

## **BASIC HUMAN COMMUNITIES**

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### **Positions regarding Basic Human Communities Vary**

Aren't Basic Christian Communities (BCCs) yet to see the light of the day in many dioceses and why at this juncture this rush towards the Basic Human Communities? - quite a few seem to wonder. Some see it as a distraction taking the focus or energy away from the commitment to build Basic Christian Communities. Their position: let us first concentrate on Basic Christian Communities; we could think of Basic Human Communities later on. Some others seem enthused about Basic Human Communities, but they do not know how to handle both BCCs and BHCs together. Some bishops, especially those in North India, feel that in their dioceses Basic Christian Communities do not have any scope at all and that Basic Human Communities is the only option.

Such differing positions and the resultant confusions demand that we clarify the following: 1) the separate identities and roles of BCCs and BHCs, 2) that building Basic Human Communities forms part of the core mission of the Church, 3) that instead of worrying that one would engulf the other we could work towards a situation where one strengthens the other. This article proposes to do just that.

### **1. Similarities and Differences**

We begin with a discussion on the identity of the BHCs and their unique role and advantages. What is so special about Basic

Human Communities (BHCs)? The answer to this question is very much related to the answer to the other often-asked question: What is so special about Basic Christian Communities (BCCs)? The same aspects that make BCCs special are also the aspects that make BHCs special. Both are alike in various ways. The main difference being that one limits itself to Catholics/Christians, and the other includes everybody. Like BCCs, BHCs too are small group-oriented. They offer a way of beating the sense of being lost and the alienation one feels in bigger structures. Normally, they are of about 30 to 50 families.

Like BCCs, BHCs too are territory-based. As in BCCs, where every Catholic, whether practicing or not, whether actively involved or not, irrespective of whether he is even opposed to the concept - as long as he is not explicitly excommunicated by the Church - is a member, so too every human person, whether he or she agrees with the whole idea of BHC or not, is automatically considered a part of the BHC. It is a kind of a mini-ward. Just as a person residing in a panchayat ward, whether he/she votes or not, is automatically a citizen of the ward, so too in this mini-ward.

Like BCCs, which are not just adjuncts to the Church, but the Church itself in a given neighbourhood - a mini-Church? - so too the BHCs are not just appendices to the nation, but nation itself in a given neighbourhood. They too are mini-nations that form the big nation. Like BCCs which become the basic constitutive units of the Church, BHCs are to be the basic constitutive units of the nation/world. Like BCCs which get juridically and legally integrated in the presently available local constitutional units of the Church like parishes, the BHCs get linked to the civil structures like *gram sabhas* and *panchayats*. Like BCCs, which try to give a sense of belonging and participation to the members of the Church, the BHCs give the same to the people of a nation/world. Just as BCCs which though small give scope for participation and impact at wider levels through networks of representative structures at the levels of the parish, foranate, diocese etc., so too BHCs ensure the same at wider levels through networks of representative structures at the levels of the village, panchayat, mandal, district, state, nation, etc.

Just as it is in BCCs, the guiding principle in BHCs too is to be subsidiarity. Whereby whatever can be done at a lower level is done at that level and not at any level above it and the higher levels

take up only those tasks that cannot be handled at the lower levels. Subsidiary units get the prime focus. Just as in BCCs the insistence is to be on non-dominating leadership, the BHCs too work for a world where no domination is tolerated. Just as BCCs are a way of ensuring a Church from below, BHCs are for ushering in a world which is from below and where the least too matter. BCCs aim at a participatory Church. BHCs aim at a participatory world. BCCs are ecclesial communities. BHCs could be called 'Kingdom Communities'.

## 2. BHCs as a Kingdom Strategy

Our next task is to point out that building Basic Human Communities forms part of the core mission of the Church. That it is not an option but a contextual necessity arising out of the very cause that gives the justification for the very existence of the Church. Church - the *ecclesia* - exists for the Kingdom. Church is the "coming together" or the community of disciples who hear the Good News of the Kingdom Jesus preached and commit themselves to realize it. Thus the core task of the Church, even as that of the Master, is to build the Kingdom of God. What is this Kingdom task? For too long the Kingdom-concern suffered on account of an overly other-wordly approach. One of the factors that caused this was the expression St. Mathew used in deference to the mentality of his target audience, the Jews. As the Jews were not comfortable with using the word, "God", and preferred to say "heaven will reward you" rather than "God will reward you", St. Mathew opted for the expression, "Kingdom of heaven" instead of "Kingdom of God". This lead many to think that the only job of the Church was to send people to heaven. This misunderstanding is happily being corrected.

