

# Basic Ecclesial Communities: Fertile Ground for Social and Religious Harmony

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**Abstract:** Religious intolerance and blatant polarization along the lines of caste, colour, and racial differences are on the rise in India, a trend that has been compounded by the explicit religious nationalism of the incumbent ruling party, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). In the face of this rising intolerance and polarization, a substantial number of Indians from different demographics have begun to envision and participate in people-centred initiatives to nurture religious and social harmony. The present article proposes that Basic Ecclesial Communities – a practical, resourceful, and sustainable means of fostering community and religious harmony through interfaith sharing, hospitality, and a welcoming mindset – represent an impactful contribution to this effort.

**Keywords:** Basic Ecclesial Communities, Religious and Social Harmony, Hindutva, Religious Polarization, Inter-Religious Collaboration

This article proposes that Basic Ecclesial Communities (BECs)<sup>1</sup> have the potential to become important social healers and agents of change in the fight against intolerance and rising polarization in Indian society. BECs first emerged in South America in the 1960s as organic manifestations of the spiritual life and needs of communities of lay people and have since emerged in other contexts and become somewhat of a global phenomenon. As BECs arose without any detailed, comprehensive, or pre-drafted plan for their initiation, it cannot be said that BECs in India were created as a way for Indian Catholics to deal with religious nationalism (i.e., Hindutva) or the environment of social disharmony that it has been linked with. Despite not being specifically created for this purpose, BECs can represent important facilitators of both intra- and interreligious social harmony, as will be argued below.

This article is divided into seven sections. The first section of the article sheds critical light on religious nationalism in India. The second section analyses the theological foundations of BECs and their pastoral relevance for the Church. The third section explains in detail the origin and historical development of BECs, the role of the episcopal conferences in establishing them, as well as their positive influence on the life of the Church in South America, Africa, and Asia. The fourth section describes the papal recognition of BECs, while the subsequent section deals with the role of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of India (CBCI) in the establishment of the BECs in India. It also discusses the founding of the Developing Indian Integral Pastoral Approach (DIIPA) to sustain BECs in India. The penultimate section attempts to highlight how BECs build fraternity in neighbourhoods and inter-faith

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1. In the Catholic Church, BECs are variously known as *Communities of Hope*, *Communion of Communities*, *A New Way of Being Church*, *Church on the Move*, *Basic Christian Communities*, *Small Christian Communities*, *Covenantal Communities*, *Eucharistic Communities*, and *Intentional Christian Communities*. In the continents of Africa and Asia, they are called *Small Christian Communities* (SCCs). The Church in the Philippines refers to them as *Basic Christian Communities* (BCCs), and they are called *Lagu Khristiya Samudaya* in the states of India where people largely speak Hindi. In the Indian state of Tamil Nadu BECs are known as *Anbiyam*, which means a movement/organization that is fueled by love or that is solely moved by/with love. During the Covid-19 pandemic, the Conference of Catholic Bishops in India (CCBI) of the Latin Rite opted for the use of *Basic Ecclesial Communities* (BECs) instead of *Small Christian Communities* (SCCs). This article will use BECs.

collaborations in India. The conclusion emphasizes the benefit of viewing BECs as social healers and reconcilers<sup>2</sup> – which is to say, as communities that are planting the seeds of social and religious harmony and respect for diversity in India.

### **Religious Nationalism in India: Belligerent Political Polarization and Its Impact**

This section examines how the Hindutva ideology has effectively penetrated various spheres of life in India and gained currency through Hindutva-inspired cultural and socio-political organizations, including political parties. India is a land of diverse cultures, religions, languages, and ethnicities. It is also a land of great economic and social disparity. It is a diverse and complicated country with an ancient history and entrenched traditions. The hardening of the boundaries of Hinduism – and the narrow interpretative frameworks that underlie this trend – can be traced back to the Hindutva movement, a movement which is vehemently propagated by the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). This Hindu nationalist movement has led to rising xenophobia and threats to religious minorities (mainly Muslims and Christians) across India, and, accordingly, has adversely impacted internal Indian politics in innumerable ways.<sup>3</sup>

In the new saffron-tainted India, icons of secular humanism – who framed India’s religious pluralism as a strength – are being supplanted by patron saints of Hindutva.<sup>4</sup> As a result, the conflicts and communal riots between religious communities that marked the pre-independence period continue to be widespread to this day. Mahatma Gandhi, the Father of Indian Nation, was disappointed over the growing violence within Indian society. He was deeply saddened by the Hindu nationalist movement’s chauvinistic attacks on Indian Muslims. Sadly, he was assassinated by an extremist belonging to the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS),<sup>5</sup> and the contemporary socio-cultural fabric of India continues to be torn apart by the divisive forces<sup>6</sup> belonging to the RSS and its offshoots.

Mr. Modi, the serving Prime Minister of India, is an ardent supporter of Hindutva<sup>7</sup> – so much so that the term Hindutva is sometimes now referred to as Moditva. This ideology/political movement continues to violate human rights in a pluralistic India.<sup>8</sup> Many well-researched books and works on the Gujarat riots have exposed Modi’s provincial government in Gujarat as being complicit.<sup>9</sup> Mr. Keshubhai

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2. Paul Samasumo, “Kenyan Loreto Sister Teaching Non-Violent Conflict Resolution,” *Vatican News*, December 16, 2022, <https://www.vaticannews.va/en/church/news/2022-12/sisters-project-kenya-loreto-nun-non-violence.html>.

3. Paul Pudussery, “Minority Victimization,” *Indian Currents Journalism with a Soul A Voice for the Voiceless*, December 12, 2022, <https://www.indiancurrents.org/article-minority-victimization-dr-paul-pudussery-1478.php>.

4. Mathew John, “Laboratory of Hate,” *Indian Currents*, December 19, 2022, <https://www.indiancurrents.org/article-laboratory-of-hate-mathew-john-1482.php>.

5. Paul S. Rowe, *Religion and Global Politics* (Don Mills, ON: Oxford University Press, 2012), 137.

6. “Bharat Jodo Yatra,” accessed December 17, 2022, <https://www.bharatjodoyatra.in/>.

7. Ishadrita Lahiri, “‘Believe in Bharat Jodo,’ Rahul to Visit Vajpayee Memorial during Yatra in Delhi,” *The Print*, December 24, 2022, <https://theprint.in/india/believe-in-bharat-jodo-rahul-to-visit-vajpayee-memorial-during-yatra-in-delhi/1280273/>.

8. Cedric Prakash, “The Politicization of Hindu Faith in India,” *Open Global Rights*, April 30, 2014, <https://www.openglobalrights.org/politicization-of-hindu-faith-in-india/>.

9. In 2002, following a fire on a train at Godhra in Gujarat which led to the death of 59 Hindu pilgrims, the state of Gujarat found itself swept up in a sea of interreligious violence directed at the state’s Muslim population. For more on Modi’s complacency in these riots, see: Siddharth Varadarajan, *The Making of a Tragedy* (New Delhi: Penguin Books, 2002); Harsh Mander, *Between Memory and Forgetting: Massacre and the Modi Years* (New Delhi: Yoda Press, 2019); Rana Ayup, *Gujarat Files: The Anatomy of a Cover-up* (self-pub: Amazon, 2016); Ashish Ketan, *Under-cover: My Journey into the Darkness of Hindutva* (Chennai: Context, an imprint of Westland Publications Private Limited, 2021).

