net/Proyectos/VCELAM/docuVCELAM/206\\_AmerindiaAparecidaLibroVirtual.pdf](http://www.hechoreligioso.net/Proyectos/VCELAM/docuVCELAM/206_AmerindiaAparecidaLibroVirtual.pdf) Accessed 20.06.2012.

<sup>63</sup> Dogmatic Constitution on the Church (*Lumen Gentium*) 1964 chapter 2 In: Flannery A. (ed) (1992) *Vatican Council II The Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents*. New York: Costello Publishing and Eerdmans Publishing 359.

<sup>64</sup> II Session: 29 September – 4 December 1963. III Session: 14 September – 21 November 1964. IV Session: 14 September – 8 December 1965.

We have commented upon two major influences on the development of CEBs in Brazil – the pastoral evangelical dimension from Barra do Pirai and the educational methodology from Natal. Libanio makes an important and significant point when he states that ‘All of this would probably have produced only a more modern Church, as has happened in other parts of the world. However, the addition of a political ingredient produced the CEBs phenomenon.’<sup>65</sup> From the late 1950s and throughout the 1960s Brazil witnessed a growth of popular movements and social forces encompassing voices from the middle and upper classes as well as those at the base calling for a change in society. Auspiciously there came together within the Catholic Church two significant factors: on the one hand a group of progressive bishops led by Dom Helder Camara and on the other a growing mass of faithful in various social apostolates increasingly critical of a Church allied with the dominant classes. Libanio called this ‘the beginning of the realignment’ of those who still identified with the dominant conservative forces of the ruling hegemony and those who identified with the cause of the majority urban and rural poor. Put simply the Church began to turn towards the poor and the popular classes became significant for the Church. The more official repression restricted both peasants and trade unionists, the more the Church cemented its alliance with the poor. Following the bloodless ousting of President Goulart in a military coup in 1964 the Church became during the dark years of repression virtually the only safe space in which anyone could meet and discuss the concerns that were surfacing from within the poor sectors of society. ‘Without the vigour of the popular classes, without this new openness to the poor on the part of certain segments of the episcopacy, and without the vitality of some of the middle class laity ... the explosion of the CEBs would be difficult to imagine or explain.’<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>65</sup> Libanio (1980) 324.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*

### 2.3 MEDELLIN THE KAIROS MOMENT

A moment of extraordinary genius and profound institutional inspiration took place in Medellin in 1968. It was the II General Assembly of CELAM and the result of a process of reflection begun during the sessions of the Second Vatican Council and now bearing fruit in the official response of the entire Latin American Episcopacy in a programme of action that was to bring the insights and experiences of the Council to bear on the reality of Latin America. Marins was present throughout and therefore saw first-hand how the enthusiasm and spirit of the Council became the driving force of an entire Church for an entire generation. It was unique and as Comblin commented recently, ‘Latin America had Medellin, but in Europe, Asia or Africa there were no gatherings with an impact similar to Medellin, and hence the utopias, hopes, aspirations and even the decisions of Vatican II could easily be dismantled.’<sup>67</sup> This meeting was in effect a legitimate and authoritative teaching moment for the bishops of the Church, yet it came under sustained attack from forces within the Curia in Rome and from a minority within the Latin American Church. But Medellin remains forever as an impressive attempt on the part of a significant sector of the universal Catholic Church to take seriously the insights and decisions of Vatican II and faithfully to turn them into reality.

By 1968 there was enough experience already within the Church for the bishops to make some very significant statements about the emerging experience of CEBs. These are worth looking at as they set the tone and direction for CEBs and gave them full Episcopal approval almost from the outset. What is quite remarkable is the arrangement that is given to chapter 15 of the final document on the renewal of pastoral structures. They started their assessment of ecclesial structures from the base upwards. The first level to

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<sup>67</sup> Comblin J. (2004) *People of God*. New York: Orbis Books 181.

be considered was the Comunidad Ecclesial de Base, followed by the Parish, the Diocese, the Bishops Conference and the Continental structure of CELAM. In other words they had already seen and acknowledged that: ‘The Base Christian Community is therefore the first and fundamental ecclesial unit... It is, then, the initial cell of ecclesial structure...’<sup>68</sup> The Latin Americans were amongst those who began to understand that neither the parish nor the clergy as long-standing ecclesial structures in the Catholic Church had been capable of delivering the kind of setting in which people could be evangelised and live out their Catholic faith in communities geared towards mission. And so they set about a restructuring of the Church placing the emphasis firmly at the base rather than at the apex. Other Churches in the developing world made similar reflections in the following decades however the Episcopates of the Churches of the developed world in Europe and North America have never, to my knowledge, decided that the Church needs restructuring in this way.

Another element at Medellin that was to prove crucial and distinctive for CEBs was the acknowledgment that the Church primarily exists in and for the world and was not a group turned inwards towards the intra-ecclesial: ‘The CEBs, open to the world and inserted within it, have to be the fruit of evangelisation, and in this way also the sign that confirms with deeds the message of salvation.’<sup>69</sup> The bishops were in no doubt about what they wanted to see as a major pastoral option emerging from the Conference and it was: ‘That they should secure the formation of the greatest number of ecclesial communities in the parishes...’<sup>70</sup> They were making a choice for the future of their Church and they were prepared to back up that choice with personnel who would be

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<sup>68</sup> CELAM (1968) *Medellin: II Conferencia General del Episcopado Latinoamericano*. Mexico: Ediciones Dabar paragraph 15:10 177.

<sup>69</sup> CELAM (1968) paragraph 8:10 108.

<sup>70</sup> CELAM (1968) paragraph 6:13 94.

available to travel to each country and community to facilitate the growth of the CEBs. Marins had become the assistant secretary to Bishop Eduardo Pironio,<sup>71</sup> the Secretary General of CELAM. He suggested that Marins should embrace a new ministry, which continues to this day, by responding to the many requests that CELAM was receiving for help and support after Medellin and Marins decided that the best approach would be an itinerant team. Suggestions for participants were made by the Directors of CELAM's Pastoral Institute in Quito, Ecuador, where Marins was also a professor. This work with the full support of the bishops started out with no budget and was told to rely totally on the generosity of the dioceses requesting their help. Marins had \$80 with which to commence his project. He was joined by Sr Teolide Maria Trevisan (Brazil) of the Congregation of the Immaculate Heart of Mary, Fr Juan Carlos Iguartua (Venezuela) missionary of the Padres de Burgos, Fr Joaquin Martinez Corcoles (Spanish) IEME,<sup>72</sup> and Fr Carlos Samaniego (Ecuador) Vincentian. A consequence of having an itinerant team has meant an option for the spirituality of mission; no home or base to operate from, no office or secretarial support or centre from which to offer courses, no place for study or writing except airport departure lounges and arrival halls, no salary and no power over your own life; everything depends daily on the choices and possibilities of the host. Living out of a suitcase for over 40 years is testimony enough to the profound commitment and spirituality not only of Marins but of Sr Teolide Trevisan who has been his constant companion. Despite all of this Marins remains the most prolific writer about CEBs in the world and his authority finds inspiration not in theory but in praxis, the lived experience of CEBs in every country and continent. He was also a member for 11 years of the CELAM Theological Commission.

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<sup>71</sup> Went to Rome and became a Cardinal in 1976 and Prefect of the Congregation for Religious 1976-1998 and later President of the Pontifical Council for the Laity 1984-1996. Died 05.02.1998.

<sup>72</sup> IEME: *Instituto Espanol de Misiones Extranjeras* – the missionary endeavour of the Spanish diocesan clergy.

## 2.4 SIGNIFICANT PROJECTS AND PEOPLE

Across Latin America a number of expressions of ecclesial life had been taking place during this time along the lines of liturgical and catechetical experiments as well as base communities, ecclesial or otherwise. It is worth noting some of the more significant outside Brazil: los Presidentes del Asamblea (Dominican Republic) with Bishop Roque Adames in Santiago de Caballeros; los Delegados de la Palabra (Honduras) with Bishop Marcelo Gerin in Choluteca; CEBs in San Miguelito (Panama) with the missionaries from Chicago; in Riobamba (Ecuador) with Bishop Leonidas Proano;<sup>73</sup> also in Chile and Peru; in Guatemala with the Maryknoll Missionaries; and with the reflection groups in Montevideo (Uruguay). Marins was to visit all of these places and more with his team over the next decades offering them support and encouragement in their calling to be Church at the smallest level in the barrios and favelas of the cities as well as in the rural areas in the remotest parts of the continent.

Before we commence a reflection upon the ecclesiology and theology of the CEBs it is useful to take a synoptic overview of those persons who were essential to the communities. These small communities of the poor became the dynamo for a flourishing of theological, biblical, spiritual, historical and sociological reflection across the continent and indeed for the large number of martyrs<sup>74</sup> from within the CEBs. Some of those who developed a theology in tandem with the CEBs were José Comblin (Brazil), Gustavo Gutierrez (Peru), Leonardo Boff (Brazil), Juan Luis Segundo (Uruguay), Juan Bautista Libanio (Brazil), Lucio Gera (Argentina), Luis de Valle (Mexico), Carlos Bravo (Colombia), Jesus Andres Vela (Columbia) and Boaventura Kloppenburg (Brazil).

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<sup>73</sup> I knew Bishop Proano and spent time with him at Santa Cruz, Riobamba, during my time as a missionary with the St James Society in Ecuador from 1985-1991.

<sup>74</sup> One estimate suggests that there were 850. Fox M. (2011) *The Pope's War*, New York: Sterling Ethos 42.



Amongst the great biblicists were Carlos Mesters (Brazil) and Pablo Richard (Chile/Costa Rica) and Javier Saravia SJ (Mexico). Segundo Galilea (Chile), Bishop Pedro Casaldaliga (Brazil), José Maria Vigil (Nicaragua) and Ronaldo Munoz (Chile) wrote about spirituality and inspired a generation in their struggle for justice and contemplation. Enrique Dussel (Argentina/Mexico) critically developed historical insights that assisted the communities to place themselves in a greater context. Bishop Leonidas Proano (Ecuador) and Bishop Samuel Ruiz (Mexico) were instrumental in giving voice to the indigenous peoples of the continent. There were many bishops who showed determined leadership and great valour in their defence of the poor and their communities of faith in the face of powerful political and military opposition: Carlos Partelli (Uruguay); Enrique Angeleli, Jaime de Nevarez and Vicente Zaspé (Argentina); Anibal Maricevich and Ramon Bogarin (Paraguay); Valencia Cano and Raul Zambrano Camarero (Colombia); Helder Camara, Luis Fernandes, Luis Colussi and Fernando Gomes (Brazil); Sergio Mendes Arceo, José Llaguno, Bartolome Carrasco and Arturo Lana (Mexico); Silva Enríques and Enrique Alvear (Chile); François Gayot (Haiti); Jorge Manriquez Hurtado (Bolivia); Marcos McGrath (Panama); Juan Gerardi and Gerardo Flores (Guatemala); Oscar Romero and Arturo Rivera y Damas (El Salvador). Marins knew personally all of these people and worked with them over many years.<sup>75</sup> They were a generation of pastors who showed exceptional courage and leadership in difficult times. Their names are revered across the continent.

There were many significant priests and women religious and laity who over decades and often at great risk to their lives worked with the CEBs and with Marins as the CEBs grew

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<sup>75</sup> A full list of inspirational Latin American bishops can be found at Marins J. (2002) *Lo que Nuestros Antepasados Nos han Enseñado* Guadalajara, Mexico: Enrique de Ossó 444-666.

and developed. Among them were: Fr Expedito Medeiros and Mr Fernando Altemeyer (Brazil); Sr Carolee Chanona (Belize) Fr Rafael Palácio (El Salvador); Fr Edwin Baltodano (Costa Rica); Fr Joaquin Martinez Córcoles (Dominican Republic); Fr Ivan Marin (Columbia); Fr Anibal Coerezza (Argentina). There were countless women religious throughout the continent whose unsung role was vital for the success of the CEBs. They were inserted into the poorest communities, living and working alongside the people, participating in the life of the CEBs and accompanying them with leadership training and formation programmes. Without their contribution it is certain that the priests and theologians alone could never have enabled such a flourishing of CEBs to take place.

## **2.5 CEBs EMBODIMENT OF THE SECOND VATICAN COUNCIL**

From the beginning Marins has accompanied not only the praxis of the CEBs but also the theological reflection surrounding them. Starting with the Second Vatican Council and continuing through Medellin what is revealed by that reflective process in the emerging understanding of CEBs is the most thorough reception of the basic principle from Vatican II, namely the idea of the People of God.<sup>76</sup> Latin America is probably the first continent to grasp the significance of this ecclesial understanding and to relate it to the everyday way the Church was being organised and understood throughout the many countries in South and Central America. As we have already seen in the Medellin document the CEBs are understood to be equal in content and nature to the community of the parish and diocese. As an expression of the base they are therefore the most reduced and smallest number of participants as well as in geographical extension but they are not reduced in

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<sup>76</sup> Tamayo-Acosta J. J. (1989) *Para Comprender La Teologia de la Liberacion* Estella, Spain: Editorial Verbo Divino '...the fact of Vatican II having so favoured the idea of *People of God* made possible the birth and development of CEBs in Latin America' 47.

ecclesial intensity or density. CEBs localise the great ecclesial community in every human space where they exist and appear.

Many authors, such as Juan José Tamayo-Acosta have noted,

... the creative fidelity with which the Latin American Church has received the legacy of the Council... together with the communitarian perspective sanctioned at the Council, the new ecclesial paradigm becomes concentrated in Latin America around the comunidades eclesiales de base.<sup>77</sup>

He goes on to state that the CEBs are no more than a way of understanding and living the mystery of the Church, they constitute in a sense ‘the privileged channel for the conciliar ecclesiology of communion.’<sup>78</sup> Tamayo-Acosta in 1989 is noting publicly that the European Episcopal Conferences are in many cases actively opposing the phenomenon of CEBs and putting innumerable obstacles in their way.<sup>79</sup> This will be returned to at a later stage in the chapter when we look at the conflict aroused by this new way of being Church. Despite this early resistance within Europe to the experience of CEBs in Latin America it seems to me that what the bishops of the New World did was very much inspired by the same Spirit of God who had indeed also been inspirationally present at the Council. This research has shown that the phenomenon of CEBs was understood as a reception of the Council. The spirit and teachings of the Council were now being given flesh and put into practice in a concrete form by the poor majority of the believing

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<sup>77</sup> Tamayo-Acosta (1989) 44.

<sup>78</sup> Tamayo-Acosta (1989) 45.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*

Catholic faithful. ‘This way of acting by the Latin American bishops, first in Medellin and 11 years later in Puebla, was nothing improvised or random, but had its basis in the ecclesiology of Vatican II.’<sup>80</sup>

A major understanding from an early stage about CEBs sprung from the Vatican Council’s Dogmatic Constitution on the Church (*Lumen Gentium*); especially paragraph 26 from which it is worth quoting extensively:

This Church of Christ is really present in all legitimately organised local groups of the faithful, which in so far as they are united to their pastors, are quite appropriately called Churches in the New Testament. For these are in fact, in their own localities, the new people called by God, in the power of the Holy Spirit.... In these communities, though they may often be small and poor, or existing in the diaspora, Christ is present through whose power and influence the One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church is constituted.<sup>81</sup>

Two ideas flow immediately from *Lumen Gentium* 26; one is the theology of the local Church<sup>82</sup> and the other is the Church as the Sacrament of the presence of Christ. Both of these theological ideas are found throughout the writings of not only Latin American theologians and bishops but also those in Africa and Asia too when referring to CEBs.

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<sup>80</sup> Tamayo-Acosta (1989) 48. ‘The CEBs are the cells of this new ecclesiology, oriented towards the kingdom of God’ Codina V. (2007) ‘Eclesiologia de Aparecida’ *Aparecida: Renacer de una Esperanza*, Fundacion Amerindia, digital book, 107. [http://www.hechoreligioso.net/Proyectos/VCELAM/docuVCELAM/206\\_AmerindiaAparecidaLibroVirtual.pdf](http://www.hechoreligioso.net/Proyectos/VCELAM/docuVCELAM/206_AmerindiaAparecidaLibroVirtual.pdf) Accessed 20.06.2012.

<sup>81</sup> Flannery (1992) paragraph 26 381.

<sup>82</sup> ‘The ecclesiology of the local Church has been absent in the Church during all the 2<sup>nd</sup> Millennium.’ Codina (2007) 105

Constantly authors are making the point that so much of what emerges in Latin America in the years following the Council is the fruit and direct result of that same Council. Casaldaliga says: ‘The new idea of the Church that is part of our Latin America spirituality is deeply marked by the new view of the Church that emerged from Vatican II.’<sup>83</sup> And he also quotes some words of Karl Rahner about the same paragraph who said that section 26 was probably: ‘the greatest innovation in Conciliar ecclesiology and a really promising approach for the Church of the future.’<sup>84</sup> When the bishops met at Medellin they were consciously attempting to live out the Council in the context of their countries and perhaps in some ways to take forward the insights of the Council and insert them into the cultures and spiritualities of the peoples of the continent.

In the opening paragraph of *Lumen Gentium* the Council Fathers had approved these words: ‘Since the Church, in Christ, is in the nature of sacrament – a sign and instrument...’<sup>85</sup> it became normative for theologians to refer to the Church as the Sacrament of Christ, as Casaldaliga put it, ‘the flesh of Jesus in every time and place, the visible, incarnate and inculturated sign of the presence of Jesus...’<sup>86</sup> Marins was one of the first theologians to speak of the CEBs in terms of them being situated at the level of sacrament and not at the level of charism. In other words it is in the nature of the CEBs to be part of that tradition of the Church which understands itself as being in full communion and conformity with the sacramental nature of Church as sign of the presence of Jesus, but at the lowest strata in society and with the smallest numbers in the Church, experienced at the place where ordinary people live out their lives, in the neighbourhood.

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<sup>83</sup> Casaldaliga P. and Vigil J. M. (1994) *The Spirituality of Liberation*. Kent, UK: Burns & Oates Ltd 186.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>85</sup> Flannery (1992) paragraph 1 350

<sup>86</sup> Casaldaliga and Vigil (1994) 183.

It is a crucial and significant development because many have not understood CEBs in this way and see them as a movement within the Church, a kind of apostolic group, a society that one can choose to belong to or not. From their earliest days in Latin America CEBs were understood as belonging to the very nature of the Church, as sharing in the sacramentality of the whole Church, as permanent sign and presence of the Catholic Church in its smallest manifestation, at the lowest level of the parish and society. In a sense this is what the parish has always been, the setting down of a Christian mission in the midst of the world and as close as possible to the people it will serve. But with parishes becoming so large and the clergy so few it was part of the genius of the Latin Americans to come up with the challenge of taking Church to another level, a lower, smaller level, closer again to the people and more clearly a part of their neighbourhood lives without any dilution of the experience or presence of being Church. This is a belonging by virtue of baptism; one is a member of the Church through baptism and equally a member of the local CEB through baptism. It is seen and understood simply as the way a person truly belongs to the community of the Church, within a grouping small and intimate enough for the baptised to be known personally and to participate fully in the mission and communion of the Church. The CEB enables the baptised to live out in their life the vocation of being a believer committed to the Reign of God and the transformation of the world. Gutierrez says 'These communities are cut down to human size'<sup>87</sup> and in them people gather, meet and find identity as persons, and in this way the CEBs promote personalisation and are schools of growth and development for the participating members.

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<sup>87</sup> Gutierrez G. (1980) 'The Irruption of the Poor in Latin America and the Christian Communities of the Common People' In Torres S. and Eagleson J. (eds) *The Challenge of Basic Christian Communities*. New York:Orbis 116.

## 2.6 CEBs REDEFINING ECCLESIAL CONSCIOUSNESS

These reflections make clear what many have realised, that ‘The basic ecclesial community is a redefinition of ecclesial consciousness.’<sup>88</sup> For some, that ecclesial consciousness is the legitimate living out of the new understandings of Christian life flowing from the Second Vatican Council. Others clearly felt as time went on that this was an incorrect interpretation of the Council and they attempted to oppose both the CEBs and the theology that accompanied them. Although working in a hidden and secretive manner, whoever these people were, there began a persecution and violent attack upon those who were active in the CEBs, creating an extraordinary number of martyrs and victims of civil and ecclesial repression.<sup>89</sup> The ecclesial consciousness of the CEBs revolved around the foundational conviction that these base communities are genuine experiences of Christian communities that are fully in communion with their pastors at parish and diocesan levels. The people knew that they were members of the Church just as much as the clergy and religious were and shared with them an equal dignity and responsibility.

Latin Americans have a very strong sense of their identity as a ‘people’, that is that they exist as part of a wider social or civil collective. This sense of being greater than the individual adds to their consciousness that in belonging to the CEBs they are part of a reality that is born of the people and is not just a structure that is imposed upon the people from without. Libanio expresses it in this way: ‘The heart of this new ecclesiology

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<sup>88</sup> Libanio J. B. (1979) ‘A Community with a New Image’ *International Review of Mission* 68:271-275.

<sup>89</sup> The presence of a ‘hidden, disrespectful and arbitrary hand’ is noted by Oliveros R. (2007) ‘Iglesia Particular, Parroquia y CEBs’ *Aparecida: Renacer de una Esperanza*, Fundacion Amerindia, digital book, [http://www.hechoreligioso.net/Proyectos/VCELAM/docuVCELAM/206\\_AmerindiaAparecidaLibroVirtual.pdf](http://www.hechoreligioso.net/Proyectos/VCELAM/docuVCELAM/206_AmerindiaAparecidaLibroVirtual.pdf) 211 Accessed 20.06.2012. Also .Lernoux P. (1989) *People of God: The Struggle for World Catholicism* New York: Viking, documents extensively aspects of the persecution.

appears to be the community as it is born of the people and to which the people want to belong, as a continuation of the historical commitment in the region.’<sup>90</sup>

In order to grasp more fully what we mean by being ‘born of the people’ we need to realise that this phrase has very specific connotations in terms of referring specifically to the sense of the people as the poor, oppressed, believing majority, the ones at the ‘base’, the marginalised races, the exploited classes and despised cultures. It is from these that the CEBs are arising; from these poor, oppressed sectors a Church is emerging rooted in the milieu of exploitation and the struggle for liberation. This new ecclesial phenomenon is making the Church present amongst these poor and marginalised people in a way that previously it never was present. It is almost a different kind of Church or at least presence of Church. These Christian communities are not some parallel organisation operating alongside those of the people’s movement. They are rather communities and a Church made up of persons involved in that movement who seek to live their faith and celebrate it together in such communities. In other words the Church is emerging from within a social reality of poverty and oppression and as such is being born of the people, is growing from within their reality and is totally identified with the people and their struggle in a way that it never was before when the Church was seen as being a clerical hierarchy who in fact appeared to be more identified with the establishment and the ruling civic authorities than with the poorest at the base of society.

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<sup>90</sup> Libanio (1979) 259.



Gutierrez understands very well the implications of this way of thinking about the Church, often referred to in Latin America as an ‘ecclesiogenesis’ or re-birthing of the Church.<sup>91</sup> He states:

A debate on ecclesiology has even been opened up by efforts to show that to be born of the people is the vocation of the whole Church, not some parasitic or fruitless alternative to it. Such efforts could not help but provoke questions, fears, false interpretations and even hostility.<sup>92</sup>

From the perspective of Latin American practitioners and theologians this is not a debate about what the Church ought to be, but of what the Church is now, concretely. Once again we are not dealing with theory but with practice, an attempt to describe in an authentic manner the reality that is being lived and felt within the CEBs all over the continent. Those outside and dealing merely with the theory or theology arising from the CEBs have been quick to accuse the CEBs of being a parallel Church.<sup>93</sup> The real antagonism here is not between institution and community but between a Christendom system and a people’s Church, or a Church of the poor. The former is characterised by a Church that is tied to those with power and prestige and the latter is formed by those at the base and those who choose to live in solidarity with them making their cause their own.

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<sup>91</sup> Boff L. (1986) *Ecclesiogenesis: The Base Communities Reinvent the Church*. New York: Orbis.

<sup>92</sup> Gutierrez G. (1980) ‘The Irruption of the Poor in Latin America and the Christian Communities of the Common People’ In: Torres S. and Eagleson J. (eds) *The Challenge of Basic Christian Communities – Papers from the International Ecumenical Congress of Theology, February 20th-March 2nd 1980, Sao Paulo, Brazil*. New York: Orbis Books 119.

<sup>93</sup> The Nicaraguan bishops accused the BECs there of being a parallel Church, see Vandenakker J. P. (1994) *Small Christian Communities and the Parish*. Kansas City: Sheed and Ward 102. Also Gallo, J. (1989) *BECs: A New Form of Christian Organisational Response to the World Today*. Boston University: Doctoral Dissertation 440.

There are mutual benefits to both of these groups and in reality within Latin America these different trends within the Church have been converging for decades, the two are geared toward each other, they are not two Churches, they are one and the same Church made concrete at different levels of society. However the tension between these two ecclesiologies continues throughout this period and right up to today. Latin America proved to be perhaps the main battle ground and people paid for being on the wrong side in this debate sometimes with their lives and often with their careers; and the perceived ‘wrong side’ was always the side that didn’t have power, either civil or ecclesial.

## **2.7 HISTORY MOVES ON**

By 1979 and the III General Assembly of CELAM held in Puebla, sufficient time had elapsed for the final document produced by the Assembly to reflect the many tensions this level of ecclesial life was causing within the Church hierarchy. One of the first comments in the final document (paragraph 96) noted that ‘The CEBs that in 1968 were just an emerging experience, have matured and multiplied in a number of countries, in such a way that that they are now a source of joy and hope for the Church...’<sup>94</sup> I have noticed that there are 15 paragraphs that reference the CEBs doctrinally in a positive light while there are a further 7 that reflect upon their problems.<sup>95</sup> The insights and declarations of Medellin are referenced throughout and applauded as is the admonition of paragraph 58 of *Evangelii Nuntiandi* in 1975.<sup>96</sup> However by the time of the IV General Assembly of CELAM in Santo Domingo in 1992 the forces of opposition have gained sufficient

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<sup>94</sup> CELAM (1979) *Puebla: III Conferencia General del Episcopado Latinoamericano*. Mexico: Ediciones Dabar 78 (my translation)

<sup>95</sup> CELAM (1979) positive: paragraphs 96, 173, 239, 261, 273, 618, 629, 640-643, 648, 650, 653, 1147; problems: paragraphs 98, 111, 262, 462, 627, 628, 630.

<sup>96</sup> [http://www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/paul\\_vi/apost\\_exhortations/documents/hf\\_p-vi\\_exh\\_19751208\\_evangelii-nuntiandi\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/paul_vi/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_p-vi_exh_19751208_evangelii-nuntiandi_en.html) Apostolic Exhortation of Pope Paul VI. Accessed 28.08.2012.

strength to undermine one of the fundamental aspects of the nature of CEBs by putting onto the same level CEBs and movements in the Church. In paragraph 58 ‘The Parish, community of communities and movements...’ and in paragraph 259 ‘... small communities, groups and ecclesial movements and Base Ecclesial Communities.’<sup>97</sup> This theological confusion is an attempt to challenge the basis that CEBs are a level of Church, part of the sacramentality of the whole Church, while ecclesial movements and organisations are in fact part of the charisms that the Church enjoys for her mission. There is a conscious and deliberate downgrading of CEBs in the official documentation - even though it appears to be slight it is in fact highly significant and represents the growing influence of the Roman and curial position. Oliveros has been particularly clear about this moment:

This affirmation of Santo Domingo could lead to the error of considering that the Church is community and also is movements. Another thing would be to clarify what is ecclesologically correct: that the Church IS community and within her she HAS movements.<sup>98</sup>

José Comblin reflecting upon IV CELAM General Assembly in Santo Domingo (1992) and also on the Synod of the Americas (1997) traces an opposition to the very notion of a Church of the poor, which was given impetus and form by the CEBs. The analysis he makes in his seminal work *People of God* shows that the concept of the people of God cannot be separated from the notion of the people being the poor majority with their

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<sup>97</sup> CELAM (1992) *Santo Domingo: IV Conferencia General del Episcopado Latinoamericano*. Mexico: Ediciones Dabar 75 and 259 (my translation)

<sup>98</sup> Oliveros (2007) 206.

causes and concerns. The emergence of the CEBs was in effect the emergence and recognition of this Church of the poor as an identifiable and conscious gathering and organising of the great mass of poor people. It was an irruption of the poor in history. 'History has shown that the Church cannot be people of God unless it is Church of the poor. The two go together (as shown by their suppression at Santo Domingo and at the Synod of the Americas).'<sup>99</sup> In a remarkable sentence in the final document from the Synod Pope John Paul II attempts to redress the balance that he sees has been disturbed by the CEBs with their stress on the Church of the poor by identifying the elite members of society as a neglected and disaffected ecclesial grouping.<sup>100</sup> Comblin analyses the present reality of the CEBs:

Base communities reached their highpoint in Brazil between 1975 and 1985. At that point they levelled off and they have been on the defensive since then... For a time it was hoped that the CEBs would provide a model for the future Church. Some dioceses were reorganised based on CEBs, giving the impression that the whole Church would be a constellation of CEBs. As could have been expected, the times were not yet ripe... The CEBs were shown to be what they actually were: a popular minority facing a Church predominantly tied to the middle classes, though it kept talking about the preferential option for the poor for some time. Even the term had disappeared by the time of the Synod of the Americas (1997). The poor went back to where they had

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<sup>99</sup> Comblin (2004) 141.

<sup>100</sup> 'As I have already noted, love for the poor must be preferential, but not exclusive. The Synod Fathers observed that it was in part because of an approach to the pastoral care of the poor marked by a certain exclusiveness that the pastoral care for the leading sectors of society has been neglected and many people have thus been estranged from the Church.' Paragraph 67:251-76. Downloaded from the Catholic Document Archive <http://www.catholic-pages.com/documents/> Accessed 13.02.2012.

been for so many centuries, the object of charity of a Church united around its bourgeois base.<sup>101</sup>

## 2.8 FREIREAN PEDAGOGY

It is important to look briefly at one of the greatest legacies of the CEBs on the continent and that is the pedagogy of educational theorist Paulo Freire and the methodology of the hermeneutic circle developed by Juan Luis Segundo.<sup>102</sup> Freire was an educator and he created a new educational method for stimulating consciousness-raising<sup>103</sup> which significantly influenced the development of CEBs in Latin America and is noticeably absent in their emergence in other parts of the world. ‘An important role in the development of the CEBs came from the liberating pedagogy of Paulo Freire’ states Libanio.<sup>104</sup> Freire remains to this day one of the most challenging interlocutors in the CEB process because he injected into the project the idea of awareness-raising and this was something those with power and their allies were never happy to witness; because, as the thesis has shown, we are talking about the awareness or consciousness of the poor who are the majority. This carried with it serious consequences. A key insight from Freire and one that again differentiated these CEBs from their BEC cousins in Africa and Asia was the primacy of praxis. He made the point that no amount of lessons, sermons, lectures or courses would change consciousness but only the action of human beings on the world. There was a naivety that imagined that words and thought had the power to transform and Freire insisted that only action, engagement with reality, was truly transformative.

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<sup>101</sup> Comblin (2004) 140-141.

<sup>102</sup> Segundo J. L. (1976) *The Liberation of Theology*. New York: Orbis Books.

<sup>103</sup> Comblin (2004) 129

<sup>104</sup> Libanio J. B. (1980) ‘Experiences with the Base Ecclesial Communities in Brazil’ *Missiology* 8:3 325.

...one cannot change consciousness outside of praxis. But it must be emphasised that the praxis by which consciousness is changed is not only action but action and reflection. Thus there is a unity between praxis and theory in which both are constructed, shaped and reshaped in constant movement from practice to theory, then back to a new practice.<sup>105</sup>

And so in the dialectic between reflection and action a new moment was born that of 'theoretic praxis' as Freire called it, when the people stood back from their action to reflect upon that action in order to return to the action in a new way and achieve understanding or a raised level of consciousness which was of course a critical attempt to reveal reality and in the process transform it by the liberative action of the people. 'There is no conscientisation if the result is not the conscious action of the oppressed as an exploited social class, struggling for liberation.'<sup>106</sup> CEBs, through the methodology that was followed in their meetings, were locked into the reflection-action process by the hermeneutic circle. Freire is perfectly aware that 'a growing number of Christians in Latin America are discovering these things'<sup>107</sup> through the CEB process which was rapidly spreading across the continent. As mentioned already this often produced a crisis in both the people and their political and religious leaders. This was occurring at a time when there were very few governments with democratic credentials on the continent and when some ecclesiastical leaders were afraid of the changes being wrought by the Second Vatican Council. The result was widespread persecution of the leaders of CEBs from within and without the Church. The heroic witness to the liberating transformation of many local and national situations through the concerted action of the participants of the

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<sup>105</sup> Freire P. (1973) 'Education, Liberation and the Church' *Study Encounter SE/38* 9 (1) 3.

<sup>106</sup> Freire (1973) 4.

<sup>107</sup> *Ibid*

CEBs was matched by the increasing dismantling of the prophetic dimension of the Church, 'whose witness became one of fear - fear of change, fear that an unjust world will be radically transformed, fear of getting lost in an uncertain future.'<sup>108</sup>

We cannot understand the role and importance of Freire in the basic communities if we cannot grasp the importance of history to the Latin American culture and people. He insisted that the Church lost its way when it became anxious to avoid the risk of a future that must always be constructed and not just received. There was a clear grasp of the theological principle that Jesus came to inaugurate a kingdom that radically altered reality and challenged the creation of a new historic moment that tipped the balance in favour of a particular way of being human and being together in society. The Church is the sacrament of Jesus and the CEBs as part of that sacramental line and tradition are called to be faithful to the mission entrusted to all the disciples to transform the world into the kind of place where all could flourish and the values of the kingdom were lived and experienced by everyone. Freire, Segundo, Marins and others contributed massively to the formation of a methodology and praxis that delivered a conscientised people who saw themselves as immersed in history transforming it by their simple actions and gestures. This was often what inspired so many to give their lives in the simple yet courageous act of being a member of their base community.

And indeed Freire himself was part of that inspiration, for example in this passage where he spoke to the problems faced by those who had become afraid of the violence levelled

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<sup>108</sup> Freire (1973) 5.

against them and were tempted to withdraw or retreat from their commitment to the cause of the people's liberation:

A basic difference between those who leave and those who stay is that the latter accept, as an integral part of existence, the dramatic tension between past and future, death and life, staying and going, creating and not creating, between saying the word and mutilating silence, between hope and despair, being and non-being... It is only in so far as I accept to the full my responsibility within the play of this dramatic tension that I make myself a conscious presence in the world. I cannot permit myself to be a mere spectator. On the contrary, I must demand my place in the process of change... History is becoming; it is a human event. But rather than feeling disappointed and frightened by critical discovery of the tension in which my humanity places me, I discover in that tension the joy of being.<sup>109</sup>

In 1973 Freire wrote something prophetic given the trajectory of Santo Domingo and Aparecida: '... we should not be surprised if one day CELAM is severely restricted by the power elite, through the anti-prophetic Church of which we spoke.'<sup>110</sup>

I suggested earlier that Freire's work fed into the development of what is referred to as the hermeneutic circle and basically constituted the methodology that the CEBs used to organise their gatherings and to create coherence between Church and gospel, and faith and life. Cadorette makes a significant point when he states that: 'An important

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<sup>109</sup> Freire (1973) 7.

