

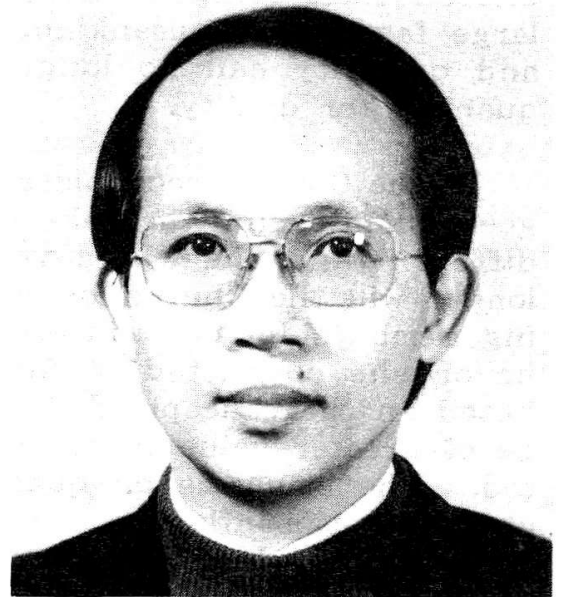
The Establishment of Small Faith Communities in Hong Kong



Preface

Cardinal John Wu in his pastoral letter March into a Bright Decade of May 1989 has stated that in the future the Hong Kong Catholic Church should move in the direction of establishing 'small faith communities'. The original name for 'small faith communities' is Basic Christian Communities, or BCC for short, while the church in Taiwan calls them 'Basic Faith Communities.'

by Luke Tsui
translated by Peter Barry



Small faith communities are not the same as traditional parish societies or ordinary Christian associations; nor are they Bible study groups, life-sharing or prayer groups only. Rather, in the parlance of Vatican Council II, they are new 'models of the church.' In today's church, the small faith communities seem to be the most active, and at the same time, the most thoughtful pastoral means of approach to the modern world. For many who look for church reform, they are the future hope of the church.

Small faith communities are communities which have the Bible as their guide, the Eucharist as their motivating force and the attainment of a richer life as their object. The members of these communities hear the Word of God and reflect upon it; then they put it into practice by sharing it with others. While maintaining their unity with the universal church, these small communities act independently and spontaneously to help their members accept Christ and put Christ's teachings into practice. The members share among themselves the difficulties, joys, and beneficial results of a life of faith. The communities require their

members, individually or as a group, directly by word of mouth or indirectly by the example of a life of faith, to spread the good news of Jesus Christ. In this way, they work to make this a more humanitarian and beautiful world by making Christ's presence felt within it.

Small faith communities will allow the church to manifest to the world a completely new face. After the manner of the 'salt' and 'light' mentioned in the Gospels, they will allow the church to be more broadly and completely present in every place where Christians live. They will cause the seeds of Christ's Gospel, with its spirit of love and justice, to spread to every corner of the world and sink deeper roots into its soil.

Small faith communities are places for nourishing active Christians and schools for training Christian disciples. They motivate Christians to assume responsibility for their faith. Christians are evangelized in these communities; their faith deepens and becomes more mature. With faith and life completely united, Christians become messengers and witnesses of the Gospel in the secular world.

Small faith communities are an important tool for making Chinese Christians aware of the great challenge of evangelizing 1.1 billion of their fellow countrymen. They can serve to release the latent potential of the larger Christian community. Now at a time when China feels a need for spiritual renewal and is actively seeking to establish a 'spiritual civilization' on the mainland, small faith communities can be a source of strength for them. In this way, they can be called a gift of God to the Chinese people at the present time.

The small faith communities are not just one option among many for Christians. They are, rather, a necessary condition for developing a fuller faith-life, places where believers can truly become believers. Ideally, the small faith community can satisfy completely all the basic needs of a Christian.

Learning to be Persons in the Church

The Catholic Church today is quite open to many questions with regard to its systematic theology, ecclesiology and even questions involving salvation itself. This leads some people to ask: Can a person believe in God, in Christ and yet not enter the church?