The Kingdom task is to usher in a world, on earth, where, as in heaven, the Father's will is done - the will of God, which is love - love that wills for the fullness of life for all. The Church is to lay down its life even as the Master to usher in the Kingdom

- where people will get their daily bread; where people will forgive one another even as the Father forgives;
- where the Lord's mighty arm will scatter the proud - the conceited - in the imagination of their hearts;

- where the highly placed will be thrown away from their thrones and the lowly placed will be given high places;
- where the rich will be sent away empty and the poor will be filled with good things;
- where the prostitutes and the tax-collectors will enter before the scribes; and
- where the rich man will not enter even if a camel passes through the eye of a needle.

### **Task along with Others**

But happily the Church is not to shoulder this immense task all alone. It is not the only agent of God for the Kingdom. As stated in the Vat II document on relations with the people of other faiths, the Spirit of God has been at work in various religions. Where the Spirit inspires, it is always to ensure that the will of the Father is done, that the Father reigns, that the Kingdom of love is realized. The invitation to the Church today is to join, beyond religious divides, with all persons of good will to usher in the Kingdom.

### **BHCs as the Structural Tool for the Kingdom**

Where do the BHCs come in this task that the Church has to do together with other religions? The Kingdom, in realizing a world where all God's children are ruled by love, is to be characterized by a preferential option for the poor. "Blessed are the poor, for theirs is the Kingdom of God." Two aspects of BHCs make them the most effective structural tool today for the realization of this preferential option for the poor. One: the smallness of the forums they provide. The other: the structural networking. We begin with the principle related to the size of forums: the bigger the forum you are in, the bigger a voice you need to get across. The not-so-big-voices, the voices of the poor, get lost and go unheard in bigger forums.

I am reminded in this connection of an observation by our layman saint and martyr, St. Thomas Moore, who served as the Chancellor in British Government and who authored *Utopia*. People who didn't share his values found the ideals expressed in *Utopia* unrealistic. Hence the term 'utopian' for everything that is not 'practical'. According to St. Thomas Moore, governments are plots of the rich. Against whom? Evidently against the poor. How? My reasoning is as follows. The poor, if they are given a voice,

would demand their right to the fullness of life and this would not be in the interests of the rich. The poor are somehow to be prevented from having their say. How to do this? The answer is simple: Make the talking-forums big. Thus come about big parliamentary constituencies where the poor have no voice except as a token vote in every five years or so. Thus the big 'voices' get elected and then on it is a game of the big. The Government of the big, by the big and for the big; of the rich, by the rich and for the rich. The poor will continue to be poor as long as the talking-forums - the parliaments - are controlled by the rich. It is not the basic needs of the poor like food, clothing, shelter etc. that would occupy the minds of such rich people. Such are distant issues for the rich. As long as such rich voices continue to have their exclusive say as ensured by the bigness of these parliaments, the poor cannot hope for a better deal. All they would get may just be a lip service and the grounds under their feet will continue to be eroded. How to beat this plot and make the poor have their say and thus have their way? The answer is, again, simple: make the talking-forums small. This means that we have, instead of big parliamentary constituencies, parliaments that are small enough that small people find them handleable - parliaments at grassroots. And Basic Human Communities are just that.

When such communities - such neighbourhood parliaments - are organized at the base and networked through representative structures at various levels like that of the village, panchayat, block, district, state, nation etc. - to form village parliaments, panchayat parliaments, block parliaments, state parliaments, national parliaments, international regional parliaments and the world parliament - people can have scope for a democracy that functions on a day-to-day basis. Once networked properly, any constructive action, campaign or struggle can be effectively handled through such networks to ensure the well-being of all in various ways. Such neighbourhood forums and their networks could mean that the governance is always under the control of the people, especially the poor as the poor are always in the majority; people, especially the poor, have scope to participate in, monitor and control processes and programmes that affect them; people have forums to come together as people and identify, discuss and decide on the challenges they have and the options before them. Such neighbourhood forums and networks could also ensure better representative character, better transparency, better

answerability and accountability, better organizability, better coverage, permanency and sustainability of structures and processes. When the poor really begin having their say through such small neighbourhood parliaments and their representative networks at ever wider levels, they will have control over decisions and processes that affect them and it will be for their liberation and for their rightful place in the society. The world then comes to the hands of the poor.

