

Sixth Plenary Assembly: Background Paper

**THE FEDERATION OF ASIAN BISHOPS' CONFERENCES:
ORIENTATIONS, CHALLENGES AND IMPACT**

- I. The Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences (FABC): Orientations, Challenges and Impact, by Father Felix Wilfred
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PROLOGUE

In November 1970, Pope Paul VI joined the First Asian Meeting of Bishops, and it was then, with him, that the proposal to found a federation of bishops' conferences in Asia was first voiced formally and approved by the bishops. Twenty-five years later, in January, 1995, Pope John Paul II joins our Silver Jubilee Plenary Assembly – this is a grace of fellowship and partnership for the Church in Asia.

The theme of the Plenary Assembly is "Christian Discipleship in Asia Today: Service to Life." We have seen through the workings of our previous five plenary assemblies key themes — and key words — emerge to provide a continuing inspiration. When the bishops met in Taipei in 1974 their concern was the Church's task of evangelization in the world: the *societal* dimension. In Calcutta in 1978 they focused on prayer and interiority: the *intrapersonal* dimension. In Bangkok in 1982 the participants dealt with the Church as a gathering of disciples: the *communitarian* dimension. In Tokyo in 1986 they felt anew the apostolic vitality of the whole People of God, and in particular, of the laity: the *universal* dimension. In Bandung in 1990 the Church's mission was seen as a journey in faith, and a journey with every man and women of good will for the betterment of all: the dimension of *partnership*. How shall history describe the deliberations of the Sixth Plenary Assembly?

This background paper has been prepared for the Sixth Plenary Assembly of the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences (FABC), convening at Manila, Philippines, January 10-19, 1995. The theme of the Plenary Assembly is: "Christian Discipleship in Asia Today: Service to Life."

We join also the thousands of young people who will assemble in Manila for the World Youth Day, to enter into the vibrant expression of their Catholic Faith. We join with Cardinal Jaime Sin and the Catholics of Manila, and the faithful of the other Philippine dioceses, who are celebrating over 400 years of being witnesses in Asia to Christ's Gospel. We join Radio Veritas in their silver jubilee celebration, twenty-five years of beaming the Gospel throughout Asia and beyond. We join with those zealous faithful who are meeting in their first National Catholic Charismatic Congress. We reach out to all our brothers and sisters of good will.

I. The Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences (FABC): Orientations, Challenges and Impact

by

Father Felix Wilfred*

The establishment of the Federation of Asian Bishops Conferences (FABC) is certainly a landmark in the history of Christianity in Asia. As a transnational body it binds together the various local Churches of Asia, represented by their bishops, in fellowship and mutual cooperation. The members of this Federation are the bishops' conferences in South, South-east and East Asia. The member conferences of the Federation are Bangladesh, India, Indonesia, Japan, Korea, Laos-Cambodia, Malaysia-Singapore-Brunei, Myanmar, Pakistan, the Philippines, Sri Lanka, Taiwan, R.O.C., Thailand and Viet Nam. The ecclesiastical jurisdictions of Hong Kong, Macau, Mongolia and Nepal enjoy associate membership.

The origin of the Federation dates back to the historic gathering of 180 Asian bishops in Manila in November 1970, on the occasion of the visit of Pope Paul VI. Never before had Asian bishops come together to exchange experiences and to deliberate jointly on common questions and problems facing the continent. The meeting marked the beginning of a new consciousness of the many traditional links that united the various peoples of this region of the globe. In spite of the many differences, the peoples of this region of Asia have been bound together by a spiritual affinity and sharing of common moral and religious values; the cultural, religious and ethical influence of India and China can be easily identified in various parts of the region.

In addition to the traditional connections, the peoples of Asia experience today the same patterns of socio-political conditions and common chal-

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lenges and concerns. This is expressed at the political level through regional bodies such as SARC (South Asian Regional Cooperation) and ASEAN (Association of South East Asian Nations). The constitution of FABC, therefore, was not the creation of an ecclesial structure by simply grouping together Churches on a geographical basis, but an organizational expression of the many bonds — historical and contemporary — which exist among the peoples of South, Southeast and East Asia.

Before surveying the orientations set by FABC, the challenges to which it tries to respond and the impact it has had, a word must be said about the organizational and operational structures of this transnational body.

The Plenary Assembly, in which the presidents and delegates of the member conferences participate, is the highest body, and it generally convenes once in four years. The direction of the Federation is carried out by a Central Committee composed of the presidents of the member conferences. The Federation has no president; a Standing Committee of appointed members executes the directives and policies of the Federation, with the assistance of a secretary general and a central secretariat. At the operational level, the various activities of the Federation are carried on through the offices relating to various fields in the life of Church and society. Thus, there are offices for evangelization, laity, social communications, human development, ecumenical and interreligious affairs, and education and student chaplaincies. In addition to these six offices, there is the recently-constituted Theological Advisory Commission which is at the service of FABC and its various organs.

The Orientations of FABC

Ironically, foreignness is one thing which characterizes all the local Churches in Asia. This is not due simply to the fact that Christianity was introduced into the region from outside. Buddhism, for example, entered China, Japan, Thailand, etc., from the outside, yet Buddhism is not considered alien, whereas Christianity is. Nor is the foreignness of Christianity due to the fact that it professes a different faith. Asian peoples have always accepted and cherished diversity. The main reason why Christianity has been viewed as alien is because the local Churches in the countries of Asia have, by and large, kept themselves aloof from the mainstream of the life of the people, their history, struggles and dreams. They have failed to identify themselves with the people, although providing them with many services.

It is against this background that we should understand and appreciate the orientations of the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences since its inception.¹

If we were to summarize the orientation of FABC in one word, then it is *dialogue*. It is around this focal point that FABC's understanding of the Church and its mission revolves. Dialogue frees the Church from becoming a self-centered community and links it with the people in all areas and dimensions of their life. In the view of the bishops, dialogue in Asia needs to be pursued in three interrelated spheres in particular: Asian religions, Asian cultures, and the immense multitude of the poor.

Down through the centuries and millenia, this continent has been characterized by its quest for the Divine, and for lofty ethical ideals. All the world's major religions were born and nurtured in Asia. The world-view, the life and the institutions of Asian peoples are permeated by a remarkable religious and spiritual sensitivity. Well aware of this, FABC wishes the Church to reach out to the soul of the people by entering into *dialogue with the various religions* and thereby to become rooted in the soil. The bishops not only acknowledge the place religions hold in the lives of the people; they also view their role from a positive theological perspective. In their very first plenary assembly, the bishops stated: "In this dialogue we accept them (religions) as significant and positive elements in the economy of God's design of salvation. In them we recognize and respect profound spiritual and ethical meanings and values."²

This positive appreciation of other religions is not a conclusion drawn from some theological argumentation, but an attitude and conviction born out of a direct, experiential encounter with men and women who are followers of other religions. The dialogue with them will be a "dialogue of life,"³ which is not the same as comparison of doctrines. Instead of defining them, with reference to Christianity, as non-Christians, the bishops prefer to refer to them as "brothers and sisters of other faiths."

The various Bishops' Institutes for Interreligious Affairs (BIRA) have focused attention on dialogue with the followers of Islam, Buddhism and Hinduism. The foundation for interreligious dialogue today is being deepened through a series of twelve institutes on the "Theology of Dialogue."⁴

Closely connected to religion is *culture*, in the shaping of which religions have played an important role. "It (the Church) seeks to share in whatever truly belongs to the people: its meanings and its values, its aspirations, its thoughts and its language, its songs and its artistry."⁵ This comes out of the realization that the Church should be well integrated into the larger community of peoples, something which is impossible if it does not share their culture and way of life.

Another crucial area of the bishops' concern is *the immense masses of the poor* in this continent. More than half of humanity lives in Asia, and

80% of these people are poor, hungry and oppressed. If we take into account the fact that in this part of Asia over 50% of the population is below 15 years of age, we can see how those most struck by hunger and poverty are the innocent children. Over many centuries and decades the Church expressed its concern for the poor through various charitable works, and in recent decades through a spate of development projects. FABC wishes to go beyond this and become truly "a Church of the poor" in its proclamation, witness, life-style, planning, decision, etc. The preferential option for the poor is seen by FABC as "an act of faith" to be carried on in the teeth of opposition and conflicts. They are aware of the consequences of this option for themselves and for the local Churches.

Thus, opting to be with the poor involves risk of conflict with vested interests or "establishments," religious, economic, social, political. It also involves, for leaders of the Church especially, loss of security, and that not only material but spiritual. For it means taking the unfamiliar course of looking for guidelines of policy and action, not to readymade theological, legal and sociological systems developed principally in the West, but to a discernment of the historical process taking place among our own people.⁶

FABC, through its Office for Human Development, has taken the lead in conducting exposure programs for the bishops, so that they experience directly the appalling conditions of the various underprivileged groups — slum dwellers, workers, bonded laborers, political prisoners, etc. The various Bishops' Institutes of Social Action (BISA) of FABC manifest an increasing awareness of the socio-political realities, situations of injustice, violation of human dignity and rights. The bishops, going to the root causes of this situation, speak of the important place of social analysis in unmasking the systematic causes of poverty, exploitation and injustice. Such analysis should be integrated into the pastoral policies of the Church.

