

BCCS AND HINDU – CHRISTIAN RELATIONSHIP

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The Indian subcontinent has played a significant role in the religious and spiritual history of humankind. Primeval religions as well as all major religious traditions of humanity have found a place in this civilizational zone. It is striking that during India's millennial history, by and large, there prevailed religious understanding and tolerance. If practice of respect for the sacred in the experience of others marked the daily lives of the people, philosophical reflections centred on the innumerable expressions of the Ultimate Mystery inspired their vision of life.

The long association of India with tolerance, which has been universally considered as a great contribution of the country to humanity, has unfortunately been marred in modern times. Religious conflicts and tensions have been steadily rising and have exploded into open violence victimizing many people in different parts of the nation. While there are historical, social and political causes explaining the conflicts, the attitude and approaches of religions across boundaries is a major contributive factor. Therefore, a meaningful presence and interpretation of any religion calls for an introspection into its own self-understanding from the multi-religious context as well as its relationship with others.

The programme of Basic Christian Communities (BCCs) which originated in Latin America is gaining momentum and

popularity in many parts of the world today.¹ It can be understood as an attempt by the Christian Churches to interpret themselves from the perspective of the marginalized people. Awareness among the common men and women about the biblical roots of Christian life and the aspiration to integrate elements of their faith with life realities have given birth to the formation of Basic Communities in the Christian Churches.² BCCs, have made their appearance in Asia since 1970, and Philippines is the pioneer to form such communities.³ The role of FABC in promoting these communities as a form of Christian life appropriate to our times is

¹ One can find the presence of BCCs in Latin America, Europe, Africa and Asia. Cf. A. Maria David, *Hindu-Christian Relationship and Basic Christian communities in the District of Kanyakumari*, unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Madras, Chennai, 1999, 113.

² For a detailed study of the origin, functioning relevance and orientations of Basic Christian Communities, cf. Sergio Torres and John Eaglesonrs, ed. *The Challenge of Basic Christian Communities*, Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1981; Frances O'Gorman, *Base Communities in Brazil: Dynamics of a Journey*. Rio de Janerio, Brazil, 1983; Margarat Hebblethwaite, *Base Communities: An Introduction*, London: Geofbrey Chapman, 1993. Joseph Prasad Pinto. *Inculturation Through Basic Communities: An Indian Perspective*, Bangalore: ATC, 1985; Selvister Ponnnumuthan, *The Spirituality of Basic Ecclesial Communities in the Socio Religious Context of Trivandrum/Kerala, India*, Rome: Gregorian University Press, 1996; James Shagba Moti, *The Early Jerusalem Christian Community: A Biblical Model for Basic Ecclesial Communities*, Rome, 1983; Alvaro Barreiro, *Basic Ecclesial Communities: The Evangelization of the Poor*, Manyknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1984; James O'Halloran, *Living Cells: Developing Small Christian Communities*, Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1992; Guillermo Cook, *The Latin American Basic Ecclesial Communities in Protestant Perspective*, Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1998; Leonardo Boff, *The Base Communities Reinvent the Church*, London: Collins Publication, 1986; Marcello Azevedo, *Basic Ecclesial Communities in Brazil: The Challenge of a New Way of Being Church*, Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 1987; Dominique Barbe, *Grace and Power*, Washington, D.C., 1987; Dominique Barbe, *Grace and Power: Base Communities and Non-violence in Brazil*, Marykoll New York: Orbis Books, 1987;

³ Cf. T. Gresh, M.m. (Ed), *Basic Christian Communities in the Philippines*, Manila, 1977; B. Secondin, "Basic Christian Communities in Asia", in *PMV Bulletin*, 62(1976), 21-22; J.X. Labayan, "Basic Christian Communities", *Afer* 3(1988), 135-144; Gabino A Mendoza (ed), *Church of the People: The Basic Community, Experience in the Philippines*, Manila: Bishop's Business Conference for Human Development, 1988.

of paramount importance.⁴ Among the Asian countries, apart from the Philippines, BCCs are widely found in India, Sri Lanka, Malaysia and South Korea.

BCCs make their appearance in the Indian scene about the late 70s and in the beginning of the 80s. Initially many Church leaders were hesitant to promote them due to the fear of the threat to the existing structures and power equations in the Church. However, in the 90s they have found more acceptance among the Church leaders as well as among the people.⁵ The Catholic Bishops' Conference of India (CBCI) has proposed BCCs as the new way of being Church and the best form to tackle the pressing needs of the Church.⁶ At present, in many dioceses they are already functioning as a regular programme⁷ and in several places they are in the process of formation.