The question is complicated, but, answering in brief, if one's purpose is to be a good person, to communicate with God, and to obtain salvation, then generally speaking, it is not requisite that he/she must also

enter the church. The reason for entering the church and becoming a Christian is to live life more abundantly (Jn. 10:10), to follow Christ, to explore with other brothers and sisters in the church the breadth and depth of this life created by God, and to be a complete human being. Put more simply, to enter the church means choosing to learn how to be a person within the church. To reach our goal, we must possess a correct faith-outlook, live a healthy faith-life and grow and mature in the midst of a faith-community. In these three areas, small faith communities can make a positive contribution to a Catholic's faith.

Faith-outlook: this covers everything that has to do with religion, faith, world-view, view of life, the spiritual life, God's revelation, and the important rites of passage in an individual's life, e.g., birth, adolescence, mature adulthood, old age, sickness and death. Such outlooks on existence are the common fruit of God's inspiration and man's own reflection. Their function is to act as a guide to life, to give impetus to life, to raise the level of life, and to develop life in all its depth and breadth.

Faith life: this means that relying on the directions indicated by faith we renew our lives, re-creating them through our faith. Here we are concerned with individual conversion and growth in faith, personal relationships, social responsibility, and one's relationship with God. The fruits of such a life are a greater degree of personal involvement, a life that is happier, more positive, and much richer.

Faith community: this describes a group of people sharing a common faith, who desire to struggle together for the same life ideals. United, they search continuously throughout their whole lives for life's meaning and content. Searching for God's will and living a community life marked by mutual love and support, they are able concretely and progressively to bear witness to their life of faith.

Three Key Elements in Small Faith Communities

Three key elements in small faith communities are clearly spelled out in their original name: Basic Christian Communities. Many articles have been written about these three key elements. This essay presents only a bare outline of them, adding a more lengthy explanation of the meaning of "basic" at the end.

Community: the small faith community is a community where its members experience an intimate, comfortable and relaxed relationship

with one another. It is a large family where everyone lives together happily and one which everyone looks forward to returning to while away from it. It is a community where brothers and sisters live in love, in which the spirit of its unity and the experience of its communion renew the heart, and where members can share their joys and their sorrows, "bearing one another's burdens and encouraging one another." It is a community in which one's spirits are uplifted, where personalities mature and where even the sharing of material goods finds a proper place. Members are given inner strength to cope with external problems, such as those at work or in the family.

Christian: the small faith community is not a recreation centre, nor a fraternal association or social club. This community has Christ as its centre. When the members focus on Christ or speak of Christian ideals, it fires their enthusiasm. In Christ, they seek the Father's will and seek to build up the kingdom of God in the world in accordance with the teachings of Christ. Their model is the newly established Christian community described in Acts 2:41-47. Their method is to sink roots into the Word of God, to saturate themselves with Christian love, and to obtain nourishment and strength from the sacraments.

Basic: an important characteristic of small faith communities is their quality of 'basicness.' Just as the family is the most basic unit in a country, so the small faith community is the most basic unit in the church. In the past the parish was the most basic unit in the church. If you did not belong to a parish, then you were not considered a zealous, devout Catholic. In the future small faith communities will function as mini-parishes. In fact, they will be more effective than parishes are at present. If at that time a Catholic does not belong to a small faith community, it may become difficult for him to give authentic Christian witness in the midst of an increasingly complicated world.

A community possessing this quality of "basicness," always with the understanding that it is also in communion with the diocese, parish, and other small faith communities, should spontaneously and on its own initiative develop its faith-life, and realize a concrete, active, and positive presence for the church in a certain locality. Taking charge of their own affairs, the members themselves take up the task of proclaiming the Gospel, because they are the church.

This kind of community has three obvious characteristics: orientation towards life, community participation and independence.

Life orientation: in the first place, small faith communities do not

deal per se with parish problems and activities; rather, they deal with their members' personal and life problems. Thus, life's challenges, secular concerns, environmental pressures, the bettering of work conditions, family matters, and pertinent political questions are all valid topics for the community's meetings. Of course, the interior vitality of mature groups and their interior faith becomes activated in service both to the parish and the community at large. While this service is the necessary fruit of the development of the small groups, it is not their primary reason for existence. This is the fundamental difference between small faith communities and traditional parish societies.