<sup>110</sup> Freire (1973) 8.



characteristic of basic Christian communities, particularly in Latin American countries, is a concern with injustice and the evangelical demand for the believing community to confront it in a socially efficacious way.’<sup>111</sup> CEBs in this continental incarnation have a distinctive ethos and culture; their service of the world is achieved by confronting the injustices suffered by the poor majority, with the gospel demand for a liberation from all that is not of God and God’s kingdom. The methodology that the overwhelming majority of CEB groups used was that of the See/Judge/Act method, developed in Europe initially, where it was known as the Cardijn method after the structure established by Cardinal Joseph Cardijn in Belgium when he started the Young Christian Worker movement.

## **2.9 CARDIJN METHODOLOGY<sup>112</sup>**

In Segundo’s theology there was a coming together of sociological analysis with liberative theological praxis; in this method critical information and experience served as an indispensable catalyst that enabled the Christian community to engage with the reality of tackling injustice where it affected the lives of people in the neighbourhood. Knowledge awakens us to what is, but also and perhaps more significantly, to what might be. In other words the facts that are evidenced in the analysis at the stage of seeing the reality and gaining as much knowledge as possible of the present situation, then enabled participants to transcend the oppression of the present moment by imagining, through the next phase of judging that reality in the light of the gospel and therefore being enabled to re-imagine themselves in a new moment, while making a commitment to acting together

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<sup>111</sup> Cadorette C. (1987) ‘Basic Christian Communities: Their Social Role and Missiological Promise’ *Missiology: An International Review* 15:2 18.

<sup>112</sup> See an article by Marins J. (2007) ‘El Ir y Venire del Método: Ver-Juzgar-Actuar’ *Aparecida: Renacer de una Esperanza*, Fundacion Amerindia, digital book, 53-58.  
[http://www.hechoreligioso.net/Proyectos/VCELAM/docuVCELAM/206\\_AmerindiaAparecidaLibroVirtual.pdf](http://www.hechoreligioso.net/Proyectos/VCELAM/docuVCELAM/206_AmerindiaAparecidaLibroVirtual.pdf) Accessed 20.06.2012.

in the social sphere for a different future. This process led many of the CEB practitioners to a state of heightened consciousness or raised awareness and along with that the attendant ideological suspicion that became part of many of the CEBs. Slowly but imperceptibly the poor and marginalised began to see through what they saw as the false logic of the dominant sector's values and language as they grew in critical self-awareness.

Marins believed that the CEBs in Latin America refined and improved upon the methodology that they took from the Catholic Action groups with the addition to the usual process of see/judge/act of a subsequent reflection/action process or evaluation, which is exactly what Freire described as 'theoretic praxis', and finally celebration or the moment when the faith community recognised that which had been achieved was part of the Christ-inspired mission that the people had received historically from the gospel. Segundo in his book *The Liberation of Theology* described the four steps of the hermeneutic circle and it can be seen how they corresponded to the methodology used by the CEBs in their meetings. He insisted that to begin moving through the hermeneutic circle there must first exist an 'ideological suspicion', an uneasiness about received ideas and the way they can be interpreted; this has been shown to have come about through the 'see' phase of the process. What was most controversial about this process was that it could not be contained simply within the social or political sphere but would also cross over into the ecclesial sphere and included analysis of the role and impact of the institutional Church. For example many had discovered through their meetings that despite its rhetoric the Church had sometimes failed to offer true community or a prophetic critique of oppression, and therefore that the institutional Church had been a religious legitimator of the status quo.

The second step in the hermeneutic circle followed from this realisation and was referred to as reformulation. After following the constant process of looking at reality in the light of the gospel, the 'judge' phase, the people had not only redefined their understanding of society and their place within it but had also re-imagined Church and their role within it and a new prophetic definition of Church had been born which was far richer and efficacious than that which preceded it. It was really valuable to notice how ecclesiology was springing from the human experience of people committed to a liberative praxis rather than simply from the mind of the teaching authority of the Church. The third phase of the circle entails implementation and clearly was analogous to the 'act' stage of methodology used in the CEBs. What had taken place over a period of time within the CEBs had been a re-doing of Church as the community moved from theory to practice.

A reimagining of Christian life had caused the CEBs to create more dynamic ecclesial structures. I have witnessed this personally on many occasions throughout Latin America. There the usual and expected structure for the running of Church meetings had been totally reversed, while the bishops had to sit and listen from within the large national and international gatherings, while the poor and marginalised groups (indigenous, youth and women) were given pride of place to share their experiences and insights with the assembly. The atmosphere was egalitarian, respectful and semi-democratic with ecclesial leadership forced almost to assume a position of listening service. Of course some ecclesiastics were extremely comfortable with this while others were clearly ill-at-ease.

Now to the final and fourth stage of the hermeneutic circle which ensured that the forward momentum of the Christian community was kept in motion by a critical reflection process

or evaluation which examined and refined the new ideas and structures that were emerging from the other phases of the process. ‘Thus we arrive once again at the beginning of the circle never quite content with what we have achieved nor satisfied with any given definition of the Christian community.’<sup>113</sup> This process ensured no doubt that the CEBs contributed to the credibility of the Church and gospel in the contemporary world. It also needs to be said that when compared with the way CEBs have developed in Africa and parts of Asia there was a far greater stress in Latin America upon action as a constitutive element of the CEB process and therefore there were far fewer groups that had remained at the level of bible-study groups or prayer groups or groups that simply assisted the parish priest in helping him to administer the parish.

Those who had little or no experience of the Latin American CEBs often accused them of being ‘political’ (simply because they engaged in the liberative praxis of challenging the daily injustices they encountered in the neighbourhoods where the CEBs were based) and therefore in their estimation they had become lost to the Church and were unworthy of being called ecclesial groupings. However those who had personal experience of the working of the CEBs knew very well that the mission of the CEBs was the same as that of the whole Church namely the transformation of society (the irruption of the kingdom) through the preferential ecclesial option for the poor, their cause and concerns. Now of course not everyone agreed that this was indeed an orthodox ecclesial position and so the very ethos and ideology of the CEBs throughout the continent was called into question and conflict ensued.

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<sup>113</sup> Cadorette (1987) 27.

## **2.10 CONFLICT AND THE CEBs**

The theme of conflict and the CEBs had been constant throughout the development of the communities in Latin America and the Caribbean. This chapter will now analyse the V General Assembly of CELAM held in Aparecida, Brazil, from 13-31 May 2007 as a place where that conflict again came starkly into focus through the altering of the final text of the assembly by Vatican officials in the name of Pope Benedict XV. This final section of the chapter draws upon the observations of Marins and Comblin who were participants in the Assembly. Despite the clear problems that the participants experienced both at the Conference and afterwards in receiving the approved final document from Rome, there were many who have tried to discover or recover, from within the documents and the experience of the Conference, sufficient content to be able to motivate those who look to church documents for their orientation and inspiration.

The preparations for Aparecida from within Brasil are illustrative of the issues that later came to light. Brazil is the country that has the largest Episcopal Conference in the continent as well as the country with the largest number of Catholics and yet their supportive submission about CEBs to the body responsible for the preparatory document was ignored and a number of their points failed to find their way into the text. Instead of their clear positive comments for example there appeared various doubts, questions and a definite refusal to commit to either promoting CEBs or developing them. The same thing was to be repeated with the submission from CELAM itself about CEBs. And it seemed to get no better when the General Assembly actually met in Aparecida. As Marins reported: 'In the lived experience and in the debates of Aparecida the theme of CEBs has

been conflictive...'<sup>114</sup> He notices three main currents that were present at the Conference; one that wanted to ensure continuity with and relevance to the pastoral options from Medellin and Puebla (the option for the poor, for justice and for the CEBs); another more attuned to the concerns of the Vatican authorities, insisting in making sure that the interests, focuses and themes coming from Rome should predominate (the truths of faith, teachings of the Popes, the battle against moral relativism, bioethics etc); and a third less numerous but more 'spiritualising' trend that tried to disconnect the experience of faith from social and political issues.<sup>115</sup>

The first and second redactions of the Conference text showed significant improvements on the initial pre-Conference documentation but by the third redaction the power of those who opposed CEBs became obvious. CEBs were removed from their context and now were placed alongside the family, the movements, seminaries and Catholic teaching in general. This was a 'purified' version of the text and taken together was not at all enthusiastic about CEBs; everything positive said about them in the second redaction had mysteriously disappeared. For the fourth redaction it took the intervention of ten of the Bishops' Conferences during the final plenary session and a series of tense votes for the text that had been approved in the second draft to be reintroduced. 70 bishops voted in favour while 57 voted against, therefore it didn't achieve the two-thirds majority required. However without further problems or interventions it appeared in the final document where it was approved by all the bishops with 2 votes against and 1 abstention.<sup>116</sup>

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<sup>114</sup> Marins unpublished manuscript used with permission. 3-part document 2007 Part 2 CEBs La 5<sup>a</sup> Asamblea, Aparecida, Brazil; 3:2 El Contexto de la Asamblea.

<sup>115</sup> Marins unpublished manuscript used with permission. 3-part document 2007 Part 2 CEBs La 5a Asamblea, Aparecida, Brazil; 3:2 El Contexto de la Asamblea.

<sup>116</sup> Marins unpublished manuscript used with permission. 3-part document 2007 Part 2 CEBs La 5a Asamblea, Aparecida, Brazil; 3:3 La Crisis de los Textos.

The previous General Assembly in Santo Domingo (1992) had not been a high-point in the development of the understanding of the CEBs. It did not go any further than Medellin (1968), neither did it repeat or even deepen in any way that which had been said about CEBs in Puebla (1979) where they had been clearly seen to be part of the ecclesial structure and were understood to be an integral level of ecclesiality, namely that fullness of Church at the base or smallest and most local level alongside the parish and diocese. The same could be seen in the methodology used by the bishops of see/judge/act where CEBs found a place at each stage or moment in the process. However in Aparecida the document was ambiguous about CEBs, there being no continuity about how they were understood or expressed in the life and mission of the Church. They were placed in the same unsatisfactory situation as in Santo Domingo, namely as just another expression of small communities, movements and new ecclesial groups. There was no clear definition about their identity or the place of each of those in the ecclesial structure. And yet they had also reinstated in its entirety chapter 7 of the second redaction where CEBs were situated alongside the parish, diocese and Episcopal conference as part of the structure of Church. Nonetheless the final document that received almost unanimous approbation from the Bishops was welcomed by all the CEB practitioners, given the level of controversy engendered in the debates.

The process that was followed by all meetings of bishops' conferences around the world was that the document agreed by them now had to go to Rome for final approval by the Holy Father. When this approved document returned to Latin America and was read by the bishops and participants it became clear that in some sections there had been serious changes made to the text approved by the bishops. The section which had suffered the greatest censure was CEBs. Whole phrases and sentences were deleted, new ideas and

phrases inserted and in places entire paragraphs had been restructured. Some important elements had been kept<sup>117</sup> but they had been weakened and undermined by an obsessive insistence on the CEBs being integrated fully into the parish and in complete fidelity to ‘the inestimable treasure of the Tradition and Magisterium of the Church’. Indeed the Roman document renewed the accusation, which had appeared in the Puebla document in an entirely different historical context, about secularization and an ‘ideological radicalisation’ of ‘members of the communities and entire communities’. All of which was used to justify the removal of a ‘unequivocal reaffirmation’ and a ‘new impulse’ which the V General Assembly wished to give to the CEBs in this new context in Latin America and the Caribbean.<sup>118</sup>

The real shock here was not that the section on CEBs had been radically altered but that the text that the bishops had voted in General Assembly had been so seriously changed. It was the rejection of the significance and competence of the ecclesial authority representing a whole continent and it seemed to negate the teachings of the Second Vatican Council about collegiality. A letter was sent to all the bishops who had been at Aparecida by the continental leaders of the CEBs in which they said:

We want to express our profound anxiety and distress, at discovering that the final document from Aparecida, approved unanimously, has been modified in a way that not only makes changes to the document but actually changes the document. This

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<sup>117</sup> ‘... it is important to note that the clear affirmation in the Aparecida Document of the parish as community of communities, overcomes the theological and pastoral confusion introduced in the Santo Domingo Document.’ Oliveros (2007) 206.

<sup>118</sup> For a full account of the texts before and after corrections see Muñoz R. (2007) ‘Los Cambios al Documento de Aparecida’ *Aparecida: Renacer de una Esperanza*, Fundacion Amerindia, digital book, [http://www.hechoreligioso.net/Proyectos/VCELAM/docuVCELAM/206\\_AmerindiaAparecidaLibroVirtual.pdf](http://www.hechoreligioso.net/Proyectos/VCELAM/docuVCELAM/206_AmerindiaAparecidaLibroVirtual.pdf) 297-308. Accessed 20.06.2012.



seems to us that it calls into question the magisterial authority of the Bishops of Latin America and the Caribbean. It disturbs us that the teachings of the Second Vatican Council that we welcome as the word of the Magisterium for the Universal Church appear to have been seriously damaged in a way that affects the meaning of subsidiarity for the Local Churches. This attack on the work you have done at Aparecida saddens us.<sup>119</sup>

The response from the bishops was disappointing; though individuals made their frustrations known privately, collectively they said nothing, preferring to show their obedience to and maintain their communion with the Holy Father. But what is clear is that as a result of what happened many rejected the document that came from Rome and took instead the final document approved unanimously by the Bishops. It is also clear that CEBs remain an important topic for Rome and that they continue to make an impact not only on the social scene but also within ecclesial circles too. If this wasn't the case why would so much effort be put into changing the text agreed by the bishops; surely it would have made more sense just to let it all pass without the need to add and insert new phrases, getting rid of words, substituting others and transforming the pastoral style into a far more moralising and disciplinary style?

Many questions remained unanswered; why had they removed expressions of support and confidence and expressions of a willingness to accompany the CEBs substituting instead generalisations of one-sided isolated events and failings that left open the possibility of

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<sup>119</sup> CEB theologians, practitioners and facilitators letter to Aparecida bishops of 28.07.2007 from Santo Domingo and signed by Fr Jose Marins, Sr Teolide Trevisan and 19 others. Marins unpublished manuscript used with permission.

new responses including perhaps that of Episcopal rejection? Why had the positive approach of the Assembly been changed into one from the Vatican of suspicions, allegations and antipathy? Why was there such an insistence on demoralising the CEBs; on a best-case scenario by reducing them to the level of a movement or a short-term pastoral programme and on a worst-case scenario by leaving the clear impression that the CEBs no longer had a trusted place within the Church? It was deeply significant that the same attitude wasn't exhibited against the new ecclesial movements many of which showed well-documented fundamentalist tendencies and there were even cases within the charismatic movement of break-away churches and in parishes of disconnected pastoral and liturgical structures. Why had Rome found it necessary to add suspicions and allegations in relation to CEB fidelity to Church teachings and authority when nothing of this sort appeared in a single text voted on by the Bishops during the Assembly?

The perspective of José Comblin is noteworthy. He wrote a response to the V General Assembly which was written for the Chilean Catholic movement *Somos Iglesia* and published by Fundacion Amerindia.<sup>120</sup> The final document from *Aparecida* addresses CEBs in paragraphs 176-179. Comblin comments:

This is the part of the document that suffered most corrections in Rome, the Bishop's document being much more insightful. Even so the text mentions all the positive fruits of the CEBs, recognising that they were the sign of the option for the poor. The Bishops had written: 'we want to vigorously reaffirm and to give a new impulse to the

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<sup>120</sup>Comblin J. (2007) 'El Proyecto Aparecida' *Aparecida: Renacer de una Esperanza*, Fundacion Amerindia, digital book, 171-186.  
[http://www.hechoreligioso.net/Proyectos/VCELAM/docuVCELAM/206\\_AmerindiaAparecidaLibroVirtual.pdf](http://www.hechoreligioso.net/Proyectos/VCELAM/docuVCELAM/206_AmerindiaAparecidaLibroVirtual.pdf) Accessed 20.06.2012.

life and mission of the CEBs in their missionary following of Jesus. They were one of the great manifestations of the Spirit in the Latin American and Caribbean Church after the Second Vatican Council.’ (194) These phrases were censured and removed and the text became much weaker as a result. Other corrections followed a similar line. But the Bishop’s text remains and can be consulted; and for the Latin American consciousness that text is more significant than the censored text.<sup>121</sup>

Comblin draws our attention to one of the most challenging aspects of the entire Aparecida Conference: its focus on mission. This was an attempt to inject a relatively new dimension for the Church to consider and in so doing challenged the future and the structure of the ecclesial community in Latin America. Of course for almost 50 years the CEBs had self-defined as ‘a missionary community with a communitarian mission’ and so were well placed to develop some missionary principles from their long experience of being an out-going and outward-looking Church focusing on transformative change in the social and ecclesial spheres. This mission-centred change which the Bishops were calling for ought to affect all the institutions of the Church if it was going to be effective. The Bishops stated in the final document that it should start with the reform of the parish (372) which must be subdivided into smaller communities where there were closer and better relationships. The Bishops went on to say that care must be taken that these groupings don’t reproduce the structure and the activity of the parish. And yet it was extremely helpful and indeed brave that the Bishops should hint that it was a badly-functioning, inadequate institution for these times of growing urbanisation and increasing secularisation.

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<sup>121</sup> Comblin (2007) 175

This mission-centred project of Aparecida was so radical that doubts arose as to who was going to put this programme into practice. Comblin pointed out that history showed that the most profound changes in the Church came from new people forming new groups and creating a new life-style, always starting from a life-option of poverty. It was never the established leadership or the traditional structures that empowered change as these were shown to be incapable of taking the necessary risks; and it was this understanding that enabled the realisation that the clergy were not in any condition to apply this programme. Generally it was the laity and only occasionally bishops and priests who somehow managed to undergo a conversion usually by escaping from the system in which they had been rooted. ‘Personally, I believe that the future missionaries capable of changing the face of the Church will be the laity, lay missionaries’.<sup>122</sup> As Comblin explored the practical outcomes of the Aparecida Conference with regard to mission it became clear that he was describing what the CEBs had been doing for decades and would continue to do in the future despite there being those in Rome and some Bishops on the continent who wouldn’t agree. This transformation of the Church would not be realised in a top-down way, nor would it begin with a theoretical plan, but simply with people who were willing to start an adventure, hopefully with the support of the hierarchy. There could not be some preordained programme to follow because the Holy Spirit must be leading the way. If the missionary action doesn’t come organically from the actual people engaged in this activity it will have no effect because it won’t be a living human witness, which is in fact the only thing that can touch the hearts of those to whom the mission is addressed.

This chapter has spent some considerable time exploring the origins and theology of the CEBs specifically analysing them through the lens of Fr José Marins. We looked at the

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<sup>122</sup> Comblin (2007) 178.

inspirational CELAM meeting at Medellin and the consequent meetings terminating with an extensive comment on the controversial and conflictive Aparecida meeting. We saw how CEBs were celebrated as an embodiment of Vatican II and how they have led over the years to a rich and developing new ecclesial consciousness, likewise controversial, which has given rise to a sense of a Church of the Poor or Church from the Poor. This research has also focused on the distinctive pedagogy of the CEBs and the methodology that emerged across the continent, noting the considerable contribution of Paulo Freire. In the next two chapters we shall explore the impact and contribution of the BECs of Africa and Asia to the world-wide phenomenon of this grass-roots ecclesial development.

## CHAPTER THREE

### AFRICA: DIFFERENT CONTEXT IMPORTANT LESSONS

This chapter having left behind the experience and spread of BECs in Latin America will now focus on their growth and development throughout the continent of Africa, where they prefer to call them Small Christian Communities (SCCs).<sup>123</sup> This research has not uncovered any direct causal effect in their spread and growth; different circumstances and diverse influences have nonetheless produced a result similar in many ways to the experience of Latin America, without the added problem of ecclesial and societal conflict. The chapter will explore the history of SCC development, the underlying theology that accompanied it and the lessons learnt in the process, focusing particularly on Eastern Africa.<sup>124</sup> This region has probably seen the greatest development in SCCs in Africa and from within the considerable literature brief comments and evaluations of other African regions are also made.

The chapter will look closely at the context in which SCCs became the preferred pastoral option of the Catholic bishops and this will involve a brief examination of the perceived inadequacy of the colonially inherited model of Church and parish and also an understanding of the contribution of the African independence movements as well as the growth of African Independent Churches. It will ask what if any, are the ways in which this different context led to the development of a different version of SCCs? What impact

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<sup>123</sup> Out of respect for the peoples of Africa the acronym SCCs will most usually be used.

<sup>124</sup> The *de facto* historian of this period is Fr Joseph G. Healey MM who started work in the Nairobi offices of AMECEA in 1968 as the first Social Communications Secretary. His latest book is the most authoritative version of the historical process of SCCs in the region. Healey J. (2012) *Building the Church as Family of God: Evaluation of Small Christian Communities in Eastern Africa*. AMECEA Gaba Publications – CUEA Press; Double Spearhead Nos 199-200.

has this had on their success or otherwise? One of the significant aspects of SCC development in Africa is the critique that emerges from within the SCC process. It raises questions about the relationship between establishing a pastoral priority and fully understanding the implications and limitations of current ecclesiologies. In recent years Africa has been instrumental in the spread of SCCs to Asia through the AsIPA programme and in the next chapter we will look at whether any of the African lessons and evaluations accompanied the process.

Research for this chapter began with a familiarisation visit to South Africa at the end of 2005 where I participated in the International Pastoral Ministry Course at the Lumko Institute in Johannesburg.<sup>125</sup> Here I gained first-hand knowledge of SCCs from within the organisation that has developed the training and facilitation of leaders throughout the whole of Southern and Eastern Africa. Being exposed to the methodology and materials of Lumko proved to be vital in my research programme, enabling me to compare not only the way SCCs are organised in Africa but also the ethos and methodology used in their replication. This was important because if SCCs are genuinely an experience of Church then it is crucial to also sense the spirit that permeates them and animates the process of formation. I also set aside time to study some of the literature on the subject at the mayor seminary in Pretoria before returning to the UK where I soon discovered that I would have to travel to either London or Edinburgh if I was to access the same journals at home.<sup>126</sup> Much of my information came from the African Ecclesial Review (AFER) and

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<sup>125</sup> <http://www.sacbc.org.za/about-us/associate-bodies/lumko-institute/> Accessed 11.09.2012.

<sup>126</sup> During the period of this research there have been over 80 different articles published in East African journals on the subject of SCCs between 1973 and 2006. The greatest period of reflective output was during the 1980's when 39 articles were published, 20 in the 1970's and 25 in the 1990's.

the AMECEA Spearhead journal,<sup>127</sup> this is a large body of material all of which I have accessed but a smaller body of work produced in Kenya called the AMECEA Documentation Service (ADS) was more difficult to track down, however many of their authors have also published in other journals and are cited in the bibliography.<sup>128</sup>

### **3.1 DISCOVERING ANOTHER TRADITION**

Parallel to the changes taking place within the universal Catholic Church during the 1960's as a result of the Second Vatican Council, changes were occurring in Africa that left an indelible mark upon the thinking and attitudes of many Church personnel. The African world-view had not disappeared with the advent of a western-style Christianity but emerged again in the post-colonial period. Changes taking place right across the continent included the dramatic impact on the established mainstream churches of the growth of African Independent Churches and from the late 1940s onwards the spread of anti-colonial African independence movements. These had an enormous effect upon the way Africans saw themselves and understood their relationships with their history and their choices for the future. At the same time and connected in some way was the growing realisation that the structure of Church life was inadequate to meet the needs of these newly independent Africans.

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<sup>127</sup> Both journals are produced by Gaba Publications, Kenya for the AMECEA (Association of Member Episcopal Conferences in Eastern Africa) bishops. AMECEA is a service organization for the National Episcopal Conferences of the nine English-speaking countries of Eastern Africa - Eritrea (1993), Ethiopia (1979), Kenya (1961), Malawi (1961), South Sudan (2011), Sudan (1973), Tanzania (1961), Uganda (1961) and Zambia (1961). The Republic of South Sudan became independent on 9 July, 2011, but the two Sudans remain part of one Episcopal Conference. Somalia (1995) and Djibouti (2002) are Affiliate Members.

<sup>128</sup> Edele (1979) 135; Healey (1978) 136, (1979) 175, (1984) 284, (1996) 453; Sirikwa (1979) 168; Buys (1979) 171; Healey (1979) 183, (1984) 284; Shorter (1985) 299; Walliggo (1994) 429; Ishengoma (1996) 453.



R Hunt Davis<sup>129</sup> listed three divergent interpretations of the colonial period which he drew out from a number of academic papers on African history. They were all concerned with examining which had the most impact on shaping independent Africa - the pre-colonial or the colonial period. The first and earliest group of writers argued that the colonial period created a decisive break with the African past. Other historians responded by arguing that the colonial period must be set within the perspective of African history as a whole and stressed that continuity with the past was as important as the changes brought about by the colonisers. The third position is that of the 'radical pessimists' who though agreeing with the first school that the colonial period was the most important in African history and constituted a significant rupture with the previous era nonetheless argued that the colonial powers had left the continent in such a state of dependence that only a world-wide economic revolution would bring about the radical change necessary to truly liberate Africa.<sup>130</sup>

Africans such as the novelist Chinua Achebe and the political scientist Abiola Irele<sup>131</sup> argued that colonialism affected African society and culture to its core. This in turn had led Africans in a search for new values that had produced popular movements like religious independency and negritude.<sup>132</sup> African leaders like Leopold Sedar Senghor and Julius Nyerere have then argued that the process of nation-building necessitated recapturing the memory of the past from which the colonial period had separated Africans. It was not enough to be going forward but in both national as well as ecclesial

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<sup>129</sup> Hunt Davis R. 'Interpreting the Colonial Period in African History' *African Affairs: Journal of the Royal African Society* (1973) 72 (289) 383-400 [www.jstor.org/stable/721149](http://www.jstor.org/stable/721149) Accessed 02.02.2010

<sup>130</sup> Hunt Davis (1973) 387.

<sup>131</sup> Hunt Davis (1973) 389.

<sup>132</sup> Abiola Irele 'Negritude or Black Cultural Nationalism' *Journal of Modern African Studies* (1965) 3 (3) cited by Hunt Davis (1973) 389.

life there developed a sense that in order to move to the next stage of post-colonial African development there would be a need to recapture and reconnect with the past, with a different way of doing things; in other words exploring another tradition, another way of being African.

This seeking out of another or older tradition for inspiration was happening for some African leaders on two levels; firstly society was attempting to reconnect with a pre-colonial past in order to make sense of the challenges of the present, and secondly for Catholics the Second Vatican Council was doing a similar thing, when it encouraged a return to the roots of scripture and tradition as an inspiration for renewal. There were a number of Church leaders who sensing the signs of the times produced insights that were to have an enormous impact on the ecclesial scene just as political leaders were having on the national scene. Their contribution will be explored later.

### **3.2 THE EXERCISE OF AFRICAN INITIATIVE**

It was becoming apparent to many that though the Catholic Church was seeing a significant increase in the consecration of African bishops during this period ‘... paradoxically at the same time the Catholic Church could be called the least African of all, because it was so thoroughly controlled from abroad.’<sup>133</sup> This was most obvious in the naming of bishops according to a list and agenda drawn up in the Vatican but it was also very apparent in its missionary involvement. Gifford noted in passing the influence of the Catholic Church on the socio-political field, its prestige and formidable presence across

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<sup>133</sup> Gifford P. ‘Some Recent Developments in African Christianity’ *African Affairs: Journal of the Royal African Society* (1994) 93 (373) 522.

the continent.<sup>134</sup> Yet despite this level of interaction with African societies it should still be noted that the Church continued to be understood and interpreted within the foreign and colonial period of African history.

Historians of the transition from traditional to contemporary Africa have noted the significance of the concept of African initiative, demonstrated particularly in the Independent and Separatist churches movement but by no means confined to them. Richard Gray commented in a paper delivered in 1977:

We begin to see African Christian initiative not merely in the propagation, expansion and explanation of an alien religion in black Africa but also in the context of a global transformation of a purely western, parochial understanding of Christianity itself.<sup>135</sup>

The impact here was not only that Africans were taking the initiative in organising their own versions of the Christian faith which were drawing thousands away from the European-based colonial Churches but that their very existence was having an influence on mainstream churches. The Church universal is challenged by her encounter with Africa and the consequent insights and experiences which will impact upon the self-understanding of the churches in the West.<sup>136</sup> This process is identified by Healey as being underway within the Catholic Church possibly as early as 1961 in former Zaire<sup>137</sup>

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<sup>134</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>135</sup> Gray R. (1978) 'Christianity and Religious Change in Africa' *African Affairs: Journal of the Royal African Society* 77 (306) 90.

<sup>136</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>137</sup> 'At its 6th Plenary Assembly from 20 November to 2 December, 1961 the Zaire Episcopal Conference (now the Democratic Republic of the Congo or DRC that is a neighbour to Eastern Africa) approved a pastoral plan to promote "Living Ecclesial Communities" (also called "Living Christian Communities").

(now called the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), a neighbour to AMECEA and a Francophone country). However he does acknowledge that SCCs were not officially launched until 1971-72 during a period of crisis within the country.<sup>138</sup> Another significant date is 1969 in Tanzania when Fr Daniel Zwack called for a study to be made of the reasons why large numbers of Catholics were leaving their Church and joining the Independent Churches. He raised some very important questions in his Position Paper for the Tanzanian Seminar Study Year in which he had drawn attention to the success of a three-year project of creating small communities among the Luo in North Mara, Tanzania.<sup>139</sup> As a result Dr Perrin-Jassy, a cultural anthropologist, was requested by the Maryknoll Fathers to investigate three problems that were affecting the mission of the Church amongst the Luo<sup>140</sup> in Tanzania including: the impact of the growing number of African Independent Churches (some of which involved breakaway former Catholics), to explain why they had such a strong following among the people in North Mara and propose practical conclusions on a pastoral plane. Perrin-Jassy published her groundbreaking study in French in 1970 (which was later translated into English in 1973) in

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*Communautés Ecclésiales Vivantes de Base* (CEVB) is the full French term for SCCs. The bishops opted for these communities to be more important than the well-known mission structures (church buildings, schools, hospitals). These Living Ecclesial Communities were said to be the only way to make the Church more "African" and close to the people.' Healey (2012) 11-12.

<sup>138</sup> 'The actual launching of SCCs in DRC goes back to the period 1971-1972 when there was a confrontation between President Mobutu Sese Seko and the Catholic Church. Mobutu's "authenticity" campaign suppressed the missionary institutes and associations. To meet the crisis the Church established the priority of the creation and organization of SCCs. The pioneering and visionary Cardinal Joseph Malula of Kinshasa Archdiocese, DRC stated: "The Living Ecclesial Communities are slowly becoming the ordinary place of Christian life, with the parish as the communion of the Living Ecclesial Communities." This included emphasizing lay ministries and implementing Vatican II's theology of laity...' Healey (2012) 12.

<sup>139</sup> Healey specifically identifies the area as the Luo-speaking Deanery (especially Nyarombo, Ingri and Masonga Parishes) in North Mara in Musoma Diocese in northwestern Tanzania. Healey (2012) 13.

<sup>140</sup> (i) Meaning and importance of the dissident movement called Legio Maria (ii) Why the Luo were leaving the Church to join African movements (iii) What are the religious needs of the Luo? Kelly J. (1991) 'The Evolution of Small Christian Communities' *AFER* 33 (3) 110-111.

which she highlighted many points that proved to be significant for the developing self-understanding of the Catholic hierarchy.<sup>141</sup>

(i) For people to feel they ‘belong’ to a group they have to take an active role in that group. (ii) Experience has shown that one can attain recognition more easily in a small group than in a large one. (iii) Members become ‘totally involved’ in the group’s activities and planning when it is small.<sup>142</sup>

What emerged were an awareness of and a focusing on questions of participation, belonging, involvement and size. These were the building blocks of community and they contributed significantly to the growth of the African Independent Churches. The study was massively influential and went on to highlight the importance and stress placed upon the experience of community among the members of their congregations.<sup>143</sup> What was missing in the Catholic Church for most Africans was precisely an experience of community. This basic anthropological need of Africans emerged into view once the clerical culture reacted to the disappearing crowds of baptised Catholics by asking the question what the religious needs of the Luo were and whether the Catholic Church was meeting them? This focus on the African and their experience of Christianity opened the Church to an implicit critique of the culture and choices of the colonial Church. The exercise of African initiative and basic elements of anthropology became recognised as

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<sup>141</sup> Perrin Jassy M-F. (1970) *La Communauté de Base dans les Eglises Africaines* Series I Vol IV Ceeba Publications Bandundu: Zaire. English edition *Basic Community in the African Churches* (1973) New York: Orbis

<sup>142</sup> Kelly J. (1991) ‘The evolution of SCCs’ *AFER*. 33 (3) 111.

<sup>143</sup> Gray (1986) 51. Kelly (1991) 110-112. Bishop Holmes-Siedle remarked ‘...she published the results of her Tanzanian research which influenced so profoundly our way of conceiving our apostolate in Africa.’ Holmes-Siedle J. *MAfr* ‘Overview of Small Christian Communities in East Africa’ *AFER* (1979) 21 (5) 275.

essential ingredients in the re-thinking of Catholic pastoral priorities that emerged from a deeper encounter with culture and tradition. The Catholic experience of SCCs was an African response to an African problem, it was not the copying from another continent of a model of Church that might or might not prove pastorally useful here.

### **3.3 AN ANCIENT AFRICAN VALUE**

I found in Latin America that the concept of ‘reality’ was crucial in beginning to understand how the Latin American thought and reacted to the whole of life. It was second nature – an understanding that what was, the way things in fact exist, the actual experience of life, underpinned everything in their cultural responses to events and experiences. Reality was encountered in a profound analysis of an event that involved many elements including the socio-political, socio-economic and the theological-cultural. In Africa the concept was nuanced differently. Reality was found in the handing on of information from one generation to the next, not simply within the content but in the process of transmission itself. The ability to become a full person was wrapped up in the process of receiving that ‘power to be’ by the younger generation from their elders.<sup>144</sup> This made the relationship between one generation and the next not simply chronological but also ontological. It showed the vital importance of relationships and the unique weight placed on this element by African cultures. To hand on tradition was at the same time to be involved in community, ‘tradition and community are two sides of the same reality.’<sup>145</sup>

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<sup>144</sup> Booth Jr N. S. ‘Tradition and Community in African Religion’ *Journal of Religion in Africa* (1978) 9 89.