### **BHCs and Dialogue at the Base**

They could also help in various other ways. Such forums could also give a 'we'-feeling, a sense of belonging, a sense of togetherness and fellowship, etc. Such Basic Human Communities could also be the forums for inter-religious dialogue at the base. For too long our dialogue processes were elitist and cerebral. The dialogue, again is not just to be one of ideas but also one of life and action. Dialogue, again, must come to the grassroots and become a people's movement. Basic Human Communities offer the best scope for it. In these Basic Communities, people could share the 'treasures' given by God through the various religious traditions, as the Vat II puts it. They could communicate among themselves on the values and demands of the Kingdom. They could begin and live up to the ideals of the Kingdom, pray for the coming of the Kingdom and work towards its realization in the wider world.

### **How Viable?**

All that we said above would appear a mere dream unless, before we proceed further, we add a few words regarding their viability. Actually it is not difficult to organize such communities. All you need to do is identify the various such neighbourhoods and ensure they have each an answerability structure in terms of the elected/selected offices-bearers like president, vice-president etc. But we should involve all - people of various faiths, governmental people, non-governmental organizations etc. - from the very beginning. It is they who will have to ensure the on-going follow-up.

Fortunately the neighbourhood groups are becoming the in-thing. In Kanyakumari the entire district is being organized into neighbourhood governance communities and their networks in a joint secular effort. It has already 5245 such grassroots parliaments all federated into 2002 village parliaments, 125 panchayat

parliaments, 9 block parliaments and a district parliament. Says Mr. Christopher, an activist, "By the time we organize 12,000 parliaments in total, the district would already have come to the hands of the people". In Kerala, the Left Democratic Front government introduced 'Neighbourhood Sabhas' of about fifty families in 215 of its panchayats. Here the planning began at these neighbourhood sabhas themselves and was taken further to the village sabhas and panchayats. And the 'Neighbourhood Sabhas' continued to involve by the way of doing community monitoring, social auditing etc. Seeing the Kerala experiment, the Singh Committee set up to study ways and means to improve the functioning of panchayats has recommended the integration of such neighbourhood sabhas or *ayalkootams* in the panchayat raj structure. In Kerala and in Kanyakumari District children's/adolescents' neighbourhood forums too are formed and networked simultaneously. In a village in Kanyakumari District, we had an interesting experience of linking the school and the neighbourhood communities. Children in the school were grouped according to the neighbourhood communities they came from and were guided to take responsibility for communicating relevant messages and doing things in their respective neighbourhoods. Such initiatives are undertaken throughout the world. Tamilnadu State Taskforce for Adolescents has integrated the neighbourhood approach in their strategy for the integral growth of the adolescents. Hundreds of thousands of poor women are organized in self-help groups all over the country. And these could be turned into neighbourhood groups. Some friends are trying to get these neighbourhood sabhas pushed into the Indian Constitution too as done through 73 & 74 Amendments relating to Panchayats and Nagar Palika. The movement for such neighbourhood-community based approach is promoted by national and international agencies including United Nations agencies like UNICEF.

At the ecclesial realm, the Commission for the Interreligious Dialogue of the Tamilnadu Bishop's Council (TNBC), the TNBC Commission for Education, Catholic Health Association of Tamilnadu etc. have opted for the neighbourhood-based approach. The CCBI Commission for Dialogue too has already conducted a seminar on the same. The Conference of the Catholic Bishops of India came out at the end of their Millennium Conference held in Calcutta in 2001 with the following statement:

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

The movement is also finding enthusiastic response from people of other religions. Siddha Samadhi Yoga by Guruji Rishi Prabhakar, for example, with nearly 20 training Centers, situated in the nation and abroad, and with over 25 million trained disciples have taken it as their main agenda.

### 3. Strengthening Each Other

The next task is to allay the fears that Basic Human Communities will weaken the Basic Christian Communities and to clarify confusions related to the actual functioning of the two types of basic communities.

