

**ASIAN
HORIZONS**

Vol. 9, No. 3, September 2015

Pages: 454-466

A VISION OF CHURCH FOR THE FUTURE

Virginia Saldanha[♦]
Mumbai

Abstract

The resignation of Pope Benedict XVI brought into public domain the numerous problems the institutional Church is besieged with but the election of a Latin American Pope brought us a ray of hope. A man with his ear to the ground, constantly "reading the signs of the time and interpreting it in the light of the gospel" (*Gaudium et Spes*, #; hereafter GS), he calls upon the entire Church to transform itself. He outlines the transformation in his first encyclical *Evangelii Gaudium* [hereafter EG].

In 1990 the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences (FABC), articulated their vision for the Church in Asia to promote the role of the People of God, in the mission of the Church in the modern world as well as to promote communion and solidarity with the poor and marginalized sections of society without distinction of class or faith.

My paper attempts to take a deeper look at the vision of the New Way of Being Church and examine how it can become a reality for a Church of the Future.

Keywords: Mission, People of God, Reign of God, Signs of the Time, Small Christian Communities, Solidarity, Women's Leadership Roles

[♦]**Virginia Saldanha:** Widowed at 28 with three children, now a happy grandmother of eight grandchildren. Former Executive Secretary of the FABC Office of Laity & Family with responsibility for the Women's Desk as well; former Executive Secretary of the CBCI Commission for Women; founder member and Secretary of the Indian Women's Theologians Forum; Advisory member of the Co-ordinating Team of Ecclesia of Women in Asia; Secretary of the Indian Christian Women's Movement. Saldanha is a writer and activist working for justice for women in Church and Society. She has published *Woman Image of God* (St Paul's Better Yourself Books, Mumbai, 2005) and has edited Vol I & II of *Discipleship of Asian Women – At the Service of Life* (Claretian Publications, Bangalore, 2007 & 2010). She has contributed chapters to several books. Email: womynvs@gmail.com

In the age of the smart phone, instant communication and materialism, self-centeredness has attained new heights. This has led to isolation and fragmentation of families and communities, yet the human heart yearns for relatedness. "Isolated individuals can lose their ability and freedom to escape the utilitarian mindset, and end up prey to an unethical consumerism bereft of social or ecological awareness. Social problems must be addressed by community networks and not simply by the sum of individual good deeds" (*Laudato Sí*, 152; hereafter LS), is what Pope Francis recommends to meet the challenges of our time. The vision of Jesus for his followers (both women and men) is to live united as a caring community (Jn 17:21).

Rooted in a Trinitarian God of communion the Church has struggled in the course of her pilgrim journey through history challenged by the world and its rapidly changing value systems. One of the greatest achievements of the Second Vatican council was to re-project the image of the church as a communion of communities by affirming the local character of the Church, built on faith translated into human relationships.¹

The election of a Latin American Pope with his ear to the ground, constantly "reading the signs of the time and interpreting it in the light of the gospel" (GS, 4), calls upon the entire Church to transform itself, to be a poor Church for the poor as it is the poor who are most impacted by the economic, political and environmental problems that exist today.

At times a commendable human ecology is practised by the poor despite numerous hardships. The feeling of asphyxiation brought on by densely populated residential areas is countered if close and warm relationships develop, if communities are created, if the limitations of the environment are compensated for in the interior of each person who feels held within a network of solidarity and belonging. In this way, any place can turn from being a hell on earth into the setting for a dignified life (LS, 148).