<sup>145</sup> *Ibid.*

African religion is communal in two senses. First, the beliefs and practices are those of a particular community and so in a sense it could be said that there are as many African religions as there are identifiable communities. But secondly, African religion is communal in the sense that the community is itself the ‘ultimate concern,’ that for which a person would sacrifice everything, even life itself. Newell S. Booth Jr states that this appears to be characteristic of religion all over sub-Saharan Africa.<sup>146</sup> We cannot understand African religion or culture without a realisation of this communal concern. It is expressed very succinctly by Mbiti in this way: ‘I am because we are and since we are, therefore, I am.’<sup>147</sup> Community along with tradition has ontological significance; it is sacred. A person has their being only as a participant in the on-going community.

The community dimension is central to our understanding of the contribution Africa has made to the Catholic Church and it goes a long way to understanding why and how the concept of Small Christian Communities gradually took on such importance right across the continent. But another crucial element in the process that made SCCs seem like such a good idea to the bishops was the fact that African religion is at its core ‘humanistic’ because its primary focus is on human values.<sup>148</sup> This humanism is communal, rather than individualistic; the individual is significant in so far as they participate in the community. SCCs were a way in which these critical elements of African anthropology could be assimilated into the pastoral practice of the Catholic Church. It is not as if these elements were ‘foreign’ simply that they had been disregarded in favour of other cultural and religious priorities of the West

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<sup>146</sup> Booth (1978) 90.

<sup>147</sup> Quoted by Booth (1978) 90 and taken from Mbiti J, *African Religions and Philosophy*, Heinemann, London, (1969) 108.

<sup>148</sup> Booth (1978) 91.

### 3.4 THE IMPLoding PARISH

Given the considerations we have briefly noted about the impact of a thorough reconsideration of all things colonial it is not surprising that in the ecclesiastical area a major focus was a revision of the parish, in response to the question as to whether it was meeting the needs of the Church in a post-colonial independent era. In one of the first articles to appear in the literature MacInnes raised a vital question about the African parish: ‘fundamentally it is a Western European parish system transplanted on African soil... can it continue to convince people in a new situation and a new society: Independent Uganda, 1969?’<sup>149</sup> Clearly linking the critiquing of the parish system with the newly emerging moment in African history the conclusion was dawning that the inherited colonial model of Church was no longer adequate for these new times as people began to analyse the nature and working of a system that had been imposed on them by European and North American missionaries. His article also identified something that could no longer be ignored even though it was a direct result of the prevailing system – namely, the passivity of the laity. He wrote ‘...many of our people long ago opted out of an active role in this church, in this system. It had little to offer them.’<sup>150</sup> There was something about the way Catholic life was structured that seemed to create this reality and the ensuing problems and difficulties. Less than a decade later Crowley reports, ‘It is painfully obvious that many of the structures related to the community and to ministry are now totally inadequate to meet the demands and thinking of the African Church.’<sup>151</sup> He specifically named the parish as being at the root of the problem. He was not alone in making this connection, Gray agreed with his analysis, ‘One of the dominant facts of

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<sup>149</sup>MacInnes G. (1969) ‘An African Parish – Is there an alternative?’ *AFER* 11 (3) 225.

<sup>150</sup>MacInnes (1969) 231. “Still today it has little to offer the great mass of Christians living at any distance from Parish centres, small hope of personal growth or spiritual progress, little enough in the way of community life or an authentic African celebration of times and events.”

<sup>151</sup> Crowley P. (1977) ‘Christian Community and Ministry’ *AFER* 19 (4) 201.



church history in Africa is that the parish... has so seldom provided the structure of the local Christian communities.’<sup>152</sup>

An avalanche of commentators weighed in with their analysis - Hetsen stated that there were ‘...those who feel the need for a complete ‘overhaul’ of the traditional parish system. This ‘overhaul’ should enable the parish to move slowly into a new reality: that is to move away from a sacramental service station and to develop into a communion of communities.’<sup>153</sup> Moschetti wrote ‘... the parish in its present form requires renewal as it no longer meets people’s needs.’<sup>154</sup> Kalilombe added ‘Our parishes are often too big, and at best they are useful administrative units.’<sup>155</sup> Ndingi also noted that ‘...in 1973 we began to realise that the structure we had in the church would not be sufficient for the 1980’s. It was good for administration, but did not go down deeply enough.’<sup>156</sup> This was a conversation little heard in Latin America or indeed in Asia and yet in Africa it was deafening. African commentators were noting that the parish as an administrative unit had indeed some benefits, but that they needed it to deliver far more. I take Ndingi’s ‘did not go down deeply enough’ to mean the parish wasn’t taking root in genuine African culture and traditions. SCCs would be an attempt to do just that.

The parish was in desperate need of revision, because the colonial system more interested in administration and the faithful reporting back to Rome of precise numbers of baptisms, communicants, marriages etc, had created a passive, dependent and infantile Church

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<sup>152</sup> Gray R. (1986) ‘Popular Theologies in Africa: A report on a workshop on Small Christian Communities in Southern Africa’ *African Affairs: Journal of the Royal African Society* 85 50.

<sup>153</sup> Hetsen J. ‘Aspects of Christian Community Building in Africa’ *AMECEA Spearhead* (1983) 75 19.

<sup>154</sup> Moschetti D. ‘Small Christian Communities – A Fitting Ecclesiology for the Cities’ *AMECEA Spearhead* (1997) 145-147 69.

<sup>155</sup> Kalilombe P. (1974) ‘Biblical background to the AMECEA theme – position paper’ *AFER*. 16 (1) 60.

<sup>156</sup> Ndingi R. *A New Missionary Era* (1982) 99.

which contrasted with the growing awareness and experience of collective participation in the emancipation and liberation of many African peoples. Interestingly in Africa though the parish was a territorial concept of rural origin and had serious limitations when applied to the urban milieu<sup>157</sup> nonetheless it was out in vast areas of the African countryside that its inherent deficiencies were exposed; the parish was never a sufficient level of structure even for the missionaries who sub-divided the system into out-stations where the priests could attempt to gather and organise at least some of the faithful.

It was within this context of a profound questioning of the parish model that the bishops of East Africa became open to reviewing the perceived wisdom that the basic structure of the Church as practiced in Western Europe was the only way that Catholic life could flourish. They were clearly aware that even though numbers were still increasing almost exponentially, their Catholic communities were not truly flourishing but were in crisis. Kalilombe readily acknowledged to the bishops of AMECEA, in a position paper for the 1976 Plenary Assembly, that unless there was a whole-scale revision of pastoral practice then disaster was staring them in the face:

In these circumstances of Eastern Africa, what we call missions or parishes cannot be taken as the basic units of the local Church. If we do the Church is doomed to failure. We need to adopt a new system whereby the basic units of the Church are those smaller communities where the ordinary life of the people takes place.<sup>158</sup>

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<sup>157</sup> Moschetti (1997) 69

<sup>158</sup> Kalilombe P. (1976) 'An overall view on building Christian communities – position paper' *AFER*. 18 (5) 267.

This was the beginning of a creative moment for the Catholic Church which was being challenged on many fronts to respond to the new realities of both secular and ecclesial life. The bishops were aware that their Church was heavily dependent, firstly upon a small minority of the baptised, the clergy and religious, leaving the majority laity passive and uninvolved, and secondly upon help from abroad in the form of missionaries and financial and material support. They knew that this state of affairs maintained a Church in a state of infantile dependence, incapable of standing on its own feet, 'missionary' and not truly local and therefore to a degree 'foreign' because it was not yet rooted in African cultures and traditions. There was a real need for the Catholic Church to become a mature and truly local Church, which would only happen when the organisation of Church life would depend on the majority of the local people themselves taking full responsibility for the development and growth of their ecclesial reality.

### **3.5 AFRICANISATION BY BECOMING LOCAL**

This thrust or drive to become a 'local' Church was one of the factors that made the experience of Africa quite different from that of Latin America. The post-colonial context was forcing the bishops to find a way of organising ecclesial life in such a way that they could really engage with all of their people and not just the clerical elite. Similarly, as at the national political level Africans were taking responsibility for the direction that their countries were moving in, so at all ecclesial levels there was a growing need to allow the Catholic people to start taking responsibility for the future direction of their Church and its mission. Of course this was already happening all around them in the spectacular growth of the African Independent Churches.

Perrin-Jassy's report became a very important piece of evidence as the AMECEA bishops prepared for their decisive IV Plenary Assembly in Nairobi, Kenya. This proved to be a critical step in clarifying the need to re-structure Church, away from the traditional model of parish and outstation with its juridical and bureaucratic ethos, and towards smaller groups of the faithful that would be marked out by inter-personal relationships, active involvement and communal responsibility. In August of 1972 Patrick Kalilombe had become bishop of Lilongwe, Malawi. His input and impact in those early days proved to be foundational for the AMECEA bishops. Gray attested that 'Kalilombe...had been one of the principal architects of the concept of Small Christian Communities among Roman Catholics in Africa.'<sup>159</sup> They held their IV AMECEA Plenary in December 1973 which was entitled: 'Planning for the Church in Eastern Africa in the 1980's'. Of the 26 position papers drawn up by the bishops, the question of SCCs was not among them. The bishops did not even include SCCs in the resolutions of the Study Conference. However SCCs made their first appearance in an official AMECEA document when they were mentioned in the preamble to the guidelines issued at the close of the IV Assembly and Kalilombe was responsible for that input.

Kalilombe had presented one of the Position Papers requested by the bishops: 'The biblical background to the AMECEA theme' within which he situated their debate in the context of biblical scholarship on the New Testament experience of Church. He outlined for the bishops that the early Church understood itself to be the Church of Christ subsisting in a communion of local Churches. Each local community was of a size that made possible genuine personal relationships where people were known by name and experienced a high degree of communal bonding in living, worship and witness. The

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<sup>159</sup> Gray (1986) 49.

Pauline Churches of Antioch, Ephesus, Philippi, Corinth and Thessalonica made strenuous efforts to support one another and share resources and maintain the bond of unity amongst them all. And yet the basis of their Christian life was the local community of the faithful to which they belonged. In taking the bishops back to a place before the parish system came into being he freed them from the historical and cultural limitations of the present reality and allowed them to get in touch with the source and origin of the Church. It was here that they sensed the vitality and dynamism of those early Christians that contrasted so forcefully with the paralysed state of their own African congregations. His reflection asked the bishops to examine if their inherited complex colonial system ‘has not led to a gradual loss of the importance put on the basic Christian community?’<sup>160</sup>

In the African context community was a cultural priority as we have seen and the European missionaries had not given sufficient weight to the deeply held conviction that life only had meaning within a context of profound personal relationships, not only with the living but also with the ancestors. This uniquely African world-view was not the experience of the foreign clergy coming as they did from societies heavily influenced by a very different world-view. Kalilombe was able to show that the desire to restructure Church life was actually a returning to a more scriptural ecclesial reality and therefore not a new idea at all, but a going back to the roots, something indeed that the Second Vatican Council had asked of the entire Church. Pastoral planning had been done for too long at the diocesan and parish level, one removed from where people actually lived and interacted. The thrust of his appeal was clear ‘that it is really at this grass-root level that

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<sup>160</sup> Kalilombe (1974) 60.

the Church can hope to be part and parcel of everyday life.’<sup>161</sup> And this was to be reflected in the preamble to the guidelines issued at the end of the Plenary Assembly.

Unlike other parts of the world the decision to promote SCCs in Africa was based on a sense of needing to own the Church, to make it ‘indigenous’ or ‘local’, so that there was no longer a gap between the faith people professed and the lives they lived. What was stark in Africa was the foreign face of the Church; it was felt to be European and not African, something that the consecration of black bishops had not really challenged. The AMECEA bishops grasped the urgent necessity of looking for a different model or a new way of doing Church that would deliver the vision they had sensed in the New Testament and that chimed so closely with their own sense of African identity.

While the Church of Christ is universal, it is a communion of small local Christian Churches, communities of Christians rooted in their own society...so that with time they become firmly rooted in the life and culture of the people... incarnated in the life of the people. She is led by local people, meets and answers the local needs and problems, and finds within herself the resources needed for her life and mission. We are convinced that in these countries of Eastern Africa it is time to become really ‘local’, that is: self-ministering, self-propagating and self-supporting.<sup>162</sup>

This was the moment when the young Churches of Kenya, Malawi, Tanzania, Uganda and Zambia decided it was time to grow up, to stand on their own two feet, to become a

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<sup>161</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>162</sup> AMECEA (1973) ‘For the Catholic Church in Eastern Africa in the 1980’s’ *AFER*. 16 (1) 9-10.

mature Church, independent of the European missionaries. Of course it was no surprise that this came about in the decade following the bloody struggle for independence of many African nations. Society was definitely setting the agenda and showing the way. The realisation that the present parish system was unsustainable underpinned the drive for renewal. This again is something unique to Africa as they feel their way towards a different expression of Church in communities at the base of society and Church.

We believe that in order to achieve this we have to insist on building Church life and work on basic Christian communities, in both rural and urban areas. Church life must be based on the communities in which everyday life and work takes place: those basic and manageable social groupings whose members can experience real inter-personal relationships and feel a sense of communal belonging, both in living and working.<sup>163</sup>

### **3.6 SCCs A PRIORITY BEYOND AFRICA**

While this research looked in detail at the leadership given by the collective voice of the East African bishops through their AMECEA gatherings it was also important to make the point that there were already a few people at the grass-root level who were ahead of the game. There was not a great deal of evidence to say exactly how many missionaries or native clergy had adopted the form of base communities before the bishops began to formulate their pastoral choice. One of them however was Fr Edele, MAfr who started

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<sup>163</sup> AMECEA (1973) 10.

preparing for SCCs in his parish in Lusaka, Zambia from 1968 and finally launched them in 1971 two years before the bishops gathered.<sup>164</sup>

The bishops gained a significant boost to their confidence and their project when in 1974, the year following their first official foray into the idea of SCCs, there took place in Rome the Synod on Evangelisation and the presence of episcopates from all over the world had a dramatic effect on those from Eastern Africa. There was a mutual exploration of this new phenomenon of base communities as Bishop Ndingi from Nakuru, Kenya comments:

Our bishops also became interested when they realised that similar developments were taking place in the Church in other parts of the world. Small communities became so much a part of the Synod that Pope Paul VI devoted an entire section to them in *Evangelii Nuntiandi*.<sup>165</sup>

Kalilombe agreed: 'The AMECEA delegates ...had the chance to realise that all over the Church there is much talk about Basic Christian Communities,'<sup>166</sup> reinforcing for them the importance of the theme. The bishops were aware that although a similar process was underway across the developing world nonetheless each was growing independently of

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<sup>164</sup> Edele A. MAfr reports starting BCCs in his parish in Lusaka, Zambia in 1971 but having prepared for them by a 3-yr visitation of parishioners since 1968. "We got valuable hints on how to form BCCs from Europe and South America" but he was keen to improve on what he had heard by including "...every Catholic family... not just a small percentage of the Catholic population" 'Establishing Basic Christian Communities in Lusaka, Zambia' *Pro Mundi Vita Bulletin* (1980) 81 22.

<sup>165</sup> Ndingi (1982) 'Basic Communities: The African Experience' In: Padraig Flanagan SPS (ed) *A New Missionary Era*. New York: Orbis 101. Also Ndingi (1979) 'Implementing AMECEA's pastoral priority' *AFER*. 21 (5) 287.

<sup>166</sup> Kalilombe (1976) 262.



the other. This fact was attested to by a number of writers<sup>167</sup> who made the point that Africa was not attempting to copy what was going on elsewhere in Latin America and Asia but was coming to similar conclusions for quite different and independent reasons, as Ndingi explains, ‘we had had very little communication with those places.’<sup>168</sup> What was fascinating about the African practitioners of SCCs was that they felt the need both to express their independence of the growth of BECs in South America for example but at the same time to constantly evaluate what they were doing against the experiences of the Latin Americans. This evaluation was well documented in a series of articles published for about a decade from 1984.<sup>169</sup> They attest to many and significant differences between the development of BECs in Latin America and SCCs in East Africa (not least of which was the connected question of differing terminology)<sup>170</sup> but it was clear to me that despite those differences the basic concept is virtually identical. They both understand the BEC/SCC to be a level of church, something that will be explored in greater detail.

The determination of the African bishops to continue along the pastoral path they had chosen is further underlined by their decision to make SCCs their study theme for the next two Plenary Assemblies of AMECEA. Building Small Christian Communities in Eastern Africa was their chosen theme at the V Plenary in 1976 in Nairobi, Kenya and again in 1979 in Zomba, Malawi at the VI Plenary Assembly. This was an extraordinary commitment and reveals the vital importance the bishops attached to renewing the Church in Africa. We were not dealing here with people paying lip service to a concept that had been agreed at some academic or bureaucratic level but this showed a remarkable

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<sup>167</sup> Ndingi (1982) 100; Healey (1986) 17; Pro Mundi Vita (1977) 22.

<sup>168</sup> Ndingi (1982) 100.

<sup>169</sup> Kritzinger (1989); Healey (1984, 1986); Lobinger (1987, 1995); Kwame Kumi. (1995); Guiney J(1988).

<sup>170</sup> Lorscheider A. (1977); Ndingi (1982); Healey (1983, 1984, 1986, 1987, 1993); Hetsen (1984); Collins R. (1988); Kritzinger (1989); Kakuba-Kapia (1991); Wuestenberg (1995).

understanding of the need to fully explore both the theological and practical requirements of their ground-breaking option. Kalilombe found their 1973 pastoral priority decision 'remarkable' when reporting back to the bishops in a Position Paper for the 1976 Plenary Assembly.<sup>171</sup> He traces how many of them have followed up their decision with local synods, pastoral study or planning meetings across East Africa. So much so that when the AMECEA Documentation Service circulated a questionnaire in 1975 to ascertain how the dioceses ranked their priorities they were pleased to find that the highest priority in AMECEA was 'building Christian communities'. Not surprisingly then the Executive Committee chose this as their theme for the V Plenary Assembly.<sup>172</sup>

### **3.7 AN EMERGING THEOLOGY OF LOCAL**

Having issued guidelines in 1973 the bishops felt the need now to offer a deeper and more argued theology for their pastoral priority. As with their Latin America counterparts they understood SCCs to be the basic element of being Church, the smallest expression of the fullness of being Catholic.

The Christian Communities we are trying to build are simply the most local incarnations of the one, holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church ... The task of building Christian Communities is more of creating and developing awareness of what our renewed vision of the Church means in practical terms and relationships, than one of building structures.<sup>173</sup>

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<sup>171</sup> Kalilombe (1976) 261.

<sup>172</sup> AMECEA Documentation Service 19<sup>th</sup> November 1975 No 11/75/1 contains the results of the enquiry and the subsequent decision to choose the topic for the 1976 Plenary Assembly.

<sup>173</sup> AMECEA bishops plenary statement in *AFER* (1976) 18 (5) 250.

They did not imagine that they were starting a new group or sodality, nor was it a project to implement a new ecclesial movement with headquarters in Rome, it was quite simply a renewed vision of the nature of belonging to the Catholic Church that without a sense of participating at the most local neighbourhood level there was something essential missing from one's Christian discipleship. By 1979 they were clarifying exactly what these SCCs were not:

The Small Christian Communities should not be understood as a fringe group, nor a group for a few elite people, nor a group formed for a particular purpose, such as a prayer group, a sodality, a Catholic Action group, a development group, a study group, though these are legitimate and valuable: it is precisely the means by which the one Church is present in each locality, touching the whole life of its members.<sup>174</sup>

That local level was the place where people shared life together, lived alongside one another in the same network of streets, experienced meaningful personal relationships and supported each other through similar needs, problems and anxieties. Ndingi stated that 'Whatever structures a community assumes, they should reflect the Church as an institution of brotherhood, of communication and of dialogue.'<sup>175</sup> The renewed vision of Church that the AMECEA bishops shared was one where relationships had a priority and the search for communion and communication among individual Christians was a living out of the gospel challenge to love one another. It was also a way of fleshing out the Vatican II designation of Church as People of God which was freeing up many from

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<sup>174</sup> AMECEA (1979) 267.

<sup>175</sup> Ndingi (1979) 290.

understanding Church as a merely hierarchical institution and giving due recognition to the dignity of all the baptised and their role too as a People structured ministerially.

The decision to establish SCCs across this region of Africa responded to a new ecclesial moment fed both by a reflection on the failures and inadequacies of the colonial system and by the theological renewal inspired by the Second Vatican Council as well as by a growing awareness of the surfacing of a deeper African identity, an Africanisation of the Church. Many writers noted that what was fundamentally happening with the emergence of SCCs was a re-understanding of the Church, a re-working of foundational structures and a re-engaging with the concepts of relationship and communion. In other words there was a new ecclesiology being forged, which required a new attitude and mentality on the part of leaders and people formed in the previous way of Church self-understanding. The new style of leadership required by this pastoral decision necessitated a different set of skills if there was ever to be a fostering of the gifts and charisms of the Spirit from within the whole People of God, giving rise to the flourishing of new ministries and services. This was a challenge that some writers would say has not been met.

Ndingi was not alone in highlighting perhaps one of the most crucial elements of the SCC phenomenon when he drew attention in his Position Paper for the 1979 Plenary Assembly to the continued emphasis on the local church meant that they were precisely talking about 'part of the Church's structure.'<sup>176</sup> The place that had done most work on this difficult area is Latin America and unfortunately this thesis will not be able to explore this

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<sup>176</sup> Ndingi (1979) 294. He also uses this expression in another article: 'the Small Christian Communities are meant to be the groundwork of Church structure and are therefore the basic cell for all the Christians in the neighbourhood' Ndingi (1982)103.

concept as fully as it deserves, suffice to notice here that the same intuition was being registered in faraway Africa as early as 1979. The point Ndingi was making was that just as the parish is the local embodiment of the diocese and the diocese of the universal Church so ‘the SCC is an attempt to get down to an even more local level than the parish’ and was therefore an embodiment of the Church in its smallest unit. There was a truly African sense that unless the Church can get into the very place where life was lived, felt, experienced, suffered and struggled with there could be no engagement with the very mystery and nature of the God who was manifested as incarnate in the neighbourhoods of Bethlehem, Nazareth and Jerusalem. ‘That is the place where God is most truly for them, the God who is ‘Emmanuel’, God-with-us; there is the place where the Church, as the Body of Christ, must be effectively present to them.’<sup>177</sup>

Kalilombe in his Position Paper, *An Overall View on Building Christian Communities*, for the 1976 AMECEA Plenary Assembly had made it very clear to the assembled hierarchy that the whole question of ‘local’ was rich and profound in its meaning. ‘If we are justified in concluding that the aim of the AMECEA bishops in their efforts at planning for the Church in the years to come was to “localise the Church” it is because this “localisation” is a pregnant notion.’<sup>178</sup>

Kalilombe spent quite some time with the bishops in defining exactly what he meant by this term. He rejected the simple idea of ‘adaptation’ where the Church merely replaced the foreign-born missionaries with indigenous personnel, in favour of a more thorough-going notion of ‘incarnation’, where the Church was literally born of the people, took

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<sup>177</sup> Ndingi (1979) 294.

<sup>178</sup> Kalilombe (1976) 262.

flesh, substance, from the very lives of the African people. He then used language which was very powerful and perhaps provocative for some declaring that he ‘mean(s) a Church which, in the area where it exists, becomes the “Sacrament” or effective sign of men’s reconciliation or reunion with God and with one another.’<sup>179</sup> This bringing the concept of sacrament right down to an area, a specific geographical place, the locale where African laity are striving to make Christ present ‘for the people in that area,’<sup>180</sup> profoundly altered the clerical balance of power, which had traditionally understood itself as the custodian of the sacramental system. This became abundantly clear when he stated categorically that ‘the real point at stake is whether or not it is on the local people and local conditions that the running of the Church really depends’ and went on further to explain that it was in fact a question of power by stating that ‘the Church will not be localised until these (laity) are in a position to determine the shape of the Church in that place.’<sup>181</sup> Such powerful and profound imagery made clear the challenges that lay ahead.

In Africa the Church was trying to insist on the need to engage at the most local level if there was to be not only any meaning to the concept of belonging but also if there was to be any meaning to the concept of being Catholic. In the closing statement of their 1979 Plenary Study Conference in Zomba, Malawi, the bishops drew inspiration from the words of Pope John Paul II in his first encyclical letter, *Redemptor Hominis*, where he stated that the Church was ‘a community that, even from a human point of view, should become more aware of itself, of its own life and activity,’<sup>182</sup> to understand that the project they were engaged upon was precisely a process of growing self-awareness. They were exercised by their determination to see that ‘this universal Church must be really present

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<sup>179</sup> Kalilombe (1976) 263.

<sup>180</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>181</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>182</sup> Donders J. (ed) (1996) John Paul II *The Encyclicals in Everyday Language* New York: Orbis 18.

to Christians in their own locality; it must be truly local as well as universal.<sup>183</sup> The bishops were convinced that their Church which was spread all over the world and had a very defined international not to say global presence should also be capable of operating at the smallest and remotest level of the planet.

Small Christian Communities are means by which the Church is brought down to the daily life and concerns of people where they actually live. In them, the Church takes on flesh and blood in the life situations of people... In them, they can truly experience the Church as a new way of being together.<sup>184</sup>

The bishops' document stated that 'Structurally, the Small Christian Community is the most local unit of the Church.'<sup>185</sup> In making SCCs a part of the ecclesial structure the bishops here were going beyond that which had been accepted by the Second Vatican Council where there was not any reference to Church that was not either the church universal or the local church meaning the diocese. This designation of the SCC as Church had its roots in New Testament, especially Pauline ecclesiology. The bishops felt that they could go beyond the Council in their theology, perhaps because the very existence of this way of being Church had already moved them beyond that which was envisioned at the time of the Council. The bishop's statement went on to say that the family was the 'domestic Church', without challenging that assertion; though in fact, in the documents of the Council where this phrase was introduced, it was always prefixed by the Latin word 'velut' which means 'as if/like'. In other words its use was metaphorical rather than

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<sup>183</sup> AMECEA (1979) 266.

<sup>184</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>185</sup> AMECEA (1979) 268

descriptive. But in order to make clear that any theology which attempted to say that the family and not the SCC was actually the basic unit of the Church the bishops corrected that notion by stating ‘...but of its very nature it (the family) has to reach out to other families, and the Small Christian Community is made up of several family groups.’<sup>186</sup>

### **3.8 SAME CHURCH - DIFFERENT ECCLESIOLOGY**

Commenting as early as 1979 at the Irish Missionary Congress, Ndingi stated that ‘In East Africa a new approach to ecclesiology is evolving.’<sup>187</sup> He was aware that the AMECEA decision to base the life of the Church in the region on SCCs had meant a rupture with the past, a change from the way things were done previously. Only six years earlier the bishops had realised that the structure they were operating from would not be adequate for the 1980s. They reconfigured the structural failure of the inherited system as he went on to explain: ‘Instead of starting the groundwork with the parish, as we did formerly, we start it with the small communities.’<sup>188</sup> The inadequacy of the existing pastoral models has been well attested to already and Lwaminda notes that it was this critical awareness that motivated the bishops in their pastoral choices, in other words it was an ecclesiological reason that lay behind the pastoral priority.

The Bishops were searching for ways and means of making the Church local so that it could play an effective role in the development of the young nations of the region as

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<sup>186</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>187</sup> Ndingi (1982) 101.

<sup>188</sup> *Ibid.*



their salt, leaven and light. But, this would only be possible if and when it is present in living local communities and is in constant dialogue with the society.<sup>189</sup>

These men realised that they needed to be part of the emerging independent Africa or they and their flocks would be left behind on the shore as the tide ebbed away from their still too European-styled Church. This emerging ecclesiology however was grafted onto an understanding of Church that was anything but renewed and engaged. No doubt amongst the bishops who voted in favour of SCCs were a number who went home and did very little about the implementation of their proposals, not because they were not men of goodwill, but simply because they had a concept of Church that precluded this idea of dialogue with the world as a necessary part of the Church's mission and *raison d'être*. The pre-Vatican II view that the Church was a divinely instituted hierarchical organisation whose main purpose was to dispense the sacraments as essential means of salvation held sway amongst a great many of the Church's clerical personnel. This was the model that they were trained in and have operated from for decades; that the role of the Church was in the spiritual and religious sphere and not directly in the social, economic and political areas of human life. Their central concerns were therefore intra-Church activities like teaching religious doctrine, dispensing the sacraments, spiritual sanctification, internal order and discipline, personal and sexual morality.

Kalilombe was one of East Africa's most significant SCC commentators. Speaking of his own reality in the diocese of Lilongwe, Malawi, he stated that if SCCs were to succeed in

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<sup>189</sup> Lwaminda P. (1996) 'A theological analysis of the AMECEA documents on the local Church with special emphasis on the pastoral option for SCCs' *AMECEA Spearhead*. 140-141 89.

the diocese then one supposed that ‘...the clergy must be quite conscious of the change in the conception of the Church’s role in society implied in the new system, and accept it as the basis of Church life and activity. It is tempting to assume that such an understanding has taken place.’<sup>190</sup>

This assumption was made because it was the clergy who were in touch with recent developments in Church teaching and would have benefited from in-service training on the documents of Vatican II. However, the bishop challenged that assumption saying that many priests active in the diocese after 1975 (the year the diocesan synod made SCCs the pastoral priority) were accustomed to thinking about and organising Church according to the former distinction between the ecclesiastical and secular spheres. Change would not come easily to them. He went on to make an absolutely crucial point often overlooked when implementing new pastoral strategies that the main problem was not necessarily one of theory but more probably one of change of attitudes, mentality, reflexes and practical skills. Even when people were capable of intellectually grasping new ideas it could take time and effort before that translated into actual changes in everyday attitudes and activities. He took his point a stage further when he noted that the potential problem with the clergy was that they would try to implement the new system with the attitudes, values and habits more appropriate to the former system.

This insight is profound and critical, as Mejia states, ‘The first criterion to be taken into consideration before establishing pastoral priorities is the model of Church we have in

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<sup>190</sup> Kalilombe P. (1984) ‘From outstations to SCCs’ *AMECEA Spearhead* 82-83 20.

mind, either consciously or unconsciously.<sup>191</sup> There has not been sufficient reflection dedicated to understanding that our way of approaching any pastoral challenge will depend to a great extent on the way we conceive of and understand the nature of Church and its mission in the world today. Long before a new pastoral initiative is launched significant amounts of time need to be spent preparing the ground by analysing the preconceived ideas and presuppositions of those who will be required to implement the new strategy. On the whole this has not been the pastoral practice. Kalilombe admitted that when the bishops decided to adopt the new system of small communities not enough study had been made of the differences between this new method and the old one of outstations it was replacing. The ecclesiologies implied in the two methods had not been sufficiently analyzed and contrasted. Consequently, at several points in the implementation, the typical conceptual ideology, practical objectives, tools, methods, and attitudes undergirding the outstation system were still being used in pursuing the objectives of the quite different projects of Christian Communities. Hence the problems.<sup>192</sup>

About the same time Hetsen was reaching an identical conclusion: ‘The first requirement for the establishment of SCCs seems a very fundamental one: namely, the need of a change of attitude or mentality’<sup>193</sup> by everyone involved in the project. Hetsen called it looking at the Church in a different light. This new light meant for him becoming aware that the Church meant first of all the people, the faithful, and not just the clergy who are less than 1% of the Church. He went on to quote Bishop Zoa of Cameroon intuitively feeling that SCCs in West Africa would imply a strong ‘declericalisation’. It was

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<sup>191</sup> Mejia R. (1992) ‘The pastoral priorities of the local Church in Eastern Africa’ *AFER*. 34 (6) 329.

<sup>192</sup> Kalilombe (1984) 71-74. Also Kalilombe (1976) 269-272.

<sup>193</sup> Hetsen (1983) 20.

becoming clear that the ecclesiology one brings to any project must be recognised, acknowledged and worked on if any pastoral project was to succeed.

The Tanzanian writer Magesa, who was grappling with the fact that many people, laity and clergy alike, treat SCCs with suspicion, introduced another interesting angle on the debate. He noted that present ecclesiologies stood in the way of people recognising SCCs as both helpful and orthodox, despite the bishops being the ones who were promoting them! And the reason was:

Many pastoral agents in the region are doubtful about them, and see them as challenges to the present parish structure. In most minds, the parish remains the primary structure and expression of the Church; the parish priest the primary (in some cases the only) minister.<sup>194</sup>

This attitude was understandable given the dominant presence of the parish in the mind-set and experience of the Catholic population. But as Magesa went on to explain this parish-centred ecclesiology was by no means the only ecclesiology available, there was also a different and earlier ecclesiological perspective that traced its origin right back to the New Testament. The early churches provided us with a rich source of experience that enabled us to better appreciate the new moment we were facing and understand the new challenges that SCCs were designed to meet. There are important consequences to be considered in saying that SCCs were the most local realization of the Catholic Church. From the scriptural accounts of the early church communities we could see that they

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<sup>194</sup> Magesa L. (1984) 'BCCs and the apostolic succession of the Church' AFER. 26 (6) 348.

followed no blue-print or model left behind by Jesus and that whatever ministries came to flourish in the different urban fellowships, they tended to emerge from each community as a response to their local needs, under the watchful gaze of their founding apostle. While Magesa was delighted to exclaim that SCCs were probably one of the best things to have happened since the close of the first century, he also cautioned with this insightful analysis:

The concrete, realistic and independent choice in faith must be made to let SCCs express their 'being churches' with structures and ministries evolving at least partially from within themselves. But if our ecclesiology continues to insist that SCCs remain parish-centred in structure and priest-centred in ministry, while at the same time we say they are 'churches', we can only wonder if we are not wasting our time in our efforts at renewing the Church through the building of Small Christian Communities.<sup>195</sup>

Reflecting the tension between the two main ecclesiological perspectives he drew our attention to the vital importance of ensuring that the framework or methodology we operate out of was appropriate to the content we were trying to share. Perhaps more gently the Jesuit Guiney wrote 'It can be safely said that church leaders who have not grasped Vatican II ecclesiology do find it difficult to understand how SCCs can be accepted as a new way of being church.'<sup>196</sup> Yet it was precisely this that made the SCC experience so exciting for the whole Church today, it was a new conception of Church, an

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<sup>195</sup> Magesa (1984) 352.