Three more points should be noted regarding dialogue with the poor. The bishops speak of pluralism in the response of the Church. In practice, this pluralism results from the "mediation of secular analysis and worldview,"⁷ and it should be considered as an enriching diversity, not a threat to unity. Further, while acknowledging the validity and importance of social analysis, the Federation is of the view that we need to draw inspiration from Asian resources, evolving alternative models of development that will vibrate with the Asian spirit and reflect its tradition. They would like to see that dialogue with the poor in terms of involvement for their human rights, liberation, etc., being intertwined with the characteristic spiritual and religious vision of Asian peoples. The holistic vision of reality, a sense of harmony,⁸ and especially contemplation, should accompany our dialogue and identification with the poor.⁹

Finally, in the vision of FABC, action for justice and involvement for the liberation of the poor are tasks to be accomplished ever more increasingly in collaboration with peoples of other religions. Thus, dialogue with other religions is not a meeting in a vacuum; religions converse with one another and converge in the process of liberating the oppressed and in enhancing the quality of life.

These three dialogues correspond to a threefold awakening among the Asian people. In fact, what we see today is the resurgence of the traditional religions, belying all predictions that they would, in the course of time, become weakened and wither away. The new vigor of life they manifest percolates through all aspects of life. Similarly, there is a heightened awareness of the cultural identity of the various peoples and nations in this continent, sometimes linked to patriotism as, for example, in Indonesia. Culture is not simply a question of customs and traditions; it is a matter of identity and legitimate selfhood of a people, for Asian peoples do not wish to live on borrowed identities, but on their own. Finally, we see in various parts of Asia the eruption of a new consciousness among the oppressed masses who claim, ever more pressingly, their right to live and die as humans, in spite of all the hurdles placed in their way.

It is the dynamic insertion of the Gospel and its power into these realities of Asia in a process of dialogue and transformation in vital continuity with its tradition that the bishops understand as evangelization.

To achieve ideals requires appropriate changes in the Christian communities at the structural and ministerial levels. The bishops have repeatedly recommended the creation of basic Christian communities, and they place much hope in these communities as they facilitate the daily practice of the Gospel, the expression of the various charisms of believers in the community, and participative leadership. It implies, among other things, recognition of the laity, with their diverse charisms, as underlined by the statements of the Bishops' Institutes for Lay Apostolate (BILA), and especially the statement of the IVth Plenary Assembly held in Tokyo in 1986 on the theme of laity. Similarly, FABC has called for new forms of ministries as warranted by the Asian situation.¹⁰

FABC and the Challenges of an Evolving Asian Context

But what are the challenges confronting Asia?¹¹ They can be grouped into four clusters. The first cluster of issues relates to the *socio-political sphere*. As in many parts of the Third World, in Asian countries too we have, to varying degrees, authoritarian regimes. The mass media are controlled by the authoritarian state apparatus; any voice of dissent is im-

mediately silenced, and any legitimate opposition quashed by the enforcement of the highly-questionable Internal Security Act (ISA). Recent events in Singapore and Malaysia provide ample illustration of this.

On the economic front, the development mode being pursued in Asia continues to widen the gap between the poor and the affluent. Production, instead of being geared to fulfilling the majority, is dictated by the demands of the market. Multinationals and agri-business hold sway over the economy to the benefit of foreign investors and local elites, with serious detriment to the survival of the poor. In this context, even peace is seen in terms of the stability necessary — no matter the human or social cost — for the production of goods and their marketing. And this *pax economica* is, in turn, guaranteed by the authoritarian regimes.

A second cluster of challenges concerns *national integration*. At the moment a grave crisis of fragmentation seems to be sweeping through most Asian countries. Composed as they are of many racial, linguistic and religious groups, the Asian nations have not yet found a cohesive stability whereby all groups can exist in harmony. Some countries, such as India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka and Malaysia, are plagued by endemic conflicts and bloody communal violence. In this volatile situation, what is remarkable is that religions, instead of being forces of unity, are spawning hatred, rivalry and division. Religious fundamentalism is springing up everywhere in Asia. Furthermore, politicians are using religion and religious symbols to their own ends. As a result of all this, a sense of insecurity is spreading among various groups, and secessionist tendencies are on the upsurge.

The *harmonizing of tradition and modernity* is yet another challenge in Asia. The survival of any culture depends upon its capacity to encounter new forces, as a result of which it continues to dialogue in dynamic continuity with the past and arrives at ever-new syntheses. As they encounter science, technology, industrialization — with their humanizing and dehumanizing aspects — Asian nations are experiencing an epoch-making mutation. Urbanization is growing rapidly in Asia. The sight of skyscrapers side by side with huts and shanties in Asian cities symbolizes what is going on in Asia. It represents not only the gulf between the rich and the poor, but also the position of Asia as it finds itself between tradition and modernity.

The last cluster of challenges derives from the *differences in ideological orientations*. The vision and the development of the future society implies the choice of an ideology with corresponding strategies. The two dominant ideologies — capitalism and socialism — are very much present in Asia; more correctly, Asia is torn between these two. In fact, 46% of the Asian population lives in socialist countries. Concrete experience of the inadequacies of either of these ideologies has given rise to the search for indige-

nous ideologies in some countries, e.g., Indonesia, where *pancasila* is the state ideology. Likewise, the Gandhian ideology of *sarvodaya* has been rather influential in India.

The challenges facing the national episcopal conferences of Asia and the Federation are immense. In Asia, Catholics represent barely 2.4% of the population, and less than 1% if we do not include the Philippines. As leaders of a tiny minority in Asia, how effectively can the bishops act? We should remember that though the Church is a small minority, its influence in society is much greater than its numbers warrant. The orientations of Church leaders, as a body, are bound to have a major impact on the life of the people, of society and of the nation. Although FABC has not taken a definite stand on the course of action to be taken, the orientations it has set seem to indicate the need for a strong political role on the part of Christians, a role which "flows from the secular implications of the Gospel and the Reign of God."¹² How the leaders of the Church should respond to the situation in Asia is a difficult question to answer. The Asian situation is quite specific, and the bishops have continuously to explore, along with the Christian communities, new ways of responding. Although there may not be much clarity about the approaches to be taken and the means to be adopted, one thing is becoming clear, namely, that the leaders of the Church, more than ever before, must search together, act together and bear collective responsibility. Only such joint deliberation and action can make any dent on the life of the nation and its future course. The voice of an individual bishop can easily be drowned, whereas that of a conference cannot be ignored by the general public and the powers that be. Although this may be applicable in every part of the world, in Asia, because of the minority status of Christians, united action and orientation among the bishops become particularly important.

Some of the member conferences of FABC have already taken bold steps in reaching common decisions, as a body, with regard to the challenges and situations in their countries. A well-known and widely acclaimed example was the collective stand, after much prayer and discernment, of the bishops of the Philippines in the revolution of February 1986.¹³ Another example is that of the collective stand of the bishops of West Malaysia in protesting against the arrest of people involved in work for justice and their detention without trial under the Internal Security Act. Similar situations are to be seen in South Korea.

Not every country in Asia is the Philippines. With a small minority of Christians in all other Asian countries, the situation there is different. Yet this member conference has helped other conferences to be aware of and sensitive to the situation in their countries and to respond courageously in their own way.

Before the creation of FABC it was thought natural that an Asian bishop should know many more bishops in faraway Western countries than in the neighboring countries of Asia. FABC has created horizontal communication between the bishops and the bishops' conferences; it has fostered a spirit of collegiality, communion and cooperation among them.

Through its various initiatives and programs, FABC has made the bishops aware of the problems in their own countries and regions. For long the Churches in Asia have been in the grip of a minority complex: the fear of losing their rights and anxiety about their survival. This has prevented them from adopting a broader orientation and acting courageously. FABC has, to some extent, helped overcome this minority complex. The various departments of the national conferences dealing with dialogue, social action, etc., have been more directly influenced by the orientations of the relevant FABC offices. Individual bishops and member conferences will readily agree that FABC has, in short, created a ferment of fresh thinking and paved the way for and contextual pastoral action in Asia.

The experience and reflections of FABC have had their influence even beyond the confines of Asia. Reviewing FABC's ten years of existence and activities in 1982, the bishops said: "We have also been enabled by our joint reflection and discernment, by pastoral options and policies we have together taken, to contribute to the ongoing reflection and discernment of Churches in other continents and to the thinking and policies of the central administrative offices of the Church."¹⁴ The actual impact of FABC on the local Churches, especially at the grass-root level, is difficult to assess.¹⁵ Similarly, it is also difficult to measure the influence the grass-root movement have had on the orientations of FABC. It cannot be denied that many insights, reflections and the practice of committed Christians — individuals and groups — have flowed imperceptibly into the deliberations of the Federation. In their turn, various groups committed to the people in proclaiming the Gospel feel encouraged and supported by the Federation and its inspiration.

These few thoughts on the influence of FABC would not be complete were we not to mention some of Federation's limitations also. The situation of society and the Church in Asian countries, despite many similarities, is still quite different, so that FABC can speak only in general terms and cannot address itself specifically to concrete situations. The individual bishops are overwhelmed by so many new ideas and insights generated by FABC that they sometimes feel helpless in putting them into practice. The resources at the disposal of the bishops in Asia are so limited that they feel

helpless in implementing the grand vision of FABC.