Patel, the former chief minister of Gujarat state, even labelled Modi the Hitler of Gujarat.<sup>10</sup> The cogency of this label is bolstered by the fact that school textbooks in Gujarat depict Adolf Hitler as a strong administrator without making mention of the Holocaust.<sup>11</sup>

Moditva fosters hostility and creates an ecosystem of fear and discord. Mr. Amit Shah, the current Home Minister of India, openly acknowledged the role of the BJP in the killing of Gujarat Muslims during the riots, and used this to appeal to the people of Gujarat to vote for the BJP during the election campaign held in Mahudha of the Kheda District in Gujarat.<sup>12</sup> This is just one example of how the BJP tends to inflame public sentiments by sowing hatred towards their own nationals to garner votes<sup>13</sup> during electoral campaigns.<sup>14</sup> Hate speech keeps the political careers of the proponents of Hindutva secure in India, which allows them to succeed in communalizing large sections of society against religious minorities.<sup>15</sup> Social media is also used to spread hate messages and polarize Hindus, the majority community in India.<sup>16</sup> As Paul S. Rower summarizes,

Frustration with the persistence of challenges to Indian security and the continuing polarization of religion in various parts of India continue to threaten communal peace [...]. Religious revivalism and the blatant politicization of religion for partisan gain have also introduced dangerous precedents over the past thirty years. Although India's founders attempted to constrain the divisive forces of religion, India has been internally polarized and divided from its neighbours based on religion.<sup>17</sup>

Historian Lawrence Britt has identified fourteen elements that were prevalent during the fascist regimes of Hitler, Mussolini, Franco, Suharto, and Pinochet, and, according to human rights activist Cedric Prakash, Modi's regime shares these fourteen elements, which are: "1) Powerful and continuing nationalism, 2) Disdain for the recognition of human rights, 3) Identification of enemies/ scapegoats as a unifying cause, 4) Supremacy of the military, 5) Rampant sexism, 6) Controlled mass media, 7) Obsession with national security, 8) Religion and government are intertwined, 9) Protection of corporate power, 10) Suppression of labour power, 11) Disdain for the intellectuals and the arts, 12) Obsession with crime and punishment, 13) Rampant cronyism and corruption, and 14) Fraudulent elections."<sup>18</sup> In such a context different religious and cultural identities are thus often pit against each other and made "to compete in groups for crumbs of state favour," a process in which "the state grows ever more powerful" and many citizens feel "disempowered [and] doomed to wage war against each other."<sup>19</sup> However, as will be argued below, BECs provide, not only a means for Catholics to resist this type of societal polarization through faith-based community building at the local level, but also a working model for inspiring other, similar (but non-denominational) types of local community support structures.

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10. Prakash, "The Politicization of Hindu Faith."

11. Prakash, "The Politicization of Hindu Faith."

12. Jacob Peenikaparambil, "Stop Hatred and Violence," *Indian Currents Journalism with a Soul A Voice for the Voiceless*, December 5, 2022, <https://www.indiancurrents.org/article-stop-hatred-and-violence-jacob-peenikaparambil-1465.php>.

13. John, "Laboratory of Hate."

14. Rowe, *Religion and Global Politics*, 147.

15. Prakash, "The Politicization of Hindu Faith."

16. Peenikaparambil, "Stop Hatred and Violence."

17. Rowe, *Religion and Global Politics*, 151.

18. Cedric Prakash, "The Emergence of Neo-Fascism," *Indian Currents Journalism with a Soul A Voice for the Voiceless*, October 31, 2022, <https://www.indiancurrents.org/article-the-emergence-of-neofascism-cedric-prakash-1413.php>.

19. Sagarika Ghose, "The Pragya Singh Syndrome: Polarising Tribalism Is Antithetical to Liberal Democracy," *The Times of India*, December 5, 2019, <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/blogs/toi-edit-page/the-pragya-singh-syndrome-polarising-tribalism-is-antithetical-to-liberal-democracy/>.

### The Theological Foundation of BECs

BECs have been christened as concrete expressions of the Church, true expressions of communion, sources of new hope for the Church, sources for new ministries, instruments of evangelization, self-sustaining churches, and communions of domestic churches.<sup>20</sup> The Lumko Institute of South Africa (LISA) lists four characteristics that distinguish BECs from other parish groups.<sup>21</sup> They are as follows: 1) The members of BECs are neighbours; 2) BECs share the Gospel/Word of God/the Bible; 3) BECs act together; and 4) BECs are united with the universal Church through the parish. As neighbours, BEC participants meet in each other's homes at regular intervals – weekly, fortnightly, and/or monthly. They follow the command of Jesus to serve the least – i.e., the poor and people on the periphery<sup>22</sup> – and promote the values of the Kingdom of God inspired by the teachings of the Bible. They constructively take up the issues of the poor and marginalized.<sup>23</sup> *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church*, presented by the Pontifical Biblical Commission to Pope John Paul II on April 23, 1993, reads thusly: “[BECs] focus their gatherings upon the Bible and set themselves a threefold objective: to know the Bible, to create community, and to serve the people.”<sup>24</sup> Thus BECs allow for members of the lay community, who are generally viewed as passive members of the Church, to become more active members of the community by collaborating and participating in activities which bring the community together to share and face obstacles and problem-solve through their Christian, faith-based learning.

### BECs: Bible-Centred Communities

As the quotation provided above indicates, BECs create a greater acceptance of the Word of God. They provide a place where members, through their faith and deeper exploration of the word of God, reflect on reality in light of the Gospel and grow in their interpersonal relationships. Members thus actively seek to be nourished by the Word of God and celebrate the Word of God in daily life.<sup>25</sup> As these comments suggest, BECs are deeply nurtured by the Word of God and the sharing of the lived experiences of BEC members.<sup>26</sup> In other words, they are Bible-based, and Bible/Gospel sharing is a vital constituent and necessary foundation of community life in the BECs. Jesus, who is present through the Word of God, is thus at the centre of every BEC,<sup>27</sup> as wherever two or three are gathered in His name, the risen Lord Jesus is present in a very powerful way. Each one of them is united with the Word and the Word in turn unites them to one another. Thus, the Spirit of the Living God living among his people builds them into his holy temple, an ecclesial body of Christ. Gospel/Bible sharing leads members of BECs to listen devoutly to the loving voice of Jesus in and through the words of the Scriptures and to share their experience of Jesus with the group.<sup>28</sup> In Gospel Sharing, BEC members experience the presence of the Risen Lord in their midst. They become aware of the Holy Spirit who

20. Thomas Vijay, Agnes Chawadi, and Joseph D'Souza, eds., *Church Teachings on SCCs* (Nagpur: PAC Publications, 2006), 103.

21. Arockia Dhas Rayappan, “A Scientific Study on the Effectiveness of the SCCs in the Archdiocese of Bombay,” (MA thesis, Jnana Deepa Institute of Philosophy and Theology, 2012), 11–12.

22. Gospel of Matthew 25:40.

23. Vijay, Chawadi, and D'Souza, *Church Teachings on SCCs*, 103.

24. Vijay, Chawadi, and D'Souza, *Church Teachings on SCCs*, 19.

25. Jose Marins, Teolide Maria Trevisan, and Carolee Chanona, *The Church from The Roots: Basic Ecclesial Communities* (London: CADOD, 1989), 19.

26. Vijay, Chawadi, and D'Souza, *Church Teachings on SCCs*, 69.

27. Thomas Vijay, Francis Scaria, and Elvin Colaco, eds., *Breaking Ground: Papers Presented at the International Theological Congress on Small Christian Communities* (Nagpur: PAC Publications, 2014), 69.