In 1990 reading the signs of the time in Asia and walking the dedicated path of the triple dialogue of faith with poverty, culture, and other religions/faiths, the 5th Plenary Assembly of the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences (FABC), articulated their vision for the Church in Asia. It was a vision to promote the role of the People of God, in the mission of the Church in the modern world as well as to promote communion and solidarity with the poor and marginalized

¹Statement of IVth AsIPA General Assembly, November 2006, Trivandrum, Kerala, November 2006, Trivandrum, Kerala, in *For All the Peoples of Asia*, Vol. IV, ed., Franz-Josef Eilers, SVD, Quezon City: Claretian Publications, 2007, 180.

sections of society without distinction of class or faith. The bishops called it A NEW WAY OF BEING CHURCH. It is described as a Church which will be “a communion of communities,” where “laity, religious and clergy recognize and accept each other as sister and brothers” (FABC V, 8.1.1), a participatory and co-responsible Church. This is a prophetic vision for the future of the Church in Asia where the majority of Christians are poor and marginalized. A Desk called Asian Integral Pastoral Approach (AsIPA) was set up in the Office of Laity with a full time Executive Secretary who set about concretizing the vision, providing resource materials and training programmes for National and Diocesan teams promoting the new way of being Church. The Catholic Bishops Conference of India adopted the FABC vision as their pastoral priority and DIIPA (Developing Indian Integral Pastoral Approach) was established in Nagpur.

Internationally this vision had first taken root in Latin America following the decision of the General Conference of Latin American Bishops to restructure the Church at Medellin (1968), Puebla (1979) and Santo Domingo (1992).²

At its 6th Plenary Assembly in 1961 the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) Bishops’ Conference approved a pastoral plan to promote “Living Base Ecclesial Communities.” Between 1966 and 1976 the seed of the Small Christian Community (SCC) was sown and began to grow within the Association of Member Episcopal Conferences in Eastern Africa (AMECEA).³ In 1976 South African Catholic Bishops’ Conference passed a resolution to make SCCs a priority. The Lumko Missiological Institute (LMI) in South Africa developed materials and courses to help with Church renewal by *restructuring* the parish through the introduction and maintenance of SCCs.⁴ The LMI soon became internationally known and was tapped to help other countries in their pursuit of this new vision of Church. Some pockets of India, Malaysia and the Philippines tried to organize parishes into SCCs with varying degrees of success.

²Gerry Proctor “Analyzing the Present Moment – Latin American BECs in 2004,” in ed. Joseph G. Healey and Jeanne Hinton, *Small Christian Communities Today, Capturing the New Moment*, Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2005, 33.

³Healey Joseph G., MM, “Small Christian Communities (SCCs) as Domestic Church in the Context of African Ecclesiology,” 3 & 5, http://www.academia.edu/8022439/Small_Christian_Communities_as_Domestic_Church_in_the_Context_of_African_Ecclesiology accessed on 18th May 2015.

⁴ <http://www.sedosmission.org/journal/index.php/sedbul/article/viewFile/2196/1881>, accessed on 5th Nov. 2015.

There are pockets of this vision being implemented in some dioceses of North America, Australia and Europe.⁵ With help from the ASIPA Desk some parishes in Switzerland and Germany have tried to follow the model of the New Vision of Being Church to counter the individualism and isolation people feel in this material age.

This paper attempts to take a deeper look at the FABC vision of the New Way of Being Church and examine its relevance for a Church of the Future.

The Vision

This vision is rooted in the Second Vatican Council that emphasizes the Mission of the faithful “who by Baptism are incorporated into Christ, are placed in the People of God, and in their own way share the priestly, prophetic and kingly office of Christ to carry on the mission in the Church and in the world” (LG, 30).

“The understanding of Church as a community is a central and fundamental concept in the documents of the Second Vatican Council” (*Christifideles Laici*, 19; hereafter CL). It is the concrete realization of the communitarian model of the Church (as Communion and as People of God) promoted by the Second Vatican Council. It calls for a change in structure and focus from the parish church as centre where the parish priest is provider, to life in the community where people become the centre,

the Church living ‘in the midst of the homes of her sons and daughters.’ This presumes that it really is in contact with the homes and the lives of its people, and does not become a useless structure out of touch with people or a self-absorbed group made up of a chosen few. The parish is the presence of the Church in a given territory, an environment for hearing God’s word, for growth in the Christian life, for dialogue, proclamation, charitable outreach, worship and celebration. In all its activities the parish encourages and trains its members to be evangelizers. It is a community of communities, a sanctuary where the thirsty come to drink in the midst of their journey, and a centre of constant missionary outreach. We must admit, though, that the call to review and renew our parishes has not yet sufficed to bring them nearer to people, to make them environments of living communion and participation, and to make them completely mission-oriented (EG, 28).