FOOTNOTES:

1. The various statements and documents of FABC pertaining to the period 1970-1986 have been collected and published in two volumes: *For All the Peoples of Asia*, vols. 1 & 2, Manila, IMC Publications, 1984-1987. (Editor's Note: A second edition extending the collection of documentation to 1991 was published in a single volume).
2. Plenary Assembly I, Taipei, nos. 14 & 15.
3. *Ibid.*, no. 20.
4. Cf. the mimeographed report of Archbishop Angelo Fernando at the FABC Central Committee Meeting, Hong Kong, 6-9 June 1988.
5. Plenary Assembly I, no. 12.
6. *Message and Resolution of Asian Bishops' Meeting*, Manila, 29 November 1970, no. 19; Bishops' Institute for Social Action (BISA) I, no. 7. Cf. also BISA IV, nos. 9 ff.
7. BISA II, no. 10.
8. "Theology of Harmony" was the theme of the BIRA meetings held in Sukabumi, Indonesia, 24-30 June and 1-7 July 1988.
9. BISA VII, no. 11.
10. Asian Colloquium on Ministries in the Church, Hong Kong, March 1977, nos. 58 ff.
12. Plenary Assembly IV, no. 3.1.2.
13. Cf. *The Philippine Revolution and the Involvement of the Church*, Manila, UST Social Research, University of Santo Tomas, 1986.
14. Plenary Assembly III, Bangkok, 20-27 October 1982, nos. 3.4.
15. Editor's Note: In 1994 FABC commissioned Manila's Asian Social Institute to make an impact study with FABC's conferences' membership.

II. FABC Sharings. A Collection by the Union of Catholic News (UCAN)*

1. One Bishop Shares His Personal Experience with FABC by Archbishop Joseph Ti-Kang of Taipei, Taiwan, R.O.C.

For the 25th anniversary of the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences, I am happy to share briefly about my relationship with the Federation and especially about my role with its Office of Laity (OL).

After I was ordained bishop of Chiayi, Taiwan, in 1975, I participated in the work of the FABC Office for Evangelization, which was under the leadership of Bishop Patrick D'Souza of Varanasi, India.

In 1981, I was named convener of a committee to explore setting up an office for laity. The office was set up as an experiment in 1982, and I became chairman. I continued in that capacity from 1986, when the OL was officially established, until 1992.

I have benefited considerably from the FABC's many organizations, notably its offices for human development, ecumenical and interreligious affairs, social communications, evangelization, and education and student chaplaincies.

These offices helped me be sensitive and more attentive to social service work in my diocese and country and to understand and appreciate the importance of the mass media in the field of evangelization.

They also helped me see the importance of developing sincere and profound relationships with other religions and learning more about evangelization.

Working at the OL for 12 years was for me a special grace from God.

It auspiciously provided me the opportunity to serve the Church in Asia, in promoting the role and formation of the laity and in enhancing their participation in the mission of the Church.

*These "sharings" were generated by the Union of Catholic Asian News (UCAN) and originally published as reports for the UCAN Dispatch. UCAN has graciously permitted them to be reprinted by FABC Papers.

We held the Bishops' Institute for Lay Apostolate (BILA) on several occasions. The BILAs presented many models for the formation of laity and made communication links for exchange between the laity of different Churches.

Consequently, organizations of the lay apostolate are on the increase and the Churches in Asia have established or are establishing commissions for the laity.

Laity in East Asia started exchange meetings in 1986 and have held one every three years. South and Southeast Asian laity have recently decided to convene similar meetings.

In 1984, the Pontifical Council for the Laity organized a meeting for Asian laypeople. A decade later, Asian laity under the sponsorship of the FABC-OL together with the National Lay Apostolate Council of Korea convened the First Asian Laity Meeting.

The OL's service has extended to the universal Church through its contacts with international lay groups and cooperation with activities of the Pontifical Council for the Laity.

Outside the OL, I found I benefited greatly from the FABC's colloquiums on Basic Christian Communities and bishops' leadership seminars.

Lastly, I really appreciate FABC's organizational structure, model and personnel system. May God bless the FABC abundantly!

2. FABC Accomplishments Have Positive and Negative Aspects

by Bishop Stephen Fumio Hamao of Yokohama, Japan

Rather than attempt the very difficult task of evaluating the successes and failures of the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences, I prefer to express positive and negative aspects of what FABC has accomplished since its founding 25 years ago.

The positive aspects of what FABC has accomplished abound.

First of all, through FABC activities, all the bishops of Asia have drawn together into a warm fellowship of close cooperation. Previous to FABC, we were accustomed to contact with one another within our own countries or with the Holy See, but not with our fellow bishops in other Asian countries.

Especially helpful in promoting mutual contacts are the regional meet-

ings.

The FABC's general assemblies, five held between 1974 and 1990, the standing committee meetings, the activities of all the FABC offices and the joint planning meetings of those offices are great helps in coordinating activities in the various fields in which the Church is engaged in the Asian level.

I would like to especially mention the exposure programs of the Bishops' Institute for Social Action (BISA), organized by the FABC Office of Human Development. They have proved very beneficial in making bishops conscious of the Church's involvement in the lives of the Asian people.

At BISA II, I personally learned about the social dimension of the Gospel, and at BISA VI in Korea, I was able to realize the importance of the Church's social involvement in the lives of people, especially of the poor.

The final document of the First Plenary Assembly (Taipei 1974) declared the Asian Church as the "Church of the Youth." Assemblies that followed declared the Church of Asia as the "Church of the Poor."

These declarations clearly state the characteristics of the Asian Church and determine the path which the future Church intends to travel.

The last Plenary Assembly (Bandung, Indonesia, 1990) focused on the following issues: that the Church of Asia should be in dialogue with the other major religions of Asia; that the Gospel must be incarnated into local cultures; and that there must be a preferential option for the poor.

Moreover, as an element of the Asian Church's new evangelization, the social teachings of the Church must be given stronger emphasis, Bandung said.

In the Asian countries where Buddhism and Hinduism strongly influence the people, the theology of the Church has given increasingly strong emphasis to the virtues of harmony and compassion.

Among the negative aspects of the FABC, the following can be listed:

According to its statutes, the FABC touches only the national bishops' conferences and does not directly reach the clergy, Religious and laypeople.

There is a lack of mutual contact among the priests, Religious and laypeople within FABC, though meetings occur outside the FABC organism.

Due to lack of communication, it seems that the Holy See and the Church of Europe know almost nothing about the Church of Asia, the activities of FABC, or the documents it issues.

At the present time, we have a South Asia region, a Southeast Asia region and an East Asia region in FABC, but no region to include Siberia and far eastern Russia. Is it possible to establish another region, for example, a North or Northeast Asia region, in FABC?

Until the present, FABC has not attempted to make contact with the Churches of mainland China, North Korea and the countries of Indochina.

I think that we should be more conscious of the Catholics who live in those areas that have no contact with us. FABC should open a special office for these Churches that suffer under socialist or communist regimes.

Preparing to celebrate the 25th anniversary of the foundation of FABC in 1995, we hope that the Church of Asia may become more Asian-oriented and less European-oriented and that the Asian Church will enrich the universal Church with the new theologies and new evangelization it has developed.

(Editor's Note: Bishop Hamao is chairperson of the FABC Office of Human Development.)

3. Strengths and A Few Weaknesses Emerge in FABC's 25 Years by Father Bonnie Mendes of Faisalabad, Pakistan

Today it is obvious that the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences is one of the strengths of the Asian Church. It is hard to believe that 25 years ago some people opposed such a federation.

When Cardinal Valerian Gracias of Bombay, India, returned from sessions of the Second Vatican Council in 1964, he complained that the Asian bishops did not know each other. They had better contacts with the West than among themselves, he said. Thanks to FABC, and efforts of pioneers such as Colombo's late Cardinal Thomas Cooray, that has changed substantially.

FABC meets in general assembly every four years. In between, it operates through commissions or offices of human development, social communications, evangelization, ecumenism and interreligious affairs, education and student chaplaincy, and laity.

Over the years there have been many programs. Many Asian churchmen and women have had opportunities to learn from one another. Others writing for UCA News on the FABC's 25th anniversary have noted that the Bishops' Institute for Social Action (BISA) series conducted by the Office of Human Development (OHD) has perhaps been the most influential and long-lasting in its effects.

OHD's contribution, especially when FABC was an infant, was crucial. BISA not only introduced bishops to changing realities in Asia and the need for Asian theology; it also introduced a new methodology of exposure and immersion with the poor, making them teachers of bishops and other Church leaders.

Writing from the distance, though, I wonder if the OHD has lost some of its original enthusiasm when it was under the leadership of Bishops Julio Labayen of Infanta, the Philippines, Michael Bunluen Mansap of Ubon Ratchathani, Thailand, and Archbishop Anthony Soter Fernandez of Kuala Lumpur. Perhaps not having a full-time executive secretary is affecting its performance.

The Office of Laity (OL), established a few years ago, is an active office, bringing to FABC the enthusiasm a newborn brings to a family. On September 5-8, 1994, OL organized in South Korea the First Asian Laity Meeting.

Another strength of FABC is its statements. They reflect the hard work that goes into organizing good programs. The statements make wonderful reading; however, a weakness is that activists are questioned when they try to put those very statements into practice. Leaders who agree enthusiastically with statements at meetings find it hard to allow their personnel to act on them.

