

B: Small Christian Communities

B\2

SCCs ARE “A CONCRETE EXPRESSION OF THE CHURCH”

(The Four Marks of SCCs)

TOPICS OF ASIPA TEXTS:

A : GOSPEL SHARING (7 steps)

B : SMALL CHRISTIAN COMMUNITIES

C : A PARTICIPATORY CHURCH

D : TRAINING FOR PARISH TEAMS

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ASIPA B: SMALL CHRISTIAN COMMUNITIES
Programmes for Training the Christian Community

B\2

SCCs ARE “A CONCRETE EXPRESSION OF THE CHURCH”

(The Four Marks of SCCs)

It may be necessary to use two sessions for this topic.

INTRODUCTION

Some priests will say, “I have always had Small Christian Communities. My prayer groups, for instance, are SCCs because they are small and consist of Christians!”

This is not quite correct. A prayer group is not yet a SCC, as we understand it. Pope John Paul II, for instance, calls Small Christian Communities “*A concrete expression of the Church*” and “*A home and family for everyone*”.¹

Let us visit a SCC today in the city of Lagos, the capital of Nigeria. In small groups we shall listen to the story of a layman, Mr. Mathias Faleye.

A. THE STORY OF A SMALL CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY

1. Group work for 30 minutes

- Form groups of 5/8.
- After the story has been read once or twice in each group, discuss the questions as given at the end of the story.
- After 30 minutes report to the whole group.

THE STORY²

Beginnings of a Christian community in Mushin parish:

Lagos is a city in which people do not care about knowing neighbours: we live in a city of “mind your own business”. In the year 1977, Sister Miriam Therese asked me to look up the parish register to find the names and addresses of Catholics who lived close to where I lived. As a worker, I knew that the best time to visit them was between 6 p.m. and 9 p.m. Then we visited them. These visits went on for some weeks.

During the visits we introduced ourselves as coming from Regina Mundi Catholic Church, and wanting to greet them. This short introduction had a big effect. I remember Mr. Matthew Osunkoya, for example who said in response to our visit, “The world is coming to an end!” He found it hard to believe that a fellow Catholic was coming to visit him. He had been living there and no one had shown any interest in him. Some even said they were thinking of changing Church, because, though they went to Mass every Sunday, they did not know a single face.

After several such visitations, we planned a meeting for all the people we had met so far. The first meeting was held on 13th February 1978, and was attended by 15 families.

The first meetings

The first meeting was held in front of the house of one of the members. There was an introduction of all the members present. Acts 4,32-35 was read to help us to understand the meaning of a Christian community. It led to an agreement that going to church on Sunday was not enough - we needed to meet in small groups to get to know one another better. We decided to meet weekly.

These weekly meetings united us through the sharing of the scriptures, praying for one another's needs, singing, calling each other by name, helping one another, planning and working together, visiting one another and eating together. At times, one person stood up and named all the people present, from the youngest to the oldest. Though this may seem a very simple thing, it created a sense of belonging to the community, and we often did it with great joy.

Leadership:

Since I was involved from the very start in the visitation with Sr. Miriam, I was asked to coordinate the meetings. As the community grew, other leaders emerged, and a six weeks' training programme was organised for all the leaders, and we then started working together as a team.

Activities and success:

We discussed various ways of helping each other as a group: how to help our children, the poor, the aged, the disabled, and any people of the neighbourhood who were in need. As a result, a catechism class was introduced on Saturdays for children. A health team was asked to advise on things like child care, preventing under-nourishment, breast feeding, etc.

We decided to clean up the dirty parts of the neighbourhood, and wrote to the Local Government for their help in this cleaning up exercise. Vehicles and tools were provided, and the whole community joined in the task. 23 loads of rubbish were removed during the first three occasions.

There was also a time when rice became extremely expensive, and the community bought rice at the National Supply Company in bulk, at a considerable reduction. People were very happy about this, although problems developed the next time we tried to buy in bulk.

Marriages were rectified through the help of the concerned members, widows and orphans were looked after.