<sup>196</sup> Guiney J. (1988) 'Comparing BCCs in South America and Africa' AFER. 30 (3) 177.

ecclesiology as the Latin Americans refer to it,<sup>197</sup> and the new could only be given birth to by those who to some extent were dissatisfied with the past and were awaiting or actively encouraging the new present. Concluding his important article Magesa stated that 'the success of SCCs in Eastern Africa will depend a great deal on our ecclesiology.'<sup>198</sup>

The decisive factor in the success or not of SCCs lay with the clerical elite and their willingness to relinquish power. Church leaders whose formation took place prior to the Vatican Council were operating in a feudalistic institution very much concerned with power and it is this inherited image of the Church that is the greatest threat to the progress of the Church in Africa and beyond. When Healey made the first evaluation of the AMECEA process in 1986,<sup>199</sup> 10 years after the bishops officially made it their pastoral priority, he noted that there were some achievements but sounded a note of warning that the project was not attaining its overall purpose. Many dioceses were not even making a start with SCCs while in those that had made efforts the 'major problems' were linked to clerical resistance and control:

Some dioceses had done little to encourage SCCs in practical terms... SCCs are clerical-centred with little and at times no initiative at all from the laity... Some priests fear that if such communities are not properly managed other sects may spring up. There has been over-supervision of the SCCs due to fears of the danger of the emergence of 'splinter groups' and 'schisms'... Thus SCC leaders are not allowed to

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<sup>197</sup> Boff L. (1986) *Ecclesiology: The Base Communities Reinvent the Church*. New York: Orbis.

<sup>198</sup> Magesa (1984) 356.

<sup>199</sup> Healey J. (1987) 'Four Africans Evaluate SCCs in East Africa' *AFER* 29 (5) 266-277.

take full responsibility... Other people do not like changes. They want to continue things as they always did... When the laity is responsible the clergy tend to be very strict. Good recommendations from the Christian communities are not welcome.<sup>200</sup>

Some report the worldwide emergence of SCCs as an inspiration of the Holy Spirit<sup>201</sup> but nonetheless its implementation rests in the hands of those who have authority in the Church. It can be seen from the many commentaries and evaluations of the process that this new style of being Church threatens the command structure and reveals that many of those in power are not ready for change. Uzukwu traces the problems of SCCs in Eastern Africa back to the ‘burden of European Christianity which the African clergy appears unwilling to cast off.’<sup>202</sup> This far-reaching analysis recognises that the hierarchical and authoritarian structure of the colonial Church is now the very impediment to the African Church’s effort of renewal. In other words indigenous clergy have internalised and accepted that model of Church, which they have also stated is no longer adequate to meet the needs of Africans today. Uzukwu takes his comments a step further and ponders how this state of affairs has come about? He takes issue with the training programme in the seminaries and religious houses that maintains the ideology of authority by shielding the students from the real concerns of life in Africa. They may be in Africa, he says, but they do not live in Africa.

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<sup>200</sup> Healey (1987) 266-277, quoted in Uzukwu E. (1992) ‘The Birth and Development of a Local Church: Difficulties and Signs of Hope’ *Concilium* 1992/1 18.

<sup>201</sup> O’Halloran J. (1996) *Small Christian Communities – A Pastoral Companion* New York: Orbis 23-27.

<sup>202</sup> Uzukwu (1992) 18.

### 3.9 LESSONS AND INSIGHTS

The experience of developing SCCs in Africa has taught us some very important lessons. Though the reasons for their growth are very different from and later than Latin America nonetheless their basic shape is similar.<sup>203</sup> One significant difference however lies with the motivation of the people who gather together at the neighbourhood level, as Hetsen observes: ‘in Africa, the reason for starting an SCC usually is a deepening of the faith.’<sup>204</sup> Of course what we mean by that phrase differs according to our faith understanding and to some extent also our cultures. Latin Americans as we have seen form BECs as a faith response to the gospel invitation to inaugurate the kingdom on earth, which means for them to transform the world with kingdom values. In Africa people join an SCC to get closer to God, to deepen their piety, to be more spiritually aware and to experience the love and closeness of family relationships and so what they do with the SCC turns out to be quite different in the sense that they are content with the element of prayer and bible reflection and less comfortable with the next stage of going out and changing the neighbourhood.<sup>205</sup>

A key lesson from Africa is the distinction between establishing a pastoral priority and examining and understanding a person’s underlying ecclesiology. It has been a great help to learn from local evaluations of the process to date that many of the failures are due to an ignorance of the importance and significance of the ecclesiology, or church-

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<sup>203</sup> Kwame Kumi (1995) ‘Despite the significant differences in their origins, the Latin America and East Africa BECs have a lot of things in common and they both constitute a new way of building the Church at the grassroots.’ 165.

<sup>204</sup> Hetsen (1983) 27.

<sup>205</sup> Healey J. (1997) ‘Our Five Year Journey of SCCs: The Evolving Sociology and Ecclesiology of Church as Family in East Africa’ *AFER* 39 (5-6). ‘In spite of the present dose of piety and spiritual devotion among many African Christians, moving to SCCs with a real spirit of inculturation, service and transformation of society is still very difficult’ 292. He also gives a good description of a typical SCC meeting in Nakuru Town, Kenya where there is a strong emphasis on piety and devotions: 288.



understanding, that pastoral workers bring to the task of forming small communities. Africa more than anywhere else it seems has revealed that the two ecclesiologies<sup>206</sup> leading up to and present in the documents of the Second Vatican Council actually present us with certain difficulties and obstacles in the successful completion of the collegial decision of the AMECEA bishops to make SCCs their preferred pastoral priority. Basically those whose understanding of the Church and her mission follows a more pre-Vatican II approach find SCCs almost unnecessary as for them the sacraments are key and they take place in the parish church, these are often members of the hierarchy both bishops and clergy.<sup>207</sup> While those whose formation has placed a high priority on the vocation of all the baptised as People of God, collegiality, and the building of the kingdom find SCCs an invaluable tool for the mission and self-expression of the Church.

In Africa SCCs have offered the Catholic Church perhaps the only way in which given its structure and history it can at last offer to local people a truly African sense of belonging to a community and therefore of beginning to become an indigenous church or at least an inculturated church. In this regard it also offers to the universal Church an essential element of its own identity that of giving people (not only the faithful through experience but also those non-members through example) a genuine experience of community, of showing in concrete how love of neighbour can become a reality in even the smallest and remotest place.

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<sup>206</sup> Kalilombe (1984) 25-27; 73-74. Also Kalilombe (1976) 269-272.

<sup>207</sup> Ugeux (1995) 'Yet in spite of all the enthusiastic official declarations from Rome and the different Episcopal Conferences, local Church leaders have rarely given priority to this policy' 135.

The willingness of theologians and practitioners to talk and write about the failures and limitations of the SCC pastoral priority was a real strength. Healey was identifying a number of elements contributing to their lack of success. He first lays some blame at the feet of the bishops of AMECEA: ‘Various African theologians have stated that when the bishops in Eastern Africa launched the SCCs in 1973, 1976 and 1979 they underestimated the importance of a guiding theology for the experiment.’<sup>208</sup> We have commented on this problem in our discussion of ecclesiologies. However Healey goes further with his analysis. He argues that despite the years of SCC growth and development ‘SCCs are taken as simply an addition to the old way of being Church. The institutional model of Church under hierarchical, clerical and often paternalistic control is still the most dominant.’<sup>209</sup> He says that the problem goes back to the very beginning of the initiative and the failure to place it fully under the people at the grassroots. I wonder whether the bishops really thought that the people at parish level would be capable of delivering this new ecclesial vision. He also identifies a failure to clearly and powerfully articulate the aims of SCCs from the beginning, perhaps for reasons of fear or prudence, but the impact of that had repercussions on the very shape of the evolving SCCs. Healey is distressed to note that they have remained disconnected from much of Africa’s reality.<sup>210</sup>

But there is much to celebrate in the African experience of SCCs. Healey, in his latest book evaluating SCCs states that there are 120,000 Small Christian Communities throughout the nine countries of the AMECEA region.<sup>211</sup> This is an extraordinary achievement and is indeed a sign of vitality and growth since they were first instigated

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<sup>208</sup> Healey (1997) 296.

<sup>209</sup> Healey (1997) 297.

<sup>210</sup> ‘However given Africa’s most oppressive problems of poverty, corruption, disease, suppression of human rights, wars and conflicts, dictatorships and exploitation, it is shocking to find that the SCCs do not take these issues as fundamental in their vision and activities.’ *Ibid.*

<sup>211</sup> Healey (2012) 8.

over 50 years ago. I would like to draw attention to a further aspect of the success story of SCCs in Africa that should both serve as an example of excellent practice but also as an indictment of the state of the Church in the so-called cradle of democracy in the western world. Because Africa generally (and in this case Tanzania particularly) has been engaged in a grass-roots project of building up the Church from the bottom, from its base, over time it has become possible to re-structure their model of Church in an organic way that invites admiration from those who haven't even given a thought to this level of ecclesial maturity and awareness.

The implementation of the new Constitution of the National Lay Council in 1998 required that the election of lay leaders in parishes throughout Tanzania start at the level of SCCs and move upwards. This insured that the parish council leaders would be chosen from those who were already leaders in their SCCs – thus true representation from below. Such decisions gave full confidence to the faithful and opened new possibilities for the laity in the local church.<sup>212</sup>

This example feels light years away from the suspicion of democracy and the fear of genuine lay empowerment that seems to pervade attempts at renewal in many of the countries of Europe. Democratic elections within every parish starting at the lowest level ensures that those who are leading their Church community in the neighbourhood are valued and empowered as they are also called upon to represent their communities at higher levels of the parish and diocese. Decision-making that is seriously influenced by a

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<sup>212</sup> Cieslikiewicz C. (2005) 'Pastoral Involvement of Parish-based SCCs in Dar es Salaam' In Healey J. and Hinton J. (eds) *Small Christian Communities Today: Capturing the New Moment*. Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books 99, also quoted in Healey (2012) 23.

strong lay voice is truly inspirational and it must be noted is structural. SCCs are bringing about a change at a quite fundamental level by organically permitting new stages of growth and development to take place simply because the place where effort at renewal has been made was at the very bottom, at the smallest level of Church existence – a small group-gathering in the neighbourhood.

Given my limited and brief personal experience of SCCs in Asia, it will be interesting to see what of the successes and critiques that have been readily acknowledged in Africa, found their way in the process of sharing SCCs with bishops throughout Asia, as they were being introduced to the Lumko model with Lumko practitioners. It would seem to me that there was so much useful reflection coming out of Africa about SCCs that one would hope to find these insights freely shared and similar mistakes not being replicated across another continent.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### ASIA: DIFFERENT CONTEXT WIDER HORIZONS

Asia is most definitely not Africa or Latin America, and the cultural, religious and social contexts are significantly divergent from the other continents. In this chapter we shall explore the history and origins of BECs in two countries of Asia. The first place to introduce the new ideas was the Philippines and that though there was some influence from the experiences in Latin America, BEC growth and development in the islands was much more a parallel occurrence than anything imitated or replicated. The Philippines were followed about a decade later by Mumbai in India, probably the first place in the subcontinent to introduce this new way of living Church. There was then a new wave of BEC initiative about 10 years later again, this time originating from Lumko, South Africa, and being promoted as the Asian Integral Pastoral Approach (AsIPA) by the Federation of Asian Bishops Conferences (FABC). We shall look in some detail at these different strands of BEC/SCC<sup>213</sup> activity and notice how there are tensions between the promoters and practitioners of both methods and that the BECs/SCCs themselves manifest some important and distinctive differences. The term most frequently used about these base communities is BEC in the Philippines but SCC elsewhere and this chapter will try to respect both traditions by using the terminology most appropriate to each region.

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<sup>213</sup> In Asia terminology varies perhaps more than anywhere else. I shall try and use BECs/SCCs when referring generically to the continent but when referring to each region I will use the terminology appropriate there. Some commentators also use the term BCC but for consistency I will refer only to BEC and SCC or the indigenous Filipino terminology.

The parish in Asia is for some commentators in need of strategic reform, but unlike Africa there is little or no comment about the colonial origins of this level of Church or indeed of a desire to be free from the influences of the former imperial powers. The debate about the local Church is also very much alive here though nuanced in a different way to Africa. The accusation that the Church is ‘foreign’ is similar to how Africans feel; however the difference here is that Christianity remains very much a minority faith. The literature suggests that although the documents of the Second Vatican Council refer only to the diocese as the local Church, there has been a significant development since then on the part of Asian theologians and BEC/SCC practitioners. Asian theologians bring to the table their unique context of being the place where many of the world’s great religions have their origin and this pluralistic environment casts a very different hue over the development of and reflections on the BEC/SCC Asian experience. This will lead many theologians to call for the development of BECs/SCCs from being merely ecclesial or Christian communities into being human communities where everyone is welcomed into the neighbourhood gatherings. This is a unique Asian contribution and offers a considerable challenge to other cultures who share a similarly pluralistic faith context.

This chapter will also study the emerging ecclesiology of BECs/SCCs from within Asia influenced strongly by their understanding of inculturation or as they prefer to call it the gospel-culture encounter.<sup>214</sup> Very much like both Africa and Latin America the socio-economic environment is marked by the extreme poverty of the majority populations and it is this bedrock that also strongly influences the challenges and focus of BECs/SCCs throughout Asia. The literature is not as extensive as either Latin America or East Africa

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<sup>214</sup> Amaladoss M. SJ (2002) ‘The Challenges of Gospel-Culture Encounter’ In: Erasto Fernandes SSS and Joji Kunduru SJ (eds) *Renewed Efforts at Inculturation for an Indian Church*. Bangalore: Dharmaram Publications 13-26.

and perhaps shows that to date BECs/SCCs are still quite a marginal experience in most Asian countries with the Philippines and India being the main exceptions and Korea also beginning to produce articles on their experiences of growing this style of Church.

For this research to be authentic I visited Asia several times over a 4 year period in order to gain first-hand knowledge of the BEC/SCC reality across a range of countries. I attended the AsIPA IV General Assembly<sup>215</sup> in Kerala, India in 2006 and the AsIPA V General Assembly<sup>216</sup> in Mindanao, Philippines in 2009. On each occasion I spent a month in the country and travelled extensively to visit BEC/SCC communities and talk with a wide range of personnel. I also participated in a Symposium of SCC Ecclesiology<sup>217</sup> in Bangalore, India 2007 and in 2008 made a 3-month visit to the region with Fr José Marins from Brazil delivering workshops and seminars in India, Sri Lanka, Singapore and Korea. I cannot overestimate the value of this direct encounter with the local Asian reality of BECs/SCCs for my research and while being able to make the most of each visit to access any available literature I was also able to sense the actual ethos of the process in each country. But as I have acknowledged in the Introduction I remain an outsider with all the limitations that implies.

#### **4.1 A SEED IS SOWN IN THE PHILIPPINES**

I begin the history of Asian BECs in the Philippines, as it is here that all the literature that I have reviewed points to as being the origins of this new experience of being Church. Br

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<sup>215</sup> 'SCCs/BECs: Towards a Church of Communion' Maria Rani Centre, Trivandrum, India, 15-23 November 2006.

<sup>216</sup> 'Do this in Memory of Me (Lk 22:19): Bread Broken and Word Shared in SCCs/BECs' Regional Major Seminary, Davao City, Philippines, 20-28 October 2009.

<sup>217</sup> 'Symposium on the Ecclesiological Foundations of SCCs' NBCLC Bangalore, India, 8-10<sup>th</sup> July 2007.

Karl Gaspar CSsR writes that it was about a year or two after the crucial meeting of the Latin American episcopate in Medellin, Colombia in 1968 that an international community of Catholic missionaries became the catalyst for spreading BECs across the world to Asia. ‘The Maryknoll Fathers and Brothers ... served as the bridge to connect Latin America and this part of Asia in terms of a sharing of pastoral praxis.’<sup>218</sup> Members of this religious community became familiar with the BEC process in Latin America and shared their understanding with their colleagues not only in Asia I suspect but also in Africa too. However the Maryknoll community in the Prelature of Tagum, Philippines, immediately saw the possibilities that it offered them in their responsibilities of establishing appropriate new Church structures in the south-eastern part of Mindanao which was in the process of being handed over to local people. The first communities to be started were called Gagmay’ng Kristohanong Katilingban or GKK.<sup>219</sup>

This inter-ecclesial sharing of pastoral practice soon influenced the process already underway within the local Church and was to have far reaching consequences for the growth of BECs/GKKs across the region. This was helped and supported by the formation of the Mindanao-Sulu Pastoral Conference (MSPC) which commenced as a regional meeting of the representatives of the laity, clergy, religious and bishops during the decade of the 1970s<sup>220</sup> and became the place where the pastoral discourse on GKKs was promoted and developed. Over the years the MSPC was to promote a holistic model of GKKs as witnessing, worshiping and serving communities. The young Filipino clergy who were assigned to the Nabunturan Deanery to prepare to replace the Maryknoll

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<sup>218</sup> Gaspar K. (2004) ‘Will BECs Flourish or Self-Destruct in the Post-Modern Era?’ In Delgado J, Gabriel M, Padilla E, Picardal A, (eds) *BECs in the Philippines: Dream or Reality? A Multi-Disciplinary Reflection*. Rizal, Philippines: BUKAL NG TIPAN. 306-307.

<sup>219</sup> This indigenous terminology is still used and in the Philippines and so I will also use the acronym out of respect for the people.

<sup>220</sup> MSPC I: 1972 Davao City; MSPC II: 1974 Cagayan de Oro City; MSPC III: 1976 Ozamis City.



missionaries when they would leave worked hard in order to build in the barrios and among the people GKKs that were described as ‘self-nourishing, self-sustaining and self-governing communities’ in the 1974 MSPC II.<sup>221</sup> This designation looks surprisingly similar to the 1973 declaration of the AMECEA bishops in East Africa declaring that they wanted their local Churches to become ‘self-ministering, self-propagating and self-supporting.’<sup>222</sup> Interesting as those statements are, they are not evidence of any direct or indirect influence upon the formation of BECs/GKKs in the Philippines.

It is important not to overstate the influence of either continent on Filipino BEC development. In fact a prior process had been at work in the Philippines just as it had in other parts of the developing world that enabled BECs to grow rapidly and in a parallel way. Perhaps the greatest influence of all did not come from any pastoral sharing between missionaries of the same congregation but from the sheer impact of the reforming teachings of the Second Vatican Council and the renewed vision of Church that emerged from them. Given their shared history of Iberian Catholicism, which created similar conditions and contexts, it only needed the identical triggering mechanism of Vatican II for a parallel development to take place which gives the impression of direct Latin American influence but is probably nothing of the sort.

It is important to enforce the idea that the GKKs did not emerge into a vacuum, but while the Jesuits in Bukidnon were developing leadership formation programmes, others were developing a liturgical movement that saw lay people trained and commissioned to lead a

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<sup>221</sup> This phrase was the title of MSPC II in document: Prelature of St. Mary’s in Marawi Dialogue of Life and Faith Section II p.4 [www.cpn.nd.edu/assets/14537/marawi\\_handout.doc](http://www.cpn.nd.edu/assets/14537/marawi_handout.doc) Accessed 28.08.2012.

<sup>222</sup> AMECEA (1973) 9-10.

Sunday Liturgy of the Word (Kasaulogan sa Pulong) in the absence of a priest. These commenced in 1965 with the PME<sup>223</sup> missionaries in the Prelature of Davao, and then in 1968, in the Prelature of Tagum with the Maryknoll missionaries in the Lupon Deanery, who conducted experiments involving lay people as liturgical co-operators, catechists, leaders, formators, programme and project managers in the chapels and parishes of the area. This goes some way to explaining the GKK phenomenon that they seem to have begun life first and foremost as liturgical communities delivering the Sunday worship in the chapels of the parishes, which they indeed continue to this day.<sup>224</sup> To other Asian BEC/SCC practitioners this practice seems quite strange, is not understood and has been criticised in personal conversations from around the region of which I have been a part. Bishop Francisco Claver SJ states unapologetically that the first function of the BECs is to come together for worship: ‘worship is the start of a process whereby the community seeks consciously and deliberately to respond to the problems of daily living.’<sup>225</sup> However Padilla offers a note of caution: ‘worship often does not flow into engagement with life issues.’<sup>226</sup>

The historical, political, social and economic situation of the Philippines was remarkably similar to that of Latin America and never more so than when President Ferdinand Marcos declared Martial Law on September 21st 1972 and the fledgling GKKs suddenly

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<sup>223</sup> Priests of the Societe de Missions-Etrangeres from Canada.

<sup>224</sup> Padilla E. (2008) ‘BECs at 40: Tumatanda Na?’ In: Arquiza Y. (2008) *Creating a Culture of Sustainability for BEC*. CBCP-BEC Desk. ‘In Philippine setting, ‘going to the barrios’ and conducting lay-led Sunday Liturgies of the Word started the formation of lay leaders and planted the seed for the birth of local faith communities (BCCs/BECs) at the barrio level as early as the mid-60s. Moreover, not a few regard the Baranggay Sang Virgen, a grassroots and lay-led prayer movement which started in Negros Occidental in the mid-50s as a forerunner of BECs.’ 4. Also see: Picardal A.(1995) *An Ecclesiological Perspective of the Basic Ecclesial Communities in the Philippines*. Roma: Tipografia Poliglotta della Pontificia Universitas Gregoriana, 11 and Mendoza G. (1988) *Church of the People: the Basic Christian Community Experience in the Philippines* Manila: Bishops-Businessmen’s Conference on Human Development, 49.

<sup>225</sup> Claver F. (2009) *The Making of a Local Church*. Quezon City, Philippines: Claretian Publications 108.

<sup>226</sup> Padilla (2008) 5.

found themselves not only close to the people in each neighbourhood but right alongside them in the daily struggles and repression to which they were subjected. The context for the base communities was now one of aggressive militarisation, gross violation of the people's basic human rights, a growing impoverishment of the poor, massive corruption in government and the non-delivery of social services. Not surprisingly the military eventually attacked the GKKs<sup>227</sup> and subjected them to harassment, arrest, imprisonment and even the killing of some GKK leaders. The legacy naturally enough was mixed with Gaspar saying that at the time 'The GKKs flourished and made a difference in the lives of the poor and powerless,'<sup>228</sup> while Picardal states that 'The military harassment and the loss of support from some bishops and priests led to the weakening of BECs.'<sup>229</sup> Both positions reflect something of the complexity of both the actual moment and the aftermath of the nine year Martial Law period. But it was this experience that also gave the GKKs their prophetic stance which sets them apart from all other BEC experiences in Asia and often leads to the unfounded accusation that BECs in the Philippines are more political than spiritual.

Gaspar recognises that even before the final collapse of the Marcos dictatorship the negative images of the GKKs among the military in the corridors of power gradually reverberated also in ecclesiastical corridors. A campaign was launched to prevent Church activities from being infiltrated by leftist elements and ideologies. Even before People Power erupted in 1986 there were already moves to minimize the ideological characteristics and political engagements of the GKKs. A shift was taking place in both

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<sup>227</sup> Picardal A. (2004) 'In a Master's thesis on "Contemporary Religious Radicalism in the Philippines" which he submitted to the National Defence College in 1979, Colonel Galileo Kintanar wrote, that the religious radicals were building up the BECs as "an infrastructure of political power" that could pose as a threat to national security' 142.

<sup>228</sup> Gaspar (2004) 308.

<sup>229</sup> Picardal (2004) 143.

Filipino society and Church as a new era dawned, one where those GKK activists whether clerical or lay would no longer be trusted to define the vision and characteristics of the base communities, henceforth it would be for the bishops to decide.

When the BCCs gave way to a more apolitical model and were no longer a threat to those in power, these base communities became more acceptable among Church people. As they became more popular, an increasing number of dioceses in the Philippines jumped onto the bandwagon to organise their own model. As can be expected, the model was mainly concerned with the worshipping aspect; consequently their main activities were liturgical. With the rise of this model, the BEC turned mainstream... However each diocese re-appropriated the BEC in whatever way they wished; oftentimes moving drastically away from its holistic and prophetic framework.<sup>230</sup>

In another much earlier article written in 1985 Gaspar challenges the myth of BECs as revolutionary and politically influenced organisations stating that ‘most of the BECs have remained liturgical in character.’<sup>231</sup> He gives a realistic and thorough analysis of their praxis which he says is a real paradox:

On the one hand it is the product of the post-Vatican II Church in search of a more meaningful evangelising ministry; on the other, it is a mere extension of the pre-Vatican II Church’s concern to keep the flock within the Catholic fold. There is lay

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<sup>230</sup> Gaspar (2004) 311-312. Also Padilla (2008) ‘BECs now a mainstream pastoral programme’ 6.

<sup>231</sup> Gaspar K. (1985) ‘The Local Church and Militant Lay Participation. The MSPC Experience’ *Pro Mundi Vita: Dossiers* (3) 21.

participation, but it is always subject to the authority of the clergy and the ordinary. There is an indigenised liturgy, but all it means is that the celebration is in the local language, for both content and format continue to be directed from above. There are Bible reflections, but these are done to equip the lay leaders with old, orthodox theological frameworks that can better prepare them for debate (in order not to lose face) with the Bible-carrying Christian Alliance or Southern Baptists.<sup>232</sup>

That level of insight and honest comment is what makes the Philippines unique in the Asian context. Gaspar goes on to speak about the different types of BECs that have emerged within the country. The ‘pastoral-developmental model’ is but a liturgical-oriented BEC clothed in the finery of Vatican II and development jargon. He says they have still got a long way to go before they fulfil the promise of a genuine pilgrim people now being found in the ‘liberation model’. This model is the one that came through the Martial Law years strengthened and purified, mature and aware, and totally engaged with the poor people and their struggle and immersed in their lives and in the local neighbourhoods. He mentions that various pastoral methodologies have helped along this process and it is worth noting exactly what they were because again this input is not found in many other Asian realities. He notes the training of the BEC lay leaders and catechists involving the social teachings of the Church, the tools for social analysis, biblical-theological reflections, Vatican II and MSPC documents, the history of the Philippines from a nationalistic perspective and the action-reflection process, all of which ‘have helped towards massive conscientisation.’<sup>233</sup> This level of group consciousness and social

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<sup>232</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>233</sup> Gaspar (1985) 23.

awareness is what makes the Filipino BECs share the same DNA as their Latin American counterparts.

Fr Louis Mascarenhas OFM in an article published in 1980 in the *Pro Mundi Vita Bulletin* notes that ‘almost everywhere in Asia seminars and meetings are being held about the building up of Basic Christian Communities.’<sup>234</sup> However he notices that BECs have developed in countries with Christian majorities and wonders ‘how relevant the Latin American situation is for the Church in Asia.’<sup>235</sup> He goes on to negate the success of the BECs in the Philippines as having anything relevant to say about BECs/SCCs to the rest of Asia ‘since the Philippines is so largely Catholic, and does not face the reality of other Asian countries with their large non-Christian populations.’<sup>236</sup> His point is interesting and there is no doubt that among Asian practitioners the Philippines has a history that is quite different from the generic BEC developments in other regions of Asia. Despite his comments it is interesting to note that he mentions a seminar organised in 1978 for the clergy of Multan and Karachi (Pakistan) by the Filipino East Asian Pastoral Institute (EAPI) which ‘resulted in a greater enthusiasm for Basic Christian Communities,’<sup>237</sup> and also that in 1980 further seminars were being run in Karachi and Hyderabad on BECs organised by two friars from Brazil. Many BEC practitioners from across Asia were travelling to the Philippines to study at EAPI and that clearly had a significant influence on them and their understanding of base communities. Certainly in the days before AsIPA it is thanks to these Filipino practitioners and to other Latin Americans that there was some level of accompaniment and outreach across the continent. From November 1980 until February 1981 Fr José Marins and his team from Latin America were invited to

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<sup>234</sup> Mascarenhas L. OFM (1980) ‘BCCs in an Islamic Setting in Pakistan’ *Pro Mundi Vita: Bulletin* 81 26.

<sup>235</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>236</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>237</sup> Mascarenhas (1980) 27.

visit Asia delivering workshops and BEC training in a number of countries at the invitation of local hierarchies and facilitated by both the Claretian and Maryknoll missionaries.<sup>238</sup>

Reflecting back on the Filipino experience, Bishop Orlando Quevedo called for a re-founding of BECs as they were ‘originally the product of a desire for a more efficient parish organisation’ and that ‘this mainly administrative system continues to this day.’<sup>239</sup> He notes that this system was only effective for a short time. What was clear from the comments of Claver and Padilla as well was that the liturgical orientation of many of the original BECs in Mindanao had not necessarily delivered all that was hoped for and that it was time for them to be reviewed.

## 4.2 SIGNS OF A NEW DAWN IN INDIA

Bishop Thomas Dabre writing in the year 2000 describes Bishop Bosco Penha<sup>240</sup> as ‘the father of the movement of Basic Ecclesial Communities in India for he spearheaded the cause.’<sup>241</sup> The first indication of the significance of SCCs in India came at the 1980 Bombay Priests Synod; the concluding statement of the assembly indicated that SCCs, the

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<sup>238</sup> Japan, Hong Kong/Macau, Philippines, Singapore, Indonesia, Sri Lanka, India, Thailand, Taiwan and South Korea.

<sup>239</sup> Quevedo O. (2008) ‘Renewing the Church: Pastoral Thrusts for BECs’ In: Arquiza Y. (ed) *Creating a Culture of Sustainability for BECs*. Manila: CBCP-BEC Desk. 195-196.

<sup>240</sup> ‘The contribution of Bishop Penha deserves special mentioning in spreading the vision of BECs in many parts of India’ footnote 132 Ponnunmuthan S. (1996) *The Spirituality of Basic Ecclesial Communities in the Socio-Religious Context of Trivandrum/Kerala, India*. Rome, Italy. Editrice Pontificia Universita Gregoriana 267. Also Lobo-Gajiwala A. (2002) ‘Inculturation Through Basic Christian Communities and Basic Communities’ In: Fernandes E. SSS and Kunduru J. SJ (eds) *Renewed Efforts at Inculturation for an Indian Church*. Bangalore: Dharmaram Publications 145-166.

<sup>241</sup> Dabre T. (2000) ‘The Synod for Asia and the Ecclesial Community Formation’ *Vidyajyoti Journal of Theological Reflection*. 64 (8) 578.

preferred term for BECs in Mumbai,<sup>242</sup> were to be the priests' first priority. The Synod situated this task within the context of a collapsing parish model that was unable to respond to the needs of the growing Catholic communities around the city. 'We see that the typical parish of today cannot, for various reasons, be the starting point for community building. We have therefore to work with small units within the parish...'<sup>243</sup> Looking back almost 20 years later Nazareth<sup>244</sup> states that the main reason for the thrust towards SCCs seems to have been the 'city culture' which promotes individualism, impersonal relationships, superficial religious practice and unconcern for others. This is not the inspiration that led to the BECs emerging in Brazil and across Latin America in the 1960's. This new motivation responds very much to a reality that is replicated all over the world and not only in the countries of the south but in those of the north too.

Following from the earlier Priests Synod, in 1984 Bosco Penha, who was then the Rector of Mumbai's Major Seminary, initiated an experiment in the local parish of St Thomas, Goregaon. He organised the parish into about 30 potential SCCs that he started to form with the help of a large number of seminarians and lay volunteers. Initial progress was slow,<sup>245</sup> but two years later 25 parishes had embarked upon the adventure and Archbishop Simon Pimenta appointed a diocesan team for lay formation and community building to support this development. Writing in 2003 Penha sought to answer critics who said that this venture of SCCs was imported from outside India. He countered by arguing:

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<sup>242</sup> Bombay is still the name of the Archdiocese and therefore their historic meetings and documents, whilst Mumbai is the modern name of the city. As stated the acronym SCC is used when referring to India out of respect for the people and their process.

<sup>243</sup> Bombay Priests Synod Document 138 quoted in Nazareth A. (2003) *Handbook of Small Christian Communities for the Archdiocese of Bombay*. Mumbai, India: FILMC 1.

<sup>244</sup> Ashley Nazareth is the author of the official Archdiocesan Handbook for SCCs, which carries the full approval of the hierarchy and is the authoritative account of the history and theology of SCCs in Mumbai.

<sup>245</sup> "Fostering BCCs can become a very uphill task in the early years." Lobo-Gajiwala (2002) 149.



I have sometimes been asked whether we are following the Latin American model. The idea of small communities certainly originated in Latin America but we are not following the Latin American model. We have allowed this particular method to evolve in the Mumbai culture and it is still growing and evolving. For one thing we have not used communities for political purposes as was often the case in Latin America; also we have not restricted ourselves to the poor as I understand has been decided in the Philippines. Our model is more holistic embracing all aspects of human development and we have successful communities in Mumbai also among the affluent.<sup>246</sup>

Having myself worked as a member of the Marins Team both in Latin America and in Asia I can say that they have no concept of models of BECs that they are attempting to export. They concentrate instead on the process of becoming Church through the formation of real communities that themselves must be rooted in their own reality and must emerge out of their own socio-cultural environment responding in their own unique way to the demands of the gospel and the needs of the people (usually the poor). The Mumbai experience is exactly what is expected to happen, and now every parish in Bombay Archdiocese<sup>247</sup> is organised into smaller communities at the neighbourhood level.

What was striking in the literature from Bombay Archdiocese was the stress laid on the underlying reasons given for the efforts made there to create SCCs. At the root of everything was the basic assumption that the Church was first and foremost a community

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<sup>246</sup> Nazareth (2003) (i) foreward.

<sup>247</sup> Nazareth (2003) '16 years later practically all the 114 parishes are fully into communities.' 145.

of believers and that the parish must, therefore, provide an experience of community. In assessing the Indian reality the Mumbai literature noted that ‘the number of parishioners in the average Mumbai parish is so large that there is little semblance of this community.’<sup>248</sup> The Archdiocesan Handbook on SCCs went on to express the view that though there might be some feeling of togetherness at the Sunday liturgy this sort of community experience was mostly superficial. It was stated that many congregations were just a motley collection of strangers and that even when the Sign of Peace was exchanged it was not accompanied by a genuine desire to get to know the unknown person being greeted. The majority of parishioners they claimed felt uninvolved if not actually alienated.

However, the same documentation went further than simply reflecting upon the experience of Catholics whilst at church and looked at the reality in the wider city and neighbourhoods. Individualism and isolationism were heightened by the fast pace of life in Mumbai and a widely-diffused consumerist mentality made it not uncommon to find Catholics not knowing who their next door neighbours were. Criticism was levelled at those Catholics who had lived together in their neighbourhoods for some years and yet it was not unusual to find among them divisions created by prejudice, competitiveness, casteism, communalism and selfishness. The Handbook of Small Christian Communities warned that these rifts were conveniently hidden away and even white-washed by one’s faithful and regular observance of Sunday Mass ‘at which the numbers being large, it is possible to remain undisturbed under a veil of anonymous piety.’<sup>249</sup> Not surprisingly the author noted that in these circumstances whole congregations were drifting towards a

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<sup>248</sup> Nazareth (2003) 8.

<sup>249</sup> Nazareth (2003) 9.

form of Christianity where believers were defined by the doctrinal truths they adhered to rather than by their commitment to the community of Jesus' disciples. This kind of anonymous, privatised and individualised Christianity offered an easy escape from the social and communitarian dimensions of the faith.