The response of the people to this programme of BCCs is also positive and in certain places they are highly enthusiastic about it. Because it opens up the possibility for the simple people in the Church to express the faith experience from their own perspective. People considered to be neglected and far from the Church are made to come closer and the Church not only speaks to them but also is able to listen and learn from them. In some places BCCs also play the role of breaking the established power structures in the Church and in villages and initiate a de-centralized and

⁴ The statement of the fifth plenary Assembly of the FABC, Bandung, nos 8.1.1. to 8.1.4. spelt out the necessity of forming Basic Christian Communities in the context of Asia for a meaningful Christian life and the theological characteristics of such communities.

⁵ BCCs have become the pastoral programs in many dioceses in India, such as Kottar, Bombay, Chennai-Mylapore, Latin Diocese of Trivandram, Neyyatiakara, Thoothukudi etc. BCCs are also formed in many Individual parishes under the care of the Jesuits throughout India. Cf. T.V. John, S.J., *Report on Small Communities*, JEPASA, 2-5

⁶ Final Statement of the General Meeting of CBCI, Pune, January 1992 and in Trivandrum, February, 1996. Cf. FILMC, *Handbook of Small Christian Communities for the Arch-diocese of Mumbai*, Dadar, Mumbai: Salvation Seva Kendra, 1996, 4-5.

⁷ In dioceses like Kottar, Mumbai, Trivandrum (Latin) and Chennai-Mylapore they function regularly.

participatory system of administration.⁸ Thus BCCs present a participatory and a people-centred model of the Church.

However, at this juncture we need to raise the broader question of religious pluralism in the subcontinent and the attitude of the BCCs towards other religions. It is possible that BCCs which have originated in Latin America, where 95% of the population is Christian, understand and organize themselves with exclusivist attitudes. In a country like India where 98% of the population is non-Christian and the majority are Hindus, one needs to give serious attention to the aspect of inter-religious relationship. Promotion of BCCs without fostering a positive attitude among the people towards other religions would again repeat the mistakes of the past.

The Experience of BCCs and Hindu-Christian Relationship in the District of Kanyakumari

The district of Kanyakumari in the state of Tamil Nadu is situated at the Southern end of India. Before independence it was part of the ancient Kingdom of Travancore. After independence, due to the abolition of the native states and re-organization of the states on linguistic basis, it was merged with the state of Madras, now called Tamil Nadu.

Christianity came to this area through foreign missionaries.⁹ St. Francis Xavier was instrumental in converting the fisher people of the coast in the district. Christians in the interior areas of the district owe their origin partly to the Madurai mission of the Jesuits in the beginning of the 18th century and the Mulagumoodu mission of the Carmelites in the 19th century. The Protestant Christians in the district have their origin through Tranquebar mission of the Danish, in the beginning of nineteenth century.

The religious composition of the district according to 1981 census report is: Hindus are 53.48%, Christians are 42.34% and the

⁸ In the district of Kanyakumari election to the parish administrative council is made through the BCCs Cf. A. Maria David, 173-75.

⁹ A. Maria David, 16-45

Muslims are 4.15%. The Hindus and Christians are almost equal not only numerically, but also in socio-political strength. This spectacular success of the missionary initiative in the district and the consequent socio-economic progress among the Christians draws the attention of anyone. It is also important to note that the district has also witnessed Hindu-Christian communal flareups for the last two decades. A historical review of the factors leading to communal incidents in the district can help us to find the right direction for the BCCs in the multi-religious context of India.

The Negative Attitude of the Missionaries towards Hinduism

The Christian missionaries had adopted an apologetic attitude towards Hinduism as their missionary strategy. In unequivocal terms they propagated that Christianity alone was salvific and all the other religions were mere idolatries. These were followed by attitudes of contempt towards the other religions; especially Hinduism. The Hindu deities were ridiculed as satans and devils. Hindu rituals, practices and festivals were termed as devil worship, madness and absurd.¹⁰ The people attending these feasts were called as “sensual idolaters”.¹¹

Ideologically too Christianity alone was considered to contain principles that are loftier, rational and progressive, while the principles and practices of Hinduism were considered to be destroying not only faith in God, but also those finer and loftier emotions and sentiments of human nature.¹² In his letter to Ignatius of Loyola in 1549, St. Francis Xavier describes the whole race of the Hindus as barbarous, bad, caring little for the knowledge of God, and with such a magnitude of sins that they are estimated to be unfit to receive the Gospel.¹³

¹⁰ Samuel Mateer, *The Land of Charity*, New Delhi: Asian Educational Services, 1870, 158.

