

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.

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## 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-

quently, the traditional role of the parish church as social and religious centre for our Christians has also been affected by this shift in population. Previously, the parish church had always been considered as the initiation point for all parish activities and the focal point for training and for community development. In such an environment, parish members tended to play a more passive role and a spirit of active participation by individual members was not strong. Most active members of the parish belonged to a small number of pious societies. For the majority, the only religious gathering held in the home was the annual recitation of the rosary during the month of October. It was the custom of the parish priest to visit the homes of Christian families each evening during October and join with them in saying the rosary. It was about the only time during the year that the priest would have contact with his people on this most basic level. It was also the only formal opportunity the family had to gather for religious purposes and exchange views about their spiritual life in a family context. But as the years went by the number of participants in even this minimal family activity began to dwindle.

By the end of the 70's, parish leaders were exploring new avenues of approach to the problem of parish organization. We became more and more convinced that the home and not the parish church should become the basic unit for Christian family organization. It was felt that the home was the best place for the Church to sink its roots deep into local society and there to bear witness to Christ. It also seemed to be more suitable to the changing times and the requirements of Vatican II to shift our emphasis from the parish church to the Christian home.

Our plan was to promote the establishment of a Catholic Family Association in every housing estate within the parish boundaries. Each building would become a unit within the larger district. The Parish Council, through elected representation, would provide the overall structure of unity necessary to develop each district. The organizational nature of the Catholic Family Associations was intended to be different from that of traditional parish associations. It was to be more family and neighbourhood orientated, with relationships based on faith and frequent contacts through prayer gatherings. Each unit was also to be responsible for nourishing community concern as an expression of Christian love. In prayer gatherings and other activities, they were to bear Christian witness to their neighbours, work to improve the local environment and carry out their Christian mission in their neighbourhood.

The method we chose to initiate the establishment of these family

communities was to select one or two estates within the parish and organize on an experimental basis. We chose estates where the Catholic population was most numerous, where active and fervent Catholics were in the majority, where there was a commitment on the part of Catholics living in the area to the Association, and where at least one Catholic was willing to assume responsibility as a contact person and facilitator. After choosing the estate, we would begin organizing in one or two buildings only. Then after gaining practical experience and mastering needed skills, we would expand into other buildings within the estate. By constantly evaluating our work as we went along, we hoped to fine-tune and modify our methods of operation in the process.

Experience has taught us that volunteer workers need both an understanding of what is involved and a certain amount of individual training. This is most important. It is better to begin with motivated and committed Christians, making good use of members of the traditional parish associations as core organizers. Wait until you have achieved some practical results before inviting others to participate. After a suitable time, the parish can make this work the focal point for its continuing development as a parish and involve its personnel and material resources in more efficient and effective ways.

In the process of setting up the Catholic Family Association, it is important that the initial gathering of prospective members be held within three months of the first contact. A pro tem structure should be set up at this meeting, and the full association should be established within a year. This is based on the fact that we cannot wait for Christians to mature in faith before we begin to organize formally. Rather, it is within the faith environment itself that faith grows and matures.

Another important principle to remember is that the organizing process should not be stretched out over too long a period of time. Otherwise novice workers will become bored or feel they are under pressure and begin to lose interest. This can have a negative influence on the project as a whole. The members themselves should also be assigned different roles and invited to assume a variety of responsibilities, and they should be given the proper training to enable them to perform their tasks well.

Another point to keep in mind is this. Do not use an outing or a social celebration as the occasion for the initial gathering of members. This would give the unfortunate impression that the Catholic Family Association is merely the parish equivalent of other neighbourhood social organizations. The first and all subsequent meetings should have the

faith-life of the Christians and prayer as their primary focus.

The process of establishing the Catholic Family Association falls into two phases: first, the initial preparation, and second, the actual setting up of the individual units themselves. The planning phase can take anywhere from three months to a year. In some cases a longer period may be required, but it is important that this phase not be prolonged for an undue length of time.

The second phase focuses on nurturing activity and practical training, of which there are two kinds. The first involves the leaders or committee members in a number of brief training sessions; the second is geared to all members of the association and consists in lectures, retreats, prayer gatherings and other such activities. Sometimes this would involve members from just one building or block; at other times several blocks would join together. On occasion, the whole district would be involved.