#### **4.3 THE EMERGENCE OF AsIPA AT THE CONTINENTAL LEVEL**

The uncoordinated and disparate development of BECs/SCCs in Asia across two decades took a significant step forward with the 1993 decision of the Federation of Asian Bishops Conferences (FABC) to launch the Asian Integral Pastoral Approach (AsIPA). This decision followed what has become known in BEC/SCC circles as the Bandung Statement which was made by the FABC at the close of their V Plenary Assembly at Bandung, Indonesia in 1990. Paragraph 8 of the penultimate section of the document, 'A New Way of Being Church in the 1990s' the bishops stated that: 'The Church in Asia will have to be a communion of communities' and where the Risen Lord '...leads them to form small Christian communities (e.g., neighbourhood groups, Basic Ecclesial Communities and "covenant" communities).'<sup>250</sup> This Church is described as being a participatory Church, one which reaches out to those of other faiths in a dialogue of life directed at the integral liberation of everyone and one that should be a leaven of transformation in the world and a sign of prophetic witness among all people. In 1991 the FABC tasked the Office of Laity<sup>251</sup> with developing a formation programme aimed at delivering this New Way of Being Church.

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<sup>250</sup> FABC V Plenary Assembly Final Statement 'Journeying Together Toward the Third Millennium' July 17-27 1990 Bandung, Indonesia 8.1.11.

<sup>251</sup> 'The AsIPA was formulated at a conference called by the Bishop's Institute of the Lay Apostolate (BILA), one of the commissions of the FABC.' Claver (2009) 100.

Claver commented on this moment:

When I first heard the term and saw what the approach was, I thought to myself, ‘There’s nothing particularly Asian about it’- especially since I knew that its original formulation was similar to (if not adopted outright from) that of the Lumko Institute of South Africa.<sup>252</sup>

Oswald Hirmer (later Bishop Hirmer) of the Lumko Institute was one of the workshop facilitators at the Bandung Assembly, and he offered to rewrite the Lumko materials for an Asian audience along with a specially developed team (ART: AsIPA Resource Team). This action gave rise to the AsIPA process and programme. In 1995 he brought the AsIPA programmes to India with Fr Thomas Vijay and they eventually came to be known as DIIPA (Developing an Indian Integral Pastoral Approach). From 1990 to 1995 Hirmer delivered SCC workshops of a month’s duration at the invitation of both Bishop Penha and Fr Vijay on behalf of the Catholic Bishops Conference of India (CBCI) Laity Commission.

With the support and backing of the Asian episcopate in place, AsIPA quickly delivered to each participating country the materials to enable each Bishops Conference to commence building this new style and structure of Church at neighbourhood level. This was the same model and approach that characterised the AMECEA bishops of East Africa in the decades of the 70’s and 80’s. The promotion and development of BECs/SCCs at parish level was a hierarchical pastoral initiative that became the priority among both national and international echelons. AsIPA had produced a comprehensive array of

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<sup>252</sup> Claver (2009) 100.

materials to aid local trainers in their task of forming lay people and clergy capable of delivering this New Way of Being Church described in the Bandung Statement.

At the core of this approach was the concept of a ‘participatory Church’ arising from the idea that most Catholic parishes were not really engaging with the vast majority of their Mass-going people, who remained in various stages of passive indifference. The aim was a parish community in which the majority were actively involved in the evangelising mission of the Church. To achieve this end stress was laid on the concept of Training for a Participatory Church.<sup>253</sup> This training entailed a three-step process: the ‘Code’ (to present one particular life situation), the Bible Text (to reflect on the Word of God), and the Action (to guide the community towards transformation). The methodology used was variously described as the ‘participatory method’, the ‘participatory approach’ or the ‘participatory learning process.’ The AsIPA approach relied heavily on its pre-designed texts, and a close adherence to those texts was urged. ‘The facilitator is requested to follow the text as closely as possible and allow the participants to contribute when indicated in the text.’<sup>254</sup> This method of developing BECs/SCCs contrasts strongly with the methods used in Latin America particularly and remains one of the few areas where there is a radical difference of approach. The process used and the methodology employed in Africa and Asia generally varies somewhat from the Freirean approach popular in Latin America, as we have already noted in a previous chapter. Basically if one attends a base community meeting in Latin America it would be unusual to find the leader or facilitator using a text that he or she has to follow rigidly; though there are some

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<sup>253</sup> *Short History of AsIPA* given to delegates at the AsIPA V General Assembly in the Philippines and produced by the AsIPA team. Four series of AsIPA texts: 1) A Series: Topics related to gospel sharing methods. 2) B Series: Topics related to starting and maintaining SCCs. 3) C Series: Topics to reflect on the vision of a participatory Church. 4) D Series: Topics for the training of the Parish Team.

<sup>254</sup> *Ibid.*

countries that do send out guidelines for use in the base communities, they always use Freirean pedagogy. However it was the norm in parts of Asia that I visited to find a text being rigidly followed.

However, Claver was supportive of the AsIPA process because he situated it in the same context that he had found operative in the older Filipino BEC tradition.

On closer inspection, I realised its genesis in the action-reflection-action methodology ... was already accepted as a method of anthropological research... The methodology is actually a methodology of change based on dialogue about ideas from discernment-prayer on social problems, participation in decision-making, planning, acting, and co-responsibility in executing decisions and evaluating action on them.<sup>255</sup>

In 1995 research was carried out into BECs in the Philippines by the National Secretariat of Social Action of the Bishops Conference identified two major activities which were regarded as defining BEC. These were Bible-sharing and Pastoral Planning, both carried out in a participatory manner. Claver states unequivocally that these ‘two activities and the spirit in which they are done are actually all present in the Asian Integral Pastoral Approach methodology...’<sup>256</sup> The Philippines come to the debate from a pre-existing BEC tradition and culture, and Claver insists that there is basically no discontinuity between the new and the old approaches, identifying similar methods at work in them both.

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<sup>255</sup> Claver (2009) 101.

<sup>256</sup> Claver (2009) 115.

When later the churches of Asia came up with the AsIPA as their own way of forming BECs, it was only the name that we took to describe what was already substantially being done at all levels of the diocese. The AsIPA, as we've repeatedly said, is no different from the sociologist's action-reflection-action method of social research. Nor, for that matter, from the see/judge/act manner of action-reflection of Cardinal Joseph Cardijn's Young Christian Workers.<sup>257</sup>

Claver's perspective assists a balanced and nuanced discussion about the comparable processes of formation from Latin America and from Africa (Lumko) that actually now meet up in the Philippines, but not in any other part of Asia. My own sense, however, is that the different Latin American and African approaches have led to not only different praxes but also to the expression of vastly different ethos in the way formation is delivered and the meetings are run. The impact is different in each case; between making people subjects of their own liberation through a process designed to enable them to make choices and decisions about the transformation they want to see around them and people being told what to do, when and how by a text prepared at another level which runs the risk of maintaining them as objects of someone else's decisions and choices. Where I agree with Claver is that the theory as stated by AsIPA is undoubtedly similar in many respects to what Claver was used to but my experience of delivering training in both Asia and Latin America has revealed that the praxis can be quite different and therefore the results can be too. It has to be said that if the texts are particularly good and enable their users to put them to one side as they pursue an agenda of transformation that is emerging from within their own reflections then there should be no reason why those participants cannot become protagonists in an emerging new future.

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<sup>257</sup> Claver (2009) 197.

#### 4.4 UNIQUELY ASIAN BASIC HUMAN COMMUNITIES

One of the most promising developments with BECs/SCCs in Asia was the emergence of the idea that BECs/SCCs were probably a stage on a journey rather than the destination they had become in other places. This was undoubtedly because of the pluralistic context in which Asian Christians were very conscious of being an almost insignificant minority throughout Asia (the Philippines and East Timor being the exceptions). Bishop Thomas Dabre of Vasai, India, during a presentation to an international audience at Cochabamba, Bolivia at the close of the last millennium<sup>258</sup> made reference to the unique situation of Asia and its consequences for the mission of the Church.

Small Christian and Ecclesial Communities are possible in homogenous settings, when all profess the one Catholic faith. Both Catholic and non-Catholic Christians are about 2% of the total population of India. The evangelising mission of the Church and the actual multi-religious and multi-cultural setting of India demand that the small Christian communities should be open to become basic human communities including people of different faiths.<sup>259</sup>

This perspective carried potential significance for the northern hemisphere where many of the countries of Western Europe and North America have large multi-faith communities and where the practice of the Christian faith was fast becoming a minority activity. Despite the feeling that these basic human communities were only going to develop in places like India there were signs that they were also being found in the Philippines:

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<sup>258</sup> The International Consultation on Small Ecclesial Communities, Cochabamba, Bolivia, 31<sup>st</sup> October – 5<sup>th</sup> November 1999.

<sup>259</sup> Dabre (2000) 581.



In parts of the country where the Muslim presence is significant, Church workers have promoted what is described as basic human communities. The shift of focus from ecclesial to human communities highlights the commonality that exists among neighbours. It is now directed to the promotion of human dignity and kingdom values in our quest for total human development.<sup>260</sup>

A basic human community understood in these terms is one where the BEC/SCC was aware that in order to transform the neighbourhood in a way that everyone desired there was a need to make that project open to other neighbours in the vicinity. If the group was merely functioning as a bible-study group or a prayer-group then that question or pressure was unlikely ever to arise as they would feel completely self-contained within their own faith world. It was in many ways a testimony to the larger vision both of BECs/SCCs and of the mission of the Catholic Church in Asia that this option had become such a strong possibility in the region. It was also another way in which we could evaluate the process and development of the existing BECs/SCCs against wider criteria than whether they were simply satisfied with their service to and connection with the originating Catholic parish community.

This discussion was taking place especially in the Indian context where a number of theologians had reflected that in order to be genuinely authentic within the challenge of India's multi-faith reality the SCCs must reject the older model of BECs coming out of

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<sup>260</sup> Gabriel (2004) 333.

the Catholic majority countries of Latin America and forge their own style of basic community that responded to the situation of most Indian people.<sup>261</sup>

The Christian communities in India should not be closed and exclusive communities. They must remain open communities where all people in each place, irrespective of religion, caste, creed and ideology, should be brought together and basic human communities to be formed.<sup>262</sup>

This understanding saw the BECs/SCCs as the possible creators of contact between different faith groups at the most local level through an invitation extended to individual neighbours living alongside those who participated in their BEC/SCC. A model of Christian community as bridge-builder, a reaching out in a project of creating a new humanity based on people's common identification as sons and daughters of God and members of the human race.

The Church's objective in India must be the formation of basic human communities where common life-styles and common strategies for the liberation of the Indian masses and inter-religious approaches to the basic human problems and questions must be developed.<sup>263</sup>

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<sup>261</sup> 'The South American model of the BCC where almost the entire population is Catholic or Christian and the entire life of the community is organised practically on an ecclesial basis, seems to be not a viable model for India.' Pathil K. (2006) *Theology of the Church: New Horizons*. Bangalore, India: Dharmaram Publications 216.

<sup>262</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>263</sup> Pathil (2006) 216.

Pathil sees the SCCs of India as ‘only a first step towards the renewal of Christian life that should lead to the creation of basic human communities.’<sup>264</sup> This stance is replicated throughout India as can be seen in the official Handbook of SCCs for the Archdiocese of Bombay:

The people of other faiths living in the neighbourhood should also be invited for most of the programmes – the earlier the better... Many activities can be undertaken jointly. Living in close proximity many common interests and concerns are shared. Every SCC should move towards becoming a Small Human Community. This has to be the end product of our efforts keeping in mind the context of India as a plurality of religions.<sup>265</sup>

Even at the national level, the Catholic Bishops Conference of India (CBCI) brought out a statement at the end of their Millennium Conference in Calcutta in 2001 confirming their support for this approach:

In the Indian multi-cultural context, there is a need to network with all people of goodwill in promoting and nurturing small human/neighbourhood communities that usher in a society based on love, justice, peace and harmony. SCCs, while preserving their ecclesial identity, are called to play a vital role in promoting this process.<sup>266</sup>

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<sup>264</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>265</sup> Nazareth (2003) 33.

<sup>266</sup> Concluding Statement No 3 Catholic Bishops Conference of India, Calcutta January 2001.

Perhaps the foremost promoter of Basic Human Communities (BHCs) in India was Fr M.J. Edwin from Nagercoil, Tamil Nadu. He was a practitioner and an exponent of the BHCs and has clarified how he saw them both emerging from and working alongside the SCCs. There were many similarities between them. Both were small-group oriented and were territory-based. Just as the SCC was the Church itself in a given neighbourhood so the BHC was the nation itself in miniature in the neighbourhood. Both were committed to non-dominating styles of leadership and both were developing a participatory world. The guiding principle of them both was subsidiarity, that whatever can be done at a lower level was done at that level and not at any level above it and the higher level only took up those tasks that could not be handled at the lower levels. In a paper distributed to the IV AsIPA General Assembly in 2006, he made it clear that BHCs were ‘kingdom communities’, that the responsibility for ‘building Basic Human Communities forms part of the core mission of the Church. That it is not an option but a contextual necessity arising out of the very cause that gives the justification for the very existence of the Church.’<sup>267</sup> They were not in competition but were a structural tool for the realising of the kingdom. They were forums where the voice of the smallest and least could be heard and shared, where actions that initiate a fairer and more just world could be instigated. They encouraged a practise of dialogue at the grassroots of society and were forums where religious treasures could be shared and improvements to the neighbourhood planned and executed.

This same perspective was found also in other writers such as K.C. Abraham who wrote, ‘What we need today is a new generation of Hindus, Muslims and Christians who will

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<sup>267</sup> Edwin M. J. (2006) *Basic Human Communities* a paper distributed at the AsIPA IV General Assembly in Kerala, India, 15-23 November 2006.

recapture the humanising universal perspective and give shape to it in basic human communities.<sup>268</sup>

Lobo-Gajiwala offered an important reality check when she analysed the extent to which most SCCs had remained aloof from peoples of other faiths. She asserted that as SCCs started out as a ministry to and among Catholics they excluded other faith peoples from the beginning. The models and materials that had influenced India mostly had come from Latin America, Africa and the Philippines and these had as their context a Catholic-only focus and as far as both parishioners and parish clergy were aware there was little connectivity promoted through them with other faiths.<sup>269</sup> Changing the culture of existing group practice would be very difficult. Nonetheless she saw an opportunity for those with the vision to actively promote basic communities as well as SCCs ‘since total human development however, is the goal of evangelisation, (they) can promote a method of community organising as well as a religious consciousness...’<sup>270</sup>

#### **4.5 GOSPEL-CULTURE ENCOUNTER: ASIAN INSIGHTS**

‘Being a community is first and foremost a cultural and symbolic reality, and not a matter of structures and institution.’<sup>271</sup> This important intuition will be explored through the work of two Indian theologians Felix Wilfred and Michael Amaladoss, who contribute significantly to the unique development of BECs/SCCs in an Asian context. Though the question of inculturation was also crucial in Africa it seemed that the same issues here are

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<sup>268</sup> Quoted in Kumar Wesley A. (2007) ‘Condo Communes: Towards the Formation of Urban Base Communities as Spiritual Centres’ *Asian Journal of Theology*. 21(2) 281.

<sup>269</sup> Lobo-Gajiwala (2002) 156-158.

<sup>270</sup> Lobo-Gajiwala (2002) 157.

<sup>271</sup> Wilfred F. (1990) ‘Towards an Anthropologically and Culturally Founded Ecclesiology’ *Vidyajyoti Theological Journal of Reflection* 54 (10) 510-511.

nuanced in a slightly different way. Wilfred began his analysis by noting ‘the lack of an anthropological and cultural foundation for the very being of the Church among the Asian peoples.’<sup>272</sup> Basically he stated that the present-day ecclesiological orientations are inadequate for Asia. He classified them in four major categories; Reformist, Liberal, Liberational and Inculturational.

Reformist: This current began a few decades before Vatican II and made its mark on the conciliar deliberations and documents. In contrast to the preceding ultramontanist ecclesiology of the ‘perfect society’ it understood Church as communion and highlighted the aspect of mystery. It stressed going back to the roots or the sources of faith for inspiration and reform and from this approach developed the concept of the local Church. Dialogue with all people was a core value. (Congar, Lanne, Legrand, Tillard, Dulles and Komanchak are examples)

Liberal: This ecclesiology was concerned with the relevance of the Christian message in a secularised and mature world-view. It was highly critical of aspects of Church life; clericalism, authoritarianism, triumphalism, centralisation, papal primacy, infallibility and paternalism. It sought to create a more flexible and open structure to the Church and promoted freedom of thought and expression, the role of women and the importance of the laity. (Kung, Swidler, and McKenzie are examples)

Liberational: This approach grew directly out of the Second Vatican Council specifically in areas that didn’t receive the attention in the Council that they merited; Christian unity,

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<sup>272</sup> Wilfred (1990) 502.

openness to the world and the option for the poor. The context of extensive poverty, misery and oppression among the masses of the developing world, especially Latin America where they also happened to be Catholic, gave rise to an innovative and fresh ecclesiology of liberation. BECs were a focal point for praxis and reflection. (Sobrino, Boff, Segundo, Galilea, Gutierrez and Comblin are examples)

Inculturational: This orientation had grown significantly in the post-conciliar period especially in the southern hemisphere where the aim had been to transform a Euro-centric Church into a local Asian or African Church by assuming the cultural and spiritual heritage of the indigenous peoples. This process received its impetus from a number of documents of the Council including *Ad Gentes*. (Rahner and Buhmann are European examples but there are many others in each continent)

This brief synopsis suggests that the Reformist and Liberal trends were locked in a controversy with reactionary and traditionalist forces in the Church where the debate related to the reception and interpretation of Vatican II and the extent of continuity or discontinuity with a pre-Vatican II Tridentine tradition. Liberational ecclesiology, on the other hand, had come under sustained attack at both Vatican and national levels. However, argues Wilfred, none of these four orientations however was adequate for Asia because they all allowed the theological to precede the anthropological and the cultural. Wilfred stated that ecclesiology should rest on anthropological and cultural foundations. Rather than attempting to make the Church local by relating it to indigenous cultural forms, there was a need to ‘perceive, understand and re-appropriate the essence of the

Church itself in terms of Asian cultures, ways of life, inter-human relationships and communitarian existence.<sup>273</sup>

The concrete shape of the Church, therefore, could not be a priori, something pre-given, pre-defined, but had to be constructed and fashioned from within the ways of being a community found among the diverse peoples of the world. 'The anthropological and the cultural are not simply the context of the Church-community to which it has to accommodate and adapt, but form in a way part of the very text of the Church.'<sup>274</sup> That meant essentially that the Church actually emerged from and discovered its very nature and identity resulting from the hermeneutical praxis of a movement from the anthropological and the cultural to the theological. The implications of this we will explore shortly.

Amaladoss has taken a very similar approach: 'the incarnational paradigm embodied in the term inculturation', he argues, 'is inadequate to explore the challenges of the encounter between gospel and culture(s).'<sup>275</sup> He carefully defined his terms in this debate - Acculturation: A process through which a foreigner adapted themselves to a new cultural context; Enculturation: The process through which a child grew into the culture of the community; Inculturation: A theological notion that did not describe an anthropological process. He argued that incarnation was from above and from the outside and in the interaction between the gospel and culture there was never as close and neat a fit as in an incarnation. The relationship between religion and culture was always a

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<sup>273</sup> Wilfred (1990) 504.

<sup>274</sup> Wilfred (1990) 505.

<sup>275</sup> Amaladoss (2002) 13.



dialectical one and the agents of the process had got to be the people themselves. In practice the agents had been the missionaries who had laid down the norms and conditions for entry into the Church as well as defining the symbols and rituals used in the process. The response was at the very least complex, confused and ambiguous and was experienced as imposed and imported. It was a process tightly controlled by the local hierarchy who in turn owed their allegiance to Vatican officials who would make all the decisions about what could and couldn't be allowed, what could and couldn't be adapted or changed without themselves being from that culture or often having any experience of it. The gospel that was proclaimed in a new culture was a much-mediated experience having emerged from centuries of cultural adaptation in very different settings.

The coming into being of the Church in Asia had firstly to emerge out of the very nature and experience of Asian peoples themselves as the agents in this process. Before the gospel arrived there was already an understanding of community and human relationships for instance. Out of the way Asian people lived and conceived community, emerged a characteristic cultural trait of inclusivism. For example among Asian cultures boundaries were not fixed and inflexible, structures were not rigorously policed and conditions for belonging not strictly laid down. Community existed in the people, in their attitudes and values, in their vision and experience. Belonging therefore to the community of Jesus felt quite different in Asia than it did in Europe for example. The conception of one's self-identity (individual or group) being in opposition to or in contrast with the self-identity of another was quite alien in Asian culture where one's identity was not in contrast to the other but in relation to the other. It was the relationship which defined identity. An either/or way of thinking was quite foreign; Asians failed to be moved by the idea that

you were either in or out, relationships were fluid and open and so were their expressions of community.

‘In the Asian way of being a community,’ Wilfred argues, ‘the boundaries are so fluid, the relationships are so open that one could be in the Jesus-community without ceasing to be a participant in other religious experiences and community expressions.’<sup>276</sup> In fact what mattered to most people in the continent was not one’s external religious identity but the deeper religious experience one had and the path one followed to attain it. Asia seemed to be a place where it was imperative that one accepted various levels of ecclesiality, within which not all the followers of Jesus belonged to his community in the same way. This could be seen in the New Testament even in a superficial way simply by looking at the role of the crowd, the seventy-two, and the twelve and amongst them the threesome of Peter, James and John. Then there was Mary Magdalene, Nicodemus, Joseph of Arimathea, Zacchaeus, and Lazarus etc. This openness, fluidity and inclusivity corresponded to the Asian culture, ethos, and understanding of community.

The truth that different kinds of people were in Jesus’ company in different ways and in various grades of relationships had been obscured by Christian history where for most of the time only one form of belonging had been permitted and that enforced by the theological principal of ‘extra ecclesiam nulla salus’ (outside the Church there is no salvation) which attempted to draw very clear and distinct boundaries between the true believer and those deemed outside the flock and therefore unsure of their eternal salvation. This model of Church identity was derived from Christendom and despite

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<sup>276</sup> Wilfred (1990) 506.

renewal and rethinking in the field of ecclesiology remains the model in force today. ‘An anthropologically and culturally founded ecclesiality in Asia will find embodiment in a wide variety of forms.’<sup>277</sup> When the shape of the Church community arises from within the culture and genius of the people one should expect to see ecclesial forms and patterns quite different from what is considered to be the norm in a European context. As Amaladoss explained ‘Any Gospel-Culture encounter that starts from below is bound to be pluralistic.’<sup>278</sup> In India for example the Ashram could be an authentic expression of ecclesial identity; as could the many grassroots groups and movements across the continent also be other forms of ecclesial community. What was clear was that the present-day Asian cultural situation with its religious pluralism was certainly not foreseen as the environment of Jesus-community when certain institutions and ecclesial structures evolved. As Wilfred had said being a community was first and foremost a cultural and symbolic reality, and not a matter of structures and institution. Amaladoss succinctly stated it thus:

To be oneself is a basic human and social right. This right to one’s identity is never given spontaneously by those who dominate the collectivity. It has to be taken, asserted and celebrated. Such freedom is the gift of the Spirit. The Spirit is the ultimate guarantor of communion in pluralism.<sup>279</sup>

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<sup>277</sup> Wilfred (1990) 508.

<sup>278</sup> Amaladoss (2002) 26.

<sup>279</sup> *Ibid.*

#### 4.6 BECs RENEWAL FROM THE PERIPHERY

Aloysius Pieris SJ from Sri Lanka related to Marins and myself during a visit to his home in 2008 a personal memory about Karl Rahner's advice to him and others during the Council that their task was to fully allow the spirit of the Council to impact upon them by entering deeply into its ethos while it was actually happening so that after its closure they could move forward, building upon what it proposed, using the new perspectives it was opening up. They were to proceed from where the Council would leave them; 'In other words, our mission was to complete its unwritten agenda by means of a theopraxis that is commensurate with its new orientation.'<sup>280</sup> Many of the participants at Vatican II took this approach with them when they returned home. It is perhaps in this context that we can better understand the extraordinary growth of BECs/SCCs that began during the years immediately following on from the Council.

Pieris saw the Council of Jerusalem in Acts 15:1-29 as a very useful template for understanding and analysing the more recent Second Vatican Council.<sup>281</sup> He looked particularly at the 'crisigenic' nature of the pastoral ordinances flowing from both councils noting in passing that every 'praxis' was a tacit formulation of a 'theory'. Just as the first Council initiated a crisis provoked by the rupture with a twenty centuries-old tradition of Jewish circumcision, so the latter council gave rise to a crisis as yet unresolved, provoked by the radical rupture with the West.<sup>282</sup> That is the release of the universal Church from the hiero-partriarchal local Church of Rome that had for centuries imposed itself on others as the one and only Catholic Church. This crisis also triggered

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<sup>280</sup> Pieris A. (2005) 'Vatican II: A 'Crisigenic' Council with Unwritten Agenda' *East Asian Pastoral Review* 42 (1/2) 9.

<sup>281</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>282</sup> Rahner K. (1979) 'Toward a Fundamental Theological Interpretation of Vatican II' *Theological Studies* 40 (Dec) 716-727.

off a chain of new beginnings in almost every sphere of theology, spirituality, sacramental life, and social praxis. What I have been asserting is that the activities of the BECs/SCCs are precisely part of these ‘new beginnings’ and are both a structural and attitudinal change within the whole Church.

Pieris went on to focus on the centre-periphery conflict which also had antecedents in the first Council in the early Church. He suggested that the uniqueness of Vatican II was that in its origin and development as well as its conclusions the entire Church was moved by a desire for a radical renewal rather than a mere institutional or dogmatic reform. Renewal he stated moves from the periphery to the centre whereas reform trickles down from the centre to the periphery. Renewal by its nature is a fringe-phenomenon, and although the Vatican Council made a number of crisisgenic decisions in its documents from the centre, an unwritten agenda had to be discovered and executed on the periphery. It is precisely here that both fidelity to and reception of the Council still need to be worked out today. ‘The survival of the Council’s renewalist project depends not only on the local Churches of the periphery, but also on the periphery of those local Churches themselves!’<sup>283</sup> BECs/SCCs are indeed a phenomenon of the periphery of both the universal Church and the local Church and the centre has received this renewal as a challenge and a crisis and at times has strenuously attacked them especially in Latin America.

Amaladoss in a further article in 2008 asked an important question about the Church in a discussion dealing with the issue of globalisation. Faced with this new reality he wanted

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<sup>283</sup> Pieris (2005) 23.

to know if the Church was a credible witness or does it need re-founding?<sup>284</sup> BECs/SCCs were a way in which the Church at the most local level was enabled to respond to the basic needs and issues that people had to face where they lived. It was there that amongst the neighbours the whole question of credibility was worked out as the members of the ecclesial community witnessed to gospel values and in their service of those around them they helped to bring about the reign of God and they established kingdom values in this globalised world. He believed that the Church had to be involved in the world in new ways, focusing on the world rather than on itself, on life rather than on the sacraments. BECs/SCCs were indeed a way in which this could happen; already many such groups were realising the mission of the gospel by immersing themselves in their neighbourhood and making the cause of the people their cause too.

Arun Kumar Wesley made the simple point that the early Church relied on living as a witness to the gospel<sup>285</sup> and it was this predominantly lay initiative that proved so effective in evangelising the ancient Greek and Roman communities. He spoke of Base Communes in urban areas and envisaged that they would provide the neighbourhood with a creative space where the very fact of getting to know each other as neighbours became a learning process in itself. The transformation of the neighbourhood was an object of the BECs/SCCs; bringing about change in the neighbourhood and in society at large but starting at the intersection between society and where it is lived, formed and experienced in the interactions and interrelations between people who live alongside one another in the neighbourhood.

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<sup>284</sup> Amaladoss M. (2008) 'Mission in Our New Global Context' *East Asian Pastoral Review* 45 (4) 325.

<sup>285</sup> Kumar Wesley (2007) 282.

The same intuition was found in the work of Felipe Gomez who stated that the early Church communities were not only dynamic but they were on a much smaller scale than parishes and diocese today and they ‘evangelised their neighbourhoods by personal contacts... In Asia this system makes even more sense: we are dispersed minorities like them.’<sup>286</sup> He also agreed that in the work of spreading the gospel or evangelising it was life witness that became the convincing argument. He noted that in the reception of the Second Vatican Council that began in Medellin in 1968, on the periphery some might think in Latin America, the Church had been in a process of being converted to the human person. That is, in making the Church truly available to respond to the real needs of actual people, particularly the poor and especially in their sufferings. Gomez took from this a basic pastoral priority of brotherhood over worship and of course it was precisely in that aspect of Christian fellowship that the BECs/SCCs specialise. There was a need for a radical rethink of the way the Church operated in Asia and throughout the developing world thought Gomez. He cited the main problem being the inherited structures, institutions, values and attitudes that had come down to us from the Constantinian period of ecclesiastical-imperial power and that made the Church unfit and unprepared for her mission in a context such as Asia.

#### **4.7 NEIGHBOURHOOD – COMMON GROUND FOR CIVIL SOCIETY**

The concept of civil society which was discussed by Wilfred<sup>287</sup> denotes the space that was open for citizens to meet together, to discuss, to debate, to voice their views and also to critique and make demands for change and reform. Participation and dialogue in civil

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<sup>286</sup> Gomez F. (1982) ‘Christology and Pastoral Practice from below’ *East Asian Pastoral Review* 19 (1) 12-13.

<sup>287</sup> Wilfred F. (2005) ‘Asian Christianity and Modernity: 40 years after Gaudium et Spes’ *East Asian Pastoral Review* 42 (1/2) 191-206.

society could help individual Christians and their community groups and organisations make important contributions and so affect the society and its transformation. Often the Church had given the impression that it was unconcerned with any serious engagement with civil society as it attempted to run parallel structures in education, health-care, and welfare. Across Asia the picture was diverse; in some countries civil society was vibrant in others dormant and in others practically absent because of centralisation and totalitarian regimes. Christians could contribute to the creation of civil society even from their minority position. They would begin in their neighbourhoods through the BECs/SCCs and the BHCs (Basic Human Communities) reaching out to those of other faiths to join together in tackling the simple issues that it was in their hands to resolve and improve. Conversation and dialogue were important and vital first steps in the construction of a civil society. The concept of neighbourhood understood as a meeting ground or a common space where everyone felt comfortable and ‘at home’, enabled those who wanted to promote a common vision of human community to come together and start a process that would be inclusive and responsive to the real demands and needs of the people who lived there. This idea will be developed further in the next chapter and in the conclusion.

#### **4.8 CHALLENGING THE STRUCTURES**

Almost 30 years ago Gomez provocatively wrote that ‘If all Christians are to build the Church, the present system must be changed and the sooner the better.’<sup>288</sup> In 2006 an Indian theologian highlighted the same issue when he said: ‘BCCs are new ecclesial models and structures and they seem to challenge the traditional structures of the parish and diocese.’<sup>289</sup> Pathil argued that the emergence of SCCs as a phenomenon in recent

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<sup>288</sup> Gomez (1982) 12.

<sup>289</sup> Pathil (2006) 214.



times was a very significant development and a sign of hope for the Church. As people became more aware of the BEC/SCC phenomenon it seemed to become clearer that the sheer size of the large and often anonymous parish structures made them incapable of delivering both the missionary outreach and the communitarian experience required of authentic ecclesial communities. This was the position of Jose Marins speaking in an interview also in 1982, 'But the parish, as it is now, first of all, is too big, and secondly, it has long ago stopped being a community experience.'<sup>290</sup> Marins then went on to formulate the question that this analysis raised for him:

... how to remake the basic tissue of the Church, the groundwork of the Church, through small communities... how will the Church recondition her basic level, how will she restructure herself so as to fit in today's world... This is the basic problem of the whole Church.<sup>291</sup>

The interviewer had asked Marins whether he saw ecclesial communities as the exclusive manner of being Church in the world today. Marins tried to reformulate the question by suggesting that the question to be asked should be: where does the baptised person live out their Christian calling and experience? And the response he gave was that the Christian could not live out their calling isolated and alone obviously, but it had to be amongst the community of disciples that continued the mission of Jesus. If the Church was therefore a community the question was one of exactly where was the community of each baptised person? The traditional answer was the parish; whether or not this was an

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<sup>290</sup> Marins J. (1982) 'Basic Christian Communities: An Interview with Fr José Marins' *East Asian Pastoral Review* 19 (2) 65.

<sup>291</sup> *Ibid.*

authentic expression of community was now disputed. The parish, Marins argued, was in fact part of the wider problem of the ecclesiology that informed much of present day Catholic thinking; namely, that most Catholics saw their parish as a kind of spiritual service station where they went to receive the sacraments, to practice their devotions, to fulfil their obligations but not to have a deep experience of life-sharing or even to find the support and vision necessary for their mission as baptised Christians transforming the world with kingdom values.<sup>292</sup>

BECs/SCCs are forcing the wider Church to ask questions about the nature of community as lived and experienced within the Church. The presence of the BECs/SCCs in the Church called to the attention of all the members of the Church that each one must decide where their 'basic community' was, where they experienced the fullness of faith and life as a disciple of the Lord. The significance of the Church hierarchy making a pastoral option for BECs/SCCs as they had done throughout Latin America, in the AMECEA countries of Africa for example and through the AsIPA process in Asia, was that this helped the individual believer to make their option for the same commitment to community and mission.

This vital aspect of the BECs/SCCs in raising questions for the Church to respond to was faced head-on by Bishop Tagle of the Philippines when he wrote: 'The acceptability or non-acceptability of the BECs depends in large measure on the ease or un-ease with

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<sup>292</sup> *Ibid.*

which we face the questions raised by the BECs.<sup>293</sup> Tagle went on to reflect that the presence of BECs/SCCs and the experience of living both with them and within them asked the Church what those at the base meant in the life and mission of the Church. He also felt that the BEC/SCC experience asked the Church what was the basic or fundamental reality that made a community ecclesial or Church. These questions and others were not so much addressed consciously by or from the BECs/SCCs but they emerged from within the impact they had on the wider Catholic community and called forth a response on a number of levels.

Many Catholics as has been said already experienced the parish more in terms of structures than human inter-action. BECs/SCCs provided people with direct relationships and were a real alternative to the ‘prevalent anonymity of parishes and diocese.’<sup>294</sup> Tagle asserted that they reawakened a sense of community in a highly institutionalised organisation. He also raised another important consideration that of whether the BECs/SCCs deserved to be called local Churches. That they are mostly neighbourhood communities settled their localness, but were they truly Church in a particular locality? Gutierrez worked towards some kind of response when he stated that BECs/SCCs were not just a pastoral programme but they were Church in the neighbourhood, they were in effect believers in a neighbourhood living a gospel life-style within daily settings. BECs/SCCs were indeed a way of life. His response was not from any juridical or institutional perspective but came at the question from the angle of human relationships and the life that flowed from people’s interactions. ‘If we treat BECs as a basic structure

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<sup>293</sup> Tagle L. A. (2004) ‘Some Theological Questions BECs Love to Ask’ In: Delgado, Gabriel, Padilla, Picardal, (eds) *BECs in the Philippines: Dream or Reality? A Multi-Disciplinary Reflection*. Rizal, Philippines: BUKAL NG TIPAN 79.