What have emerged right from the beginning of FABC have been efforts to build a Church in Asia that is inculturated and in constant dialogue with the poor and other faiths. It is a new way of being Church.

It is a Church trying to build communities from the base and make these communities models of Gospel living. It is a small-minority Church growing in confidence to witness to the Good News in the changing environment of Asia.

For this purpose, FABC has to organize good programs, and bishops and religious congregations have to find personnel from their ranks capable of doing Asian work well. However, many leaders fail to see this need and are reluctant to share their resources with the rest of the Asian Church.

This small-mindedness is affecting the quality of the programs being held.

Another weakness has been the reluctance over the years to emphasize Asian thinking at international forums. Before, there was not even an effort to meet and plan what to say and do at international events. That has changed.

More conscious of our Asian identity and aware we have something special to offer, we are telling what we have learned from theology born in a completely different milieu. Articulating that special message is not easy, but we try.

We still have a tendency to be inward-looking; but when one lives in a hostile environment, it is hard not to fall back on one's ghetto community.

While weaknesses exist, FABC's jubilee calls for celebration because the Asian Church has grown well. Building communities in the context of other faiths is a stiff challenge, but the Asian Church is meeting the challenge.

Countless examples of heroism illustrate this: bishops marching for peace and justice, bishops leading hunger strikes, cardinals speaking for workers, Religious and laypeople sacrificing their lives, The Asian Church is salt of the earth, light of the world and leaven in the pluralistic context of Asia.

(Editor's Note: Pakistani Father Bonnie Mendes was OHD executive secretary for four years.)

4. A Founding Father Reflects on FABC's Origin and Development by Cardinal Stephen Kim Sou Hwan of Seoul, Korea

In November 1970, Pope Paul VI visited Manila and, during that event, the Asian bishops met, with the hopes that a permanent organization could be set up. That proposal was put on the agenda for the general assembly in the name of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of Korea.

Those who favored such a conference feared that after it was proposed, nice comments would follow, the meeting would adjourn and the matter would end.

I thought then that for the future and the evangelization of Asia in a rapidly developing world its bishops' conferences needed cooperation among

themselves.

Such mutual help would not only contribute greatly to the development of the Catholic Church in Asia, but it would have the potential of making a major contribution to human development, advancing justice and creating a human-being centered society, all of which were badly needed in many countries.

After the daily assemblies in Manila in 1970, bishops strongly interested in such a permanent bishops' organization met nightly at the Jesuit Xavier House.

One day during the assembly, Archbishop Sergio Pignedoli, then secretary of the Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples, approached me to say he knew of our plan and asked that we formally present it, as he favored it.

If the bishops agreed on the proposal, he said, he would give it positive support. For me, those words were like a million reinforcements. So, gathering courage, I made the proposal at a meeting attended by Pope Paul.

In the ensuing discussion, Bishop Francis Hsu of Hong Kong, who had attended the meetings at Xavier House and spoke fluent English, explained the proposal.

After sharing opinions, a resolution was passed at the general assembly to establish a permanent organization. The nature and title of the organization were not decided, but Bishop Hsu was asked to convene a meeting of national conference presidents before the end of March 1971 to begin drafting a plan.

At that meeting, I was named president of a follow-up committee to do the drafting with Cardinal Justinus Darmojuwono of Indonesia, Archbishop Teopisto Alberto of the Philippines, Bishop Patrick D'Souza of India, and Bishop Francis Hsu.

Through Cardinal Edward Cassidy, then an archbishop and apostolic pronuncio in Taipei, we heard that some in the Roman Curia expressed critical or negative comments about establishing a permanent Asian bishops' organization.

We were unsure how to proceed. There seemed nothing more to do but to go home, though we knew to do so would be a disaster for the Church. Fortunately, Cardinal Cassidy empathized with us and promised to repre-

sent us in Rome.

The work continued with many ups and downs. A draft was sent to national conferences in November 1971, and a second draft was approved by the presidents of 12 Asian bishops' conferences in Hong Kong in August 1972.

Finally, the cardinals of Asia — Valerian Gracias of Bombay, Thomas Cooray of Colombo, Justinus Darmojuwono of Semarang and I — were received by Pope Paul in Rome. He liked the idea we presented, but was concerned it might develop into something like CELAM (the conference of Latin American bishops).

We assured him it would not become a structure with binding power. We promised him it would be a voluntary group, for fraternal solidarity, for the evangelization of Asia in pastoral areas, especially social justice and the advancement of human development and peace. Pope Paul approved the statutes of the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences on November 16, 1972.

FABC, conceived in difficulties, has maintained its original purpose by evangelizing Asia through its offices for human development and for the laity and in helping develop theology, liturgy and inculturation.

The bishops of Asia, as a federation and as individuals, have clearly come to the awareness of their mutual brotherhood, and I believe, through uniting their strength, they will push forward with spreading of the Gospel in Asia.

Finally, I would like to add that, although many Asian bishops are actively involved in FABC, some seem to lack positive interest in the organization.

While acknowledging progress, I still feel a need for FABC vision to be better known to more priests, Religious and laity. Many people are unaware of FABC and its objectives. Mass media and pamphlets and books, translated into local languages, should be employed so enlightenment can be realized.

Such efforts, I am convinced, will lead to even greater sharing by the faithful in spreading the Gospel as we move toward Evangelization 2000.

5. FABC Impact Depends on Interchurch Sharing, Participation

by Jesuit Father Robert Hardawiryana of Yogyakarta, Indonesia

On the threshold of the third millennium and, while preparations are underway for the sixth plenary assembly and the 25th jubilee of the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences, it is good to have a quick glance at what FABC so far has meant for Churches in Asia.

The statement of the First FABC Plenary (Taipei 1974) on "Evangelization in Asia Today" serves even now as the overall framework for mission and pastoral objectives and imperatives. It has been affirmed and developed over the years.

FABC has helped Asian Churches to realize that evangelization amid multireligious and multicultural Asian societies — with the proclamation of Jesus Christ as its center and primary element — must be missionary dialogue.

The threefold dialogue, with cultures, with religions and with the poor, presents us with the opportunity of witnessing to the Gospel of salvation.

The various FABC offices have carried out bishops' institutes related to various fields in the life of the Church and society and helped participants become more deeply aware of existing pastoral concerns, and search for new ways of coping with problems at national levels.

In particular, the institutes have helped bishops strive to build the "Church of the poor," a "servant Church" deeply concerned with the sufferings of millions in Asia. They have come to consider a service to justice and peace and efforts for human development as a constituent of evangelization itself.

FABC has shown bishops the many challenges to evangelization and offered new perspectives in making decisions on pastoral policies and options in their dioceses, in solidarity with all the faithful, down to the grassroots.

Growing in awareness of the Church as a "Communion of Communities," bishops see that for authentic inculturation of faith, local Churches need continual mutual exchange of "the unfathomable riches of Christ" found in the Churches.

Consequently, FABC has enhanced inculturation in Asian Churches through dialogue with cultures, religions and religious traditions, and with the poor.

The FABC's Theological Advisory Commission (TAC), established in 1986, has little-by-little stimulated theological reflection on interreligious dialogue, on inculturation and the local Church and on Church and politics in Asia.

Two years ago, TAC began searching for a new paradigm of theological reflection more in accordance with the cosmic world vision of Asian peoples.

TAC reviewed its work with an Asian Theological Colloquium in Thailand, April 1994, under the theme "Being Church in Asia Toward the Year 2000."

Still, FABC has limitations. First of all, despite many similarities, Asian societies are heterogeneous. So FABC can speak only in general terms and is not able to address itself specifically to concrete situations.

Guidelines in FABC documents need to be further articulated and made more operational by its member conferences, and even by individual dioceses.

It is difficult to assess to what extent new pastoral insights and updated orientations gained from FABC or FABC-sponsored meetings have been passed on to the faithful at large, particularly to clergy and Religious.

No evaluation has as yet been done on how far recommendations presented by FABC meetings have influenced pastoral planning at the episcopal conference and diocesan levels and, even further, at the level of individual parishes.

Renewal of Church life largely depends on openness to interchurch sharing, people's sense of coresponsibility, Church leaders' creativity and local Church structures and mechanisms bringing about participatory leadership.

Many indeed are the reasons for being grateful to the Lord for the numerous blessings he has bestowed on our Churches through FABC.

Its achievements to date already provide us with expectations for the future in meeting the challenges of a continent in continuous cultural, religious, economic, social and political transformation. Yet, much remains to be done.

Highly important at present is not only being alert to "the signs of the

times," and discerning in faith hitherto hidden opportunities for the growth of our Churches, but also being aware of the potentialities and the riches that are found among out brothers and sisters in Christian faith.

From now on, we are to develop them in view of ever-greater co-responsibility and participation in the evangelizing mission of our Christian communities.

(Editor's Note: Indonesian Father Robert Hardawiryana is a member of TAC.)

6. Theologian Asks More from FABC As New Century Approaches by Oblate Father Tissa Balasuriya of Colombo, Sri Lanka

While it is difficult to evaluate the impact of the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences on Asian Churches, FABC documents show the search among bishops for orientations to meet problems that face the Church in Asia. Generally, FABC seeks practical guidelines.