It is important in the preparatory stage to train the volunteer organizers in the theory and method of organizing small groups. Be sure to select those with a keen interest in the project and be certain that they understand it thoroughly and in detail. After selecting one or two residential blocks in an estate complex, the task of family visitations can begin. The organizers visit each family explaining the reasons for establishing the Association, its meaning and purpose, and discuss with the family benefits envisioned by the project. They also seek out those who might be willing to serve later as contact persons for other families in the complex, and they invite the family to participate in a family gathering in the not too distant future.

The next step, after visiting all the families in an estate-block, is to collate and evaluate the data in preparation for the first gathering. A temporary committee may be set up at this first meeting, with the pastor appointing its members. The formal establishment of the family block-association can be delayed until a more suitable time. The first task of the committee members is to visit those families who were not present at the initial gathering. Committee members and the parish organizers divide themselves into small groups and call on each family to inform them of what took place at the meeting and of future plans for the association. This is a good opportunity for committee members to form a more personal relationship with the families.

After these families have been revisited, preparation for the formal establishment of the block-association may begin. The gathering of

families for this occasion should assume the style of a prayer meeting. The general election of officers and permanent committee members takes place afterwards. Candidates are nominated and elected by the participants, with the pastor officiating and announcing the election results.

Newly elected committee members should undergo a short training period, and they work closely with the parish organizers in this initial planning stage. Regular meeting times for the new association should also be designated, and the parish organizers themselves should meet separately to evaluate their work, making necessary changes in their methodology to allow for a smoother functioning of the system.

Having selected contact persons within each estate, we provided special occasions for their formation training. This took place on 'formation days', at the district meetings, and during the annual retreat. Others wishing to participate in these sessions were welcome. Topics singled out for special emphasis included: Christian love and service, the meaning of mission, the role of a Christian in the world, and also various scriptural themes along with the introducing of some basic leadership training techniques.

We did run into various difficulties during these sessions. Many of the older Christians found the theological orientation of the lectures hard to grasp; because of their busy work schedules, some were not able to attend all the sessions, which resulted in gaps in their training; and some failed to see the relevance of holding such meetings at all. One of our problems was our inability to ascertain with any degree of accuracy the wide variety of educational and faith-life experiences before beginning the training program. Differences in age was also a factor.

We started formation training days that would bring together the contact persons on a district-wide level. We began with the family associations in Zhu Lian Village. Our aim was to increase contacts and strengthen relationships among the various associations from the same district. It afforded an opportunity for the contact persons to share experiences and discuss in detail the situation of each block. We hoped that eventually all districts would be represented on the board of the Parish Council, thereby directly involving the district associations in parish planning and development. Part of the meeting time was also given over to topics that had to do with formation--education through the use of slide-shows, lectures and role-playing. These sessions were held in the Parish Centre.

While the district meetings did result in an increased sense of belonging for those who participated, attendance was not very good, and the general tone of the sessions was rather passive. Also the contact persons failed to take the initiative in facilitating communication within the small groups and thus failed to establish the kind of relationships needed for community cohesiveness.

We also held annual retreats for all the contact persons in the program. But again the pressure of work made it quite impossible for many to attend, and because of family circumstances, some had to bring along their smaller children. All this had an effect on the process itself.

In 1985 the parish printed a handbook to serve as a guideline for contact persons in preparing for the regular family gatherings of the associations. It included basic suggestions about order and content, pertinent scriptural passages and readings from the psalms for use during the prayer liturgy, and a catalogue of sound-slides covering a wide variety of subjects.

As the years passed, we continued to revise our original plan in light of our growing experience. We devised a more modified formation-training program for new contact persons, limiting ourselves to six topics, one for each of the bi-monthly sessions. They included: the Church, Christian identity after Vatican II, gospel spirituality, how to lead a meeting, and bible study methods. We also gave helpful hints on how to conduct family visitations. Our evaluations of the project continued to point out the need to deepen our Christian families' awareness of the importance of the associations and their participation in them. The presence of the pastor at association gatherings was also emphasized. Not to be overlooked, and perhaps key to success of the project, was the emphasis placed on the support and training of contact persons. They should be brought together on a regular basis in a variety of ways that they might share experiences and ideas. This also helps them to overcome any feelings of isolation in their work.