⁵The Third National Convocation of SCCs that took place at St Mary’s University in San Antonio, Texas in 2002 had delegates from Canada, Mexico, Australia, Ireland, England, Scotland and Sweden. Bernard Lee & Michael Cowan, “Priority Concerns of SCCs in American Catholicism,” in ed. Joseph G Healey and Jeanne Hinton, *Small Christian Communities Today, Capturing the New Moment*, Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2005, 63.

The task of every member of the community is to communicate the love of God to each other. Every activity has to be evaluated against the values of the reign of God. Activities in the community have to be inclusive of everyone, some activities should include people of other faith as well. The activities should help people experience the presence of God in their midst. Activities should aim at promoting solidarity with those who feel marginalized and the poor; alleviate people's pain and bring justice by encouraging all to return to Gospel simplicity to create a caring and harmonious living environment. This aspect has been reiterated in *Laudato Sí*. Pope Francis proposes communitarian living with concern and solidarity especially for those living in poverty in mega cities where

overcrowding and social anonymity can create a sense of uprootedness which spawns antisocial behaviour and violence. I wish to insist that love always proves more powerful. Many people in these conditions are able to weave bonds of belonging and togetherness which convert overcrowding into an experience of community in which the walls of the ego are torn down and the barriers of selfishness overcome. This experience of a communitarian salvation often generates creative ideas for the improvement of a building or a neighbourhood (LS, 19).

During my tenure as Executive Committee member with the Justice and Peace Commission of the Archdiocese of Bombay, I personally witnessed how this has proved successful in a parish in Mumbai. The creation of Basic Human Communities (BHC) in the parish of Jeri Meri had prevented the 1992 communal riots⁶ that broke out in Mumbai, from dividing the neighbourhood on communal grounds.

Each community is patterned on the early Christian community (cf Acts 2:41-44) where the first Christians are described as "devoting themselves to the apostles' teaching, and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to the prayers." Thus the Christian community becomes the leaven for peace, spreading the values of the reign of God in their neighbourhood and ultimately in the whole city and country.

The ordained minister becomes a facilitator, accompanying the community lay leaders, helping the faithful participate in the common mission to bring about the reign of God. He has to help them understand that their mission is exercised in the context of their lives, in the home, family, neighbourhood and workplace.

Reflection on the Word of God is the spring board for action in the community. Reflection begins in the context of the lives of those in

⁶https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bombay_Riots accessed on 5th Nov. 2015

the group which in turn propels them to creatively respond to the needs of the community and directly or indirectly to the issues in the wider society.

Bp. Fritz Lobinger of South Africa, advisor to the AsIPA Desk of the FABC wrote that the communion of communities "is a Church where the average member is involved in searching for God's plan in our times and where the community as a whole, and not just special groups, works for justice and development." He pointed out that the growth process for emergent leaders should lead them beyond the stage of being mere "helpers" of the priest and give them real responsibility. He concludes:

We aim at non-dominating leadership in the communities. We believe that real and effective leadership can be combined with communal responsibility. We therefore discourage monopolies and encourage team work. We discourage privileges and encourage rotation of office. We want to give the spiritual foundation for this understanding of ministry.⁷

How Does the Vision Work

The parish is divided into neighbourhood communities. Each community elects animators with one designated as co-ordinator who represents the community on the parish council. The animators organize the community activities like regular gospel sharing, outreach and other actions flowing from the gospel sharing. The animators visit the homes of the families that form the community to come to know them well so as to address any needs of the families with the cooperation and help of the community. The coordinator together with the team of animators is expected to draw the community in the neighbourhood into communion with each other through the sharing of the Word and service to each other. This makes them living signs of Christ in the neighbourhood (Jn 13:35).