Most attention goes to the interreligious dimension of Asia and consequent challenges to Christian life and thought. FABC documents present an overall openness to the spiritual and cultural values of world and cosmic religions.

They are keen that Catholics appreciate their Asian heritage and regularly advocate that the Church inculturate Asian cultures.

Theologically, while insisting that Jesus is the ultimate revelation of God in human form, and the Church is the path to fulfilling God's plan for human salvation, the documents hold that other religions are also salvific.

The tricky issue of reconciling Jesus' uniqueness with the claims of other religions and the need of Christian mission are not discussed to finality.

Most of the documents remain within Vatican-indicated parameters.

The Bishops' Institute for Social Action of the FABC Office of Human Development has had much impact on the thinking of bishops, allowing more consciousness of political freedom and the authoritarianism of governments.

The poverty of the Asian masses and the need for justice in development are constant priorities in the documents. However, they lack an adequate systematic analysis of the situation in Asian countries, the continent and the world.

FABC is weak on such historical analysis. Its documents do not explore the forces that make for inequality in the world: land distribution, the nation-state system, the International Monetary Fund and World Bank, transnational corporations and the globalization of economics and finance.

There is little or no insistence on the collective human rights of Asia's people who form half of the human race and are oppressed by the world order set up by the global Western domination of the past 500 years.

There is no discussion of reforming economies within countries and in the world, and no study of the growth of the Asian giants, such as Japan and newly-industrialized countries, often at the expense of the poor. The consequences of development on women and families are not yet a major concern of FABC.

Relations with other Asian Christians also seem to have low priority.

FABC supports local Church and base communities, but throughout the documents is implicit insistence on hierarchical and vertical relationships.

These documents remain at the level of the participants, because the leaders did not generally have a follow-up system for communication with local groups.

FABC documents do not emanate from the base of the local Churches and do not reach them after their drafting. Hence, FABC is not a motivating force in Asian Churches, though it very much influences individual bishops and others.

A touchstone of FABC's Asianness and originality is in dealing with conflict between the Vatican and Catholics in China who want to be Chinese as well as Catholic in the context of the Chinese Revolution of 1949, especially the Chinese wanting to choose their own bishops as in the early Church.

FABC has done little to reconcile the Vatican and this Church in China. More could have been done if the Asian bishops had their own line of realistic thinking in keeping with Church history. This challenges FABC seriously.

But FABC is not meant to be a strong conference. It is a federation with each member retaining rights and direct relationship with the Vatican.

As one who in the late 1960s was perhaps the first to write on the need

for an Asian bishops conference, I am glad the FABC has made much progress.

I hope that it will give much more leadership in the coming decades, when the Catholic Church will become very much a Church of the South, a Church of women and laity and a Church of new ministries. Profound changes are coming.

FABC can give leadership in new ways of being Church in Asia, remaining faithful to the core of Jesus' message and orienting us to new situations, new realities and needs. FABC could sponsor an Asian Council in the coming years to help Asian Churches to meet these challenges.

(Editor's Note: Father Balasuriya, head of the Centre for Society and Religion in Colombo, wrote this for UCA News before Pope John Paul II revealed plans to prepare for the Jubilee Year 2000, including a possible Asian synod.)

7. FABC Must Continue Programs that Make the Church Human

by Sister Filo Hirota, of Mexico City, Mexico

I have been in Central America for five years. Before that I worked in the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences' Office of Human Development (OHD).

When I tell people here of my experiences in OHD, especially the Bishops' Institutes for Social Action (BISA), I get very strong positive reactions mixed with surprise and admiration.

"Incredible!", they say. "Your office organized a conscientizing program for bishops? Your bishops accepted taking an immersion experience with the poor? Could a bishop be willing to share his personal experience?"

I have come to realize the unique value of BISA in Asia. Even a bishop has to have a personal learning experience with the poor, for how can you have a dialogue if you never sit down to listen to your partner?

Here are things I remember hearing in BISA immersion sharing groups:

- From an American missionary bishop: I have been in my diocese 13 years and never realized squatters lived just 300 meters from my house. My host family was Protestant. The August heat was unbearable. After three days living in their small house, the family went out, leaving me alone so that I could wash.

- A bishop from South Asia: I went to live with a poor Muslim family who welcomed me wholeheartedly. They were very happy to have a Catholic bishop in their house and told me that their leaders had never come to stay with them.

- A bishop from East Asia: Arriving in a small farming village, I realized I left my wallet in my car. For the first time in many years I had to experience not having even a small coin with me. I felt insecure and uncomfortable. The experience of "being poor" even for a few days helped me have a new insight.

- The bishops talked about living with the poor, sleeping in their houses, eating their food, playing with their children and listening to their stories.

Though analysis of problems and root causes is important, I think, the simple sharing of what bishops saw and felt was also extremely important.

In many FABC meetings, seminars and consultations, women were a small minority. Often, I found myself alone among bishops and priests, and I felt I was invisible to them. Luckily, some "normal human beings" would always sit with me at dinner and not be scandalized if I took a glass of cold beer.

I had a strange experience at a Mass concelebrated by a dozen bishops and priests in a seminar house in southern India. At Communion, I realized the chief celebrant shared a big host with his brothers but gave me a small one.

If a small group of women tried to get together at any meeting or seminar, our brother participants felt at least uncomfortable, if not antagonistic. The male Church, though, needed to witness and listen to women's voices.

I believe this ongoing dialogue between the male Church and women, who are also Church, is advancing. The FABC plenary in Tokyo (1986) declared that "woman also is a person." In 1993, a women's consultation was held to urge FABC to sponsor an Asian conference on gender issues and feminist theology.

I hope that these ongoing efforts will contribute to making the face of the Church in Asia more human and deeply liberating. Sometimes, good comes from seemingly negative experiences.

At a consultation in Tokyo in 1978, the OHD was asked to collaborate with the Christian Council of Asia to organize women working for transnational corporations and to set up the Hotline to protect human rights.

The OHD "interreligious" programs for women workers and the Hotline became thorny issues, and the two programs could not get episcopal blessings. But from the efforts, a grass-roots networking developed in quite a significant way, involving justice and peace, human rights and labor organizations.

I firmly believe that the Church in Asia has much to contribute if she continues to live her own reality in a very conscious way.

The first FABC plenary (Taipei 1974) offered areas of dialogue indispensable to the life and mission of the Asian Churches. It spoke of dialogue with cultures, religions and the poor.

A small minority in an ocean of misery, the Churches in Asia have no other choice but to "journey with peoples of other faiths towards fuller life."

(Editor's Note: Sister Hirota, a Japanese Religious and one-time member of the OHD, is on a mission assignment in Mexico.)

8. FABC has Strongly Impacted the Bangladesh Church by Holy Cross Father Richard Timm of Dhaka, Bangladesh

The strong social involvement of the Bangladesh Church and its emergence into the wider Asian Church context can be traced back to the birth of the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences.

A great cyclone and tidal surge along the coastline of the Bay of Bengal in November 1970 killed more than 250,000 people and left millions homeless.

Pope Paul VI stopped in Dhaka on his way to Manila to inaugurate FABC and gave US\$100,000 each to the government and the Church for relief work.

The Church turned a dormant, one-man Caritas Bangladesh into its effective functional arm for social services. Caritas now runs over 40 projects in the country, spending annually over 300 million taka (US\$7.5 million).

The FABC call to social action and the development of a spirituality for social action evoked the greatest response from the Church of Bangladesh.

One of the earliest services of FABC, and possibly the most influential and long-lasting in its effects, was the Bishops' Institute of Social Action (BISA) series, conducted by the Office of Human Development (OHD).

These were originally designed for bishops and Caritas directors to promote awareness of social reality through the indispensable tool of social analysis.

At BISA III in Kuala Lumpur in 1975, one bishop and a few Church social workers from Bangladesh were introduced to a different way of looking at reality — through the eyes of the poor.

No longer was charity the principal focus for helping the poor but transformation of unjust social structures that perpetuate their poverty.

Social analysis of the "signs of the times" was the basis for the Pastoral Plan of the Church in Bangladesh, promulgated on Pentecost Sunday in 1985.

A second valuable effect of the BISAs was the method of exposure-immersion to the harsh conditions of the life of the poor.

These two features of BISA methodology became standard ingredients for Church social activities here since then, especially through the work of Caritas and the Bangladesh Bishops' Commission for Justice and Peace.

Caritas has become a South Asian leader in mobilizing the poor for social awareness, self-reliant development and social justice.

The option for the poor came to be seen in the context of the equal value and human rights of all as children of God and brothers and sisters of Jesus.

The Church's attention is thus directed not exclusively, or even basically, toward the spiritual realm, but also toward the world of practical decisions that so often turn the lives of the majority poor into a living nightmare.

The small size of the Church in Bangladesh does not exclude it from a prophetic mission to the poor, which necessitates some political involvement.

Several OHD-sponsored conferences made the option for the poor universally understood and accepted in the Asian Church. These meetings gave rise to the preferred way of helping the poor — organizing for self-

reliant development.

The OHD was also behind the Hotline for Asia and Oceania, established in 1980.

The Hotline gave a strong impetus to the growing, though reluctant, acceptance of the more difficult goal of involving the Church in social-justice action.

The other main local influence, of FABC came through the participation of all the Bangladesh bishops in various FABC committees and sub-committees.