Community participation: the basic community belongs to all the members of the community. Ample opportunity is provided for each member to participate in the decision making process regarding the affairs of the group, and to take up group responsibilities. In a community where members share their lives with one another, offer mutual support, and are united in mind and heart, no member is a stranger. In such a community, each member should feel that he/she is the church. Each member should have a strong and stable sense of belonging. Members do not leave the community because of petty difficulties. They participate in the community not because they enjoy what it gives them, but rather because they can contribute of their individual talents and energies to establish and create the community, making it their own. Some Christians may even take on the work of establishing such new communities as their "profession."

Independent nature: in contrast to what has been called Roman Catholic 'clericalism,' the most important quality of the basic community is its independent lay status. This certainly does not mean a rejection of the clergy. It considers members of the clergy as close friends and advisers. But the clergy should not be looked upon as essential props without which the community would fall apart. The basic communities must become self-governing, self-supporting and self-propagating. Members must assume pastoral roles and develop, as a community, their own special charisms. Under the inspiration of God's Word, as individuals and in the name of the community, they should answer Christ's call and respond to the needs of our times independently and spontaneously .

This kind of community can really be called 'a new model,' for the church of the future will take on "a completely new appearance." She will be realized first in Christian gatherings, and then, through the lives of her Christians, she will penetrate the world. The significance for our times of the pastoral letter March Into the Bright Decade is this:

the Hong Kong church has now chosen this new model in order that the Catholic Church might have a more effective presence here in Hong Kong, and her Catholics might exert a more positive and independent approach to 1997 and beyond, so that her small communities might become the leaven in society to help build a new Hong Kong.

The Hong Kong Model of Small Faith Communities

The social conditions found in the spawning grounds of Basic Christian Communities and in those countries where BCCs have been developed with relative success, are not identical with those we find here in Hong Kong. Therefore, if Hong Kong wishes to establish such small faith communities, it must also map out its own road.

The church in the three areas outlined below - Latin America, Africa and the Philippines - has had a lot of experience in developing Basic Christian Communities. The local Hong Kong model came out of this writer's detailed study of their experiences. It is hoped that as our local church moves in the direction of setting up our small faith communities, some of my own ideas will help serve to stimulate the thinking and opinions of others. (See table on page 62)

Basic Christian Communities in Latin America began at the grassroots level against the background of a people struggling for freedom and liberation. In their case, "basic" refers to the poor and the oppressed. It is for this reason that other areas of the world hesitate to use the word "basic" when referring to like communities in their own situation. The source of the African model was a national or regional pastoral plan, which acknowledged that, if the church was to bear fruit in Africa, it must set up basic Christian communities. The Africans chose the word "small" to describe these communities because they desired to establish groups where unity and harmony among the members were to be the key factors. It can be said that Hong Kong has elements of both the above models. As early as 1974, Hong Kong had begun a movement to establish basic Christian communities. But due to a lack of both theoretical knowledge and practical experience, leaders were never able to get the communities off the ground. With the impetus provided by Cardinal Wu's pastoral letter, which set up a committee to promote the small faith communities, as well as concerns over 1997, the Hong Kong church realized that if she was still to be the salt of the earth and light of the world after 1997, she must as soon as possible establish these small faith communities. Thus the climate for establishing the communities was established by the Cardinal's letter, which included an eye toward the necessity of weathering future possible storms. Although the Hong Kong