<sup>294</sup> Tagle (2004) 82.

of parish life, then it is not just an organisation but an organism that makes Church alive in every member, in every moment, in every corner of the parish.<sup>295</sup>

#### **4.9 ARE THE BECs A LOCAL CHURCH?**

The question of the local Church was being raised in every area where BECs/SCCs were in existence. Pieris claimed interestingly that the idea of ‘local Church’ was tautologous for there could be no Church that was not local.<sup>296</sup> Segundo in Latin America agreed when he affirmed that the Church was and always would be a particular community which also had claims to universal significance.<sup>297</sup> Schillebeeckx 50 years ago recognised that there was an implication to linking the idea of local Church to ‘territoriality’ and that was that it raised the question of the status of Basic Ecclesial Communities in relation to the Church.<sup>298</sup> Bouyer also believed that the first manifestation and realisation of the Church was the local communities.<sup>299</sup> And other theologians too believed that the local Church was the full presence and manifestation of the one Church of Christ in history.<sup>300</sup>

Claver noted that in Vatican II the term ‘local Church’ was seldom used, the more common phrase was ‘particular Church’ by which the Fathers of the Council meant primarily the diocese. However when Claver was present at the Synod on Evangelisation in 1974 he noticed the idea was gaining strength: ‘In that Synod the concept of the local Church took a more definite shape. Most of the bishops from the Third World wanted the

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<sup>295</sup> Gutierrez A. (2004) ‘Church Associations: Moving from Organisation to Ministry’ In: Delgado, Gabriel, Padilla, Picardal (eds) *BECs in the Philippines: Dream or Reality? A Multi-Disciplinary Reflection*. Rizal, Philippines: BUKAL NG TIPAN. 79.

<sup>296</sup> Pieris A. (1988) *An Asian Theology of Liberation*. New York: Orbis Books. 36

<sup>297</sup> Segundo J. L. (1980) *The Community Called Church*. Dublin: Gill and Macmillan. 5-7.

<sup>298</sup> Schillebeeckx E. (1972) Editorial *Concilium* 1972/1 9.

<sup>299</sup> Bouyer L. (1982) *The Church of God*. Chicago: Francisco Herald Press. 278.

<sup>300</sup> Legrand H. (1972) ‘The Re-evaluation of the Local Church: Some Theological Implications’ *Concilium* 1972/1 57. Komonchak K. (1986) ‘Towards a Theology of the Local Church’ *FABC Papers* 42 34-35.

idea of the local Church developed but the document the Synod was to issue was not passed.<sup>301</sup> The main reason being he stated was the chapter on the local Church was not approved. The bishops had wanted to see development in four main areas; law, structures of the Church, theology from indigenous perspectives, and liturgy in tune with people's cultural milieu. This proved too much for the majority of the bishops but the bishops were using the term as synonymous with national Church and the Vatican II term was being slowly replaced with the shift from the individual diocese to a collection of dioceses with commonalities. The debate was becoming more focused on the local in the sense of common languages, cultures and territories; this perspective, however, has not proved to be the final word on the question of 'local' or indeed 'Church'.

Claver returned to certain key ideas of Vatican II that when taken seriously would 'inevitably lead to the formation of local Churches and hence of BCCs.'<sup>302</sup> These simple ideas of dialogue, involvement and co-responsibility when put into practice he believed would bring about a transition from a passive institutional model of Church to a more active participative model. This involvement of a participatory people was not something that occurred at the distant level of the diocese but could in fact only take place at the nearest level for the people, at the grassroots and that was in the BEC/SCC close to where they lived. Now Claver made the point that in areas where the Christians were in a minority a territorial meeting might not be possible so they would have to find another way of meeting, another base that united them either through interest groups, professional groups or worship groups but there had to be a mechanism whereby people met together and communicated with one another.

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<sup>301</sup> Claver (1986) 'The Basic Christian Communities in the Wider Context' *East Asian Pastoral Review* 23:3 362.

<sup>302</sup> Claver (1986) 364.

Several years later the East Asian Pastoral Institute held a Summer Course in 1979 where the central theme was 'Local Church', with participants from many parts of Asia. No doubt influenced somewhat by the recent Synod on Evangelisation the course participants while debating the local Church and the formation of small ecclesial communities identified evangelisation as a core component for ecclesial authenticity.

It is one thing to experience the need for small ecclesial communities and to observe the dynamics of the growth of the small group; it is quite another to bring into being a small group which is an authentic ecclesial community... the dream of becoming truly local Church cannot possibly be realised unless our small community becomes an evangelised and an evangelising group.<sup>303</sup>

The seminar took its lead from the Second Vatican Council theology of the Church as sign and sacrament.<sup>304</sup> They focused on the question of 'sign' and asked themselves how to become the kind of sign that was actually credible and meaningful for concrete people, living at a particular historical moment within a given culture and situation. The seminar clarified what people already knew: that actions always spoke louder than words and therefore to be truly credible and authentic people had to experience the Church as being totally consistent and believable as a sign of the presence in the world of the values of the kingdom. Now that in 2012 it is 50 years since the opening of the Council, it is opportune to ask the question to what extent has this theology of sign and sacrament been fully understood or implemented in ecclesiological development? It offered immense

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<sup>303</sup> Calle J. (1979) 'Dimensions of the Local Church' *East Asian Pastoral Review*. 16 (1) 260.

<sup>304</sup> Lumen Gentium: 'Since the Church, in Christ, is in the nature of sacrament – a sign and instrument...'  
Flannery (1992) paragraph 1 350.

possibilities for the renewal of the whole Church given that the BEC/SCC experience emerging from the margins of the world and the Church was the first-fruits of a renewal of ecclesial behaviour and therefore ultimately of structures which responded very much to the intuitive insight that saw the light of day in the Council.

The Vatican II document *Gaudium et Spes* eloquently spoke about the nature of the Church as community in paragraph 32, but as Calle noted, this theme required further practical development, ‘Since the Church is a sign which is at the same time a community, she must be seen, recognised, and experienced as a community.’<sup>305</sup> The challenge to authenticity was perhaps the greatest challenge facing the Church in the sense that it was never enough to formulate statements of belief or action but if the perception on the ground differs or if people’s experience was at variance with the doctrinal declarations then the credibility of the whole Church suffered and so did her potential for mission. Therefore it was crucial that the local Church truly witnessed in a tangible and visible way, through the quality of her mutual relationships, through the styles of leadership she employed, through the pastoral structures she operated, through the liturgies she celebrated and the generous open-handed service she offered the world, that she was indeed a community.

Yet for this to happen, namely to give visibility and tangibility to what the Church is in her inner mystery, the local Church must be envisioned and structured at all levels as a community of communities... though small they are the most essential, basic units because only within them is it possible for a group of persons to experience the

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<sup>305</sup> Calle J. (1979) ‘Profile of the Local Church’ *East Asian Pastoral Review* 16:1 269.

Church as a community, and to become together a concrete expression of what the Church tries to signify as a credible sign of salvation.<sup>306</sup>

If it was possible to infer from the creedal formulation of ‘One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic’ that the oneness of the Church actually implied community in some sense then it became clear that to be truly Church she had also to be truly a community and that despite all their faults and limitations BECs/SCCs were indeed an authentic ecclesial expression in that they were a genuine attempt to create community and to be experienced as community at the level where they operated, the neighbourhood or sub-parish level. The same was true also if we were to examine the identity of the Church as an evangelising community, an apostolic community; one could understand how through the daily efforts of the people in their BECs/SCCs to live the gospel amongst their neighbours they were giving authentic witness to the true mission of the Church in the world. These two critical marks of an authentic Church – community and evangelising mission – were given expression within the BEC/SCC.

Ponnumathan in his Doctoral Thesis delivered at the Gregorian University in Rome made a number of significant points about BECs and the local Church; indeed he situated his entire research in the context of the theology of the local Church but addressing himself beyond Vatican II to the New Testament. That is more than this research allows but I want to acknowledge some of his important findings. He noted that the BECs were new forms of being local Churches. They were the whole Church in a concentrated form. They were another form of ecclesial expression. ‘The emergence of BECs is to be

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<sup>306</sup> *Ibid.*



considered as a gift of the present times to live Church and to build communities.’<sup>307</sup> He saw the vision that gave rise to the BEC/SCC phenomenon in the developing world being implicit in the ecclesiology of the Second Vatican Council. Ponnnumuthan went further than many other theologians in insisting in ‘the inability of living a true ecclesial life in the existing structure.’<sup>308</sup>

This chapter has examined the BECs/SCCs challenge to the structures of the Church, and in Trivandrum the structures have evolved to fully take into account the new insights coming from this new experience and expression of being Church. BECs/SCCs became a diocesan pastoral option in 1991 and their form and structure was decided upon at that level. As in South Australia, as we shall see in the next chapter, the diocese decided that everyone became automatically a member of the BEC/SCC. ‘In Trivandrum, the diocesan structures are set up on the basis of the BECs. One cannot become a member of the Pastoral Council unless one does frequent the BEC gatherings.’<sup>309</sup> Ponnnumuthan claimed that they were the first diocese in Kerala to ‘fully implement BECs.’<sup>310</sup> Having researched the phenomenon of BECs/SCCs across the world he arrived at his conclusion that: ‘More similarities than differences have been noticed in the functioning of BECs in most of these countries.’<sup>311</sup>

It is important in a chapter devoted to Asia that the role of the FABC should be properly acknowledged in the development of ideas about the local Church. Since its inception in

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<sup>307</sup> Ponnnumuthan S. (1996) *The Spirituality of Basic Ecclesial Communities in the Socio-Religious Context of Trivandrum/Kerala, India* Rome: Editrice Pontificia Universita Gregoriana 25.

<sup>308</sup> Ponnnumuthan (1996) 38.

<sup>309</sup> Ponnnumuthan (1996) 259.

<sup>310</sup> Ponnnumuthan (1996) 265.

<sup>311</sup> Ponnnumuthan (1996) 269.

1974 and as a preparation for the Synod on Evangelisation the first FABC Plenary Assembly held in Taipei, Taiwan, on the theme of Evangelisation in Modern Day Asia, made a clear commitment to the concept of a local Church. ‘The primary focus of our task of evangelisation then, at this time in our history, is the building of a truly local Church...’<sup>312</sup> At the Asian Colloquium on Ministries in the Church (ACMC) held in 1977 in Hong Kong another impetus was given to the idea of local Church:

... the decisive new phenomenon for Christianity in Asia will be the emergence of genuine Christian communities in Asia – Asian in their way of thinking, praying, living, communicating their own Christian experience to others... If the Asian Churches do not discover their own identity, they will have no future.<sup>313</sup>

The centrality of the local Church in the theological-missiological thought in the Asian area was highlighted by the FABC commitment to study the question in depth. They formally established the Theological Advisory Commission (TAC) in the 1980s and there followed a five-year period of research and consultation culminating in the report *Theses on the Local Church: A Theological Reflection in the Asian Context*.<sup>314</sup> ‘This is the longest document ever produced by the TAC. It was released in 1991 and is arguably the best and most comprehensive document to date on local Church.’<sup>315</sup>

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<sup>312</sup> FABC I, 9-10 quoted in Kroeger, J. (1998) *Asia’s Emerging Catholicity: FABC insights on the local Church*. *AFER* (1998) 40 86.

<sup>313</sup> Kroeger (1998) 87 ACMC paragraph 14.

<sup>314</sup> FABC Papers 60 <http://www.ucanews.com/html/fabc-papers/fabc-0.htm> Accessed 18.09.2012.

<sup>315</sup> Kroeger (1998) 91.

This chapter has brought to a conclusion the survey of the main geographical areas of the world where the phenomenon of BECs/SCCs has been developing over the past 50 years or so. We have explored their history and impact in the Philippines and India and indeed due to the restrictions of space and scope we have hardly done justice to the many different areas that we could have developed about BECs/SCCs in Asia. In this chapter we have focused mainly on their origins and influences, as well as on the work of AsIPA, which is a unique contribution to the development of BECs/SCCs in any part of the world. We also explored briefly the emergence of Basic Human Communities, predominantly from within the Indian experience though it is also spoken of elsewhere. The gospel-culture encounter has particular resonance in Asia and has exercised many theologians as we have seen. This has drawn out the theme of ecclesiology that has also been reflected upon in both the Africa and Latin American chapters. We briefly looked at the challenges to ecclesial structures from the BECs/SCCs before finally reflecting once again upon the concept of local Church as understood in the writings of the theologians from the region. This complemented a similar exploration in the previous two chapters. We shall now move on to review the final BEC experience and then look at the nature of the debate about neighbourhood and community from a variety of non-theological sources.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### EXPLORING NEIGHBOURHOOD

In this thesis so far we have been looking at the phenomenon of BECs in Latin America, Africa and Asia. We have seen that they exhibit differences as well as similarities and though they are not rooted in a common ecclesial setting nonetheless they reflect upon the same geographical setting – the neighbourhood. This chapter focuses on the particularity of neighbourhood as the location for community and mission and take inspiration from a number of non-ecclesial writers and contexts who will also draw our attention to the importance of the neighbourhood in our day. Although the Roman Catholic Church has a strong centralising tendency, there is considerable difference in emphasis and direction between the younger Churches, usually those in the poorer regions of the world and those Churches of Europe and North America. Without neglecting all that is normative within the universal Catholic tradition, the Churches we have looked at in the previous three chapters have in common an ability to focus not only on the big picture, the universal concerns and interests of a world-wide Church, but also on the smallest part, the streets that together make up a neighbourhood and in which the Catholic faithful from a particular parish will meet to form community and to exercise their task of mission to their neighbours. Within the context of Churches from the developed world that have shown little or no interest in this growing phenomenon of BECs there is one exception and that is the Archdiocese of Adelaide, South Australia to which we shall turn in a moment before leaving behind the ecclesiastical sphere to focus our attention on insights that have been gathered from the secular sphere.

This chapter of the research will draw upon the work of theologians such as Sally McFague and Yves Cattin as well as Felix Wilfred who have used ideas of neighbourhood and neighbour in their work. Their work will shed light upon the value and significance of the concept of neighbourhood for theology. This chapter will also be using the work of Lewis Mumford, Richard Sennett, Robert Putnam and James Vela-McConnell to highlight the importance of neighbourhood and the relations between people who live in the neighbourhood to urban geographers and sociologists. They have much to teach us about why efforts towards neighbourliness and community ought to be made by those parties concerned with the present and future directions that our cities are taking.

### **5.1 ADELAIDE: AUSTRALIAN EXCEPTIONALISM**

Each of the geographical areas studied in this project has brought its own unique contribution and insight to the debate about this form of ecclesial life and structure. No survey of BECs, especially one that purports to connect the experiences of the global south with the experience of Church in the post-industrial and indeed post-modern world would be complete without some reference to the important and ground-breaking work done in the Archdiocese of Adelaide, South Australia. This took place under the leadership of Archbishop Leonard Faulkner (1985-2001) and was influenced significantly by Fr Bob Wilkinson, an Adelaide diocesan priest, and a team of religious and lay people.

Over a number of decades, the Archdiocese had attempted to respond to the fast-changing scene within Australian society and Church by facing the challenges that were emerging. I spent a number of months working with the BEC Team at the end of 1999, where I noted many similarities that made the different ecclesial and socio-geographic contexts so

comparable. Adelaide's experience of BECs grew out of years of lay-formation programmes and generations brought up in Catholic movements and groups such as Young Christian Workers, Christian Life Movement and the almost ubiquitous St Vincent de Paul and Legion of Mary. As membership within these organisations and Mass attendance began to decline, leaders in the diocese sought a way to respond to this unfolding reality. In 1988, three years after taking the helm, Archbishop Faulkner presented to the priests of the archdiocese a vision statement<sup>316</sup> in which he outlined principles around which his pastoral energies would be directed, and therefore he hoped those of his clergy and people as well. There were four main areas for attention. The first was to read the signs of the times; the second was the mission of each Catholic to shape the world with the gospel; the third was the formation of Small Christian Communities in every parish and the fourth was the key question of lay leadership. Wilkinson acknowledged the difficulties involved; '... the concept of small Christian communities in every parish proved a tough theological nut.'<sup>317</sup> There followed years of experimentation with many attempts to deliver this vision but there was, alongside this process, a continuous search for that elusive missing piece of the jigsaw that, when found, would enable the entire project to be enthusiastically embraced by the majority of clergy and people alike.

Throughout this period Wilkinson used the work of French sociologist François Dubet<sup>318</sup> to influence his reflections on the Adelaide ecclesial scene. Dubet made a systemic

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<sup>316</sup> Faulkner L. (1988) *Community for the World* Adelaide: Catholic News Centre

<sup>317</sup> Wilkinson P. R. (2001) *Adelaide's Basic Ecclesial Communities Project 2*.  
<http://www.adelaide.catholic.org.au/sites/ParishNeighbourhoodChurch/media/files/1109pdf>  
Accessed 09.05.2012.

<sup>318</sup> Dubet F. (1987) *La Galère: Jeunes en Survie*, Paris: Editions Fayard/Seuil. In *Sociologie de l'Espérance* (1994) Paris: Seuil. Dubet expands his research into a general theory for post-industrial societies.

analysis of post-industrial society looking particularly at marginalised youth in France, which Wilkinson understood to have a far wider application. Dubet named three major systems each with its own logic that impacted upon individuals and groups: the erosion of traditional community systems, the individualistic competitive ethos of the market place, and the ‘subjectivation’ which is evident in modern social movements. Wilkinson commented that the power of traditional Church community systems to socialise the young was in marked decline, massively influenced by the impact of the second system defined by free market economics with its ensuing competitiveness that undermined forms of solidarity and social cohesion replacing subsidiarity with new forms of fiscal and social control. Dubet’s third system was that of the individual choosing to be a subject of life rather than the object of someone’s or society’s expectations. He found in the social movements of our time an embodiment of a desire on the part of a growing number of younger people to seek identity in some model of creative struggle for authenticity, freedom, integrity and honesty that does not exclude a desire also for some form of solidarity and commitment. ‘Using that analysis, we can see that the Church is clearly a victim of the atrophy of traditional processes and forms,’ wrote Wilkinson.<sup>319</sup>

This led Adelaide Archdiocese to search for a creative way to reach out and connect not only with those disaffected and searching young people where they live but also to all others who are found and encountered in the streets of South Australia’s many neighbourhoods

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<sup>319</sup> Wilkinson (2001) 4.

If any traditional institution is to be heard, it needs to show unexpected and creative structures within itself, offering a voice to the voiceless as equal partners. This is very similar to the experience the early Church presented to its world. Somehow new forms of community experienced by the majority as creative and life-giving, because open to healthy tensions, are vital for the Church.<sup>320</sup>

In 1994 Wilkinson and his team invited the Marins Team<sup>321</sup> to share their experiences with the Archdiocese of Adelaide. The result was a growing understanding of the gospel imperative to reach out to the 100%; something that traditional Catholic parishes and organisations had failed to grasp or understand. The Marins Team shared from their own experience that in any given parish, no more than 1% of the parish was seriously involved in any form of leadership with the parish priest. This small percentage was complemented potentially by up to another 20% that regularly attended Sunday Mass; some of them would also be members of parish groups and organisations. That left about 80% or more in some cases, of baptised Catholics who rarely touched base with the Church except through the parish school or, when they celebrated a birth, marriage or death. Marins suggested that around the world most pastoral energy in the Church was directed to getting the 20% to become part of the 1%.<sup>322</sup> There was very little sense of a mission-to-the-majority at parish level and there was little or no re-structuring of parishes to facilitate this vision of a mission-centred parish community. In the face of these

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<sup>320</sup> Wilkinson (2001) 5.

<sup>321</sup> It is worth noting a comment of Wilkinson's about the Marins Team, given an oft repeated but completely false criticism I heard about them and their work in both Asia and the UK: 'At no stage did they burden us with details of Latin American practice or methods or presume to promote any ideas of what action was appropriate for Australia.' Wilkinson (2001) 6.

<sup>322</sup> 'Marins suggested that around the world, parish pastoral energy usually goes in getting some of the 20% (the Mass-goers) to join the one per cent (active responsibilities). He wondered if the 80%, (the non-Mass-goers) would still be there in one or two generations, unless we found a way to include them in church community more fully, more consciously and more actively.' *Ibid.*



figures the Adelaide BEC Team decided that it was imperative that they made strenuous efforts to connect with 100% of their Catholic community. To facilitate this commitment, they developed an understanding of parish where everyone was organised into neighbourhoods of about 100-150 Catholic families and a small team of local people were recruited to visit them on a regular basis in their own homes. These were known as the Neighbourhood Pastoral Team (NPT) and their objective was to give flesh to the sense of community and communion that the Church had committed itself to at the baptism of each Catholic. The members of the NPT would visit between 12-16 Catholic neighbours in a geographic locality and simply try to make real the bonds of love and communion that united all those within the Church.

Wilkinson was influenced by his background in sociology, social theory and social practice and was committed to the concept of formation through action<sup>323</sup> believing that it had a greater effect on changing people than any amount of discussion and debate. This novel way of preparing people for their work in the NPTs, through a commitment to action first and then reflection upon the action, was something particular to Adelaide that addressed the problem of many Church groups in the West. Bible Study groups, Prayer Groups, and Faith Formation seldom enabled their members to move beyond discussion into action. He identified that this approach was hardest for clergy and religious who were wedded to the idea that preaching, teaching and discussing were the best, if not the only ways, of keeping alive the faith. He called this the incubation method where the

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<sup>323</sup> In 1989-90 Wilkinson studied under Alain Touraine in the *École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales*, EHESS, or the School for Advanced Studies in the Social Sciences. It is said that Touraine was the first to use the term '*post-industrial society*' and his work is based upon a 'sociology of action' and teaches that society shapes its future through structural mechanisms and its own social struggles. Touraine defined historicity as the capability of a society to take action upon itself. He has spent his life researching social movements which he defines as a non-violent struggle within a society to interpret that society's common culture. These ideas had a profound impact upon Wilkinson who drew upon them with great effect for the work he was engaged in with BECs in Adelaide.

practitioners were prepared through study and the acquisition of knowledge before they were allowed to go out and engage with people. However, Wilkinson suggested an alternative approach was necessary, one that enabled parishioners in the NPTs to learn on the job. Simply put they would reflect upon their experiences after having done something they were all well equipped to do, and that was to hold a conversation, to be-friend, to listen to and chat to a neighbour. And all that despite the obvious reticence to knock on a stranger's door.

Another aspect of the Adelaide experience was that it was one of the few examples of an entire Archdiocese in a post-industrial society choosing to follow a pastoral plan that involved total commitment to the BEC model of Church. For that reason alone it was worth bringing an academic analysis to bear upon it. The Practical Theology question of 'normativity' is useful here in that Faulkner drew upon several papal pronouncements<sup>324</sup> to establish the fact that what was being proposed was in line with official Church teaching; in other words his approach was presented as normative for the Catholic Church in the sense that what was being proposed was in communion with that which was truest and deepest in the Catholic faith and was authenticated by the magisterium in the person of the Pope. However, it clearly was not the norm in the sense of reflecting the majority approach, at least within those countries that were considered to be 'developed'.

In a Pastoral Letter of October 1994 Faulkner wrote:

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<sup>324</sup> In his Pastoral Letter of 1994 he mentions Vatican II twice, Pope Paul VI, Pope John Paul II twice, Synod of Bishops (1985) and quotes from Papal and Synodal Documents four times.

I believe that the world-wide emergence of BECs is the work of the Holy Spirit in our time, a gift of God to the Church. For this reason, they have a central place in our diocesan vision and I encourage parishes to move towards them as a long-term orientation and 'preferred way' for our local church.<sup>325</sup>

Here he made a connection between a phenomenon that he recognised was taking place all across the globe and the action of God in the world through the Holy Spirit. This statement claims a high degree of normativity by linking the whole concept of BECs directly with the Divine inspiration that he affirmed was behind it. In the same letter he also quotes from the Synod of Bishops Final Report document from 1985:<sup>326</sup> 'Because the Church is communion, the new 'basic ecclesial communities' as they are called, if they try to live within the unity of the Church are a true expression of communion and a means for the construction of a more profound communion.'<sup>327</sup> The Archbishop went on to conclude his letter<sup>328</sup> by quoting from some of the favourable words that Pope Paul VI had spoken about base communities in his Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Nuntiandi* (1975).<sup>329</sup>

But this was not the only avenue for staking a claim to normativity. It was important to the Archbishop to also draw attention to the roots of BECs in the gospels, the experience

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<sup>325</sup> Faulkner L. (1994) *Basic Ecclesial Communities* Pastoral Letter 1.

<sup>326</sup> II Extraordinary General Assembly 24 November - 8 December 1985. 'The Twentieth Anniversary of the Conclusion of the Second Vatican Council.'

[http://www.saintmike.org/library/synod\\_bishops/final\\_report1985.html](http://www.saintmike.org/library/synod_bishops/final_report1985.html) Accessed 24.07.2012.

<sup>327</sup> Faulkner (1994) 3.

<sup>328</sup> 'I believe that BECs can help to overcome the isolation that so many people experience. They can bring not only a sense of mutual belonging but also a stronger sense of discipleship and mission. As Pope Paul VI said in 1975, BECs are a cause of great hope for the life of the church'. Faulkner (1994) 4.

<sup>329</sup> [http://www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/paul\\_vi/apost\\_exhortations/documents/hf\\_p-vi\\_exh\\_19751208\\_evangelii-nuntiandi\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/paul_vi/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_p-vi_exh_19751208_evangelii-nuntiandi_en.html) paragraph 58 Accessed 24.07.2012.

of the Early Church and in Catholic doctrine. He stated immediately that the BEC ‘is a community born from the Divine Trinitarian communion.’<sup>330</sup> He referenced BECs to sacramental doctrines such as Baptism and Eucharist and spoke of them as being ‘the Sacrament of Salvation in a local area.’<sup>331</sup> He also referred six times to Jesus, the gospels and the Word of God. But his most extensive BEC scriptural referencing stated that ‘In many ways they reflect the Church of the first centuries’<sup>332</sup> where in no less than seven New Testament references he draws parallels between the BECs of Adelaide and the early Church communities gathering in the homes of Stephanas, Phoebe, Prisca and Aquila.<sup>333</sup> It is clearly important for Adelaide to be able to show to its people that what was being proposed for them as part of the diocesan plan was within the ancient tradition of the Church even though it sounded quite new, innovative and possibly even radical to many of them. I will return to the question of normativity more fully in the concluding chapter.

A number of people were engaged in theological reflection within Adelaide and, among them, a key contributor was BEC Director Cathy Whewell. Following some discussions and reflections that she and I had during my time working in her office, we became aware of the theology of Walter Brueggemann.<sup>334</sup> Whewell produced a significant piece of work in which she allowed her theological reflections to emerge from the years of BEC practice, entitled: ‘We are bound to a God for whom the neighbour comes first.’<sup>335</sup> There

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<sup>330</sup> Faulkner (1994) 1.

<sup>331</sup> Faulkner (1994) 3.

<sup>332</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>333</sup> I Cor 1:16, 16:15-17, 19; Rom 16:1-3; Acts 18-19; 2 Tim 4:19; Faulkner (1994) 3.

<sup>334</sup> Brueggemann W. (1999) *The Covenanted Self – Explorations in Law and Covenant*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press.76-90.

<sup>335</sup> Whewell C. (2000) *We are bound to a God for whom the Neighbour comes first*.

<http://www.adelaide.catholic.org.au/sites/ParishNeighbourhoodChurch/media/files/1020.pdf>

Accessed 09.05.2012.

she described fully the theological understanding that lay behind the Adelaide commitment to neighbourhood. She defined their BEC project in these terms:

The work of Basic Ecclesial Communities (BECs) is a story about ordinary Catholics honouring and exploring, in this moment in history, the intimate link between their love of God, the place where they live, the people who are their neighbours and what it means to be Church.<sup>336</sup>

Whewell started from the baptismal reality that it was the community of the Church that welcomed, received and baptised the infant (regardless of the motives that the parents might have had for presenting their child for the sacrament) and that same community (the Archdiocese and its parishes) should then draw out the full meaning of the sacramental event of becoming members of the Church. She suggested that the work of the NPTs<sup>337</sup> was simply to animate that sense of original belonging and incorporation by making sure all the baptised in any given geographical area were included in a programme of visits that reached out to every Catholic in the neighbourhood. What was historically unique here was that the baptised were not asked to join anything; they were visited and included just because they already were joined to the local Church through being baptised into a particular parish community. Whewell argued that the initial response to the baptism rested firmly with the local Catholic community. It had to make sure that it lived out and actualised what had been celebrated sacramentally in the parish church. It was not primarily the responsibility of the newly-baptised or their family to

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<sup>336</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>337</sup> 'The NPT has three main responsibilities: to meet the people and to help them know one another, to ensure that any needs that are found will be responded to, and to form a community with the people in the area.' Whewell (2000) 4-5.

decide if they wanted to join in or not. In reality no-one was asked if they wanted to join the BEC community in their neighbourhood; by virtue of living where they did within the parish they were members of it by right. They might become aware of the BEC existence when they received their first NPT visit; that and subsequent visits actualised and made evident the reality of the community of Church that they were members of through baptism. Baptism is intimately connected with mission and actually gives identity to the community of Church, which is a gathering of people called out from the world and given a mission to share the gospel with that world, and Whewell goes on to explain who it involved and how it was lived out through the BEC experience of Church:

In Adelaide we are responding to the need for stronger communities in our culture, by identifying a new mission-ground - the local neighbourhood. This is where we rub shoulders with those we do not choose for community, but rather with those whom God has called us to love, literally, our neighbours. This new mission-ground not only holds within it, the stranger, but also the whole range of social experiences in our society: domestic violence; racism; loneliness; poverty and inequality; the frail aged; family life in all its forms; sexual orientation; heroes and villains; those living with illness, mental or physical; young people; and our impact on the physical environment in which we live.<sup>338</sup>

Whewell understood that it was within neighbourhoods that 'the drama of life' was played out and neighbourhoods became the stage where God was active and waiting to be rediscovered in new and powerful ways. 'Neighbourhood' she said 'is also the place

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<sup>338</sup> Whewell (2000) 2.

where nearly every social justice issue we are confronted by has a personal face.’<sup>339</sup> For Whewell this emphasis on neighbourhood pointed to the uniqueness of the Adelaide approach: ‘This decision,’ she wrote, ‘has set the work of the Church in Adelaide apart from the forms of BECs in other countries. There has been a deliberate and conscious decision to enable the 100% to be neighbours for each other and for the world in which they live.’<sup>340</sup> The work, insights and influence of Marins from Latin America had indeed played a significant part in the development of the BEC project in South Australia, but not in the way that BEC/SCC writers or practitioners often write about. Adelaide did not directly copy a model from elsewhere, but acknowledged that the lessons learned on the BEC journey in one place could be successfully shared with people in a very different place and context.

Whewell summarises the ecclesiology implicit in all her work in this statement:

There are many leaders in the local Adelaide church who have not grasped the significance of forming relationships with our neighbours, both as an authentic response to the gospel and as a loving response to the neighbour-hungry world we live in. They see their future as repeating the past, and feel the scarcity of people to help with that task. Their view of church is ‘those who come’ and this feels like more than enough people to care for – how can we care for the other 85% of Catholics living in our parish boundaries when we are becoming a smaller and smaller community? On the government census, Catholics are increasing in number in Australia, but the numbers in church are in fact declining. Owning the 100% of baptised Catholics in

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<sup>339</sup> Whewell (2000) 5.

<sup>340</sup> *Ibid.*

our neighbourhoods as belonging because of baptism is the first step out of our perceptions of scarcity into abundance.<sup>341</sup>

Adelaide, though exceptional in many ways, stands in the tradition of a BEC Church which is undergoing an ecclesigenesis in that something new is coming to birth but from out of a rich and ancient tradition that is rooted in the scriptures and is restoring that which is central to a gospel-inspired Church – mission and community. BEC advocates there are also keenly aware that a person's underlying attitude towards the Church, their basic understanding or vision for the Church, their ecclesiology in other words, is crucial to the whole project. BECs risk becoming another unnecessary burden for those who cannot see why anyone would bother themselves with either the notion of community or with the concept of mission to the 100%. The reality is in the Catholic community at the moment we probably have a majority of clergy who think and act out of an ecclesiology that emphasises not community but access to the sacraments, and growth in personal faith rather than mission. The BEC project is indeed an up-hill struggle on so many levels – not least of which is among the leadership echelons of the Church.

## **5.2 NEIGHBOURHOOD AS PART OF THE CREATION**

The ecclesiological make-up of the Church in the British Isles is not very far removed from that of Australia. That means that we will have to look beyond the ecclesial scene if we wish to engage further with the notion of neighbourhood and so the remainder of this chapter we will be a reflection upon the nature of city and the meaning of neighbourhood from a variety of authors as a way of understanding and appreciating the importance of

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<sup>341</sup> Whewell (2000) 11.



place for human identity and even for the health and well-being of society. We will be laying foundations using arguments from a sociological and geographical perspective that I hope will lay a firm basis upon which to construct a theological edifice that will pursued the Church to re-engage with its base (congregations) at the base (neighbourhood).

Firstly, however, we consider a theologian who is engaged with ideas of neighbourhood. McFague uses the concept of neighbourhood to localise her concerns about linking the world, which can seem to be remote and out there, with God who is also felt by many to be remote and out there. She explores the God-world relationship through the prism of neighbourhood, which she uses as a metaphor for engaging with ideas of distance and closeness, transcendence and immanence. In a carefully argued and well thought through article<sup>342</sup> she exposes the lacuna in the traditional myth of creation revealing how, using a quotation from the decrees of the I Vatican Council (1890),<sup>343</sup> the relationship between God and the world is often seen as one of total distance and difference. For centuries it has coloured how we feel about the world, society and the God who created them. ‘What is left out of this story of creation is creation itself, that is, ‘the neighbourhood’, the lowly, concrete, particular – and fascinating, wonderful – details of physical reality.’<sup>344</sup>

She suggests that the mythic retelling of the creation story in doctrinal teaching tells us very little about created reality but much about the God who is its origin. The assumption

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<sup>342</sup> McFague S. (2004) ‘Imaging God and a Different World’ *Concilium* 2004/5 42-50.

<sup>343</sup> ‘The Holy, Catholic, Apostolic, Roman Church believes and confesses that there is one true and living God, Creator and Lord of Heaven and earth, almighty, eternal, immense, incomprehensible, infinite in intelligence, in will, and in all perfection, who, as being one, sole, absolutely simple and immutable spiritual substance, is to be declared really and essentially distinct from the world, of supreme beatitude in and from himself, and ineffably exalted above all things beside himself which exist or are conceivable.’ McFague (2004) 43.