This brought the Church in Bangladesh, a country formerly isolated and of little strategic or economic significance, into the Asian Church mainstream.

Preparations for Evangelization 2000 and for the October bishops' synod on consecrated life have profited by the FABC publications on evangelization.

New ways of mission and of being Church have been widely discussed.

Given the small size of the Christian community here, the need for dialogue with other religions has been one of the clearest calls of FABC.

Finally, the intellectual stimulation of the many excellent FABC studies on various subjects is an incalculable benefit that can never be fully weighed.

The concept of the local Church, for example, has attracted a great deal of interest at all levels among bishops, clergy, Religious and laity.

9. India Church Looks Back for 25th Anniversary of FABC by Archbishop Alphonsus Mathias of Bangalore, India

The Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences was unheard of in the early years of my episcopate, as it was just coming into existence.

For me and, I suppose, other Indian bishops of the late 1960s and early 1970s, the Church meant the Church in India, Europe or the Americas, as our orientation and economic dependence established our church-view.

During the Second Vatican Council we moved into the Western hemisphere year after year for four years, 1962 to 1965; therefore the axis of

the Church necessarily and perceptively became Western.

Frequent contact with the West made the Church in the East remote. We were ignorant of or ignored realities of the Church in Southeast and East Asia. Even our relations restricted to Churches in South Asia remained very tenuous.

Then Pope Paul VI's visit to Manila shifted the axis to the Asian Church by unifying Council contacts and forming FABC. Churches became conscious of each other's existence, functioning, problems, possibilities, needs and wants.

We are now called to meet common challenges unitedly, pooling our resources, energies and vision of the Church in Asia, a Copernican revolution in the outlook of the Indian Church with regard to the other Churches in Asia.

Changes effected by FABC in the life of the Church in India defy quantification. However, some features are clearer than others, prompting me to think changes have been more than superficial.

Besides changing our outlook, FABC brought us into closer cooperation with other Churches in theological reflection, Church personal formation, mass-media networking and raising bishops' consciousness of social justice in Asia.

FABC-organized seminars helped bishops grow in friendship and cooperation in the mission of the Church in Asia. For those interacting as commission and committee office-holders, the Asian Church has its own identity and mission.

Among the more visible FABC impacts on the Church in India, the Office of Social Communications revitalized Radio Veritas Asia, focusing on India's vastness and organizing capability in this missionary effort.

We were pushed harder and faster to set up a communication center network to air Tamil and Telugu languages at the outset, and later on Bengali and Hindi. So, much of the subcontinent was covered by Radio Veritas Asia transmission.

Today these languages are among the foremost in effectivity and audience profile. Thus we have had a happy collaboration with Radio Veritas Asia for the past two decades in evangelizing the peoples of our nation.

Giving the Good News to Indians via Radio Veritas Asia assumes great-

er importance because the Church has no access to the national radio network state monopoly.

Another outstanding FABC contribution to the Church in India is leadership training for bishops, in which many participate, due to FABC.

FABC provided us with a new thrust in our evangelical effort to dialogue with other religions. FABC meetings enriched the Church in India and shared our 2000-year experience of Christian living in a multireligious situation.

Being the oldest Church in Asia, we have much to share with other Churches, a sharing facilitated by FABC. We also have much to learn from the dynamism of new Churches in Asia, such as in Korea, Indonesia and Taiwan.

FABC cross-fertilized Christian thinking, living and mission in Asia.

Pope John Paul II's apostolic exhortation, "I Will Give You Pastors" (*Pastores Dabo Vobis*), issued after the 1990 Synod of Bishops on priestly formation, insists on priests' and bishops' ongoing formation and education. FABC literature updates bishops on theological and pastoral issues.

Such theological and sociological input, along with material available in our country, has enriched the ecclesial outlook of theologians and bishops of the Church in India in our own pastoral planning.

India's Church has grown in the universality and solidarity urged by the Second Vatican Council. We can talk of a Church in Europe, Africa, the Americas and, with equal confidence, of a Church in Asia, thanks to FABC.

Each constituent Church, including the Church in India, is richer for it.

(Editor's Note: Archbishop Mathias is immediate past president of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of India, and past convenor of the FABC Standing Committee).

10. FABC Urges Attention, Reflection and Action by Bishop Martin D. Situmorang of Padang, Indonesia

The impact of the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences on the Church in Indonesia is hard to assess or measure in figures and concrete activities.

Documents from FABC plenary assemblies, seminars and workshops, and from FABC offices, commissions and institutes, are all kept at the secretariat of Konperensi Waligereja Indonesia (Bishops' Conference of Indonesia).

Some of these documents have been translated into Bahasa Indonesia (the national language). The FABC secretariat can take credit for that.

FABC has been a sign of the living union and oneness of the Church in Asia. It has created beautiful occasions for close contacts, information, sharing, renewal and refreshing of minds and hearts, mostly among the Asian bishops but also among our national Churches and individual dioceses.

It encourages Indonesian bishops to remain attentive, reflective, present, and actively involved in the joys and sorrows, challenges and problems of our people. The Indonesian Church finds FABC a well-organized channel to learn from and communicate its life and mission to other bishops' conferences.

The FABC Effective Leadership Program has been an excellent occasion for bishops' formation, but in fact, all FABC programs are "bishops' formation."

Some of the most precious work coming from FABC are its recommendations on Basic Christian Communities, lay participation, spirituality of social action, priestly formation and dialogue of life with people of other faiths.

Bishops and national conference staffs benefit directly from FABC meetings and seminars. But through these people, the reflections and deliberations made during FABC sessions will help the whole Church in Asia be inculturated, deeply rooted and actively contributing to the development of our peoples.

FABC gives fraternal, moral and spiritual support as well as enrichment and enlightenment to the Churches in Asia. It encourages research, reflection, renewal and true conversion. It challenges the Church to grow and be alive.

The Church of Indonesia has also opened wider through its sharing and receiving from FABC. The Federation strengthens the Indonesian hierarchy's commitment to encourage the laity to play their proper role, to respect their autonomy and particular place, especially in the secular world.

It also encourages learning new ways of living and proclaiming the Good News through dialogue with modern society and our brothers and sisters of other religions. FABC does not allow one to grow complacent with past glories.

Still, FABC has some weaknesses and has not met all challenges.

There are indeed many FABC meetings, seminars, workshops and documents, the fruits of much prayer, study, sharing, exposure and immersion, reflection and meditation from assemblies, committees, and commissions.

However, the bishops and participants of these events are the agents of action back home. Implementation of all FABC work depends on the willingness of member conferences to make use of these vast resources.

FABC needs to look more seriously and continuously into some particular issues, such as youth, people who are permanently and increasingly deprived, poor in all senses, family life and women.

Language is always a difficulty. FABC conducts all its business in English, but not all bishops of Asia are in good command of English.

Many of FABC's activities are made possible still very much by the fraternal and generous support of other Churches.

National and regional issues and problems of the Churches in Asia are often so different that no unique and all pervading solution could be expected. It is unrealistic to expect from FABC binding-for-all solutions.

FABC's strength is as an inspiration to member conferences. Member conferences learn by hearing about the openness and creativity of other members and how they implement the policies and recommendations of FABC.

Knowing the limits and the strengths of FABC, and reflecting on its contributions to the socio-religious, cultural, economic and political realities of Asia, one sees FABC is a grace to the Church in Indonesia.

(Editor's Note: Capuchin Bishop Martin D. Situmorang of Padang is secretary general of the Bishops' Conference of Indonesia, and past chairman of the FABC Office of Laity.)

11. The Korean Church and FABC Grew Up Together

by Bishop Angelo Kim Nam Soo of Suwon, Korea

From its beginning 25 years ago, the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences and the Korean Catholic Church have maintained a close relationship, and each has learned from the other.

Christianity came to Korea in 1779, but for the first 100 years our Church suffered severe persecution. In the following time of religious freedom, the Korean Church expected to grow spiritually and numerically, but evangelization was hindered by Japanese occupation and colonization.

In 1945, at the end of World War II, Korea became independent but was divided into the south, supported by the United States, and north, supported by the Soviet Union. In 1950, the north invaded the south and a three-year war began.

In the north, the Catholic Church was persecuted by a government policy bent on liquidating all religions, and it went underground. But after the war, the Church in the south entered into a new prosperous period of evangelization.

In 1945, the Catholic population of the whole nation was 183,000, and it grew to a million by 1974. By the merit and prayers of the numerous Korean martyrs, our Church grew rapidly in numbers and in evangelizing activities.

In 1986, Korean Catholics numbered 2 million, thus doubling its population in 12 years, and by 1992, it had surpassed 3 million. While membership and parishes increased, the number of foreign missionaries steadily declined.

This was offset by the providential rise of Korean priesthood candidates. Until 1982, Korea had but two seminaries in Seoul and Kwangju. Today, we have six. The one in Taegu opened in 1982, Suwon in 1984, Pusan in 1990 and Taejon in 1994. A new seminary is to open in Incheon diocese in 1996.

Some say the Korean Catholic Church is in a golden age of prosperity for evangelization. Others, more pessimistic, say this time will not last long.

In my opinion, our Lord is pouring abundant graces into the Korean Church for its special mission to the people in neighboring countries, especially those once ruled by communist regimes.