	LATIN AMERICAN MODEL	AFRICAN MODEL	PHILIPPINES MODEL	HONG KONG MODEL
ORIGIN	From below to above	From above to below (pastoral plan for whole continent)	Some from each direction	Some from each direction
BACKGROUND	The struggle for freedom and liberation	Pastoral Plan	Begun for pastoral reasons, but changed due to political & economic circumstances	"10 year plan," plus "1997"
MEANING OF WORDS	Basic =the poor and oppressed	Small =small communities based on interpersonal relationships	Some of both aspects	A new model of church
DIRECTION	Renewal of society	Church = Communion(more internally oriented)	Some of both aspects	Integration, Incarnation, I am the church
METHOD	Observe- Judge- Act,Life- God's Word - Life (meetings, research and Bible sharing)	The Bible -Life	Some of both aspects	Life (society, the heart)- God's Word - Life; Analysis of society - Word - Witness
STAGES OF DEVELOPMENT	1.Prayer groups 2.Mutual aid Community 3.Community to work for social change	1.Prayer groups reflection on Word 2.Mutual aid community	1.Prayer groups Biblical reflection 2.Mutual aid community 3.Community to work for social change	1.Prayer/communion group 2.Service/development organization 3.Witnessing community (all 3 types)
ECCLESIASTICAL OUTLOOK	People of God in the midst of history to create history, and to establish the kingdom of God	The church is a community within a community	Some of both aspects	Some of both aspects

church opted for the word "small" to describe the communities, she did not reject the word "basic." What she wants is that these small faith communities be the basic unit of the church's presence on the local level. They are the new model of the church's presence in Hong Kong for the future.

As seen in the above outline, the direction of the Latin American BCCs is towards the renewal of society. They begin with life-sharing and analyzing society. Then, under the inspiration and guidance of the Word of God, they carry out activities aimed at reforming society. The development of their communities has taken place in three stages. From prayer groups and Bible study groups, they developed into mutual aid communities, and then, in a further development, into communities for changing society. They view the church as "the people of God," existing in history. They struggle to create the future in accordance with God's plan and to establish the kingdom of God.

The African BCCs are more oriented towards the interior life. They emphasize prayer and reflection on the Bible to help their small groups to develop into harmonious, mutual aid communities. They are not so much concerned with reforming society. Their ecclesiastical outlook is one of "a community within a community." No matter if it is the parish, the diocese or the universal church, for them the large community is formed by many small communities.

If Hong Kong Christians desire to live in communities which will be both independent and influential after 1997, and which at the same time will make a contribution to society, they must place importance upon a complete union of faith and life. In this way the salvation brought by Christ will more clearly and concretely make its appearance in our city. Each Christian must commit mind and heart to the notion "I am the church." They must then cooperate with others of similar outlook in continually searching out ways to make the Gospel an active force in society. Eventually, they should become a community which has "we are the church" as its ideal.

In order to accomplish this purpose, the method used by Hong Kong's basic Christian communities can be divided into two stages. In the first stage, members' efforts should be concentrated on life-sharing. That is, through the use of sociology and psychology, they try to arrive at an understanding of life, and, through a reading of the Bible, attempt to uplift life. In the latter stage, with the help of social analysis, the members arrive at an understanding of their own mission and of how they can best bear witness to the Gospel's spirit and ideals in these

times.

The development of basic Christian communities in Hong Kong should, therefore, proceed in proper sequence. Prayer and community groups should become service communities. In their efforts, they should gradually raise the quality of their service. Later, they should transform themselves into witnessing and prophetic communities, and communities which can accommodate the great majority of Hong Kong citizens. They should experience the joys and sorrows, as well as the victories and defeats of their fellow Hong Kong citizens, all the while working with them to create the future together. From an ecclesial viewpoint Hong Kong Christians should pay attention to their own special way of being the people of God and their own special quality of communion. For through this communion, they may become a force for creating history and for bearing witness to the Gospel in Hong Kong.

The Origin and Development of Catholic Family Associations in St. Vincent's Parish, Hong Kong

by Catholic Family Association
translated by Peter Barry

Ten years have already passed since St. Vincent's first began efforts to organize parish members into small communities called 'Catholic Family Associations'. At the outset, there was little instructional material available for us to use as structural guidelines, so we had to find our own way by a process of trial and error. As a result of this, we ran up against certain problems which we recount here so that others who may be planning to start similar small communities may benefit from our experience. It is hoped that we may in this way contribute to the support of the movement to develop basic Christian communities in our diocese.

For those unfamiliar with Hong Kong, let me first explain that St. Vincent's is an urban parish in an area that has, in recent years, undergone rapid and extensive development, especially with the addition of large numbers of new housing estates. These changes have affected the parish in many ways but none more dramatically than in the movement of Catholic families. They are now spread out over a much larger area than previously, and many new families have moved in. Conse-