#### Relevance of BCCs amidst BHCs

I happened to be a part of the team conducting a two-day session on Laity in a Participatory Church, during the Millennium Conference of the Conference of Catholic Bishops of India. Asked a bishop: "Will BCCs be still needed when we have Basic Human Communities?" My answer: "As long as we need a Church to help bring about the Kingdom of God, we need Basic Christian Communities while we promote Basic Human Communities". Basic Christian Communities are supposed to be mini-Churches and the Basic Human Communities are, so to say, to be mini units of the Kingdom. Just as Church is to be a community of disciples committing themselves for the Kingdom of God, so too are Basic Christian Communities to be discipleship communities nourishing the apostles to promote Basic Human Communities. BCCs, so to say, are the training grounds and the BHCs the arenas for action.

Church has a two fold a task: to build itself as the community of disciples who are ready to lay down their lives for the Kingdom; and also, as a community ready to risk itself for the Kingdom, to build commitment within, and actually to commit itself along with others. One is pastoral or ecclesial, and the other is reaching out. BCCs as we mentioned earlier come in the pastoral or ecclesial

realm. They are pastoral or ecclesial units. BHCs on the other hand are in the Kingdom realm, where, together with people of other faiths, we work at the wide world and for the wide world which God loved so much that He gave His only son. We could then say, just as the Church exists for the Kingdom, the Basic Christian Communities exist for the Basic Human Communities or 'Kingdom communities'.

### **In Practice**

We envision a situation where, Catholics/Christians in parishes form their own Basic Christian Communities along with other Catholics/Christians, and at the same time join with people of other faiths and ideologies to form Basic Human communities. It is like a Catholic living in a parish where people of other faiths also live. He along with fellow Christians goes to the Church, and along with fellow humans of other faiths goes to the panchayat office. In situations where all in the neighbourhood are Catholics, both the BCCs and the BHCs will be the same. But in situations where people of various faiths live together in the neighbourhoods it cannot but be separate. In places where the BCCs and the BHCs are the same, the members and the office-bearers will as BCCs report to the Pastoral councils, and as BHCs to the civic structures like the councils of panchayats, blocks, districts etc. With some creativity a lot of adjustments and accommodations could be made for the effective functioning of both.

### **Strengthening Interaction**

BHCs, in fact, can strengthen the BCCs, rather than weaken them. What strengthens any group is also its goal-orientation. Any group without any task to achieve tends to disintegrate and get entangled in meaningless details. A strong vision-orientation on the other hand can mean a lot of dynamism and ability to overlook the minor tensions that might arise along the process of the life of the groups/communities. BHCs in the vicinity of BCCs could be a constant reminder of the vision challenge that the BCCs are to have as ecclesial communities and thus invigourate Basic Christian Communities. Many individuals and committees would find it difficult to translate visions into concrete action responses unless some clear-cut action-arena is given to them. Here BHCs serve BCCs by providing them with specific and concrete action arenas and thus facilitate initiation into action. And this will strengthen the BCCs filling it with dynamism.

This facilitation of initiation into action has a unique scope in the ever-widening network structure of BHCs. BCCs could begin their involvement in the small neighbourhood communities and as they get more adept could use higher levels of the network for actions of wider impact for the Kingdom. What would be needed for BCCs in the face of BHCs is the imitation of Christ in his pastoral ministry where it is in dying that we rise to new life. Over-preoccupation with one's identity and security at the risk of one's mission ill-behoves discipleship-communities of the crucified-died-and-risen master. Well, to cut short, if the BCCs and BHCs join hands a people's structure can very well be formed and sustained unto making a more humane world, a world where the reign of love prevails.

Let me conclude this with a parable that capsules the essence of the Basic Communities as for the scope for participation and empowerment they offer.

Once upon a time....

The whole world was full of basketball grounds.

People played in small groups and were happy.

Then some said:

'Let us make it a game of the big.

Let us make the balls and the grounds big'.

Then they made

small Kingdoms,

big state assemblies,

national parliaments,

globalization structures

and the world was in the hands of the big.

The poor lost their footing.

Then the call came again:

'Let us get all the people

play again'.

And then...

They made the grounds and balls small again -

Came Panchayats.

Even that wasn't small enough;

So came 'Neighbourhoodization' ✓

And

Everyone played happily ever after.