If the Korean Church faithfully and effectively responds to the Lord's

call at this time, we can carry out our unique responsibility for evangelization of the Asian region. If we do not faithfully respond to this unique missionary call, we are wasting the graces that God has given us in abundance.

We are chiefly concerned with the evangelization of mainland China and Russia. Koreans have a great responsibility for the evangelization of China, because we received the gift of faith through the Chinese 200 years ago.

Today, we are in position to pay off our debts of gratitude for the faith.

As FABC members, Korean bishops have somewhat mixed feelings. We want to learn something about true evangelization, but we do not know where to turn.

In Asian countries, Catholics are small in number, except the Church in the Philippines, which seems to be following Western patterns. Barring Indonesia, evangelization in many Asian countries does not seem to be successful.

I wonder where and what Koreans can learn for our future evangelization.

Bishops in neighboring countries have turned to the Korean Church as a focal point of interest, given our rapid growth. We often provide opportunities to explain the Korean Church reality to Church leaders from many other nations.

I am happy to have such significant gatherings with fellow FABC members.

Let us cooperate by teaching and learning from one another in a humble way. The evangelization of the Asian continent, particularly of people in the countries that are changing into democratic systems, depends on this.

(Editor's Note: Bishop Kim was president of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of Korea, and member of several FABC Offices.)

12. Asian Church "Orphan" Gets Limited Support from FABC an Interview with Bishop Domingos Lam of Macau

The language barrier accounts in part for the minimal impact of the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences on the majority of Catholics here,

says Bishop Domingos Lam Ka Tseung of Macau.

Macau, like Hong Kong, is an FABC associate member. Neither has a bishops' conference of its own, nor belongs to any Asian conference. The two dioceses are like "autonomous regions," said Bishop Lam.

"We are independent, but feel like an orphan," the 66-year-old bishop said, observing that FABC influence is stronger in the English-speaking Catholic community in Macau than among Chinese or Portuguese-speaking Catholics.

Most FABC documents are in English, not commonly used by most local Catholics, The Chinese and Portuguese communities "cannot take much advantage of (the documents)."

Macau has about 17,000 Chinese, 12,000 Portuguese and 4,500 English-speaking Catholics. About half the English speakers have regular contact with the Church, compared to three-quarters each of the other two language groups.

Since the Diocese of Macau is traditionally under the jurisdiction of the bishops' conference of Portugal, the strongest support for the Church in Macau comes from Lisbon, noted the first Chinese bishop of the 418-year-old diocese.

"Portugal sees us as a brother," Bishop Lam said. The diocese receives increasing publications from Portugal, and specialists from Portugal come to help with religious formation of Portuguese-speaking Catholics on request.

But the Church in Portugal is too far from Macau, he noted, and Portuguese support for the Chinese sector is also limited by the language barrier.

The Macau diocese is also like a "small brother" of Hong Kong, the bishop said, depending almost totally on the latter for information. He hopes future collaboration with Hong Kong will become stronger "on a jurisdictional level."

While neither Macau nor the Hong Kong diocese is affiliated with the bishops' conference in Taiwan, both maintain cordial relations and receive invitations and information from the Taiwan Church.

The bishops' conferences in Taiwan and Portugal "give us the orientation we follow," Bishop Lam said, which aids Macau's Chinese and Portuguese Catholics.

Father Lawrence Lee Len, chancellor of Hong Kong diocese, affirmed Macau and Hong Kong have friendly contacts with the bishops' conference in Taiwan.

In accordance with canon law, however, an episcopal conference has very limited power and is mainly installed for cooperation between dioceses of one area, Father Lee added.

Before the Communist takeover of China in 1949, Chinese bishops in China gave "strong support of all kinds in orientation" to Macau, Bishop Lam said.

Chinese Catholics in the diocese were influenced less by local Portuguese missionaries, he said, than by those who worked in mainland China and came to Macau because of wars and persecution. Most of these left Macau in the 1970s.

Today the number of the local clergy is going down "very sharply," he noted.

"In the past 15 years, we sent many of the young priests under age 50 to Europe and the United States for further formation," the bishop said.

But he sees a "big, big problem" with more recent missionaries here, who he says, fail in their task. "We have plenty of activities but less conversions."

In addition, Bishop Lam expects more Chinese will emigrate to Australia, Canada, Portugal and the United States during the lead-up to 1999, when administration of Macau reverts from Portugal to China.

Although the Portuguese Catholic community tends "to grow slowly and gradually but strongly," he assumes many Portuguese will leave by then.

Bishop Lam said he regrets many Catholics will emigrate to serve the Church in other countries. "But anyhow, the universal Church will grow," he added.

13. FABC Helped Nepal Church as it Emerged into the 1990s

by Jesuit Father Anthony Sharma of Kathmandu, Nepal

I first heard of the Federation of Asian Catholic Bishops' Conferences in March 1985, three months after my appointment as Nepal's ecclesiastical superior. Indian bishops invited me to attend the Seventh Bishops'

Institute for Social Action (BISA VII).

Through the Indian preparatory phase of BISA VII at Bangalore, India, in August 1985, attended by 15 bishops and two priests mostly from northern Indian dioceses, I became aware of FABC's work on behalf of the Church in Asia.

Since then, my association through bishops' seminars, training programs and regional gatherings has been truly enlightening, enriching and challenging.

Preparation for BISA VII in Bangalore included an exposure-immersion program to the painful, inhuman, subhuman, unjust and pathetic plight of the working and exploited poor, as well as bonded laborers (men, women and children).

Prior to coming to Nepal, I had heard words such as "exploitation," "people living below the poverty line," "bonded labor/laborers," but had never been exposed to situations we witnessed in Bangalore.

I returned to Nepal resolved to at least prevent such situations. The Church in Nepal, whose social, pastoral and educational activities were confined to the Kathmandu valley, was then in the catacomb stage, voiceless, powerless.

To belong to her or admit one was her member was anathema. Yet the Bangalore experience created an urge to do something, not be mere silent spectators to the pains and suffering of the poor of one of the world's poorest nations.

Thus, efforts were initiated to establish Caritas Nepal, finally registered as a local non-governmental agency and nationally recognized. Since 1986, I have tried to use FABC self-updating for training laity, religious and clergy.

Such updating broadened our vision, created awareness of the catholicity of our belonging in Asia and pride in our Asianness, and enabled us to accept and understand more those whose beliefs and practices differ from ours.

What I regard as the biggest boon is that they challenged us to take laity seriously, seeing that they have the openness and scope to deepen their faith to become faith formators in their families and parish communities.

This change in attitude, consequent to the conviction that the Church

is the People of God and must be lay-centered, is an encouraging challenge to laity, today in the forefront of pastoral, catechetical, social and media activities.

We Catholics number a little over 4,000 in Nepal, but true to the spirit of the FABC Fifth Plenary in Bandung, Indonesia, in 1990, we have begun our journey to the third millennium.

Though constitutionally prevented from preaching the "Good News from the rooftops," this year our laity began publishing *Prabhu-sanga Bhet-mala* (Encounters with the Lord), booklets for evangelization in Nepali.

The social teachings of the Church are put into practice through the development efforts of Caritas Nepal, the Christian Workers' Movement and the *Deep Shrinkhala* (Chain of Lights) Catholic Women's Association.

The Young Catholic Students (YCS) and International Movement of Catholic Students (IMCS) help give Christian formation to our young people.

The government's allowing the Nepal Catholic Society to register as an officially recognized body in 1993 gave Catholics here a sense of belonging to a homeland where Catholics were once seen as pariahs.

We have yet to initiate ecumenical and interreligious dialogue. The main hurdle is the absence of recognition of authorities of religious communities.

In Kathmandu alone, 25 Christian denominations vie with each other and eye each other with fear and suspicion. A step we have taken to reduce this is to open our facilities to other Christians for prayer services and gatherings.

The young Nepal Church has miles to go, but we have begun our journey in the right direction. Our laity are our hope, learning to lead as they realize the final statement of the Bandung Plenary Assembly on the role of lay faithful.

It says: "They are the primary evangelizers of culture and of cultures, and of the whole fabric of life in society."

(Editor's Note: Father Sharma, born in India of Nepalese parents, heads the Catholic Church in Nepal, which restored religious freedom in 1990).

14. FABC and Church in Pakistan Have Grown Together

by Bishop Anthony Lobo of Islamabad-Rawalpindi, Pakistan

The Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences has helped us in Pakistan to "listen to what the Spirit is saying to the Churches" (Revelations 2:7) in Asia, with documents from the FABC plenary assemblies and various bishops' institutes helping us read the "signs of the times."

The past 30 years have been for the Church here, and the country, a series of crises: the nationalization of schools, the "brain drain," the rise of fundamentalism, the marginalization of minorities, the increase in sectarian and ethnic violence and rising drug abuse.

On the ecclesiastical front, the aftermath of the Second Vatican Council saw much theological confusion and the erosion of traditional values. There was a general decline in vocations from "sending" countries to the missions, and local vocations did not always come up to the high standards expected.

Defections from the priesthood and religious life aggravated the situation.

FABC has helped us, if at times indirectly, respond with hope.

We have moved towards a positive appreciation of our local cultures, our music, language, literature, customs, cultural values, art and architecture.

New vistas have opened before us in the field of interreligious dialogue.

Though theological dialogue has had limited scope, the dialogue of life and common struggle with people of other religions for human rights and development is today an integral part of the life of the Church in Pakistan.