<sup>344</sup> McFague (2004) 44.

behind this understanding is that spirit and matter are completely distinct and set in a dualistic and hierarchical relationship. ‘God - and all things spiritual, heavenly and eternal – is perfect and exalted above all things material, earthly and mortal, the latter being entirely different from the former and inferior to it.’<sup>345</sup> She poses the question what if spirit and matter were intrinsically related and not diametrically opposed? Then perhaps we could rediscover that basic Christian insight that God is always incarnate, is made real and actual in the flesh of Jesus Christ, that it is in God’s nature to be embodied, to have a physical presence, a material dimension, not identical with the earthly but in continuity with it. It is right in our day to interrelate incarnational and creational theologies. At the very least they manifest a Divine interest in the material universe, a closeness of body and spirit, a relationship of intimacy and profound care and respect, which ought to be mirrored by the followers of Christ in their commitment to and involvement with the world and neighbourhood in which they live. ‘This understanding of creation asks us to find out about the neighbourhood so we can take care of it.’<sup>346</sup> We can see in her reflections that there is a theological basis for taking the neighbourhood seriously, even though this is not something that is often written about by theologians or indeed church leaders.

### **5.3 THE CITY AS PLACE OF DIVERSITY**

On the secular level Aristotle is credited with a defining insight, pin-pointing something which is at the very core of what we all experience in a city - its diversity. ‘A city is composed of different kinds of men; similar people cannot bring a city into existence.’<sup>347</sup>

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<sup>345</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>346</sup> McFague (2004) 46.

<sup>347</sup> Quoted in Sennett R. (1994) *Flesh and Stone – The body and the City in Western Civilisation* London: Faber and Faber 56.

The urban experience both fascinates and challenges. It is the majority place of habitation for the peoples of this planet. The significance of the city cannot be underestimated in any attempts to re-evaluate the role and place of Christian theology in the world of today. Indeed one of the real challenges facing the Church is the very pluralism found within the cities of Europe, their great diversity of ethnic origins, of faith traditions, of secular values, of relativistic attitudes. The Catholic Church today finds it extremely difficult to come to terms with the presence and activity, the power and influence of thoughts and ideas of which it does not approve or which directly oppose its received wisdom.

And yet the city and its quarters or neighbourhoods is the place where we meet these diverse views and the people who espouse them. Lewis Mumford, in his seminal work *The City in History*, defines the city as a ‘place of conversation’<sup>348</sup> where the differentiation of characters and occupations leads to the inevitable challenge towards dialogue. He contrasts this with the development of the village where the individual was subordinated to the collective ‘we’ and the sense of identity was crafted out of the shared commonality of the villagers. Difference was not tolerated and uniformity was enforced. The only voice that mattered was that of the village headman, secular or religious.

The city brings together the actual diversity of the human experience; it celebrates richness and difference within the human family, it allows its many voices and indeed languages to be heard. It is not uncommon for cities to market themselves today on the

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<sup>348</sup> Mumford L. (1961) *The City in History – Its Origins, Its Transformations, and Its Prospects* London: Secker and Warburg 116.

perceived strength of their diverse citizenry.<sup>349</sup> But this very strength contains also a potential weakness, that is, what is capable of holding this mass of difference together? Is there a unifying principle or force that can hold in tension the diverse ideas and customs that threaten to tear the populous apart? Will we ever be able to speak of community with any meaning in the urban environment?

‘What is needed is some neutral ground where people come together,’<sup>350</sup> noticed Gibson in his research into neighbourhood-based activism. Where can we find the common ground on which to construct a platform from which conversation and dialogue can commence? Perhaps the very expression ‘common ground’ suggests a way forward. Too little attention is paid today in the West to the value of place, of ground, as the unique point of connection between ourselves as human beings and the earth from which we are born. In the Judaeo-Christian tradition that relationship is most intimate in that creation is believed to have its origin ‘from the soil’<sup>351</sup> and is therefore referenced to and related with the earth, the ground under our feet, the very place where we live and establish our homes. The designation of this small place of earth in our urban culture is usually called ‘neighbourhood’, it is our continuing connection with the earth as component element in the creation of our being. It is also the place where we locate the ‘neighbour’, the one whose very presence and existence constructs with us the core of our identity. Neighbour is the other without whom we cannot make sense of our lives, our point of reference for discovering the human dimension of our relational selves and the one who is birthed from the earth alongside us. And the neighbour lives, creates home and family, relaxes and

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<sup>349</sup> ‘The World in One City’ was chosen as the theme to be used by Liverpool City Council in their bid in 2003 to become European Capital of Culture in 2008.

<sup>350</sup> Gibson T. (1996) *The Power in our Hands: Neighbourhood based – World shaking*. Oxfordshire: Jon Carpenter Publishing 258.

<sup>351</sup> Genesis 2:7, 9, 19.

recreates, celebrates and gives expression to their culture and faith in the neighbourhood where they have chosen to reside and where to some extent and for some period of time they belong.

As Gibson has noted, ‘The neighbourhood is within everyone’s reach. And it is common ground to everyone who lives or works there.’<sup>352</sup> He is realistic enough to state that most don’t see things that way. He states in the same study that ‘neighbourhoods are the cells which keep society whole ... A neighbourhood means the place plus the people, one whole, which is common ground for everyone.’<sup>353</sup> This is not the first time in this research that we have come across the notion of neighbourhood as common ground.

#### **5.4 FROM INHOSPITABLE SPACES TO HOSPITABLE PLACES**

It was a French writer Yves Cattin who reflected that the ‘body is this first and original territory of humanity, at the origin of all territories and all geographies.’<sup>354</sup> Like McFague he also critiqued the dualistic dialectic of body and soul, matter and spirit, outside and inside in order to lay-out a coherent description of the original totality of the human experience. These were not distinct and opposed realities, he suggested, but two words describing two aspects of the same reality – being human. In great detail he argued for an integration of these two aspects of the human condition. Human beings, if they were to exist in a human way, must develop in two directions, ‘they must become the world by becoming the body, and they must become themselves by becoming spirit.’<sup>355</sup> No human

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<sup>352</sup> Gibson T. (1984) *Counterweight: The Neighbourhood Option* London: Town and Country Planning Association 5.

<sup>353</sup> Gibson (1984) 3.

<sup>354</sup> Cattin Y. (1999) ‘Human Beings Cross Frontiers’ *Concilium* 1999/2 5.

<sup>355</sup> *Ibid.*

being could become fully human in isolation, separated from the socialising impact of other persons, commencing with the mother and father at birth and before.

Cattin identified a movement intrinsic to all humans, that of going to the world and returning to oneself, of passing towards the other than oneself in order to become and be oneself. Thus the metaphors he used were those of exile and migration, of limit and frontier. As humans we are constantly having to abandon our being, leaving it behind if we were to enter realistically into the alien-other world that was beyond us and different from us so that through that encounter we were brought face to face with that which was not us but which in the experience of inter-relationality gifted us with a new aspect, insight, understanding that meant we became more than we were before departing from our limited, historical being. I am more completely myself as a result of that process, or movement. The limit and frontier that was my body delineated my spirit, described that which made the spirit a human spirit. It determined the space required for a being to exist as a being in the world. Yet it also prevented this being from going beyond what it was. This limit and frontier were also what had to be crossed for a human being to set out to exist in the face of the world.

‘So human beings are migrants: they ceaselessly cross and re-cross the frontiers of their bodies in order to go to what is not themselves and in order to become themselves.’<sup>356</sup> He then spoke of the action that human beings undertook in this process as the invention of space, of human spaces or modes of presence in the world. He argued that we realized our humanity in a concrete way only by creating space as a place of being and existing. It

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<sup>356</sup> *Ibid.*

would seem to me that here we had a very fruitful concept that stimulated our understanding of the role of the Christian in society as being the ones who knew that they were called to invent or create spaces for the humanizing of humans, for the fulfilling of the fullness of the human being in its entirety, places thus consciously made where all could come into being.

In inventing the place, human beings invent a place for being themselves, for becoming themselves, and a place for being together. Then it is possible to realise what is called the encounter, the communication or the society, in other words a limitation of space and time, and in this space-time words, gestures and silences. Thus by inventing and occupying their places, human beings draw a provisional and complex geography of diverse and multiple humanities which are both distinct and always interconnected.<sup>357</sup>

Crucially someone has to articulate the desire of all humans for meeting and becoming, for communication and communion, by making real actual places where this could be effected and experienced. In these places what was experienced was what Christians referred to as the kingdom of God, the space where Being encouraged becoming, and it only happened in the physicality of space and time, in the neighbourhoods that all human beings inhabited and where they created a place for living.

There were also tendencies within our world that worked to inhibit and imprison the human person and societies within material and spiritual frontiers where men and women

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<sup>357</sup> Cattin (1999) 8.

became solidified and fixed so that there was little or no possibility of change. Frontiers had become barriers and this could have serious consequences for peoples and individuals. Yet frontiers paradoxically were also crossing points, they must be otherwise they became prison walls. Cattin argued persuasively that ‘hospitality is the basic rule of the humanity of human beings and their humanization.’<sup>358</sup> This hospitality was not only a welcome to the friend and neighbour next door but also to the one who comes from afar, the stranger and the foreigner. This attitude of hospitable welcome ‘makes of the one who approaches me my neighbour.’ This concept places demands on us because, as Cattin explained, what was exchanged between human beings was their ‘being human’, and not their lack of humanity or inhumanity. The value and exercise of hospitality created places for living together, spaces where the operative energy was a mutual becoming human, it was the invention of a new type of neighbourhood where every person who shared that piece of earth was encouraged and permitted, by the free actions of others, to experience the liberating and limitless infinite value of being welcomed and accepted so that each enabled the other to grow in being human.

However this is not the general experience in society today. Places for encounter are becoming increasingly rare and more difficult to find. A lack of contact space and the concomitant loss of time were making of our world an uninhabitable place. ‘Thus without our noticing it, the places and times of life are becoming non-places of life, places through which one passes, in which one can no longer stop, take one’s time, waste time.’<sup>359</sup> Cattin argued that the places we experienced, especially in the West, were increasingly experienced as places of transit or non-places of being. He drew attention to the

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<sup>358</sup> Cattin (1999) 12.

<sup>359</sup> Cattin (1999) 13.



‘progressive and perhaps inescapable disappearance of the places where human beings are, the places where they are themselves.’<sup>360</sup> In this forgetfulness of places and this lostness in space without places, individuals lost their bodies and familiarity with their bodies, which became a kind of strange alien or foreign body, existing in undifferentiated spaces. This was the opposite of the kingdom of God and therefore was an eloquent testimony of the need for the Church to rediscover the value of the temporal and territorial, to refocus on the neighbour and the neighbourhood, as the locus for an evangelising action that encouraged all the faithful to be at the forefront of the invention and creation of places or territories of hospitality and welcome where each found a home to be themselves and to grow into the person they were capable of becoming.

## **5.5 CITIES IN DECLINE**

Jesus was often known as ‘of Nazareth’ designating the actual place where he lived, the streets and neighbourhood where he grew up, matured, flourished, became a full person. It seems important today to explore the perceived dislocation, or disconnection with place, flagged up by Cattin and which is experienced by many in our European and North American culture. One of those charting the decline in connectivity is the political scientist and professor at Harvard University Robert Putnam. In his controversial book, *Bowling Alone*, he lamented the demise of ‘place-based social capital’ stating, ‘We are withdrawing from those networks of reciprocity that once constituted our communities.’<sup>361</sup> He also noted the impact of mobility on the greater or lesser availability of people for involvement in their local community.

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<sup>360</sup> Cattin (1999) 14.

<sup>361</sup> Putnam R. (2000) *Bowling Alone – The Collapse and Revival of American Community* New York: Simon and Schuster 184.

He brought to our attention the simple fact that social networks had value, that social contacts affected productivity and that social capital was the most powerful civic virtue when embedded in a dense network of reciprocal social relations. Perhaps the first to use this language was L. J. Hanifan in 1916.

The individual is helpless socially, if left to himself.... If he comes into contact with his neighbour, and they with other neighbours, there will be an accumulation of social capital, which may immediately satisfy his social needs and which may bear a social potentiality sufficient to the substantial improvement of living conditions in the whole community.<sup>362</sup>

Putnam defined social capital as that which ‘refers to connections among individuals – social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them.’<sup>363</sup> He was perhaps most renowned for his distinction between bonding and bridging social capital. Bonding occurred when you were socializing with people who were like you, those who were similar in age, race, religion, outlook etc. But if we were to build societies that were harmonious in a multi-ethnic and pluralistic world we also needed to create another type of social capital, bridging. This was what you did when you made friends with people who were not like you, those from other cultures, ethnic groups, and rival gangs etc. These two forms of social capital were declining at an alarming rate opined Putnam.<sup>364</sup>

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<sup>362</sup> Hanifan L. J. quoted by Putnam (2000) 19.

<sup>363</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>364</sup> ‘For the first two –thirds of the twentieth century a powerful tide bore Americans into ever deeper engagement in the life of their communities, but a few decades ago – silently, without warning – that tide

This distinction in social capital was helpful in another area. The bonding type was typical to the exclusive community, which was modelled by the ghetto, whereas the bridging type was inclusive and typical of the neighbourhood model of community. Indeed without the latter the entire existence of our modern urban culture was threatened. Groups in society today were often tempted to withdraw into a ghetto of their choosing. A question this posed for me was could theology and ecclesial experience offer any guidelines as to how Christians in the West might resist the pull into the ghetto and exclusivity and embrace the challenge offered by the actual neighbourhood to inclusive relationships and attitudes?

There was a real need to rediscover neighbourhood as a place of commonality, a unifying location where each was equal in being neighbour, in sharing this same space, in putting roots down into the same soil. It was, in Mumford's phrase, a place of conversation where no one had an advantage over the other, where each was confident in their shared humanity and residency whatever their differences seemed to say. It was a place where one tried to avoid all tendencies to separation, to close in, to demand order, conformity and control. Neighbourhood at its best was welcoming, was open-minded and openhearted, accepting difference and celebrating diversity, and recognised and lived with the plurality of ethnic and religious groupings. Neighbourhood was pre-eminently a place of encounter and a place of living and the question we must ask was how could this be encouraged and facilitated in an age of rampant individualism and alienation?

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reversed and we were overtaken by a treacherous rip current. Without at first noticing, we have been pulled apart from one another and from our communities over the last third of the century' Putnam (2000) 27.

Vela-McConnell attempted to address this question:

The modern world has become very impersonal. We have become detached from those around us. We value the competition that drives us apart rather than the complementarity that could bind us together.... We have become strangers in our own society.... We have become alienated from one another.<sup>365</sup>

He described social affinity as encompassing the empathy and identification between individuals or groups that lay at the heart of the classic notion of social cohesion.<sup>366</sup> He recognised that the challenge in our global context was to establish social affinity between diverse and disparate individuals in order to reinforce the cohesiveness of society. He identified the paradox of modernity as being symbolized by the tension between proximity and distance. There were three distinct variables that impacted upon social affinity; spatial proximity, temporal proximity and social proximity/distance. As the distance between others and ourselves increased, the possibility of establishing social affinity with those others was strained, undermining our relational embeddedness and interdependence.

The unique place where each of us stood was called by Vela-McConnell 'social location', it encompassed the totality of our lived experience at any given moment, and it was what was available to us in the present our 'here and now', our actuality. Vela-McConnell recognised that social interaction was a major part of everyday reality, because no one

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<sup>365</sup> Vela- McConnell J. (1999) *Who Is My Neighbour – Social Affinity in a Modern World* New York: State University Press 10-11.

<sup>366</sup> Vela- McConnell (1999) 8.

was an island. People best experienced one another in face-to-face encounters and through this interaction the ‘here and now’ of two people overlapped and there was continuous reciprocity between them. ‘Without these direct and personalized interactions, the emergence of social affinity – the sentiment of interconnectedness – is jeopardised.’<sup>367</sup>

Mumford, who was writing his magnum opus during the years of an anticipated nuclear catastrophe, was heavily influenced by the threat of total obliteration that the nuclear arms race symbolised. But he was also acutely aware that the dominant capitalist neo-liberal economic model of continual expansion also brought with it the threat of disaster. These powerful negative influences gave rise to his description of the city as ‘semi-annihilating.’<sup>368</sup> Though this would not necessarily be an appropriate metaphor today it nonetheless forced him to look to images of nurture and love as a means of finding hope for the city in an uncertain future. These images for him were pre-religious and went right back to the beginnings of Neolithic settlements, which were organised around the cherishing and nurturing of life. They remain valid and helpful images still.

He noted that prior to the emergence of city we had villages and it was in the village that we first discovered the idea of ‘neighbour’ and to some extent he argued this had been retained in the city through the neighbourhood unit, or small village-like community within the city boundaries consisting of no more than 5,000 people.<sup>369</sup> It was within those first primitive settlements from 9,000 – 4,000BC that anthropologists told us that the concept of a shared life developed, at that stage the ‘us’ and ‘I’ were one and the same,

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<sup>367</sup> Vela- McConnell (1999) 11.

<sup>368</sup> Mumford (1961) 545.

<sup>369</sup> Mumford (1961) 62.

there was little differentiation. The growth and development of the city took humans living in society to another level. One of Mumford's main arguments was that we could not function in the large grouping, that we needed to maintain in our cities a passion for the small. It was only at such a micro level that cherishing and nurturing became possible. He was an advocate for making sure our cities were organised with small units in mind.

The future of the city would depend to a great extent said Mumford on its ability to facilitate the essential, basic elements of the primary group, the family and neighbourhood. He was a great proponent of the human dimension of everything. This insight and attitude dovetailed in very well with a rediscovering of the role of place in theology. It helped us to realise that there were many others who were struggling with the challenges that modern living throws up for every society and were finding ways of encouraging the very values and approaches that would naturally flow from a renewed understanding of a Christian theology for the urban environment. However, the vision that some of these authors had for the city and for humanity was being developed at a time when in the West it often seemed that Church leaders expressed insufficient encouragement for the faithful to seriously engage with the world in which they lived.<sup>370</sup>

Mumford for example gave a very clear mandate to the modern city: 'Its new mission is to hand on to the smallest urban unit the cultural resources that make for world unity and co-operation.'<sup>371</sup> We can see here that Mumford expected each city to aspire to the highest ideals of human existence; he challenged cities to create 'a visible regional and civic structure, designed to make man at home with his deeper self and his larger world,

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<sup>370</sup> The great exception being the Second Vatican Council 1962-1965 which amongst many things promoted dialogue as a way of living and engaging with the world; especially the post-conciliar document *Humanae Personae Dignitatem* (On Dialogue with Unbelievers) in 1968 Flannery (1992) 1002-1014.

<sup>371</sup> Mumford (1961) 561.

attached to images of nurture and love.<sup>372</sup> If this was a secular vision for the world in which we live surely it was one in which Christians could make common cause bringing to the project the skills we have developed for the formation and nurturing of community. He concluded his study with these words 'For the city should be an organ of love; and the best economy of cities is the care and culture of men.'<sup>373</sup>

## **5.6 IS COMMUNITY POSSIBLE GIVEN URBAN DIVERSITY?**

Sociologist J. Scherer examined the many different facets the concept of community had for an urban population and enquired if there was such a thing as community. Developing the 'we' feeling, as she called it, happened continually when people invest in the process of being neighbourly. 'Community is a by-product that develops when people have an opportunity to interact over a period of time.'<sup>374</sup> It is an identical fascination with the concept of community that encourages Christian theologians and practitioners today to engage with the process of human living in urban environments.

The question of neighbourliness and therefore of hospitality and openness found an echo in the feminist perspective of Kanyoro who noted that women in particular, but also people in general, were discarding yesterday's limited exclusiveness; which was another echo of the ghetto model of living in society described by Putnam earlier where bonding social capital was perhaps at its strongest. This exclusivity was especially experienced by women in the Church who found that patriarchy actively worked to exclude them from any roles or functions within the community of the faithful that were commensurate with

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<sup>372</sup> Mumford (1961) 573.

<sup>373</sup> Mumford (1961) 575.

<sup>374</sup> Scherer J. (1972) *Contemporary Community – Sociological Illusion or Reality?* London: Tavistock Publications 24.

their baptismal and human dignity. So they were well placed to comment on the impact of places of welcome where they had a voice and could make a full contribution: 'It is no wonder that the open hospitality of secular social forums is a place where those in the margins find room to be heard.'<sup>375</sup> She noted in her article that what motivated people in their engagement with social action was the search for community. There was undoubtedly here an important insight from which the Church must learn that of how to create within its own communities that kind of welcome and hospitality to everyone that made a genuine experience of city and the secular spaces found in its neighbourhoods to be so life-affirming to many.

Cattin had previously introduced the idea of frontier and border and it was consistent for this thesis that has spent much time beyond the borders of the European Church to listen critically to some further reflections that come from the margins of the Church, from the frontiers of Christianity, where the faith shares a border or frontier with other world religions. 'Religion comes into its own in border situations, where compassion like equilibrium is a basic requirement and relations have to be forged anew.'<sup>376</sup> This of course continued the discourse about hospitality as a resource for the present moment of ecclesial life. Troch understood God to be a beckoning horizon towards which we might advance, beyond the exclusive limits and unchanging attitudes that were imposed on human beings. She stated quite strongly that the God who cares dwelt in the borderland; frontier areas were places where contact zones could be established, where an encounter could take place between people who were different, and God could be experienced anew as the One who was beyond the limits we imposed on ourselves and on others. This

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<sup>375</sup> Kanyoro M. (2004) 'The Shape of God to Come and the Future of Humanity' *Concilium* 2004/5 56.

<sup>376</sup> Troch L. (2007) 'Mystery in Earthenware Vessels: The Fragmenting of Images of God within New Experiences of Religion' *Concilium* 2007/1 80.



insight was particularly apt in our consideration of neighbourhood, because as we have seen the neighbourhoods of our cities today were often places where those from beyond our borders dwelt alongside us. They created in our midst frontier areas and contact zones close to home where encounters could take place, where we were afforded opportunities to practice all the skills and virtues necessary for the creation of welcoming and hospitable neighbourly communities. If Christians had this simple vision of where their God could be found and encountered there would be a motivational impetus given to them to engage more enthusiastically with the rich and varied cosmopolitan environment that was found in our cities today.

Wilfred had developed a most original and constructive concept of 'religious cosmopolitanism' that took these insights and systematised them into a basic attitude that fully respected the otherness of the different religious traditions and yet freely entered into relations with them as being the patrimony of all humanity. He suggested that civilisational and humanistic cosmopolitanism was rooted in the particular and in solidarity with the local. This cosmopolitan attitude consisted in the search for alternative modes of life in the company of other groups, peoples, and cultures.<sup>377</sup>

Wilfred noted carefully the dialectic of identity and transcendence, of rootedness and detachment contained within cosmopolitanism. He correctly stated that to live was to put down roots and yet all of life was a journey. The two experiences needed to be integrated into our understanding of what it was to be human in order that we could appropriately develop values and attitudes that corresponded to that which was deepest within the

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<sup>377</sup> Wilfred F. (2007) 'Christianity and Religious Cosmopolitanism: Toward Reverse Universality' *Concilium* 2007/1 117.

human condition. Though at first sight there appeared to be a contradiction between the stability implied by being rooted and the movement lying behind the metaphor of journey, in reality they were both aspects of human existence. We had at the same time to acknowledge our origins and the history and traditions that have formed us while being detached enough to be open to the journey towards the other, that which was different and distinct from me, so that in a creative act of communitarian listening and sharing we could discover anew deeper aspects to our common humanity. Religious cosmopolitanism was the attempt to construct a collective non-tribal self of a particular religious group.

## **5.7 ENGAGING WITH THE CITY AND ITS PEOPLE**

There was little likelihood of ever creating true communities in our disjointed and fragmented world if religions or cultures, groups and ethnicities had no connections, no places to meet, to gather, if they remained isolated and scattered. In religious cosmopolitanism the point of reference was the other, as person, as relational being, rather than the doctrines, systems of belief, rites and practices of the other religion. In this sense the other became ‘the source of reverse or incoming universality.’<sup>378</sup> They were enabling the emerging of a planetary and universal human being who while being deeply connected to their roots was also able to make the journey into the space of the other. This seemed to be a stage further on than a mere formal embracing of pluralism with its attendant tolerance of diversity; in cosmopolitanism there was an attempt to fully engage with the totality of the other precisely as other and therefore while not denying one’s roots one was able to encounter the other as an aspect of oneself that had yet to be fully discovered or explored in a journey of mutual connection.

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<sup>378</sup> Wilfred (2007) 120.

Barros offers a path for developing this idea theologically, taking as his point of departure the simple statement of faith found in the Acts of the Apostles: ‘We are only human beings’ (Acts 14:15) and ‘I am only a man’ (Acts 10:26). It was this focus on the human project that seemed to offer the best way forward for Christianity in attempting to reconnect with increasingly alienated societies and faithful. And this approach best happened at the local level, within the neighbourhood, between people of open and hospitable dispositions. ‘Religious cosmopolitanism is very often practiced most effectively at the grassroots level and in very local circumstances.’<sup>379</sup>

Putnam held faith communities to play a significant role in regard to increasing social capital in the USA. He stated that they also create, or ‘incubate’ social capital and had been identified as motivational institutions that inspired people to develop their capacity as agents of social capital.<sup>380</sup> This question of what would motivate people of faith to engage with the place where they live has been one of the driving questions behind this thesis. I have a sense in which in the UK at least the Roman Catholic Church is becoming disengaged and disconnected from neighbourhood and the small localised expression of faith-community; the dynamic at present seems to be in the opposite direction. But there is a rich seam of thought and experience which if excavated will undoubtedly enable Christian people to become major players in the development and extension of social capital or social affinity in the urban centres of each continent. Putnam towards the end of his book made a heartfelt plea: ‘... it is now past time to begin to reweave the fabric of our communities.’<sup>381</sup> It is my intention that this thesis should contribute towards this

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<sup>379</sup> Wilfred (2007) 120.

<sup>380</sup> Putnam (2000) ‘Faith communities in which people worship together are arguably the single most important repository of social capital in America’ 66.

<sup>381</sup> Putnam (2000) 402.

process in the UK specifically by influencing faith communities to re-orientate themselves towards the city and its neighbourhoods.

There is a growing body of professional opinion<sup>382</sup> that is committed to ‘the urgent political priority of constructing cities that correspond to human social needs rather than to the capitalist imperative of profit-making.’<sup>383</sup> Putting people first is a priority that is at the core of the global South’s experience of BECs within the Catholic arena and this does indeed translate to the global North but not with voices from within the faith community but with professional voices. Some of these voices are very radical in their analysis, and like Harvey, very critical in their assertion that cities are founded on the exploitation of the many by the few. He says that an urbanism founded on exploitation is in fact a legacy of history. ‘A genuinely humanising urbanism has yet to be brought into being. It remains for revolutionary theory to chart the path from an urbanism based in exploitation to an urbanism appropriate for the human species.’<sup>384</sup>

Short asserted in his work *The Humane City* that ‘Society needs reordering so as to create more humane cities, but through a collective endeavour in which people have the opportunity to change the circumstances of their own lives.’<sup>385</sup> He made the point that the best way forward to renew city living was for enlightened top-down initiatives to make sure they enhanced the purchase of bottom-up social progress. Short believed that lasting and beneficial changes to the lives of ordinary people came about by facilitating in them

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<sup>382</sup> Writers such as Jacobs J. (1962); Lefebvre H. (1968); Harvey D. (1976/1989); Smith N. (1996); Brenner N. and Theodore N. (2003) quoted in Brenner N. (2009) ‘Cities for People, not for Profit’ *City* 13: 2-3 176-177.

<sup>383</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>384</sup> Harvey D. (1976) quoted in Brenner (2009) 177.

<sup>385</sup> Short J. (1989) *The Humane City: Cities as if People Matter* Oxford: Blackwell 73.

the development of confidence in their individual and collective abilities. ‘The creation of better cities fundamentally involves questions about the shape and quality of social relations.’<sup>386</sup> Short goes on to explain that this would come about to the extent that all citizens could be both empowered and engaged. Empowerment means devolving real power over decision-making through better administrative structures and improved social arrangements. Engagement means the genuine involvement of people in all the various activities of their public life and a democratisation in the way we arrive at social goals. ‘I believe there is a deep human need for engagement. People require a sense of linkage with others in their community, and society can benefit from enhancing and encouraging these connections.’<sup>387</sup>

This element of the research confirmed what I had been working on for the past decade in that I have been involved in the slow process of working with a bottom-up resident-led organisation bringing together everyone who was a leaseholder (owners of apartments) and those who also lived in leasehold property without owning (tenants paying rent to the leaseholders) in the residential apartment developments along the Liverpool Waterfront,<sup>388</sup> which eventually in 2008 matured into a city-wide organisation called Engage Liverpool<sup>389</sup> which now speaks on behalf of all those who live in apartments in the city centre and waterfront. Engage is characterised by a determination to pursue policies and tactics that promote dialogue and engagement as we attempt to influence decision-makers and stakeholders in the city to work with us to improve the quality of life for everyone who lives in the city centre. However though as citizens we have become engaged with the city and its political and civic organisations we have not been truly

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<sup>386</sup> Short (1989) 75.

<sup>387</sup> Short (1989) 76.

<sup>388</sup> FLWRA: Federation of Liverpool Waterfront Residents Associations.

<sup>389</sup> [www.engageliverpool.com](http://www.engageliverpool.com) Accessed 25.09.2012.

empowered, in that though residents' representatives now sit on many of the major bodies that are making decisions about the future growth and direction of the city there is still real resistance from certain quarters to the idea that ordinary non-professional people should have an important and vital role to play in actually influencing the design and build of future apartments and the communities in which they are built.

## 5.8 ATTEMPTS AT DEFINING COMMUNITY

Just to mention the word community in the context of the city is indeed a challenging and controversial stance; not least in terms of what is meant by community and how it is defined. König, writing during the 1960's, attempted to get to grips with certain terminological difficulties; writing in his native German he felt it necessary to define carefully the terms being used to describe community. He noted two quite different and distinct ideas behind the word community and warned against their misuse: '... it would be better not to use the term community in general (Gemeinschaft) for the local community (Gemeinde).'<sup>390</sup> In English he said that the term was equally ambiguous because on the one hand it could refer to the local community in a very strict geographical sense and on the other hand to its more general sense of social relationships. But he noted that in English we did not use the term in quite the same way as the Germans did when using Gemeinde which could imply an intimacy of relationships whereas in English when we used community to mean the community at the local level it was not usually understood as a community in a particularly close or intimate sense. In English the more usual term that described the local instance of community was neighbourhood whilst the German Gemeinde already had an exact territorial implication. He then analysed the term

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<sup>390</sup>König R. (1968) *The Community* London: Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd. Translated from the German by FitzGerald E.

community *Gemeinschaft* in French, Italian and Spanish noting that their usage came closer to the German *Gemeinde* as it often had a local connotation but when they wanted to express a particularly close form of association in a relational sense they used the term 'communion'. This term was of course religiously ambiguous and not only for sociologists.

This research focuses on the concept of neighbourhood which does not exclude a discussion about the possibility or potentiality for community or communion at neighbourhood level. König defined it thus: 'A community is first of all a global society of a local type embracing an indefinite multiplicity of functional spheres, social groups and other social phenomena, and conditioning innumerable forms of social interaction, joint bond and value concepts.'<sup>391</sup> In other words, for König, community could never be a simple gathering of like-minded similar people as it had to be a reality that transcended the limited and the narrow and therefore was inclusive in attitude, universal in potentiality and global in tendency, transcending both family and neighbourhood. König distinguished between the principle of neighbourhood and the concrete and practical neighbourhood that he defined as an 'integrated neighbourhood.'<sup>392</sup> He noted that even when a community was small in size it was no guarantee that those living together in close proximity would necessarily be integrated into one neighbourhood. In fact he believed that purely physical proximity seemed to create only quite loose relationships. His study stated that 'proximity alone is an important direct factor in the development of social interactions only with newly-formed and perhaps even temporary groupings.'<sup>393</sup>

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<sup>391</sup> König (1968) 26-27.

<sup>392</sup> 'Even the village community, as the most important form of the reality of the neighbourhood principle, is invariably made up of a number of concrete or integrated neighbourhoods, held together by kinship or friendship, cliques, a similar class situation, common cultural traits, and so on.' König (1968) 51.

<sup>393</sup> König (1968) 53.

High-rise, city centre apartment living bears this out; proximity does not at all facilitate neighbourliness and community integration; though the potentiality is there the actuality isn't. He recognised that there could be serious problems in neighbourhoods and that the level of intensity of integration varied considerably. Neighbourhoods created not only social attachments but also social tensions too. König decided that he would like to see the expression neighbourhood 'limited to small and very small units which are in fact characterised by a closer social relationship.'<sup>394</sup> And he went on to write that he was inclined to accept the opinion that 'the neighbourhood is in some way parallel to the local environment which can be surveyed with the eye.'<sup>395</sup>

About twenty five years after König's work was published British sociologists Crow and Allan<sup>396</sup> continued this exploration of the meaning of community and referenced the work of Willmott<sup>397</sup> who defined community in three main ways: territorial or place community, interest community and community of attachment. The first was the concept of community as shared residence, a clear geographical element being that which the people held in common. The second was where the basis of community was shared characteristics other than place, such networks could be structured around common interests; though these first two concepts could coincide they might be and often were geographically dispersed. The third sense of community involved a level of social interaction and sense of shared identity. They also reported that similar conclusions were reached by Lee and Newby<sup>398</sup> whose three definitions though not identical were

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<sup>394</sup> König (1968) 71.

<sup>395</sup> König (1968) 72.

<sup>396</sup> Crow G. and Allan G. (1994) *Community Life: An Introduction to Local Social Relations* London: Harvester/Wheatsheaf.

<sup>397</sup> Willmott P. (1986) *Social Networks, Informal Care and Public Policy* London: Policy Studies Institute. chapter 6.

<sup>398</sup> Lee D. and Newby H. (1983) *The Problem of Sociology*. London: Hutchinson. Chapter 4.



nonetheless very close: locality was the weak sense of community, meaning simply the living together in a particular place, their second local social system retained a geographical referent but implied that individuals were linked together in social networks; their third definition of community involved a shared sense of identity which they called communion, a term we have previously come across in König. If commentators were looking for community to encapsulate all three definitions then it seemed to Crow and Allan that that would be such an idealised standard as to be of little use as a sociological tool because the reality would always fall far short. 'It is from such idealised notions that the pervasive 'loss of community' thesis gains misplaced credibility.'<sup>399</sup> Although this study pre-dated Putnam and Vela-McConnell these comments nonetheless are significant in placing their ideas in a longer history of the decline of community theory.