28. Thomas Vijay, “The Relationship Between the Parish Eucharist and The Life of Small Christian Communities in Their Neighbourhoods” (DMin diss., The Catholic University of America, 2014), 23, <https://cuislandora.wrlc.org/islandora/object/etd%3A414/datastream/PDF/view>.

spoke through the prophets, who comes near, dwells graciously within them, and prepares them, especially in their minds. The Gospel thus becomes the binding that keeps community members connected to one another as they listen and share in learning the biblical text. Accordingly, members who attend Gospel Sharing sessions regularly develop a strong and tight-knit community. In sum, the Bible provides the necessary resources to help the community understand and face obstacles in a way that promotes non-violent actions and resolutions.

### **BECs: Communion of Communities**

The Second Vatican Council of the Catholic Church refers to believers as the people of God. As per this understanding, God is not distant. He is very near and is indeed united to every person and all humanity in all of life.<sup>29</sup> God seeks personal relationships with every human being and with every human group. God made the covenant *face to face* with every member of the community at Horeb.<sup>30</sup> Moses may have sensed the need to stand in the gap between God and the people, or the people may have desired to put Moses in the way, but God's desire was to meet the whole community, person to person, face to face. BECs are grassroots communities. They are centred on the laity, the community, the Word/Bible, and the salvation and integral liberation of the whole human person at the individual and social level. Though BECs were born in the heart of the institutional church, they have become a new model for the Church. They emerge, are born, and are constantly reshaped whenever individuals meet to hear the Word of God, believe in it, and discern to follow Jesus Christ inspired by the Holy Spirit. In this model a paradigm shift takes place from a Church for the people to a Church of the people, making BECs a truly effective way to promote communion in parishes and dioceses.<sup>31</sup>

God created the members of the church as communities,<sup>32</sup> and the theological vision underlying BECs thus springs forth from the depths of the Holy Trinity and through Christ.<sup>33</sup> There is a growing awareness and agreement that an idea of the Church as Communion best explains the essential nature of the Church. Through the Breaking of the Bread and through the Suffering, Death and Resurrection of Jesus, the Church became identified with the Body of Christ.<sup>34</sup> This was affirmed at the 1987 Synod on the Laity, in which the Synod Fathers discussed the Vocation and Mission of the Laity in the Church and in the World from the background of the understanding of the Church as Communion. This Church, they felt, is a Mystery and a Communion, and they promoted Communion, Evangelization, and Participation in the local Church.<sup>35</sup> The concept of Communion is applied to the life of the immanent Trinity, to the faithful participation in Christ, to the unity among the Church's members, and to the relationship between local churches and the universal Church. Communion thus describes the Church's essential nature, and is the prerequisite for its ministry, mission, and practical life.<sup>36</sup>

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29. John Paul II, *Ecclesia in Asia*, Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation, November 6, 1999, [https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/apost\\_exhortations/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_exh\\_06111999\\_ecclesia-in-asia.html/](https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_jp-ii_exh_06111999_ecclesia-in-asia.html/).

30. Exodus Chapters 19–20, and Deuteronomy 5:6–21.

31. Vijay, Chawadi, and D'Souza, *Church Teachings on SCCs*, 88.

32. James O'Halloran, *Small Christian Communities: A Pastoral Companion* (New York: Orbis Books, 1996), 129.

33. O'Halloran, *Small Christian Communities*, 129.

34. Gareth Weldon Icenogle, *Biblical Foundations for Small Group Ministry* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1994), 302.

35. Roberto Suro, "Pope Opens Synod of Bishops on Role of the Laity," *The New York Times*, October 2, 1987, <https://www.nytimes.com/1987/10/02/world/pope-opens-synod-of-bishops-on-role-of-the-laity.html/>.

36. John Paul II, *Christifideles Laici*, Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation, December 30, 1988, [https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/apost\\_exhortations/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_exh\\_30121988\\_christifideles-laici.html/](https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_jp-ii_exh_30121988_christifideles-laici.html/).

Accordingly, the Delhi Archdiocese, in its synodal action plan, states that being in a BEC is like *journeying together*, as it facilitates genuine and deep relationships among the people. This *journeying together* has brought renewal to local parishes, as through BECs the lay faithful get the opportunity to animate the parish and neighbourhood. In this *journeying together* they experience more of an egalitarian Church than a hierarchical one, and, by coming together for events like the Annual BEC-Family Day at the diocesan level, they concretely experience the *Communion of Communities*. Consequently, BEC participants feel that there is a need to encourage youth and children to participate in the meetings.<sup>37</sup> As these comments highlight, BECs thus engage the lay community and shift the individual believer to being more active and to taking part in, not only shaping the community, but also in the acts and activities that will bring the community together, especially in moments of adversity.

### **BECs: Evangelizing and Participatory Communities**

BECs are a force for evangelization and an effective means of promoting participation in Church life.<sup>38</sup> Evangelizing means bringing the Good News to all strata of humanity.<sup>39</sup> Evangelization is thus an inherently communitarian task, one which begins in the community before being shared with others.<sup>40</sup> The Good News of evangelism is expressed in the values of Jesus, i.e., love, justice, healing, forgiveness, truthfulness, and service. Evangelization also means preserving creation as per God's design and understanding nature as God's gift to humanity.<sup>41</sup> Evangelization is sharing our hope, our life, and our joy, all of which we have received from Jesus.<sup>42</sup> Members of BECs – being self-evangelized by the Word of God – become the cause and reason, the salt and light of the ongoing evangelization in their neighbourhood. They are, simply put, evangelizing communities.<sup>43</sup>

Evangelization cannot happen without an ongoing conversion in the hearts of evangelizers, and BECs create a climate for such an ongoing conversion in the lives of their members through the sharing of the Word and faith in their life context.<sup>44</sup> They are becoming places, focal points, and vehicles for evangelization. In the process of spelling out the ultimate meaning and value at stake in the evangelization of the poor, the Church discovers its fullest identity. They provide a real experience of participation, a sense of what it means to become a subject in one's own history. The lived experience of the Gospel prompts members of BECs to create new forms of life, *and, in a joint endeavour, to invent new types of open, committed, and fraternal communities*. Members of BECs thus understand their vocation as Catholics through the Gospel:<sup>45</sup>

There are times and circumstances in the history of the Church when the Gospel is heard and accepted as the Good News of the Kingdom, in its original newness. On such occasions, the Gospel demonstrates its force for liberation and salvation, giving sight to blind eyes, opening deaf ears, untying mute tongues, and stirring and converting consciences and hearts. All this occurs when the poor hear the Good News.<sup>46</sup>

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37. Deepak Tauro, *Synod on Synodality: Action Plan* (New Delhi: Don Bosco Press, 2022), 6.

38. Vijay, Chawadi, and D'Souza, *Church Teachings on SCCs*, 76.

39. Thomas Vijay, *SCCs are Instruments of Evangelization* (Nagpur: PAC Centre, 2007), 5.

40. Vijay, *SCCs are Instruments of Evangelization*, iii.

41. Vijay, *SCCs are Instruments of Evangelization*, 11.

42. Vijay, *SCCs are Instruments of Evangelization*, 12.

43. Vijay, *SCCs are Ministering Communities*, 72.

44. Vijay, "The Relationship Between the Parish Eucharist and the Life," 25.

45. Paul VI, *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, Apostolic Exhortation, December 8, 1975, [https://www.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/en/apost\\_exhortations/documents/hf\\_p-vi\\_exh\\_19751208\\_evangelii-nuntiandi.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/en/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_p-vi_exh_19751208_evangelii-nuntiandi.html).