There has been a clear shift of human and material resources toward ministry and empowerment of the underprivileged, a preferential option for the poor.

Like FABC as a whole, we in Pakistan have evolved in this field. We now appreciate the need for adding the dimensions of faith and culture to economic and socio-political analysis, using what is known as the Pastoral Spiral.

The Church here has learnt the powerful impact of the media: one picture is worth a thousand words; images are more affective than concepts;

radio reaches more people than print media; videos and the dish antenna are more convincing than the traditional classroom teacher.

Our national response is WAVE (workshops on audio-visual education) Studio, which produces materials to promote Gospel values and media education.

In education, there is the search for a holistic or integral education that includes social concern for the marginalized.

Youth are the largest segment of the population and we are aware of the need to challenge them to work for the transformation of structures that alienate people and deny them their identity as human beings endowed with dignity.

Ongoing formation for clergy, Religious and laypeople has become a priority, with dioceses and religious congregations setting aside full-time personnel for this work in pastoral centers, retreat houses and houses of prayer.

A new vision of the Church has arisen, and the FABC Leadership Training courses for Asian bishops have enabled this vision to be spelled out in operational terms, thus closing the gap between rhetoric and reality.

In turn, the national bishops' conferences have also helped FABC to move in directions which were formerly less evident.

These include a thrust toward faith formation, as is evident in the recent renewal courses for rectors and spiritual directors of Asian seminaries, the seminars on liturgy and catechetics for Asia scheduled for this year, and programs for the ongoing formation of priests.

FABC has grown over the years and so has the Church in Pakistan, toward the Servant Church outlined by the Second Vatican Council: conscientizing people about their dignity; empowering them against forces of alienation; helping them grow in personal relationship with God; transforming the structures of society to make them reveal more and more the Kingdom of God.

It is not for nothing that the Sixth Plenary Assembly of Asian Bishops, scheduled for Manila in January, has chosen for its theme: "Discipleship in Asia: Service to Life."

The Servant Church has the "ear of a disciple," listening to what the Spirit says through the cries of the people, and speaks with the "disciple's

tongue” to denounce all oppression and announce consolation to the oppressed.

(Editor’s Note: Bishop Lobo chairs the FABC Office of Education and Students’ Chaplaincy.)

15. FABC’s Impact Significant, But Mostly From Above

by Archbishop Orlando Quevedo of Nueva Segovia, Philippines

The impact of the Federation of Asian Bishops’ Conferences on the Church in the Philippines, while difficult to assess and almost unknown to the average Filipino Catholic, is surely significant.

If one spoke with the ordinary Filipino Catholic, or even a member of a parish council, the name FABC would most likely not be recognized. Many older priests and Religious would, in fact, not know what FABC means.

This should not be too surprising, for even the Second Vatican Council went through a similar experience. But this is not to say that neither the Council nor FABC had any impact on the Church in the Philippines.

During the severe and harsh dictatorial regime of late president Ferdinand Marcos (1972-1986), many Church people were very much inspired by theological themes emerging from various Latin American liberation theologies.

Through FABC, some of those themes took on a distinctive Asian character that emphasized culture, multireligious traditions and contemplation.

In the Basic Christian/Ecclesial Communities (BCCs or BECs) of Mindanao in southern Philippines, hundreds of seminars towards Christian formation, community organization and leadership were conducted.

Basic resources included FABC documents, especially those of the first four plenary assemblies and various Bishops’ Institutes for Social Action (BISA) and Bishops’ Institutes for the Lay Apostolate (BILA) papers.

Today, poor BEC lay leaders in Mindanao would most likely be more aware of FABC than their better-off counterparts in Metro Manila and Luzon.

Undoubtedly, though, FABC has had greater impact on Philippine bishops than on Filipino laypeople, priests and Religious.

The most significant impact has been on the number of Filipino bishops who have participated in FABC-sponsored seminars, workshops and institutes, most notably BISA, BILA and the Leadership Training for Bishops. Many have enthusiastically applied newly-gained insights in their dioceses.

Pastoral groups and even seminaries now use a form of socio-cultural and faith analysis/discernment that was refined by the FABC Office of Human Development (OHD) into what is called "the Pastoral Spiral."

Likewise, several Philippine dioceses are now implementing the Asian Integral Pastoral Approach to community formation adapted by the FABC Office of the Laity and the OHD from the South African Lumko methodology.

At the same time, many lay participants in BILA have become renewal agents in their dioceses of "lay empowerment" and participatory decision-making. A "multiplier effect" has definitely resulted from FABC formation activities.

Filipino sisters have also benefited to a certain extent through the formation of Asian Meeting of Religious (AMOR), facilitated by the OHD.

In addition, the concerns of Asian men and women Religious were brought to the attention of Asian delegates to the bishops' synod on the consecrated life when FABC brought them together at a consultation in Thailand.

In 1993, the OHD sponsored a consultation in Hong Kong on the plight of Filipino overseas workers. A Church-based action network covering Asia and Europe to aid Filipino workers abroad will possibly result.

Still, the fact remains that except for a few cases such as in the BECs in Mindanao, FABC's impact here has been largely limited to the hierarchy.

So many and so rich are the various theological and pastoral insights circulating at FABC level, though, that it would be a great pity if they were not brought down to the level of the dioceses.

A more coordinated and focused effort should be made at the FABC level to respond to two explosive realities: that Asia is a continent of the young, and that the Asian family is terribly threatened by secularist developments.

The overarching FABC vision for the Church in Asia as, among others, a disciple Church, a Church of transformative dialogue, a Church of the

Poor and a servant of Asian humanity, has been particularized by the Second Plenary Council of the Philippines, held in 1992.

Carrying out this formidable pastoral imperative and taking it to the grass-roots through diocesan and parish programs are the tasks that remain.

(Editor's Note: Archbishop Orlando Quvedo has served in several posts within FABC.)

16. Thai Church The Way It Is Because Of FABC Impact
by Bishop George Yod Phimphisan of Udon Thani, Thailand

Twenty-five years ago, Pope Paul VI made what was possibly the longest trip of his pontificate. He came to Asia and was in Manila at the birth of the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences.

It was a very humble beginning. The people who founded FABC had a vision of mutual understanding, sharing, and possibly Catholics helping one another among the varied cultures that make up Asia.

Since the cultures are so diversified, the idea of a federation was an excellent idea. It proved that Asians do respect one another in spite of and because of their differences in cultural heritage.

FABC would help create a unity of faith in the diversity of cultures. Because Catholicism is a minority in most of the countries in Asia, this mutual support is of tremendous benefit.

Over the years, various FABC offices would hold many meetings and seminars which allowed mutual sharing of our experiences, our successes and failures, our joys and sorrows. These meetings were eye-openers.

The earliest and possibly the strongest influence of FABC is its Office of Human development (OHD), which has helped bishops of member countries not only be exposed to but be immersed in the varied reality that is Asia.

Through OHD-facilitated learning processes, the bishops of Thailand and other countries learned to cope with their own social problems, enabling the Church to be the leaven and the salt of the earth it is supposed to be.

People can see Asia's Catholic Church is not only a Church of history but of the present, identified with poor and oppressed, the voice of the voiceless.

Inspired by the FABC-OHD, the Thai Church has been involved in community development, especially in the Northeast, the poorest region of Thailand.

Thus, the Catholic Council of Thailand for Development (CCTD) was formed and from that was born diocesan offices for social development.

Thailand's Catholic Office for Emergency Relief and Refugees (COERR), born during the influx of Indochina refugees, is another fruit of the FABC-OHD.

The Bishops' Conference of Thailand deemed it prudent to have a separate office to handle the tremendous influx of refugees into Thailand. COERR has since received the Pope John XXIII Peace Award for its work for refugees.

Many of the refugees have left Thailand for third countries or to return home. COERR continues its assistance, especially in the case of Cambodia.

The FABC Office of Interreligious Dialogue, now headed by Bishop John Bosco Manat Chuabsamai of Ratchaburi, Thailand, has spurred bishops into learning about and sharing with the religions of Asia, notably Buddhism and Islam.

Because of relatively reasonable accommodations, many FABC seminars and meetings have been held here, with much Thai participation in FABC work.

Through the Office of Social Communications, Thailand has been able to bring together many Catholic laypeople involved in communication work.

The immediate past world president of the International Catholic Organization of Broadcasters (Unda), Chainarong Monthienvichienchai, is Thai. He was the first layperson and first Asian to hold this position.

By bringing together lay Catholics noted for their education expertise, the FABC Office of Education and Student Chaplaincy has broadened Thai Catholic educationists' scope to accommodate the Church prospective on education.

The FABC Office of Evangelization has helped the Church in Thailand reach out with greater awareness to our Buddhist sisters and brothers.

FABC has had a decisive effect on the Thai Church. Thai bishops thank

the Holy Spirit for inspiring the FABC founders with a far-reaching vision and for giving them the strength and courage to carry through with the vision.

Looking back over 25 years, Catholics can thank the Lord for using the FABC founders to bring together Asian bishops, priests, Religious or laity to share experiences, work, play and plan together for a better Asia of tomorrow.

(Editors' Note: Redemptorist Bishop George Yod Phimphan, 61, is immediate past president of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of Thailand and has been a member of the FABC Office of Social Communications.)

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