Anniversary days of the community members were marked by a Eucharistic celebration at the open place where the regular meetings were held. Whenever our community was having any such activity, invitations were sent to the other small communities around us, and they also participated, and invited us to their celebrations. This kept up a good link with other groups and prevented us from forgetting about others.

Problems:

Our big problem was to try to get the priests interested in the community. There were also problems about attendance at meetings, and the lack of enough people ready to take responsibility for various activities.

We tried to solve some of these problems by visiting members at home and by continuing the training of leaders.

Personal conclusion:

Personally I have gained a lot as member of a Small Christian Community. I feel much at home with the members of this family; they are very close to me and we share our feelings and our hopes together. This helps us all to see that the Church is meant to be a friendly community. I have also learned how to work with people of different characters and to maintain peace, bearing in mind that we are of different backgrounds. Finally, I feel that it is in this type of Christian community that the real presence of the Risen Christ can be seen and expressed in the true light of love. It is a place where

Christians can work together for a better world rather than be individualistic and selfish. A Small Christian Community, to me, is like a tree where each part has something to do with all the other parts. We are all one in the Body of Christ and this unity is a lived reality in the Small Christian Community.

(Discuss the questions after the story has been read once or twice:)

Questions:

- ***What is most striking for you personally in the life of this Small Christian Community in Lagos?—***
- ***Why can we say that this community in Lagos is a “concrete expression of the Church”?—***

Supplement:

(All read the supplement silently. Then they share on the question, "What other points do we find in the supplement which are additional to our own findings?")

This Small Christian Community (SCC) in Lagos is a "concrete expression of the Church" because it does what the whole Church community is supposed to do:

- The members strengthen each other in the faith,
They help each other in daily life;
They bring Christ to others;
They listen to God's word;
They praise and thank God.
- This SCC makes it possible for others to experience the Risen Christ in this particular neighbourhood.
- This SCC in Lagos shows the world that it is possible to live together in peace, although people differ from each other.
- This SCC in Lagos shows the people in the neighbourhood that we Christians are responsible for the world around us, living conditions and nature.

B. THE FOUR MARKS OF SCCs

The *many* “features” of the SCC in Lagos.

- Read to the whole group the story of the SCC in Lagos above.
- Discuss the question in the whole group.
- Write the answers on a board or newsprint.

Question:

What are “features” which belong to the life of this Small Christian Community in Lagos?—

We choose four essential “marks” of SCCs

From our story we have found many “marks” or “features” which belong to SCCs. Now we ask ourselves, what are the essential marks of a SCC? In other words, what changes a parish group into a “Small Christian Community”?

We suggest four essential marks which belong to a SCC:

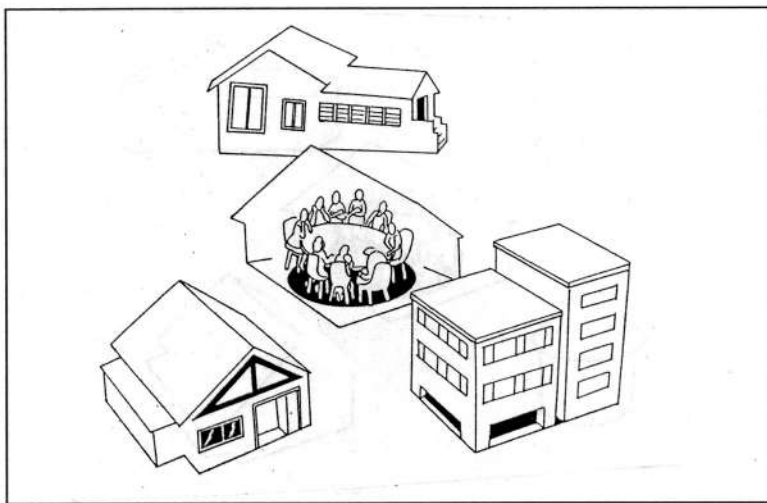
First mark:

1. Members of SCCs are neighbours

- a. Look at the drawing below and discuss in the whole group:

Question:

Who should be allowed to attend the regular meeting of a SCC?—



Supplement:

Everyone in the neighbourhood is allowed to attend the meeting of this SCC:

- rich and poor,
- *members of different language groups,*
- young and old people,
- *singles and married couples,*
- non-catholic spouses, strangers...
- The members of a SCC do not come from different parts of the parish but from the immediate neighbourhood.
- They live in the same geographical locality where they are exposed to the same conditions of life.
- They rotate the place of their gathering.
- They gather once a week or once in 2 weeks.

b. Discuss in the whole group:

Question:

What are the advantages and disadvantages of groups which do NOT meet as neighbours but as people of the same language group or of the same profession?—

Supplement:

(All read the supplement silently. Then they share on the question, “What other points do we find in the supplement which are additional to our own findings?”)

Advantages:

- Sometimes it is *easier* to bring people together in separate groups of different races, nationalities, languages, professions and interests.
- Special needs of a particular group of people can be met.

Disadvantages:

Such interest groups are good but they do not fulfill other important tasks which Jesus has given his Church:

- To build bridges between nations and races;
- *To create unity and peace between people of different social classes;*
- To be a home for everyone;
- *To be a sign of new society where people can live together in peace.*

Second mark:**2. SCCs make gospel sharing the basis of their meetings**

- Look at the drawing below.

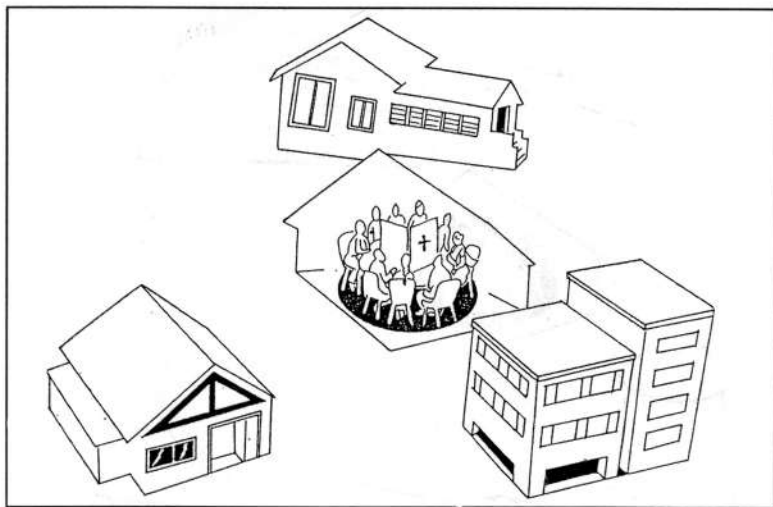
This SCC celebrates gospel sharing according to the 7 step gospel sharing method. Sometimes they use a different method.

SCCs usually use the gospel of the coming Sunday for their gospel sharing. Later they choose texts from other books of the bible as well.

- Discuss in the whole group:

Question:

Why do you think gospel sharing is so important for a SCC?—



Supplement:

(All read the supplement silently. Then they share on the question, “What other points do we find in the supplement which are additional to our own findings?”)

- Through gospel sharing we make Christ present in our midst, he who truly becomes the foundation of their community.
- Gospel sharing helps us to become the Lord’s disciples. He told us, “If you make my word your home, you will be my disciples”. (Jn 8,31)
- Gospel sharing makes us a new family. Jesus said: “My mother and my brothers are those who hear the word of God and put it into practice”. (Lk 8,21)
- All members of a SCC bring their Bible along.
- We usually follow the 7 step gospel sharing method. Gospel sharing gives the group spiritual nourishment, mutual encouragement in the faith and strengthens mutual trust among the members.
- From time to time, however, we use other methods as well which help us to see beyond our own lives to the lives of others. These methods include Group Response and Amos Programmes with social analysis.