46. Alvaro Barreiro, *Basic Ecclesial Communities: The Evangelisation of the Poor* (New York: Orbis books, 1984), 1.

Evangelization thus leads to the holistic participation of BEC members, and the presence of BECs can therefore be understood as an evangelization for the Church as a whole. Through BECs, then, the Church is moving towards decentralization – assuring increased participation by the laity in the parishes and the diocese.<sup>47</sup>

BECs are participatory Churches where the presence of the gifts of the Holy Spirit in the lives of the faithful – lay, religious, and cleric alike – are recognized and activated.<sup>48</sup> In the early period of the Church there was a real participatory community, where, with the common good of the community in mind, members had a say in decision-making processes.<sup>49</sup> During this period, when any serious problem cropped up affecting the Church, the assembly of the faithful was convoked to find a fraternal consensus. For instance, Mathias was elected as one of the twelve apostles to replace Judas Iscariot at a meeting of the community in which about one hundred and twenty believers, including women, took part.<sup>50</sup> The participation of the whole community was also on display in the appointment of the seven deacons to take care of the widows who were being neglected in the daily distribution of food. Here, the issue was one of doing what justice demanded in the practice of love.<sup>51</sup> Similarly, the Council of Jerusalem was convoked to resolve an insurmountable difference of opinion about whether circumcision was necessary for salvation or not. This major controversy in the Church was solved through a process of discernment involving the people of God, facilitated by Peter and the Apostles, expressing the collegial character of the early Church.<sup>52</sup> As these examples demonstrate, genuine participation nurtures ecclesial co-responsibility and the principles of communion, collegiality, and co-responsibility in relation to the role of the lay faithful in the Church and in the world.

In sum, BECs provide a pastoral structure where the lay faithful actively participate in the Church as subjects. While the Church needs many kinds of groups for its pastoral vitality – such as prayer groups, Bible Study groups, Support Groups for divorced Catholics, Support groups for Gay and Lesbian Catholics, Youth groups, Young Adult groups, Civic Action groups, and community organization groups, etc. – it is best not to confuse these support groups with the BECs.<sup>53</sup>

### Historical Development of BECs

BECs replicate the ecclesial communities of the early church.<sup>54</sup> They are instrumental in nurturing and strengthening the faith of the community. They are a group of believers in a particular neighbourhood who give shape to the Church. They differ greatly among themselves, both within the same region and even more from one region to another. They gather regularly in intimate groups for prayer<sup>55</sup> and to share their personal and faith experiences.<sup>56</sup> By participating in BECs, members learn to appreciate diversified unity and to work in collaboration with people of diverse backgrounds.<sup>57</sup> They broaden perspectives on life, persons, and the understanding of God. Importantly for the present discussion, participants are even inspired to form BECs with people of other denominations and

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47. Barreiro, *Basic Ecclesial Communities*, 73.

48. Vijay, Chawadi, and D'Souza, *Church Teachings on SCCs*, 24.

49. Vijay, Scaria, and Colaco, *Breaking Ground*, 70.

50. Acts of the Apostles 1:14–15.

51. Acts of the Apostles 6:1–6.

52. Vijay, Scaria, and Colaco, *Breaking Ground*, 71.

53. Michael A. Cowan and Bernard J. Lee, *Conversation, Risk & Conversion: The Inner & Public Life of Small Christian Communities* (New York: Orbis Books, 1997), 129.

54. Barreiro, *Basic Ecclesial Communities*, vii.

55. Rayappan, "A Scientific Study on the Effectiveness of the SCCs in the Archdiocese of Bombay," 3.

56. Oswald Hirmer, *Gospel-Sharing: Its Origin, Description and Theological Concept* (Nagpur: PAC Publication, 1990), 10.

57. Valerian Arumainayagam, *Kudumbabe Anbiyatin Uyirnaadi* (Nagercoil: Assisi Offset Press, 2016), 106.

religions.<sup>58</sup> There is great potential in these communities to be channels of God-experience, of encounters with the Word, of deep fellowship, and of pastoral care with a personal touch. The late twentieth century has witnessed the renewal and growth of faith communities in small local initiatives through BECs, which have now become authentic Churches in the neighbourhood. As will be discussed below, the Second Vatican Council and post-Conciliar developments regarding the nature of the Church have positively impacted the growth of BECs in South America, Africa, and Asia.<sup>59</sup>

### **The History of BECs: Social Transformation and the Church of the Periphery**

BECs first made their appearance in South America in the 1950s<sup>60</sup> – when industrialization and political changes led to huge numbers of rural folk migrating to cities in search of jobs – and are a demonstration of how faith and praxis form two inseparable sides of the face of the Church. Their development, as noted above, was spontaneous, and is understood as being inspired by the Holy Spirit. They are therefore well-described as grassroots movements that promote and facilitate social upliftment, communitarianism, and community evangelization. The original BECs in South America were comprised of people on the margins of society – i.e., the people who migrated to the city and then found themselves living in slums and feeling disconnected from their communities. These people yearned to experience a greater sense of community, and also a deeper sense of their faith. These ordinary Catholics, in communion with the church leaders, thus searched for a way to practice their faith amidst extreme poverty, suffering, exploitation, and violence, and also to liberate themselves from these things.<sup>61</sup> This strong concern for human dignity, social justice, and freedom from oppression, combined with a desire to experience a greater sense of community in faith, were the principal factors for the emergence of BECs. This being said, it must be acknowledged the development of these sentiments were facilitated by three popular movements from this era<sup>62</sup> – the *Peoples' Catechetical Movement* (PCM), *Basic Education Movement* (BEM) and *Better World Movement* (BWM).<sup>63</sup>

While a description of these movements falls beyond the scope of the present work, it is important to note that what these movements have in common and what makes them forerunners of BECs is their focus on empowering members of the laity to actively participate in the life of the Church through different educational initiatives and leadership opportunities.<sup>64</sup> Over the years these movements strengthened the deep longing of ordinary people *to experience stronger fellowship and community* in their parishes, a longing which eventually led to the transformation of their understanding of the parish.<sup>65</sup> Building on the Second Vatican Council's decision to promote the participatory approach in the Church,<sup>66</sup> and inspired by the post-Conciliar developments on the nature of the Church in Brazil, bishops in Brazil designed a Joint Pastoral Plan (JPP) that led to the recognition of BECs. BECs in South America now number between 180,000 and 200,000.<sup>67</sup> Their growth was made possible by the South Conference of South American Bishops in Medellin, Columbia, in 1968, in Puebla, Mexico, in

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58. Arumainayagam, *Anbiyam Irai-aatchiyin Adithalam*, 87.

59. Vijay, Scaria, and Colaco, *Breaking Ground*, 1.

60. Richard R. Gaillardetz, *Ecclesiology for a Global Church: A People Called and Sent* (New York: Orbis Books, 2008), 122.

61. *DIIPA Introductory Workshop* (Nagpur: PAC Publications, 2015), 12.

62. Vijay, Scaria, and Colaco, *Breaking Ground*, 1–3.

63. Leonardo Boff, *EcclesioGenesis: The Base Communities Reinvent the Church* (New York: Orbis Books, 1986),

4. For more on these movements see Vijay, Scaria, and Colaco, *Breaking Ground*.

64. For more on these movements see Vijay, Scaria, and Colaco, *Breaking Ground*.

65. Vijay, "The Relationship Between the Parish Eucharist and The Life," 7.

66. *DIIPA Introductory Workshop*, 12.