¹¹ Ibid, 197. Cf. B. Wilson, *Protest and Absorption Process in Devasahayam Pillai Folk Drama: A Critical Study of a Nineteenth Century Tamil Folk Drama Performed in the Villages of South Travancore*, Unpublished thesis, July 1994, Department of Christian Studies, University of Madras, Chennai, 135-179.

¹² S. Mateer, 225-226

¹³ C. M. Agur, *Church History of Travancore*, New Delhi: Asian Educational Services, 1903, 211.

The Hindu *Puranas* and myths were considered to be superstitious, dirty, misleading¹⁴ and directed to forces of lower order such as the spirits of the dead and elements of nature, but not to the divine power.¹⁵ The malevolent forms of divine expression in Hinduism were considered to be outrageous.¹⁶ Hindu temples were considered to be dwellings of the devils or demons and the Christians were prohibited from visiting those temples. When Christians in the rural areas of the district of Kanyakumari casually refer to a staunch Hindu, the word often used by them in Tamil is *puzhutha Hindu* which means, rotten Hindu. But while referring to a staunch Christian, the word used is *Satiya Vedakaran*, which means a person of the true religion.¹⁷

These attitudes of prejudice and contempt towards the Hindu religion and its practices reflected the ignorance of the missionaries about the native religions in India as well as the exclusivist approach in Christian theology before Vatican II. However, in terms of relationship, it had created waves of prejudice, ignorance, suspicion and misunderstanding between Hindus and Christians. The Hindus felt offended about the sacrilegious attitude of the Christians towards the much cherished and long practiced traditions, rituals and practices of their religion.

Conflict Between Hindus and Christians in the Past

This despal of the native culture and religion by the missionaries as well as by the converts to Christianity made the political and religious leaders of the State of Travancore highly indignant, and provoked them to organize and express their protest against Christianity.

One of the earliest references to the resistance of Christianity was the persecution of the Christians at the coast by the senior queen of Travancore. The senior Rani of Travancore staying in Attingal, set on foot by herself on a rampage towards Christians

¹⁴ A. Susai Regis, *Veda Tharkkam*, Trichy: St. Joseph's Industrial School Press, 30.

¹⁵ B. Wilson, 126-127.

¹⁶ S. Mateer, 213-229.

¹⁷ Noticed by the author during his field visit to the rural areas of the district of Kanyakumari from 6.6.1987 to 30.12.1987.

living at the coast of Kanyakumari, in 1571 and 1574. During these persecutions, it is reported that three churches were burnt down.¹⁸

There are reports that during the persecution by Dewan Veluthambi, three thousand people and nine priests were tortured, killed and thrown into the backwaters.¹⁹ In 1780, Dewan Nagam Pillai of Travancore commenced a persecution in which, it is estimated that, around 20,000 Christians had to leave their homes and fled to the mountains. Anyone identified as a Christian, when caught, was killed immediately.²⁰

Certain times, resistance to Christianity had also taken political turns. One of the inner motives for the attempt of Dewan Veluthambi to wage a war against the British in order to overthrow them in 1809 was the fear of the spread of Christianity. This is clear from his letter addressed to Zamorin Raja in Malabar, where he mentions that the chief cause for his plans against the British was his apprehension about the spread of Christianity and the consequences related to it.²¹ Thus, Christianity and its members were looked upon as aliens to the socio-cultural, religious and political traditions of the country of Travancore.²²

Conflict Between Hindus and Christians in Recent Times

After the missionary periods, when one comes to the recent times, it is noticed that identity formation of the people and polarization of society in Travancore had taken place on the basis of religion, as Hindus and Christians.²³ As a result, the socio-economic upliftment led to the self-assertion of the Hindus and

¹⁸ G.T. Mackenzie, *Christianity in Travancore*, Trivandrum: Travancore Government Press, 1901,15, V.Nagam Aiya, *The Travancore State Manual*, Vol.II, Madras: Asian Educational Services, 1989,154.

¹⁹ Ibid, 52

²⁰ Ibid, 58

²¹ Thornton, *History of the British Empire in India*, Vol.IV, 237 & C.M. Agur, 57.