Third mark**3. SCCs act and do things together out of faith**

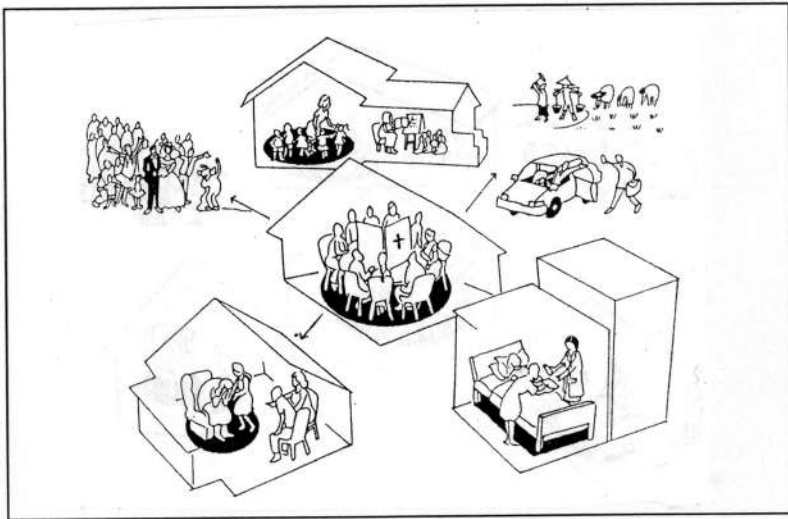
In step 6 of Gospel Sharing SCCs ask the Question:

- What is our task for the coming week?
- What is our task as “Church” in this locality?

Look at the drawing and discuss with the whole group:

Question:

What are the activities of the SCC in the picture?—



The members of a SCC say, “We are the Church in this neighbourhood!” Therefore, the SCC also undertakes other tasks which are not depicted in the drawing above.

Question:

What other tasks should a SCC undertake if their members believe, “We are the Church in this neighbourhood?”—

Supplement:

(All read the supplement silently. Then they share on the question, “What other points do we find in the supplement which are additional to our own findings?”)

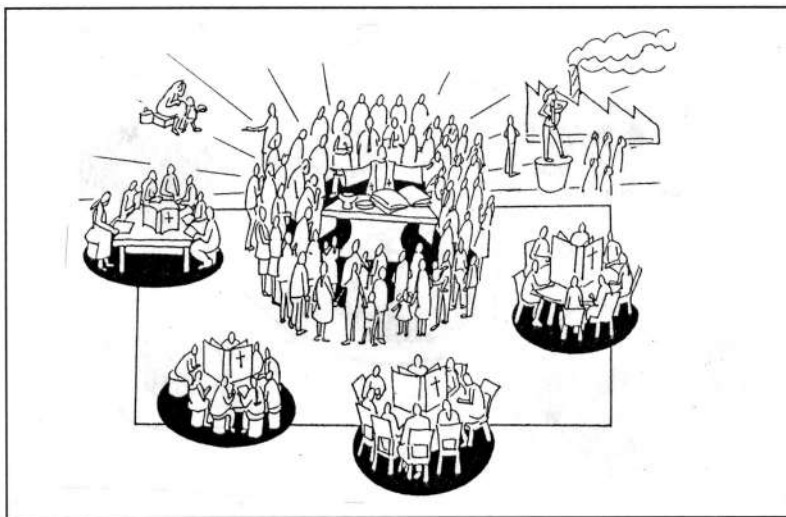
The Church the whole world over is responsible for continuing the mission of Christ today. A SCC, therefore, should feel co-responsible to continue this mission in their neighbourhood. For instance:

- Praising and thanking God;
- *Forgiving each other;*
- Creating unity and peace;
- *Sharing faith with catechumens;*
- Preparing the Sunday liturgy;
- *Preparing the children for First Holy Communion;*
- Preparing the youth for Confirmation;
- *Welcoming strangers, acting as sponsors to catechumens;*
- Standing up together against injustice and corruption;
- *Reaching out to members of other Churches and religions...;*
- Giving prophetic witness of a “new society based on a civilization of love”, as Pope John Paul II says.³

Fourth mark:**4. SCCs have to be linked to the Universal Church**

The fourth essential mark of a SCC is unity with all other Christians. Members of a SCC cannot belong to Christ if they reject unity with the other brothers and sisters of Christ. We call the Christians of the whole world also the “Universal Church”.