67. O'Halloran, *Small Christian Communities*, 18.

1979, and in Santo Domingo in 1992.<sup>68</sup> When South American immigrants who immigrated to Southern California brought their BEC experiences with them, Pope John Paul II encouraged the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) to consider the parish as a community of communities i.e., as BECs.<sup>69</sup>

### **BECs in Africa: A New Path for Developing the Church in Neighbourhoods**

On the African continent BECs are known as the Small Christian Communities (SCCs), and are recognized as playing an important role in the remarkable growth of the Church in Africa.<sup>70</sup> African bishops' conferences played a vital role in establishing and promoting SCCs, which, as discussed above, present the Church as a meaningful Christian Communion.<sup>71</sup> The purpose of establishing them was to incarnate the Church in African culture.<sup>72</sup> The African Church introduced the term SCCs because many in the Afro-Asian continents in those days were of the view that BECs in South America promoted liberation through violent methods. This being said, Eastern African countries faced serious, and similar, *pastoral challenges* to those being faced in South America. Due to large territorial parishes, priests' attention to mission stations was minimal, which the Pentecostal churches exploited to indulge in *sheep stealing*.<sup>73</sup> The Mary Knoll fathers – pioneers in mission work – responded to this challenge by asking Marie France Perrin Jassy to do research on the social structures and community values of the Luo Ethnic Group.<sup>74</sup> Through her research, it was revealed that there were some places where the faithful lived in small faith communities where they felt a sense of belonging even though the priest was absent.

The Association of Member Episcopal Conferences in Eastern Africa (AMECEA) made the SCCs their pastoral priority, as they viewed BECs as a means to incarnate the Church.<sup>75</sup> Accordingly, the Lumko Institute of South Africa (LISA),<sup>76</sup> which was founded to promote pastoral activities, gave the Church a new vision called *A New Way of Being Church*.<sup>77</sup> In 1978, Father Hirmer<sup>78</sup> was entrusted with the Biblical Apostolate for the thirty dioceses belonging to the South African Catholic Bishop's Conference (SACBC).<sup>79</sup> Subsequently, he was appointed as the National Director of the Catholic Biblical Federation to conduct the Bible Courses in order to strengthen the faith of the people.<sup>80</sup> Father Hirmer and his friend Father Lobinger developed the 4-step Gospel Sharing for common illiterate people to understand the gospel message.<sup>81</sup> The 4-step Gospel Sharing made a great impact in the lives of people who were influenced by Pentecostal preachers and had the experience of some sort of Gospel

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68. O'Halloran, *Small Christian Communities*, 18.

69. Thomas, Chawadi, and D'Souza, *Church Teachings on SCCs*, 11.

70. Gaillardetz, *Ecclesiology for a Global Church*, 123.

71. Thomas, Chawadi, and D'Souza, *Church Teachings on SCCs*, 5.

72. Thomas, Chawadi, and D'Souza, *Church Teachings on SCCs*, 22. By "incarnate" I am referring to how the establishment of SCCs helped "give form and substance to" the Church in African culture.

73. Thomas, Chawadi, and D'Souza, *Church Teachings on SCCs*, 4.

74. Vijay, Scaria, and Colaco, *Breaking Ground*, 4–5.

75. Gaillardetz, *Ecclesiology for a Global Church*, 123.

76. Lumko is the pastoral institute of the Southern African Catholic Bishops' Conference (SACBC). Until 1985, it was situated in the diocese of Queenstown in the Eastern Cape. Now it is in Germiston near Johannesburg.

77. Vijay, Scaria, and Colaco, *Breaking Ground*, 6.

78. Oswald Hirmer, from Germany, is a bishop of the Umtata diocese, and is one of the persons who contributed significantly to developing the Lumko Institute of South Africa. His love for Asia made him spend much of his time in Asia and develop ASIIPA (Asian Integral Pastoral Approach) programs for promoting participatory church structures through BECs.

79. Hirmer, *Gospel-Sharing*, 1.

80. Vijay, Scaria, and Colaco, *Breaking Ground*, 5.

81. Vijay, Scaria, and Colaco, *Breaking Ground*, 5.

Sharing. Later it was developed into the 7-Step Gospel Sharing Method.<sup>82</sup> This method of Gospel Sharing became very popular in Africa, Asia, and Europe, and gradually LISA started publishing relevant materials on Gospel Sharing. In sum, LISA, particularly through the development of its method of Gospel Sharing, helped pioneer the “participatory” church model associated with BECs by helping all lay members, even those who might be illiterate, become more active participants in the Church – which, by extension, helped the Christian faith to be transmitted and practiced more actively within smaller rural communities.<sup>83</sup> SCCs thus encourage the members themselves to take on responsibility and learn to live an ecclesial life reflecting on different human problems in the light of the gospel,<sup>84</sup> and have been wholeheartedly supported by the African Synod of bishops.

### **BECs in Asia: The Participatory Church Envisioned by the Second Vatican Council**

The Holy Spirit has actively guided the Church in Asia by providing inspiration, resources and organizational networks to make the vision of the Federation of the Asian Bishops’ Conferences (FABC) a reality in the lives of the people.<sup>85</sup> In the Asian context, the method of building BECs and forming leadership structures therein is deeply indebted to LISA.<sup>86</sup> In 1990 the Bishops in Asia spoke of *A New Way of Being Church*, where both clergy and laity consider each other sisters and brothers.<sup>87</sup> They envisioned a *participatory Church* where the gifts and charisms given by the Holy Spirit to all – i.e., laity, clergy, religious<sup>88</sup> – are recognized and activated to build the Body of Christ, the Church in the neighbourhood, to fulfil her mission in that place and time.<sup>89</sup> The FABC wished to ensure participation of all the faithful in the life and mission of the Church.<sup>90</sup> Inspired by the pastoral vision of the BECs, Bishop Peter Kang of South Korea has described BECs as “a fundamental methodology or process in South Korea in order to proceed towards an ideal image of the Church which the Second Vatican Council suggested.”<sup>91</sup>

Though the South American experience with BECs had an important impact on Churches in other parts of the world, the experience of the SCCs/ BECs in Africa has been more inspirational in the development of the BECs in Asia. The fifth Plenary Assembly of the FABC at Bandung in Indonesia in 1990 is widely considered as a turning point for the BECs in Asia.<sup>92</sup> Father Hirmer from South Africa was invited to facilitate sessions on “A New Way of Being Church in Asia” in the 1990s,<sup>93</sup> and these Lumko sessions encouraged the bishops in Asia to declare the BECs a pastoral priority for the Church

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82. Vijay, Scaria, and Colaco, *Breaking Ground*, 5

83. Vijay, “The Relationship Between the Parish Eucharist and the Life,” 9.

84. John Paul II, *Ecclesia in Africa*, Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation, September 14, 1995, [https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/apost\\_exhortations/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_exh\\_14091995\\_ecclesia-in-africa.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_jp-ii_exh_14091995_ecclesia-in-africa.html).

85. Vijay, Chawadi, and D’Souza, *Church Teachings on SCCs*, 87.

86. Daesup Kim, “The Church as Communion in Small Christian Communities in South Korea” (S.T.D diss., The Catholic University of America, 2011), 42, <https://cuislandora.wrlc.org/islandora/object/etd%3A414/datastream/PDF/view>.

87. *Journeying Together Towards the Third Millennium: The Final Statement of the Fifth Plenary Assembly of the Federation of Asian Bishops’ Conference 1990* (Bandung: FABC, 2003), 18.

88. Here, “religious” refers to sisters (nuns) and priests who belong to religious congregations, e.g., Missionaries of Charity, Sisters of Saint Joseph, the Dominicans, the Salesians, the Jesuits, etc. Clergy, on the other hand, are priests who belong to particular dioceses, e.g., Archdiocese of Montreal, Archdiocese of Delhi and Diocese of Brooklyn.

89. *Journeying Together*, 18–19.