²² For the strain in relationship between Hindus and Christians during missionary times, I am putting forward only the religious reasons. However it is to be noted that there are also other reasons such as the socio-economic upliftment of the lower castes effected by their conversion to Christianity and the identification of the Christians with the foreigners politically as well as culturally. But no doubt, the religious reasons have played a major role in building up the conflict as shown here. Cf.A. Maria David, 59-67.

²³ For a detailed study of the factors which were involved in the process of identity formation based on religion, C. A. Maria David, 68-72.

Christians against each other. Disputes crept over places of worship and symbols, right to propagate respective religions, changing the names of places, etc. Accusations began about the violations of each other's right to practice their religion, and their right to propagation. Criticism of each other's religious symbols, practices and traditions also started. Separate unity conferences were conducted by Christians as well as Hindus. Finally it took the turn of open violence in Mandaikadu in which six Christians were killed in March 1982, which was followed by large-scale violence and riots in the district.²⁴

BCCs Approach to Other Religions

When a 'missionary' religion enters into a society with deep-rooted socio-religious traditions, conflicts and tensions are inevitable. If the new religion is supported by political powers and carries a distinct cultural identity, tensions become more serious and sharper creating permanent cleavages in the society.²⁵

In the context of firm and deep-rooted faith in Hinduism, the advent and missionary ventures of Christianity coupled with foreign political powers was perceived as a threat by the Hindus and therefore was resisted by them.²⁶ When the Christians also began to assert themselves in recent times, communal explosions followed.

In the present communally charged situation of India, traditional outlook on the part of Christianity towards other religions would inevitably lead to religious tension, especially Hindu-Christian conflict. This is all the more so, if Hindus and Christians are concentrated in the same area. Therefore learning from the past, Christianity needs to re-define its approach towards other religions. We need to shed off the monopolistic, self-righteous, apologetic and exclusivist tendencies of the past and

²⁴ For a detailed study on the conflict between Hindus and Christians in recent times, and the factors behind it cf. A. Maria David, 76-112.

²⁵ George Mathe, "Hind - Christian Communalism: An Analysis of Kanyakumari Riots" *Social Action*, 33/4, Oct-Dec 1983, 407.

²⁶ Cf. Koji Kawashima, *Missionaries and the Hindu State of Travancore, 1858-1936*, Oxford University Press, 1998.

learn to relate with other religions with mutual respect, dialogue and collaboration towards common social concerns.²⁷

BCCs are understood not merely as pious associations or administrative units of the Church, but as Churches themselves, Churches in mini forms.²⁸ Therefore they need to be sensitive to the presence of other religions around and promote dialogical approach in their life and functions. This is not only a social necessity but also a theological imperative. The contextual ecclesiology evolving from within the Indian experience moots a dialogical approach. BCCs, as Churches in the true sense, need to give expression to this inter-religious dimension. The recent religio-cultural revival in Hinduism and the ideology of 'Hindutva' being advocated by political groups, place special responsibility on the BCCs regarding their relationship with the social and religions aspects in Hinduism and the people belonging to it.

Therefore inter-religions dimension is not merely decorative or secondary in BCCs. But their very self – understanding, structures and functioning are to be evolved from this context of religious pluralism. Conscious efforts are to be taken to educate the members of BCCs on a positive approach towards other religions and encourage collaboration with them on common ventures.

BCCs and Hindu-Christian Relationship in the District of Kanyakumari

In the district of Kanyakumari, BCCs were first formed in 1979, in a village called Kodimunai. After the Hindu-Christian riots in 1982, they spread to other villages, and by 1990 they became a popular programme in the diocese of Kottar. From the very beginning one notices in them a conscious attempt to promote Hindu-Christian understanding and relationship. One of the chief objectives of the programme was to transcend the barriers of caste and religion. The priests of the diocese of Kottar, while discussing on the BCCs decided that they have to not only transcend the religious barriers, but also function as agents of communal

²⁷ Ibid, 28-29.

²⁸ Cf. Marcello Azevedo, *Basic Ecdesial Communities in Brazil: The Challenge of a New Way of Being Church*, Washington, D.C.: George town University Press, 1987, 177-230; Gulliermo Cook, 71-79.

harmony.²⁹ The central executive committee meeting of the BCCs in 1993 decided to give priority to the theme of religious harmony in all its programmes for the whole year.³⁰

Educative Programmes on Communal Harmony

Since the missionary period, Christians have been taught to be negative regarding other religions. Traditional Christians consider anything connected with Hinduism as evil and devilish. But BCCs have taken initiative to create a positive outlook among the Christians about other religions and to promote social relationship with them. It is reported that training sessions were conducted for BCCs members about the evils of communalism and the necessity of inter-religious dialogue.³¹ The official news bulletin *Adithalam* continuously carried on discussions about the need for Hindu-Christian harmony.³² Conducting public meetings, making religious harmony as the theme for the annual day celebrations, performing cultural programmes on religious harmony are some of the means followed to create public awareness on Hindu-Christian relationship.³³

²⁹ *Adithalam*, 13 (August 15, 1992), 3. *Adithalam* is the official news bulletin and guide to conduct weekly meetings of the BCCs in the district of Kanyakumari.