- Look at the drawing below and discuss the question

**Question:**

In our drawing, we can detect different ways in which SCCs are “linked to the Universal Church”. What are these ways?—

Supplement:

(All read the supplement silently. Then they share on the question, “What other points do we find in the supplement which are additional to our own findings?”)

- It is the Eucharist or the Breaking of Bread which is the strongest link between SCCs and the Universal Church. Pope John Paul II says:
“The Eucharist brings about the intimate bonds of communion among all the faithful in the body of Christ which is the Church”.
- Through the Eucharist and the Word of God, the many SCCs and other groups in the parish become a “Communion of Communities” and a “New Way Of Being Church”.⁴
- The priest is the living link between the local parish, the bishop of the diocese and the Pope, the chief pastor of the Universal Church.
- The SCCs are represented in the Parish Pastoral Council.
- Leaders of SCCs receive continuous training and spiritual formation from the priest. This creates a strong bond of unity.
- The local parish is linked to the “Universal Church” by the same faith and the same mission to bring God’s love to all.

Conclusion

- We read Acts 4, 32-35
- We pray spontaneously for the same faith and love which we see in the first Christian communities.

Footnotes:

- 1 Christian Family (Familiaris Consortio) , art.85
- 2 AFER
- 3 CHURCH'S MISSIONARY MANDATE (Redemptoris Missio), art. 51
- 4 FABC5, Final Statement of Plenary Session, art. 8

METHOD OF ASIPA TEXTS

ASIPA TEXTS are compiled for Christian men and women at grass root level of the parish. They can be conducted most fruitfully in Small Christian Communities, Neighbourhood Communities, Parish Pastoral Councils or any other small groups in the parish.

ASIPA TEXTS can also be used with larger groups, e.g. in the parish hall - provided the “participatory method” is maintained in smaller working groups.

Features of the “ASIPA approach”

1. ASIPA TEXTS adopt a **“participatory approach”** in which all participants of a group search and discover for themselves as far as they are able to.
2. The texts are compiled in such a way that the facilitator can use them with a **minimum of preparation**.
3. The facilitator is requested to **follow the text** as closely as possible and allow the participants to contribute when indicated in the text.
4. The facilitator is not content with one answer to a question but he/she encourages as many participants as possible to search for an answer. **“Buzz groups”** of 2/3 are helpful to achieve maximum participation.
5. The **SUPPLEMENT** can help add to the findings of the participants and summarize them.
6. The **SUMMARY** is meant to be used as ‘input’.

ASIPA:

As-ian -I-ntegral -P-astoral -A-pproach

The Asian Bishops declared in the Final Statement of their Fifth Plenary Session in Bandung: The Church of 1990s has to be a "Participatory Church", a "Communion of Communities", a Church that "witnesses to the Risen Lord" (*FABC5,#8*).

The question was, how to promote this "new way of being Church". Therefore, late in 1993, jointly sponsored by the FABC Offices of Human Development and of Laity, a consultation meeting was held in Malaysia. It was during this consultation that the pastoral process for promoting a "Participatory Church" in Asia was termed ASIPA: Asian Integral Pastoral Approach.

ASIPA TEXTS (training programmes) follow this directive:

ASIAN

They want to implement the vision of the Asian Bishops and help Asian Christians face Asian life in the light of the gospel.

INTEGRAL

They aim at achieving a balance between the "spiritual" and the "social", between the individual and the community, between hierarchical leadership and the co-responsibility of the laity.

PASTORAL

They train the laity in their pastoral mission in Church and world.

APPROACH

The process of ASIPA TEXTS can be described as a pastoral approach which is "Christ- and Community centred". It involves the participants of workshops to search for themselves and allows them to experience a "New Way of Being Church."