90. Vijay, Chawadi, and D’Souza, *Church Teachings on SCCs*, 87.

91. Kim, “The Church as Communion in Small Christian Communities in South Korea,” 235.

92. Vijay, Scaria, and Colaco, *Breaking Ground*, 8.

93. Vijay, Scaria, and Colaco, *Breaking Ground*, 7.

in Asia and to open a desk within the FABC Office of Laity for the promotion of BECs.<sup>94</sup> Hirmer himself formed a team of delegates from the dioceses in Asia<sup>95</sup> and prepared programmes suitable for the Asian context, which he called AsIPA (Asian Integral Pastoral Approach).<sup>96</sup> Pope John Paul II affirms in *Ecclesia in Asia* that the Synod Fathers underlined the value of the BECs as an effect of promoting communion and participation in parishes and Dioceses, and as a genuine force for evangelization.<sup>97</sup>

The growth of the BECs in India has been phenomenal – 120 dioceses in India now have 62,261 BECs<sup>98</sup> – and this, along with similar success stories in the African context, have become an inspiration for the Church in Europe and North America in their search for their own way of building small faith communities.

### Popes of the Catholic Church on BECs

Many episcopal conferences of the Catholic Church all over the world promote BECs for pastoral animation, life, and ministry, and have made them the pastoral priority. BECs enable huge numbers of passive laity to become truly participative People of God; to become agents of change and transformation in the fight for a better world. Though BECs are spread across the continents of South America, Africa, and Asia, they are diversified and distinct from each other – even in the same country. They are unique in each region.<sup>99</sup> They deepen faith, fraternal charity, prayer, and the relation of the pastor with the small sociological community. BECs make a participatory Church as per the vision of the Second Vatican Council. The BEC members in the neighbourhood interact daily and invite their neighbours to live and experience the presence of the Kingdom of God and to be nourished by the Word of God. Moreover, the sharing of the Word of God (Bible) in BECs enlightens members' minds and hearts. Ignited by God's Word, they respond to each other in love.<sup>100</sup> They represent authentic Churches in the neighbourhood.

The hierarchical Church and its parishes recognize the potential of BECs to renew and revitalize faith communities locally, rooted in the Word of God. Being rooted in the Church, BECs are a great source of hope for the Church. The Popes of the Catholic Church have acknowledged, recognized, and appreciated BECs during both conciliar and post-conciliar times.

Pope Paul VI coined the phrase “nurseries of evangelization” for BECs.<sup>101</sup> From his perspective, BECs arose – and indeed continue to arise – from “the need to live the Church's life more intensely, or from the desire and quest for a more human dimension such as larger ecclesial communities can only offer with difficulty.”<sup>102</sup> He highlights the importance of meditating and sharing the Word and the bond of *agape* in BECs, which he states give hope for the universal Church.<sup>103</sup> For his part, Pope John Paul II strongly affirmed the value of BECs in promoting communion and participation in parishes and dioceses, and as a genuine force for evangelization.<sup>104</sup> According to him, BECs take root in less privileged and rural areas. They become a leaven of Christian life, care for the poor and the neglected,

94. Vijay, Scaria, and Colaco, *Breaking Ground*, 7.

95. Vijay, “The Relationship Between the Parish Eucharist and the Life,” 9–10.

96. Vijay, “The Relationship Between the Parish Eucharist and the Life,” 9–10.

97. Vijay, Chawadi, and D'Souza, *Church Teachings on SCCs*, 10.

98. Vijay, “The Relationship Between the Parish Eucharist and the Life,” 12.

99. Paul VI, *Evangelii Nuntiandi*.

100. CCBI Commission for SCCs, “Origin and Development of SCCs,” accessed December 13, 2022, <https://scccommissionindia.org/history-of-bec/>.

101. Paul VI, *Evangelii Nuntiandi*.

102. Paul VI, *Evangelii Nuntiandi*.

103. Paul VI, *Evangelii Nuntiandi*.

104. Vijay, Chawadi, and D'Souza, *Church Teachings on SCCs*, 10.

and commit to the transformation of society. BEC members, who are filled with Christ's love,<sup>105</sup> discuss humanitarian concerns (including those of the Church) with a common commitment. They live a life of witness and testimony, a life devoid of divisions, tribalism, and racism.<sup>106</sup> He encouraged the Church in Asia to consider BECs as a positive feature of the Church's evangelizing activity.<sup>107</sup> They can gather people in the community, assist with family life, and help people overcome their sense of anonymity by welcoming them and helping them become involved in their neighbourhood and the larger society. They promote a more person-centred form of evangelization and can help in reaching out to people who are far away.<sup>108</sup> They are true expressions of ecclesial communion, and centres of evangelization in communion with their pastors.<sup>109</sup> They meet the criteria of *Evangelii Nuntiandi* no. 58 as being a suitable locus for Catechesis.<sup>110</sup>

Pope Benedict XVI was of the view that BECs fan the flame of Baptism. They are a source of satisfaction, since they are sites where the proclamation of the Word of God rears rich spiritual fruit whenever the members come together for prayer, reflection on the Scriptures, and fraternal support. According to him, BECs represent the most promising path toward renewing the Church's impact on society.<sup>111</sup> He therefore encouraged BEC members to bring their areas of competence to the life and activities of the Catholic universities, political life, the arts, media, and various associations. He exhorted them to be active and courageous through their presence in the secular spheres of life. He gives assurance that these communities live the sign of peace, and also that the Word – through meditation and sharing – constantly enlivens fraternal communion.<sup>112</sup>

Pope Francis has also offered encouragement to BECs. Like the previous Popes before him, he affirms the close connection between BECs and evangelization, and advocates for BECs because of the way they lead Catholics to meet and listen to one other – which is to say, to dialogue, reflection, and discernment in carrying out the mission entrusted to them as Church.<sup>113</sup>

### Recognition of BECs by Catholic Bishops in India

As noted above, the experience of BECs in Africa has inspired the development of BECs in India.<sup>114</sup> The Catholic Bishops' Conference of India (CBCI) in Pune in 1992 exhorted Catholics to build BECs as a participatory Church built on non-dominating leadership. This participatory Church would provide opportunities for the parishioners to be involved in planning and implementing various

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105. CCBI Commission for SCCs, "Origin and Development of SCCs."

106. John Paul II, *Redemptoris Missio*, Encyclical, December 7, 1990, [https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_enc\\_07121990\\_redemptoris-missio.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_07121990_redemptoris-missio.html).

107. John Paul II, *Ecclesia in Asia*.

108. John Paul II, *Ecclesia in America*, Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation, January 22, 1999, [https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/apost\\_exhortations/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_exh\\_22011999\\_ecclesia-in-america.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_jp-ii_exh_22011999_ecclesia-in-america.html).

109. John Paul II, *Christifideles Laici*.

110. John Paul II, *Catechesi Tradendae*, Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation, October 16, 1979, [https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/apost\\_exhortations/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_exh\\_16101979\\_catechesi-tradendae.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_jp-ii_exh_16101979_catechesi-tradendae.html).

111. Benedict XVI, *Verbum Domini*, Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation, September 30, 2010, [https://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/apost\\_exhortations/documents/hf\\_ben-xvi\\_exh\\_20100930\\_verbum-domini.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_ben-xvi_exh_20100930_verbum-domini.html).

112. Benedict XVI, *Africae Munus*, Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation, November 19, 2011, [https://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/apost\\_exhortations/documents/hf\\_ben-xvi\\_exh\\_20111119\\_africae-munus.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_ben-xvi_exh_20111119_africae-munus.html).

113. Francis, "Working Document for The Continental Stage," Oct 27, 2022, <https://www.synod.va/en/highlights/working-document-for-the-continental-stage.html>.