³⁰ *Adithalam* 130 (February 27, 1993).

³¹ On November 25, 1990 in the training sessions in Thalavaipuram and Tamaraikulam BCCs twenty two members participated. Cf. *Adithalam*, 130, (February 27, 1993)

³² Two issues of *Adithalam* were entirely devoted to the reflections on communalism. In four issues, the editorial reflections were devoted to the theme of communal harmony. In these reflections, the Christians were asked to shed off the negative attitude of the past towards the Hindus and develop a positive approach. Educative process through *Adithalam* is powerful because every week people read *Adithalam* and discuss the reflections and take resolutions.

³³ The BCCs in Vavaru Villai, near Vavarai, arranged three days of public meeting on religious harmony. Hindu, Christian and Islamic leaders participated in the meeting. Cf. *Adithalam* 247 (July 15, 1998). The BCCs in Simon Colony, near Colachal, celebrated October 22, 1994 as a day of religious harmony and conducted public meeting on religious harmony. Cf. *Adithalam* 214 (November 5, 1994). Similarly the BCC in Mulagumoodu had the annual day celebration in 1993 as the communal harmony day. Cf. *Adithalam* 206 (September 10, 1994) and 164 (November 6, 1993).

Celebrating the Festivals of Other Religions

In the context of religious pluralism in India, it is common to see the people of one religion having a social participation in the festivals of others. But celebrating festivals of other religions as a religious group needs a conscious decision and purpose. Traditional Christians avoid even a social participation in the Hindu festivals. In the district of Kanyakumari, the Christians being traditional and concentrated, do not pay much attention to the Hindu festivals. But the BCCs introduced the practice of celebrating Deepavali, Onam and Pongal in their communities.³⁴

In the place called Mulloorthurai, BCCs have Muslims as their neighbours. In view of promoting inter-religious relationship in the area, they sent their wishes and greetings to the Muslim neighbours, on the festival of Bakrit. The text of the message was published in the news bulletin *Adithalam* and other BCCs were also exhorted to follow the same example.³⁵

Inter-religious BCCs

Realizing the need for dialogue, interaction and collaboration with people of other religions the BCCs decided to establish wherever possible inter-religious communities. As the first step, one community was started in a place called Chunkankadai, with members from different religions. Leaders of different religions came together and participated in the prayer session and in the public meeting held in connection with it.³⁶ The attempt was on an experimental basis and in the long run it did not function regularly.

But in other places, inter-religious communities sprang up spontaneously. In the village called Mathal there are three inter-religious communities, numbered as 3, 5, and 8. A description of

³⁴ It is reported that Pongal was celebrated in the BCCs in Pallam, Vaniakudi and Rajakamangalam. Cf. *Adithalam* 27 (January 20, 1992). On 24.10.1995, Deepavali was celebrated in the BCCs in Vellicode together with the Hindu neighbours. Cf. *Adithalam* 264 (November 11, 1995).

³⁵ *Adithalam* 95 (June 20, 1992).

³⁶ *Adithalam* 198 (July 16, 1994)

their functioning would be helpful to consider the possibility of forming such communities in other places too.

In BCC no.3, there are 60 families who are members. Among them 20 are Hindus, 10 are Muslims and the rest 30 are Christians. In regular weekly meetings, passages from the Bible are read. Passages from the Quran and Begavad Gita are read on alternative weeks. During any major Hindu, Christian, Muslim festival special meetings are conducted and passages from the Holy Books of all the three religions are read.³⁷

When the readings from the Holy Books are read, the members give interpretation to the text read. The following passage is found in the report book of the community:

A passage from the Bhagavad Gita, 9th chapter, was read. Then many, Hindus, Christians and Muslims in the group, interpreted it based on their experiences. Finally, as the message for the group from Gita, it was accepted that one who is devoted to God never forgets Him. He always lives with God.³⁸