## **5.9 LOCALITY IS NOT EVERYTHING**

Crow and Allan went on to state in their work that the emergence of community life required not only favourable local social structures but also the active creation of 'community'. Suttles<sup>400</sup> had previously drawn people's attention to this idea over against the common notion that community simply emerged automatically or naturally from the fact that people lived closely together. Suttles said that this notion was appealing because it played into the idea that community was the product of personal and human nature and needed therefore no help, support or encouragement from any agency or individual. 'Endeavouring to create communities is hampered by the perception of community life as 'natural' and thus antithetical to planned intervention.'<sup>401</sup> Even in rural areas the

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<sup>399</sup> Crow and Allan (1994) 5.

<sup>400</sup> Suttles G. (1972) *The Social Construction of Communities: Studies of Urban Society* Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

<sup>401</sup> Crow and Allan (1994) 133.

community still needed working at if it was to be defined by the quality of the relationships between the participating members, and in urban areas, especially the new-build apartments of the city centre, without some level of conscious attempts to contact and connect neighbours community would not be generated. As Crow and Allan stated 'communities are active creations.'<sup>402</sup>

They also went on to note how important it was in any study of the notion of community to look at the question of boundaries. They made the valuable point that 'communities are defined not only by relations between members, among whom there is similarity, but also by the relations between these 'insiders' and 'outsiders', who are distinguished by their difference and consequent exclusion.'<sup>403</sup> Studies into the importance of boundaries in developing community identity in urban contexts had shown different criteria being used in different areas.<sup>404</sup> In any discussion on the nature of community it remained crucial to be able to factor in the whole concept of insider/outsider and included/excluded. Many mechanisms were used to determine levels of exclusion and it remained true that in general communities gain much of their coherence from being exclusive. Cohen, writing almost 30 years ago from Manchester, also stressed the importance of boundaries: 'This consciousness of community is, then, encapsulated in perception of its boundaries, boundaries which are themselves largely constituted by people in interaction.'<sup>405</sup> Cohen's main argument was about the essentially symbolic nature of the idea of community itself.

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<sup>402</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>403</sup> Crow and Allan (1994) 7.

<sup>404</sup> Wallman's study of Battersea showed that newness to the neighbourhood was more important than race in giving outsider status (1984:7) while Cornwell's study of Bethnal Green revealed that ethnic origin had considerable importance attached to it in determining insider/outsider status (1984:53) quoted in Crow and Allan (1994) 8.

<sup>405</sup> Cohen A. P. (1985) *The Symbolic Construction of Community*. London: Ellis Horwood Ltd and Tavistock Publications Ltd 13.

Whilst noting that defining community was notoriously difficult, Cohen insisted that locality was not the only definitive element of community. Community was that entity to which one belonged, greater than kinship but more immediate than the abstraction called society. He went on to say that it was where one learnt how to 'be social' and where one acquires 'culture'; what he meant by that was that people learnt the symbols which would enable them to be social. He delved at length into the whole array of interpretation and the enormous variety of meanings attached to the symbols that helped us to delineate, define and experience community. Interestingly he proposed that rather than thinking of community as an integrating mechanism, it should be regarded instead as an aggregating device.<sup>406</sup> Cohen believed that in community there was a commonality of ways of behaving (forms) whose meanings (content) would vary considerably amongst its members. 'The triumph of community is to so contain this variety that its inherent discordance does not subvert the apparent coherence which is expressed by its boundaries.'<sup>407</sup> And in this endeavour the use of symbols in creating and defining the community and the meanings that people attached to the symbolic expression of their community would ultimately decide whether that community flourished or declined. Cohen's point about the symbolic construction of community was an important contribution to the research question of a commitment to the creative possibility of community at neighbourhood level. It was vital to pay attention to the symbols that were undiscovered yet available within an urban milieu and to enable various meanings to be formulated and potentially shared as neighbours in apartment buildings searched out better ways of living together in the centre of cities. 'The reality of community lies in its members' perception of the vitality of its culture. People construct community

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<sup>406</sup> Durkheim's abiding concern was with solidarity, identifying the bonds that could unite people; despite their differentiations in the labour market they were held together in an interdependency through being part of the productive endeavour of the whole. His aspiration was to integration. Cohen (1985) 20.

<sup>407</sup> *Ibid.*

symbolically, making it a resource and repository of meaning, and a referent of their identity.’<sup>408</sup>

Scherer in her 1972 study already referred to concluded that in the modern era of technologically advanced urbanised societies communities were divorced from place and she argued strongly that mobility had made choice possible and therefore the idea of stable, enduring communities rooted to a fixed place were a thing of the past.<sup>409</sup> Her research argued that in the future communities were not going to be limited to locality; and undoubtedly much of what she spoke of has come to pass. Like others before and since she commented upon the romantic and mythical ‘good’ rural image of community life against the perceived ‘bad’ urban view of individuality and anonymity. Scherer made a cogent argument that ‘Geography may be the way man has located himself in the universe – but other instruments are more effective in locating himself among men.’<sup>410</sup> She cites Mead and McLuhan who both concluded that there had been a massive erosion of place as a focus for social activities and that people now had the freedom to accept or reject place as they wished.<sup>411</sup> It is worth noting that she arrived at a similar understanding to Cohen (though obviously over a decade earlier) when she wrote that ‘in talking about any community we are dealing with the symbolic images held by persons.’<sup>412</sup> Scherer especially took this forward in her 1966 unpublished case study of an Anglican parish and its understanding of community, in which she made the insightful comment that the people she interviewed tended ‘to view religious communities as isolated independent units, whereas the essence of modern urban living is the

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<sup>408</sup> Cohen (1985)118.

<sup>409</sup> Scherer J. (1972) *Contemporary Community – sociological illusion or reality?* London: Tavistock Publications 15.

<sup>410</sup> Scherer (1972) 19.

<sup>411</sup> Scherer (1972) 18.

<sup>412</sup> Scherer (1972) 39.

interdependence and relatedness of people, communities, and beliefs to each other.’<sup>413</sup> Scherer noted in her study that it was necessary to both investigate the ecclesial community both from within as well as from without if the sociologist was to get a full picture of the true nature of that community. These insider and outsider perspectives were critical in grasping the different perceptions of communal and individual identity. She wrote:

It is no wonder, then, that those in religious communities who cannot evaluate the reality of their existence as defined by others outside – or understand the identity of the community as given by outsiders – may become unable to meet modern man’s needs.<sup>414</sup>

That was a very challenging perspective and one that would need careful addressing if the ecclesiastical community to which I belong was to respond appropriately to the reality of urban life and the new experience of the thousands who are living in apartments in our city centres.

It is important, finally, to comment on two authors who have made a significant contribution to the debate about community at the level of the city. The first is Allan Cochrane, who gives a masterful account of the varied responses from within urban policy to the question of community, social inclusion and social cohesion.<sup>415</sup> For Cochrane, ‘... if community meant no more than the population of a particular area, it is

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<sup>413</sup> Scherer (1972) 47.

<sup>414</sup> Scherer (1972) 49.

<sup>415</sup> Cochrane A. (2007) *Understanding Urban Policy - A Critical Approach* Oxford: Blackwell Publishing.

unlikely that it would have quite the same (almost iconic status) in the language of urban policy.<sup>416</sup> He counsels against any simple theories about community acknowledging that ‘the notion of community is not only elusive, but also ideologically slippery.’<sup>417</sup> The second writer that merits attention is Loretta Lees whose work on Gentrification and Social Mixing<sup>418</sup> has been crucial in unmasking some of the rhetoric around regeneration work in inner city neighbourhoods. She states that:

Social mix policies rely on a common set of beliefs about the benefits of mixed communities, with little evidence to support them, and a growing evidence base that contradicts the precepts embedded in social mix policies that should make policy-makers sit up and take note.<sup>419</sup>

Lees calls for a re-focus on urban design, disallowing fortress-style architecture and gated communities and re-thinking the architecture of insecurity and fear. She remains critical of state-led policies of gentrification that in reality become vehicles for social engineering or worse social cleansing of city centres.<sup>420</sup> Her work is really important if we are to appreciate more fully the complex issues behind the regeneration of city centres.

This chapter has concluded the review of BECs within the Catholic community with the addition of the Adelaide experience revealing what they consider to be unique in the

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<sup>416</sup> Cochrane (2007) 48.

<sup>417</sup> Cochrane (2007) 49.

<sup>418</sup> Lees L. (2008) ‘Gentrification and Social Mixing: Towards an Inclusive Urban Renaissance?’ *Urban Studies Journal* 45 (12) 2449-2470.

<sup>419</sup> Lees (2008) 2463.

<sup>420</sup> Lees (2008) 2465.

context of the world-wide Church. It then moved beyond the ecclesial to look at the wider and more generic questions of city, neighbourhood and community from within the perspectives of various writers. This has shown that despite there not being a great deal of interest in the concept of BECs and what they have to teach us within the Roman Catholic tradition in England and Wales there is nonetheless a most enlightening and useful contribution from secular writers who are passionate about the nature of neighbourhood and the possibility of community in an urban environment. This is what we will now take forward into the final and concluding chapter of the research.

## CHAPTER SIX

# CONCLUSION

The Introduction to this thesis described the process and methodology that would be followed throughout the research. Practical Theology is a dynamic movement from experience through to reflection and moving on to action. The experience of BECs has been examined at some length taking an almost global perspective as the work studied the practice of BECs from Latin America to Africa, Asia and Australia – a veritable tour de force of southern hemisphere continents. A narrative description of this fairly recent phenomenon in the Catholic Church has been attempted in order to lay the foundations for an academic reflection upon that lived reality. An analysis has accompanied the descriptive elements using commentators and practitioners from within the continental regions. There is so much material on this subject that it became clear in the process that the aspects treated during the research were mere fragments of a much larger whole which would have merited further and deeper examination. The focus in each continent has been on establishing the origins and history of the growth of BECs. This was then followed by an exploration of the main issues being developed within that geographical region; the most frequently commented point was with regard to the impact of the BEC phenomenon on the theology and ecclesiology of the local Church. Hypotheses were established and critiqued, for example that BECs were a normative part of being Church, a question that their very existence had provoked across the board. Another one would be that neighbourhood is an intrinsic element and a unique dynamic within the structure and organisation of each parish community.



In the four-stage process followed in this research it can be seen that the first stage, a description of the practice of BECs and a subsequent analysis of their occurrence, was the methodology pursued in chapters 2-4; while the second stage in the process was interwoven throughout those chapters as the subject arose and hypotheses were developed and explored. Chapter 5 both concluded the BEC material with a visit to the Archdiocese of Adelaide, South Australia, following the same methodological process outlined above and then drew on new material from secular academic sources drawing upon theories around cities, neighbourhoods and the nature and possibility of urban community experiences. The theories being espoused about neighbourhood community in the urban milieu will form the basis for the reflections upon praxis in this conclusion. Stage three of Practical Theology's methodology whereby an examination of the normative phase is carried out forms a major part of this concluding chapter where the vision, meaning and values behind the phenomenon of BECs will be analysed. That leaves the final stage where suggestions and recommendations mostly from the global South will be made to improve existing practice in the ecclesial sphere in the global North.

## **6.1 THE NEIGHBOUR IS COMMON TO US ALL**

Challenges posed by the rapid transformation of our social and cultural geography suggest that this is a good time to relook at some of the basic principles that at one time would have been taken for granted; neighbourliness is an example. It is much harder to be friendly with neighbours who are perfect strangers and bring with them cultural, linguistic and religious differences that make the indigenous people nervous about making initial contact. All the taken-for-granted common starting points have gone, like being born locally and going to the same schools and churches. Tobias Jones, freelance

writer/journalist and founder of the Windsor Hill Community in Somerset has noted that: ‘It’s the very lack of choice inherent in neighbourhood, the fate of whom modern life has thrown our way that makes the neighbour a person of such symbolic importance.’<sup>421</sup>

The easy superficial similarities drawn by previous generations have now given way to something at once both more challenging and difficult and yet more rewarding and much deeper. The neighbour now has to be confronted in all their difference rather than in their sameness and similarity to us. So it is no longer possible to make friends simply because the neighbour is just like us, because the likelihood is that they won’t be just like us at all. They could be very different. And so, as Jones stated, the neighbour has become symbolically important. It seems to me that this is really positive as it forces everyone to look more deeply for what commonalities there might be. This is both on a personal as well as a geographical level. Without being able to find common purpose or common ground it will become ever more difficult for human beings to live together in any kind of cohesive and harmonious way. Each person now whose life is lived primarily in a western-European or north-American city will have no choice but to either retreat into small exclusive groups, centred on resisting and opposing the multi-cultural context, or will have to embrace the challenge to see beyond difference. This will mean overcoming any natural fears in this regard, and being challenged to forge meaningful relationships with neighbours and colleagues, where diversity is valued because it is enriching.

The quality of life in the city will depend hugely upon being able to make of the human person, their needs and concerns, the centre of all policies and the measure of all success. It is a task that I have found immensely challenging and yet very necessary - to attempt to

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<sup>421</sup> Jones T. (2007) *Utopian Dreams: In Search of a Good Life*. London: Faber and Faber 191.

humanise the city, its structures, its leadership and vision and its neighbourhoods.<sup>422</sup> It is something that I have tried to live out myself during 12 years in Pastoral Ministry and now, outside public ministry for the past decade, in the purely secular realm of the city of Liverpool.

This search for commonality is not only undertaken on a social and anthropological level but must also be pursued on a geographical level too. As has been demonstrated in chapter 5 and remarked upon especially in Asian chapter 4, if we are looking for common ground between people today one place to find it is the neighbourhood. Starting small with the immediate place where my apartment or home is situated and expanding gradually to include a wider neighbourhood and city, it isn't too difficult to imagine that what unites us is our living together in this city and in this neighbourhood of the city. As human persons we share the same humanity and the same place of abode. This is not meant to pit us against those from other neighbourhoods or cities but as the movement inherent within this way of thinking is towards the other, embracing them in their difference, so it is to be hoped that the same movement and method will apply towards those from other areas. The thesis has argued, I hope persuasively, that territory is an integral part of the process of finding commonality and forming community. As Gorringer has similarly concluded territory, '... remains important, even in an age of migration and identity politics.'<sup>423</sup> What we seem to have in common everywhere is that we are all neighbours. And without doubt all the major religious traditions promote respect for and

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<sup>422</sup> I was invited to become a member of the Strategic Investment Framework Working Group organised by Liverpool Vision and reporting to the Mayor and City Council in my capacity as Chair of Engage Liverpool and representing at its meetings the needs and aspirations of the city centre's resident population. I have found not only that there is something distinctive and valuable to offer around the humanising of the city but that there is indeed an appetite for hearing this message and a desire to rebalance the consequences of previous market-driven approaches.

<sup>423</sup> Gorringer T. (2002) *A Theology of the Built Environment: Justice, Empowerment, Redemption*. Cambridge: University Press 163.

even love of neighbour; but in the Christian religion love of neighbour is elevated to the same level as love of God. Yet that mandate doesn't quite seem to have translated into basic structures or guidelines for how to lovingly respond to the actual neighbour alongside whom we live. There is not an officially developed or promoted spirituality for neighbour or neighbourhood.<sup>424</sup> There is a re-balancing required here that is urgent.

## 6.2 MOTIVATING THE FAITHFUL

A question that has continually inspired me throughout the research has been what it would take to motivate the members of the Church to see the neighbourhood and their neighbour as a spiritual and moral imperative worthy of engaging their energies and their desires for holiness in a way that has meaning for today. This thesis is an attempt to uncover elements of a theological motivation that would inspire further dialogue with the subject. In exploring the theology behind neighbour, one element that cannot be overlooked is the linking of the God-neighbour connection that was a constant rabbinic theme and in which Jesus was also drawn. It is the question of the greatest commandment.<sup>425</sup> Jesus answers it traditionally with the *shema* of Deuteronomy 6:4-5 as would have been expected of any good Jew but then much less obviously he doesn't pause at all and adds v31 about the love of neighbour taken from Leviticus 19:18, linking the two mandates and declaring them to be equal in greatness and importance. This was understood by the early Church and was made explicit in the letter of St John.<sup>426</sup> You cannot in this tradition say 'God' without saying 'neighbour', almost hyphenated 'God-

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<sup>424</sup> However the subject has been researched by Holt, S. C.(1999) *God Next Door: Towards a Spirituality of Neighbourhood*. Doctoral Thesis at Fuller Theological Seminary. Also a paper by Rev Dr Jacob Kurien (2004) from Kerala, India for the World Council of Churches Commission on Faith and Order *Being Christian Neighbours in the Context of Religious Plurality* FO/2004:20

<sup>425</sup> Mark 12:28-34

<sup>426</sup> 1 John 4:20-21

neighbour'. Brueggemann makes the startling point with regard to the Church that 'our common life is nearly destroyed by forgetting the simple, elemental mandate of neighbourliness that is intrinsic in the God command.'<sup>427</sup> Even the faith we share in common has not been enough to maintain a sense of a common life, an experience of commonality or community; and therefore it comes as no surprise to discover that the Church is not at the forefront of promoting a common life or community life among the general population in our cities or elsewhere.

What inspires and motivates me now is the common humanity of our neighbours and our common footprint in the neighbourhood. Secularists seem more capable of grasping this and leading the way than many religious groups, whose leaders and members continue to focus their efforts on their own kind. Religious leaders seem to so obviously struggle with concepts of difference and diversity; the message they communicate therefore is often experienced by many as sectarian, elitist and exclusive. If the 'other' is seen as being there only for the purpose of conversion, to make 'them' one of 'us', then it is no wonder that many people today are more attracted by and more comfortable with secularity. These non-religious movements, organisations and leaders are happy to accept each person as they are, regardless of their ethnicity, sexual orientation and gender identity or faith background.

### **6.3 MOTIVATING THE PARISH- ST MARGARET MARYS**

Influenced heavily by my experiences with BECs in Latin America generally and Adelaide in particular, during the years when I held responsibility for the large Catholic

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<sup>427</sup> Brueggemann (1999) 79.

community in the Liverpool districts of Dovecot and Knotty Ash, I was able to put into practice much of this vision. Turning a parish community around from being an inwardly-preoccupied group to being an outwardly-facing outgoing community was a challenge for more than one lifetime! Whatever success there was, flowed from the process suggested by the Australian Fr Bob Wilkinson, that of trusting in the transformative power of action. Parishioners were challenged to visit a number of people around where they lived, getting to know them and gradually becoming friends. Archbishop Len Faulkner had said to me during my time in Adelaide that for him there was no other agenda; simply the struggle to form genuine friendships was enough, everything good that happened subsequently would be as a result of that. He understood his Archdiocesan experiment with BECs to be based upon the words of Jesus ‘I call you friends.’<sup>428</sup> This simple intuition was also grasped by St Paul, who encouraged the Ephesians to ‘Be friends with one another,’<sup>429</sup> focusing on the quality of relationships among the new converts to Christianity. The Archbishop had somehow grasped a profound reality, which of course remains normative for the whole Church, and that was that living the gospel challenge to ‘love your neighbour’<sup>430</sup> cannot be left simply to the personal devotion of individual Catholics but must become part of the strategy, process and very structure of the ecclesial mission. This is precisely what BECs have done across the developing world; they have enabled the Church to put into place a system or methodology for putting the faith into practice. In a sense it has moved the debate about the believer from purely ‘believing’ to ‘doing’ or ‘acting’ out of that belief. And so in a very profound way believers in the BEC Church are not only believing, adhering to doctrinal normativity, but they are also attempting to live out that faith in the concrete

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<sup>428</sup> John 15:15

<sup>429</sup> Ephesians 4:32

<sup>430</sup> Mathew 19:19; Mark 12:31; Luke 10:27; Romans 13:9; Galatians 5:14; James 2:8.

situations of their daily life. They have a growing and ever more clear sense that to be Catholic they have to both ‘love their neighbour’ alongside whom they live, as well as to manifest in a way that those very neighbours can see and experience, a lived community existence that flows from the doctrinal truth of the Trinity - communion and community of the Divine Persons.<sup>431</sup>

In my experience attempting to motivate and transform a Catholic parish was in fact an uphill task. Especially from one where attending Mass, celebrating the sacraments and signing up to pilgrimages was considered to be the fullness of being Catholic, to one where parishioners realised that they were called also to live out in their lives the mission of the Church to become community and to reach out to those in need around them by befriending their actual neighbours. Many could not comprehend a need to alter the habits of a lifetime; being good and practicing the rituals of the faith was sufficient. The concept of making the faith a lived reality in history and locality seemed to some to be a step too far, an unnecessary task.

What was interesting to me as the priest was the discovery that the parts of the parish that understood what we were attempting and were the first to get the Neighbourhood Pastoral Teams (NPT) off the ground were predominantly in the sector of the parish that was considered by many to be the poorer and more socially-deprived part; whereas others, considered by some to be the more middle-class areas, struggled to find a handful of parishioners prepared to make even a small start with the visiting. Many were just too

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<sup>431</sup> Kurien (2004) paragraph headings include: Holy Trinity - Perfect Model of Neighbourhood; Christ – Eternal Neighbourhood Manifesting in Historical Neighbourhood; Holy Spirit – The Real Touch of Ideal Neighbourhood.

busy and too nervous about knocking on the doors of neighbours who still after many years had remained strangers. There were some notable exceptions of course, but the generality remained true. Nonetheless where groups emerged the reactions and results were indeed impressive. It was Church on the street. Making Church smaller and making it possible to experience community and to actively engage with the Church's mission did indeed transform lives – both those actively engaged members of the parish in the NPTs and those on the receiving end of the befriending experiments.

Leaders emerged from among the people, some of whom had been estranged from the Church for many years. They were inspired and were inspirational. The ethos of becoming an outward-focusing Church community touched all levels of parish life, from the liturgy to the catechesis, from the junior school to deanery and diocesan meetings. We had decided that 'being known personally mattered' and so at every single event great efforts were made to get to know each other and time was set aside to allow friendships to form and develop. The Parish Catechist was an exceptional woman who was herself inspired by the BEC vision of Church and wrote the vision into every aspect of the sacramental programmes - including having the children meeting in the neighbourhoods in each other's homes; another first for the parish and another inspired initiative. Over 70 volunteer catechists worked at any one time on the various catechetical programmes, and there were hundreds more who had worked with the programmes and had moved on as their children grew up and left school. That was another sign of the immense life that was released within the parish by the BEC phenomenon and the efforts being made to contact and connect with people at whatever stage they were at on their faith journey.



## **6.4 LEARNING FROM THE GLOBAL SOUTH**

BECs are a vision of Church from the global South. Their insights are as applicable in Europe and the western world in general, as much as in the developing world, because they are about a new level of Church at the grassroots. This is the one place where no-one needs a theology degree to set about the task of building friendship among people at the smallest level, making a connection between the Christian and the world, specifically that part of the world where they live. As a vision of Church it puts responsibility onto laypersons for becoming and being Church, for promoting the mission of the Church by building community at the base. It has to be the future of the Church even in Europe and North America simply because it recognises the full baptismal calling of all the faithful and transfers power and responsibility for the Church onto their shoulders and gives them authority to create Church from the bottom, at the base where they live out their lives as neighbours among neighbours.

In those emerging communities faith is shared and celebrated as well as lived and reviewed. Prayer, bible reflection and para-liturgies around feasts and seasons are all in the hands of baptised parishioners. And so of course that will be the main reason why many priests and bishops will not be supportive; it alters the traditional function and role of the priest. It challenges the idea that the ordained cleric is the only one with responsibility for the mission of the Church and encourages him to let go and share power and responsibility. This is again the place where an individual's ecclesiology comes to the fore; those whose vision for the Church is one of participative leadership where the priest enables the laity to assume their full role and responsibility for mission will welcome the BECs and those who understand their training and ordination to have

admitted them into a hierarchy where they are set apart from lay people and are ontologically different to them will find this level of power-divesting to be beyond them and will resist BECs. Both ecclesiologies are present in the Catholic Church and as was noted in African chapter 3 the latter approach can significantly undermine the development and acceptability of the BECs. The same story is repeated here in the UK.

This thesis is not only about examining a new phenomenon in the Catholic Church but is also about raising the same question here that Church leaders in the developing world asked themselves many decades ago: Is the way parish is presently structured enabling both mission and community to be fully experienced and clearly expressed by the Church? In other words is there any sense yet that the present model of parish isn't functioning to the best advantage of the Church? The answer came easier in the southern hemisphere for many reasons, not least among them was the impact of colonialism; but in the place that gave the present model and structure to the world the answer seems to be that there is little wrong with the historic model familiar to every diocese in Europe, save a shortage of clergy to run the system but nothing that a few parish amalgamations and closures can't resolve. There are some within the Church who are diagnosing this as a crisis of faith and not a crisis of structure; they seem to think that Europe is losing its Christian soul rather than the model or structure of ecclesial experience is failing the needs and expectations of new generations of Europeans.<sup>432</sup> Of course the reasons why Europe is in many ways in crisis about institutional religion are many and varied but the fact remains that the parish and therefore the Church is an institution shrinking, ageing and in decline. It is in this very context that we are being offered an insight, an

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<sup>432</sup> For a full discussion of this issue see Sobrino J. and Wilfred F. (eds) (2005) *Christianity in Crisis? Concilium* 2005/3 London: SCM Press.

inspiration and a new motivation for transforming our way of being Church that is emerging from the global South.

## **6.5 VISION OF COMMUNITARIAN MISSION**

The Church in general, and the parish in particular at a smaller more local level, are in need of being revitalised as the base for liturgical and faith-based communities that understand the importance of being rooted in a particular place and having a mission to that particular place. It needs to rediscover itself as truly catholic and therefore universal and all-embracing, inclusive and welcoming to everyone. Marins would often describe the Church as a ‘missionary community with a communitarian mission’. Wherever he was invited he would share with people what he considered to be a Vatican II vision and ecclesiology of Church. The definition of Church he had received, from the Council and from his Latin American bishops, was of a group of people whose faith in Jesus and whose spirituality inspired by the Holy Spirit, enabled them to create a community experience that was saved from being inward-looking and exclusive by focusing upon its mission to love the neighbour. Especially loving the poorest and most vulnerable that lived close to them in the neighbourhood, regardless of their faith, ethnicity or racial background, or sexual orientation or educational and social grouping. Their aim was simply to befriend the neighbourhood by small and simple gestures that would help to build understanding, respect and community among a diverse population. There is no right model for doing that, neither is there a one-size-fits-all approach either but there are some principles that could be taken into account in any attempt at structural transformation. These insights for renewal are coming from the edge, the margins of our world, from the global South.

Europe is in need of people who have a vision for the knitting together of communities of diverse and different people, who nonetheless live close by and alongside us in the neighbourhood. This thesis claims that this vision is present in the best theology, ecclesiology and experience of the Church, and perhaps precisely because the challenge is coming to us in the north from the southern hemisphere, many here seem incapable of being open to that vision of communitarian mission. People at the centre seldom like to take notice of those at the periphery. What this research has shown is the potential for mission and community that the BEC experience offers the Church. My encounters with BECs across each of the continents visited have impressed me with the intense commitment and motivation that the people have for transforming their neighbourhood and also their Church. Motivating parishioners here is a huge challenge and in reality will only commence once the Church as a whole has faced the deeper theological issue of the kind of ecclesiology that it is operating out of and promoting at both national and universal levels.

## **6.6 DEEP ROOTS IN THE TRADITION**

Brueggemann traces the normativity of a faith-based ‘place’ understanding right back to the Sinai covenant and Israel’s entry into the Promised Land. BECs are rooted in place, they stand upon a specific piece of the land, and they draw the attention of the Church universal back to its origins as a land-inspired religious tradition. He makes the point that the Decalogue or Ten Commandments are an attempt to construct within a particular part of the earth, in a specific country and in all parts of that country, a boundary within which heaven will be experienced; and the Jewish vision of heaven on earth is a place where everyone can be touched by the beauty of rightly-ordered human relationships, building a

society and neighbourhood which promotes justice, peace and harmony amongst everyone, even the stranger and the poor, all of whom are neighbour. In other words the Decalogue is the divine commitment to the construction of a neighbourhood in the divine image. And Israel in its commitment to the covenant accepts the mission of realising that heaven-on-earth by challenging the dominant economic and social manifestations of power that distort the land, and therefore people's experience and enjoyment of life, with their well-established, conventionally-legitimated, exploitative social relationships. Israel must transform what it finds in the land of Canaan into something that God prefers and not replicate what it finds.

...the people of Israel, when powered and energised by an intentional vision, can indeed change their place and make it a liveable, life-giving place. This is a remarkable faith claim that has been decisive for western culture. The 'place' is not fated but can be brought to an alternative destiny by the intentionality of the new vision-driven inhabitants.<sup>433</sup>

Whilst I would very much want to encourage the Church here to reform and restructure parishes through a return to a deep-rooted and normative tradition, of a land-based faith-inspired vision for delivering a real community experience that is definitively mission-oriented, I am also realistic and understand that this is unlikely to be understood or grasped anytime soon.<sup>434</sup> Therefore it seems to me to be more practical to liberate individual parishioners and small groups of Christians, who will be sufficiently reform-

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<sup>433</sup> Brueggemann (1999) 101.

<sup>434</sup> Though there are developments in Germany where the Roman Catholic development agencies Adveniat and Mission have been promoting BECs for many years; they have invited me to participate in their conference in January 2013 in Tübingen: BECs in Global Perspective.

minded and renewal-orientated to respond to the divine covenant to love the neighbour in the neighbourhood, by becoming humanisers of the urban environment. They will be people with a vision and a mission who will sow the seeds of community among the apartments, offices and public spaces of the city centre. This is already happening among some evangelical churches as I discovered during a recent meeting in Liverpool to discuss ‘Public Open Spaces in Ropewalks’<sup>435</sup> when an impressive group of young professional people attended and told me at the end of the gathering that they all belonged to a church that had sent them to live in apartments across Ropewalks with the mission of engaging with the many young people who inhabit apartment complexes. Sadly, this is not only virtually unheard of in the Catholic community in the UK, but almost unimaginable.

Antony Cohen makes the point that people domesticate the city, mark out their own territories, and invest the city with culture. ‘People en-culture the city, rather than responding passively to its deterministic power.’<sup>436</sup> He goes on to state that people must be given credit for the ingenuity and creativity with which they construct social relationships through which they can adapt the spatial and physical environment of the city to their own capacities and resources. One day it is to be hoped that the Catholic Church in the West will find inspiration in the experience of its co-religionists in the developing world and release the power inherent amongst the faithful for the transformation of the urban milieu with gospel values. In the meantime it will be up to individuals and small groups to take up the challenge and seize the opportunity for evangelisation that lies at the heart of our cities.

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<sup>435</sup> November 23<sup>rd</sup> 2011 at the Brink on Parr Street, Liverpool.

<sup>436</sup> Cohen A. and Fukui K. (1993) *Humanising the City? Social Contexts of Urban Life at the Turn of the Millennium*. Edinburgh: University Press 5.

## **6.7 REFORM FROM THE CENTRE AND RENEWAL FROM THE EDGE**

I'm not sure if the analogy of the Big Bang or of a nuclear explosion are any use here but it seems to me that it is possible that Europeans were too close to the geographical and theological epicentre of the reforming Vatican Council to be able to fully appreciate the extraordinary release of renewing energy that was instinctively and spontaneously captured and harnessed further afield in many parts of the southern hemisphere at the extremities of ecclesial life. The challenge undoubtedly for those at the centre of Church life and politics today is to be open to this simple lesson from the south that there can be no reform from the centre while ignoring and even opposing the renewal coming back to it from the edge. BECs are offering that renewal opportunity from the margins of a Eurocentric ecclesial structure. And secular professionals are offering a similar renewal opportunity from their marginal place in relation to religious institutions.

It is possible of course that an apparent lack of vision on the part of Church authorities is simply a question of maturity, a matter of time. That is in the sense that the challenges that the city and its pluralistic, multi-faith and multi-cultural communities are throwing up, are demanding a mature and considered response that the Church has barely started to consider. It is worth noting that in the secular sphere this has been faced since at least the 1970s when Richard Sennett in his influential work *The Uses of Disorder* argued that the demand for community, purified of all that might convey a feeling of difference, is built upon an adolescent fear of the pain and challenge of participation. He argued that the family in particular acted as a shield against diversity and one could say the same of the family of the Church. To grow to adulthood we need to be able to tolerate painful ambiguity and uncertainty and we therefore need the anarchy that the city can provide.

‘The great promise of city life is a new kind of confusion possible within its borders, an anarchy that will not destroy men, but make them richer and more mature.’<sup>437</sup> In the healthy city there will be no escape from situations of confrontation and conflict, and this depends on diverse and ineradicably different kinds of people being thrown together and forced to deal with each other for mutual survival.<sup>438</sup> ‘The neighbour is the irreducible condition of healthy, peaceable, productive place,’<sup>439</sup> insists Brueggemann.

The premise of this thesis is that this whole approach to community in the neighbourhood is fully normative for the Church. As was stated earlier in the Conclusion the doctrine of the Trinity is the insight that Godself lives and is community. ‘Nothing was more remarkable in the history of twentieth century theology than the recovery and development of this insight.’<sup>440</sup> As Gorringer goes on to state the recovery of the doctrine has important implications for our understanding of community and the built environment. This view of community, as rooted in Trinitarian relational theology, privileges face to face community and defines the divine persons of the Trinity primarily by their relations, whilst remaining distinct. This understanding of the nature of God is predicated both on real difference and on real unity. Could there be a better model for understanding what we are setting out to achieve in our desire to instantiate community within the city? ‘If human beings are made in the divine image then it is this form of relationship to which we have to aspire.’<sup>441</sup> The divine nature is both open and outgoing; it is inherently creative and missionary in that the entire movement of the Godhead in

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<sup>437</sup> Sennett R. (1970) *The Uses of Disorder*. New York: Norton 108.

<sup>438</sup> Sennett (1970) 163.

<sup>439</sup> Brueggemann (1999) 106.

<sup>440</sup> Gorringer (2002) 183.

<sup>441</sup> *Ibid.*



mutual relationship is an energy moving out and beyond itself, that encompasses the whole of creation which is the product of that artistic endeavour.

BECs are also a continuation of a vision of Church that is described in the Acts of the Apostles and the letters of St Paul and reveal that those early Christian communities are once again becoming the models and inspiration for declaring that mission and community are normative for the Church. BECs in their actual incarnation in the developing world offer an example and an encouragement to the entire ecclesial enterprise but not a model or template that can be copied or followed exactly and in every situation. They extend a prophetic challenge to examine how faithful members of the Church are to its foundational ecclesial narrative that is still emerging from within the tradition and thanks to BECs is being rediscovered and re-evaluated in our day. However to properly explore this New Testament element requires more than this present thesis allows and that will have to be undertaken elsewhere and perhaps by others.<sup>442</sup>

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<sup>442</sup> Perhaps the most definitive and extensive study so far to have been produced but only available in Spanish: Marins J. (2004) *Hasta Los Confines de la Tierra - Las Primeras Comunidades Cristianas*. Dominican Republic: Paulinas.

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