114. Vijay, Chawadi, and D'Souza, *Church Teachings on SCCs*, 1.

activities.<sup>115</sup> At the CBCI evaluation in 1995, the bishops reiterated their appeal that BECs be formed in all Indian dioceses while observing their formation and growth.<sup>116</sup> At the CBCI Plenary Assembly in Trivandrum they reaffirmed the resolution made in Pune in 1992, and expressed a desire for members of the parish pastoral councils to be elected from BECs.<sup>117</sup> The Final statement of the bishops at the consultation on the challenge of neo-Pentecostalism held from December 5–7, 1996, at the National, Biblical, Catechetical, and Liturgical Centre in Bangalore, stated that BECs were a providential development – i.e., that they represent channels of God-experience, encounter with the Word, deep fellowship, and pastoral care with a personal touch; that they remove the fear of anonymity and promote personal relationships and belongingness. Through the involvement of BEC members, liturgical celebrations become alive, meaningful, and participative, leading to a deep God-experience. In other words, BECs help their members become agents of pastoral care. In these communities, the Word of God inspires the members to serve the poor and the needy.<sup>118</sup> The CBCI observed that the traditional parish was marked by clericalism, over-institutionalisation, and unwieldy parish structures.<sup>119</sup>

At the Plenary Assembly in Varanasi in 1998, the CBCI stated that BECs provide a powerful witness to the mission of the Church, and, as such, should be fostered and encouraged, as they contribute to the wellbeing and growth of the Church. They also cautioned bishops and priests that their exercise of leadership in BECs should be one of animation only; in other words, it should not take on administrative or ritualistic functions. The bishops promulgated BECs as the pastoral priority in India, saying “in all our dioceses a very serious effort must be made to form and foster the Basic Ecclesial Communities because it is through these that the role of the Church to be a leaven in society can be effectively realized at the local level.”<sup>120</sup>

At the CBCI assembly held in Bangalore in September 2000, the bishops declared that the Church in India was invited to embrace the new way of being Church expressed in BECs and to encourage their formation in every parish because they help their members live the Gospel in a spirit of fraternal love and service.<sup>121</sup>

### BECs in India

It must be acknowledged that BECs in India became a reality due to the vision of the Laity Commission and episcopal conferences, both continental and national, namely the Federation of the Asian Bishops' Conferences (FABC), the Conference of the Catholic Bishops of India (CCBI) belonging to the Latin Rite, and the Catholic Bishops' Conference of India (CBCI) in collaboration with the LISA.

LISA offered immense support by conducting training via printed materials and by offering resource persons to both the FABC and the CBCI. Because of LISA, the Asian Integral Pastoral Approach (AsIPA) and DIIPA (Developing Indian Integral Pastoral Approach)<sup>122</sup> were established in Asia and India respectively. The AsIPA Team, comprised members from Asia, was ably guided by Bishop Hirmer from South Africa. It had members from India too. At the continental and national level,

115. Vijay, Chawadi, and D'Souza, *Church Teachings on SCCs*, 37.

116. Vijay, Chawadi, and D'Souza, *Church Teachings on SCCs*, 37.

117. Vijay, Chawadi, and D'Souza, *Church Teachings on SCCs*, 37–38.

118. Vijay, Chawadi, and D'Souza, *Church Teachings on SCCs*, 38.

119. Vijay, Chawadi, and D'Souza, *Church Teachings on SCCs*, 39.

120. Message of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of India, Varanasi, March 21–28, 1998, nos. 3 and 6.12, as quoted in Vijay, Chawadi, and D'Souza, *Church Teachings on SCCs*, 39.

121. Vijay, Chawadi, and D'Souza, *Church Teachings on SCCs*, 39.

122. DIIPA in many Indian languages means “light.” The pioneers of BECs intended for DIIPA to become a light for the people of India in renewing the Church. In subsequent years, its growth has been accompanied and nurtured by the LISA.

the Laity Commission played a significant role by inviting the LISA team to organize a workshop for the Indian bishops on *A New Way of Being Church*. The CBCI established DIIPA with the aim of supporting and strengthening BECs. Later, DIIPA became the BEC Centre, and began to organize BEC-related seminars, workshops, and leadership training. It continues to invest its resources in building BECs as the basic structure of the Church. Because of the strenuous and determined efforts of DIIPA, today 120 dioceses in India have BECs. It has now been forty years since BECs in India gained official recognition from the national bishops' conference.<sup>123</sup> With the support of the newly established DIIPA Centre at the Pallotine Animation Centre in Nagpur, BECs have been established in parishes and mission stations through a consultative process, servant leadership, and the active involvement of the parishioners, the religious, and the priests. This then builds a participatory Church which, by and large, naturally facilitates the implementation of the diocesan pastoral initiatives within the parishes and thereby strengthens the life, mission, and communion within the particular Church without diminishing its dialectic dynamic with the universal Church. The DIIPA Centre has training modules formulated by its personnel. These modules help them re-organize their theological and pastoral understanding according to the spirit of the New Way of Being Church. The commission for the BECs has a National Service Team, a National Resource Team, and a Media Desk.

### **BECs in India: Building Fraternity in the Church and Society**

As the above discussion has demonstrated, BECs represent a means of building a more profound sense of communion among the faithful. They have evolved from a pastoral option to a pastoral priority. In fact, they enable believing members to experience a deep sense of the Church and to be transformed by it amidst the struggles of life. They deepen the sense of community within neighbourhoods by forging communities that are interrelated, person-centred, and community driven.

Through BECs, large anonymous Catholic communities can become authentic neighbourhood Churches. BECs foster a greater willingness to reach out to the poor, the needy, and the sick, and the *neighbourhood-aspect* of BECs comes alive frequently through a plethora of celebrations, talent contests, get-togethers, picnics, newsletters, etc., as well as through lively discussions on social, ethical, and value related issues. These activities ensure that no one remains *anonymous* in the parish, and also facilitate a great deal of interaction and bonding among people. They also offer avenues for people to showcase their talents and charisms.<sup>124</sup> The development of BECs thus leads members to a very deep and authentic experience of “being Church” within the day-to-day realities of life. In BECs, families deal with their problems in the light of faith and the Gospel, and this helps to develop a sense of *we-feeling* among BEC members. This *we-feeling* is very much felt within families during funerals, or in times of crisis or sickness. As care, concern for one another, love, and understanding among BEC members grows deeper, they are able to give and receive more support in turn. There is a strong bond among members of BECs, and BECs have become a good pedestal to build families and heal rifts in familial relationships. These reconciled families become living witnesses of the reconciliation received from the Lord. BECs respond to their social situations inspired by the Bible. They help to wipe the tears from every eye and to bring a smile to every face by taking up the responsibility to care for another.<sup>125</sup>

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123. CCBI Commission for SCCs, “BEC Origin - India,” accessed December 13, 2022, <https://scccommissionindia.org/bec-origin-india/>.

124. Rayappan, “*A Scientific Study on the Effectiveness of the SCCs in the Archdiocese of Bombay*,” 33–34.

125. CCBI Commission for SCCs, “Our Pioneers,” accessed December 13, 2022, <https://scccommissionindia.org/our-pioneers/>.