Report of another week in the same community says, "A reading from Bhagavad Gita was read and explained. Finally as the message for the week it was accepted that when one controls the mind he receives all goods."³⁹ Another report goes thus: "Pongal was celebrated on 16-1-1993. Many Hindu brethren came and participated. Messrs. Sanmugasundaran, Iyyappan and Murugan came as special guests and participated in it."⁴⁰

These communities do not stop their inter-religious concerns with meetings alone. They come together often to collaborate on common ventures related to the village. They have conducted joint

³⁷ Information regarding the inter-religious BCCs in Mathal and in particular about the no. 3 community was received by the author during an interview held by him with its secretary Miss Beula. This community is located in Veeravillai colony, Mathal.

³⁸ Report Book of 3rd BCC, Mathal, 103.

³⁹ Ibid, 104

⁴⁰ Report Book of the 3rd BCC 1993,16.

demonstrations to press for the demand to build a bridge needed in the village and to lay a drainage system.⁴¹

Apart from the inter-religious BCCs, in several places the Hindu neighbours participate in the weekly meetings. It is to be noted that among 23 BCCs interviewed by this author, in 10 of them people of other religions participated in the meetings.⁴² It was also reported that this participation of the Hindus in the meeting facilitated further the collaboration among different religious groups for the common causes of the village. When the Christians in these communities were asked about their feelings with regard to the opening up of the BCCs to the neighbouring Hindus, they were all happy about it.⁴³

Social Concern across Religious Boundaries

The BCCs in the district of Kanyakumari involve themselves in several social welfare activities, like providing food materials for the poor, helping the sick and the old for medical care, rendering financial assistance to the poor students and poor girls for marriage etc.⁴⁴ The benefits of these welfare services are not limited to the Christians alone. They are open to all. The annual reports of the BCCs maintained as records, as well as those published in *Adithalam* reveal several instances of non-Christians benefiting from these social service activities. What is more important is that when a suffering neighbour who is a Hindu or a Muslim, is brought to the notice of the members of the BCCs there is no

⁴¹ Information regarding this collaboration for public good and common cause in these inter-religious communities was received during the interview by the author with the secretary of the no.3 community, Miss.Beula, on 11.10.1998, in Mathal.

⁴² Weekly meetings are an important part of BCCs. Prayer, discussion on useful matters such as health and hygiene, education, small savings and matters pertaining to the village and families, exhibition of talents by the members, small savings, cultural performances etc, take place.

⁴³ The author has visited large number of BCCs in the district of Kanyakumari in the years 1997-1998. In-depth interviews regarding the inter-religious dimension were conducted in 23 BCCs. Cf. A. Maria David, 213-270.

⁴⁴ The author has scrutinized and analyzed the report of the BCCs in their news bulletin, *Adithalam*, from January 1990 to December 1998. Service activities of the BCCs are reported

hesitation on their part due to the difference in religion. But they willingly come forward to help them depending on the availability of resources.⁴⁵

In some of the places the BCCs take up the common social causes and mobilize the people. Such open attitude and dialogical relationship of the BCCs prompt the neighboring Hindus too, to join them.⁴⁶

Conclusion

The experience of BCCs in the district of Kanyakumari indicates that the attempt to interpret the Christian faith from the perspective of the people gives it a right direction with regard to openness and dialogue with other religions. However such an understanding is very much limited to the academic circles only. In the pastoral programmes, it does not find much expression.

In BCCs, where people take the lead in interpreting the Christian life, there is a possibility for an open attitude with people of other religions. Due to practical necessities of life and long standing tradition of tolerance among them which is the heritage of our soil, ordinary people are better disposed to practice religious harmony. Therefore, while BCCs take shape in several parts of our country the inter-religious dimension should not be forgotten. The multi-religious context of India warrants that BCCs need to be promoted as open and dialogical communities which define their identities not in exclusion but in relation to other religious traditions among whom we live.

⁴⁵ Cf *Adithalam* 27 (January 20, 1991), 223 (January 1995), 216 (November 19, 1994), 224 (June 24 1995), 265 (November, 1995), 261 (October 21, 1995).

⁴⁶ During the interview of the BCC no.10 in a village called Ponnaravillai on 20.8.1997 the members informed this author that they took collective effort together with the Hindus living in the village for a road facility and drinking water for the village. During the interview of BCC no.2 in Mulavilai on 1.11.1997 the members reported that they took initiative to lay a concrete pathway for 300 meters and the neighboring Hindus joined this collective venture.