In reflecting on the Family Association project and its effects on the parish, I would say that despite the many difficulties encountered it has had a positive influence on our Christians. This is so particularly among our youth, who have the tendency to move away from the Church and into a society full of attractive alternatives. Many have come to realize through the associations that evangelization is not just the responsibility of the priest and a few zealous lay people, and that being Christian means more than just going to Mass on Sunday.

The Family Associations have not only helped many Catholics to return to the Church, but they have brought Christ's good news into the midst of the family and made Catholics more aware of their Christian mission. It is hoped that the Family Associations will become a training ground for all parish members, especially the newly baptized adults and the children, so that their faith may grow to maturity.

After many years of effort, the family Associations have successfully hurdled the first obstacle, which was to help our Christians to break down the barriers that prevented them from building closer community ties. They are no longer strangers to each other. They have now formed a community in which everyone knows everyone else. Having developed to this point, they now face a new challenge--how to raise the Family Associations to the next level, wherein they will become a community for nourishing a strong faith-life and their families places for training Christians to become more active witnesses for Christ. It is hoped that the Associations will help Christians to function as yeast, light and salt in the neighborhoods in which they live, whose main concerns will be their life in Christ and bearing witness to his gospel before others.

In closing I would like to offer some suggestions to any parish that wants to promote Catholic Family Associations:

- 1) The whole parish should have a common awareness of the need for such an Association. It should not be seen as necessary by a small group only. The priests in the parish must accept the project and give it their support. It should also receive the approval and cooperation of the Parish Council. Since this involves the development of the whole parish, the support and cooperation of every work unit in the parish is required. Without the above, the project will be in danger of being abandoned in mid-stream.

- 2) In the development of the Association all has not been smooth. This is due to the fact that the only bond of unity among the parish members at the present time is their faith. They do not yet see the need for organizing small Christian communities. In addition, their awareness of the faith is not at a high level and among them there are great differences in outlook. The doctrine which Catholics have studied in the past neglected the community and social aspects of the faith. Therefore, in promoting the Associations among them it is necessary to emphasize the communality of faith and daily life. This is to avoid the setting up of a small faith community, which has no connection with real life situations. When establishing these kinds of small communities, if one can start from recognized life needs and reflect on life from the

point of view of faith, then such small groups will be alive and active. For example, you can start by examining the common practical needs of young married couples, adolescents and senior citizens. Later you can gradually expand the level of participation to include other groups.

3) Sufficient preparatory work should be done. This includes promotion, antecedent formation of the parish organizers, a detailed working plan, and an on-going formation program.

4) It is also necessary to have a small team to supervise the work of other units, and to determine the work to be done each month and the frequency of each Association's meetings. This is necessary because an individual group often needs outside people or outside structures to stimulate it.

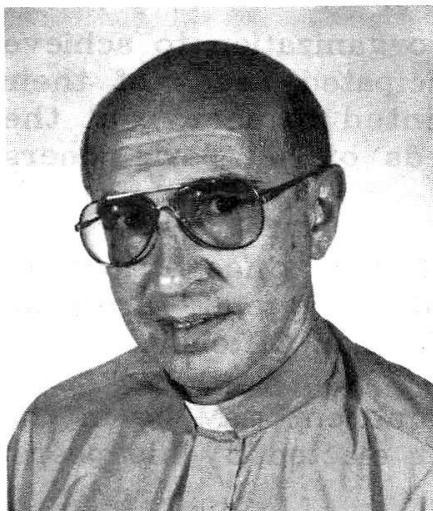
5) In order that the work can develop smoothly and systematically the establishment of an over-all planning committee is very important. The objectives of this committee are to draw up the plan, to decide on suitable times for its implementation, to organize the content of the formation courses, to gather materials and to seek appropriate methods. This committee's work is vital to the whole project.

6) The members of the parish's traditional societies who are not facilitators or contact persons in the estates, can best serve by actively participating in the Associations' meetings in their buildings where they can become yeast in the dough.

In summary, the following points cannot be neglected if the work of developing small Christian communities is to succeed: an awakening of consciousness, determination of motive and means, formation of leaders, group participation, and an organization that is structurally strong and sound.

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## Is the Parish Priest a Leader or a Manager or Both?



by John Cioppa

All priests are expected to be leaders; it is hoped that they can also be good managers. The commission to lead, to preach, to teach, to baptize and pastor comes from Jesus himself. He doesn't say much about running a good parish plant, supervising a school or paying salaries at the end of the month.