### BECs, An Inter-faith Collaboration to Build Religious and Social Harmony

In the current Indian context, building a harmonious and peace-loving society is urgent and important.<sup>126</sup> As local, neighbourhood-centred initiatives, BECs point to new paths for the Church and lead it to a state of better harmony with the logic of the gospel.<sup>127</sup> As argued above, BECs move towards the world from the Church through the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. The Second Vatican Council recognized and affirmed as good certain elements in other religions.<sup>128</sup> Inter-religious dialogue is thus part of the Church's evangelizing mission because other religions constitute a positive challenge for the Church by causing her to examine more deeply her own identity and to bear witness to the fullness of the revelation that she received for the good of all<sup>129</sup> and that is at work in and through other religions and ideologies.<sup>130</sup> Pope Paul VI cited this verse from the Vedas at the thirty-fourth International Eucharistic Congress in 1964:

From the unreal/untruth lead me to the real/truth!  
From darkness lead me to Light!  
From death, lead me to life!"<sup>131</sup>

BECs in India thus are called to engage in a dialogue of life<sup>132</sup> with the people of other religions, faiths, and spiritualities to build harmonious neighbourhood communities.<sup>133</sup> Appreciating differences between cultures can also provide opportunities to learn, by providing members with opportunities to collaborate with, not only people of other denominations and faiths, but also people who thirst for social and environmental justice.<sup>134</sup> BECs thus represent an effective means for Catholics to work towards inter-religious harmony and the integral development of the society at large.<sup>135</sup>

As these comments suggest, the task of BECs is to become a searching, discerning, witnessing, and celebrating community,<sup>136</sup> a task which is part of the greater Christian mission of creating a society which actively strives towards social justice, integral human development, the attainment of holistic liberation, and the preaching of the good news to the poor.<sup>137</sup> Indians mostly understand that the idea of a Hindu nation state violates the pluralistic character of the Constitution of India,<sup>138</sup> and in such a context BECs can spread rays of harmony, peace, and unity, and can even address concerns such as climate change amidst the negative polarisation caused by the emergence of Indian religious nationalism. Through building small, human, harmonious, ecumenical as well as inter-faith communities abounding in socio-religious harmony through non-violent means, BECs service the need of Indians to experience sustainable peace and harmony in their neighbourhood – both in the city and in the countryside – starting

126. Vijay, ed., *SCCs are Ministering Communities*, 68.

127. Barreiro, *Basic Ecclesial Communities*, 68.

128. William Madges, ed, *Vatican II Forty Years Later* (New York: Orbis Books, 2006), 261.

129. Vijay, Scaria, and Colaco, *Breaking Ground*, 231.

130. Avery Dulles, *Models of the Church* (New York: Image, 2002), 177.

131. Peter Hebblethwaite, *Paul VI The First Modern Pope* (New York: Paulist Press, 1993), 408–410.

132. The Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Ecclesia in Asia*, no. 31, defines the dialogue of life as a dialogue that imitates the gentle and humble heart of Jesus, i.e., never proud, never condescending. It thus specifies a type of dialogue that is receptive to people of other faiths in its willingness to listen, respect, and genuinely try to understand them.

133. CCBI Commission for SCCs, "New Way of Being Church," accessed December 12, 2022, <https://scccommissionindia.org/new-way-of-being-church/>.

134. Samasumo, "Kenyan Loreto Sister Teaching Non-Violent Conflict Resolution."

135. Vijay, ed., *SCCs are Ministering Communities*, 67.

136. Rayappan, "A Scientific Study on the Effectiveness of the SCCs in the Archdiocese of Bombay," 13.

137. Victoria Narciso, *Basic Christian Communities: A Seminar Kit* (Quezon City: Claretian Publications, 1987), 96.

138. Prakash, "The Politicization of Hindu Faith."

from the schools, colleges, and universities including the corporate and government-run institutes. Moreover, as will be discussed below, BECs in India also have the opportunity to help facilitate the development of “basic human communities” (BHC) where friendships and good neighbourly relationships are formed and members live in a state of true fellowship – the difference being that here, fellowship isn’t necessarily centred on Christ, but on the varied faiths and traditions of the diverse members. As Bishop Thomas Dabre states regarding this possibility:

The Basic Ecclesial Communities in India should develop into small [basic] human communities in which all peoples are able to live in true fellowship and friendship and good neighbourly relationships; communities in which people of different faiths can share the joys and sorrows of one another. Even taking inspiration from their own faiths and traditions they can collaborate with one another in trouble, needs and problems. They can organize themselves to promote justice and peace and harmony and to remove injustice, discrimination, oppression, and violation of human dignity. This way the Christians will promote peace and harmony.<sup>139</sup>

### Conclusion

BECs have had a demonstratively positive impact globally and locally. They inspire members to make themselves and their resources available and at the service of the parish and needy neighbour, and have been recognized and appreciated by the national bishop’s conferences and successive Popes from Pope Paul VI to Pope Francis.

The emergence of the Hindutva and the Sangh Parivar sends a loud and clear message: that they will leave no stone unturned to achieve the organizational end of establishing the Hindu Rashtra, even at the peril of other religious minorities. The insecurity experienced by religious minorities has been a great concern. The widespread culture of hatred and fast-creeping religious and social disharmony further endangers the pluralism of India. The culture of blatant polarization by the Hindutva elements needs a response that includes varied faiths and communities across India. Amidst this, people belonging to varied religions, faiths, and spiritualities can endeavour to initiate mature conversations and build inter-religious and social harmony by drawing inspiration from their scriptures/holy books of varied faiths. BECs, as argued above, have provided a useful model for helping local Catholic communities understand the fraternal nature of their relationship with, and responsibilities toward, not only other Christians, but also peoples of other faiths, thus providing a robust communal network for resisting this culture of blatant polarization.

I would like to conclude by expanding a bit on how BECs can also inspire the formation of other types of local, people-centred communities across India. Take, for example, the formation of Basic Human Communities (BHCs) – also referred to as Neighbourhood Human Communities – in West Bengal. Based on the model of BECs, BHCs, with the help of local NGOs, were established in West Bengal as a means of “promot[ing] neighbourhood communities with people of all religions and castes [...] to promote inter-religious harmony.”<sup>140</sup> As communities that are open to people of all religions and castes, BHCs can be instruments for holistically addressing the genuine concerns of the people on the periphery in India, i.e., women, Dalits, tribals, Adivasis, and the indigenous people of India (inclusive of the Dravidians who live in Southern India). Furthermore, with their focus on promoting interreligious

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139. Vijay, Scaria, and Colaco, *Breaking Ground*, 235.

140. Sister Christin and Father I. P. Sarro, “Promoting Neighbourhood Human Communities (NHCs)/Basic Human Communities (BHCs) in West Bengal Sikkim Region, India,” accessed December 20, 2022, <https://smallchristiancommunities.org/promoting-neighbourhood-human-communities-nhcsbasic-human-communities-bhcs-in-west-bengal-sikkim-region-india/>.

harmony, these communities could also become instruments by which the pluralistic values of the Indian Constitution are realized and renewed daily by citizens.

Nourished by the varied sacred scriptures of the varied faith groups of members, the interreligious, community-focused, and collaborative nature of BHCs can thus help respond to the negative offshoots of religious nationalism in India i.e., religious majoritarianism, increasing violence between religious groups, politicisation for partisan gains, disdain for intellectuals and arts, and rampant cronyism. As they have done in West Bengal, if BHCs were to spread across India, they could facilitate the growth of empathy and solidarity, providing sustainable people-centred initiatives that address the concerns of civil society – namely, disregard for humanity at the cost of vote bank politics, poverty, suffering, exploitation of the poor, social justice, integral human development, human rights, and indigenous rights. These initiatives could herald a culture of renewal and conversion of hearts that could eventually produce a civilisation of love where each citizen becomes co-responsible for their brethren in their neighbourhood, especially for the needy and the poor. These initiatives could then lead to collaborative initiatives, such as the poor's right to education being addressed by the community, and working together to get clean and safe roads, clean drinking water, education in the neighbourhood, and the right to live in peace and harmony.

These BHCs would provide concrete, sustainable, and people-centred structures to nurture deep bonds and feelings of belongingness, which in turn could overcome hurt between family members and communities and promote healing and forgiveness because of improved interpersonal relationships among the followers of varied faiths and Christian denominations. This would require the members of BECs to adopt self-emptying leadership, servant leadership, and catalyst leadership as a way of life, and to hold other faiths in esteem while involved in collaborative, sustainable, and people-centred initiatives in the neighbourhood. This would build social and religious harmony at the grassroots.<sup>141</sup>

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