The parish becomes a communion of communities at each Sunday Eucharist with the Holy Trinity as the paradigm of communion. In the reception of bread and wine, God is shared completely and binds the community in love, making them one not only with God through Jesus and the Spirit but also with one another. "Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood lives in me and I live in that person. As the living Father sent me and I draw life from the Father, so whoever eats me will also draw life from me" (Jn 6:56-57).

⁷"A New Vision of Church," no. 7 in *The History of LUMKO*, <http://lumko.org/history/> accessed on 18th May 2015

“Through the Eucharist and the Word of God, the many SCCs and other groups in the parish become a ‘Communion of Communities’ and a ‘New Way of Being Church.’”⁸ The life drawn from the Eucharist bears fruit in efforts to strengthen communion in the parish community, in the neighbourhood community and family. The Sunday Eucharist meaningfully celebrated, reminds the faithful of their baptismal identity and communion as members of Christ’s body.

The parish is linked to the diocese through their parish priest and the lay representative on the diocesan pastoral council. The Bishop is linked to the universal Church through his communion with his bishop colleagues and the Pope. In this way the SCC is linked to the universal church as one body of Christ.

The SCC/BEC groups use Gospel sharing as their spiritual basis, Christ is made present through his Word in every community gathering. The gospel is not to be taken as mere information about Jesus but as a sacramental sign of Christ’s presence in the group. Only when the word of God connects Jesus’ life with the lives of people can it cultivate a living faith that bears fruit of justice, love and peace, in their lives. The mission to ‘love your neighbour’ takes on concrete form as men and women delve into the Gospel to understand God’s will. They open themselves to the Spirit of God, and find the courage to make changes in their lives, in their family and society.

Towards the New Vision of a Church for the Future

“The church is being asked to retrieve its deepest identity as a communion, a communion that is not focused on itself, ... but constantly open to every human condition.”⁹

The New Vision has to become the framework within which all institutions in the Church carry out their mission. Since the New Vision facilitates social transformation as called for by Pope Francis, it necessarily has to be mainstreamed into the teaching of catechetics at all levels in the Church, so that all become familiar with this new model of Church and mission, beginning with baptismal catechesis.

⁸AsIPA Texts (training programmes) No. B/2, “SCCs Are a ‘Concrete Expression of the Church,’” Taipei: AsIPA Desk, FABC Office of Laity, 15.

⁹Luis Antonio Tagle, Keynote Address given at George Town University Theological Conference on “Vatican II, Remembering the Future: Ecumenical, Interfaith and Secular Perspectives on the Council’s Impact and Promise,” 22 May 2015. <http://ncronline.org/news/global/cardinal-tagle-church-should-not-look-idealized-past-nostalgia> 22 May 2015, accessed on 25th May 2015.

The New Way of Being Church, is based on the servant leadership model exemplified by Jesus in washing of the disciples feet. Acknowledging the divine principle that charisms are given to all to offer kenotic or self-emptying service, can help facilitate partnership and change the hierarchical structures in the Church. The priesthood and hierarchy have to be demythologised and demystified, promoting the concept of Church as the People of God who are equal in discipleship.

The vision requires that “communities take on full responsibility for their life and work. They have to become self-ministering. Lengthy, active experience (of leaders) in their parishes will have distinguished them as ‘proven’ — probati — community leaders.”¹⁰

The in-service training of priests as well as the inclusion of this vision in seminary training will help priests become catalysts in the movement towards the vision of a New Way of Being Church. Priests have to be trained to become partners with the people of God in the Mission of the Church. Seminarians have to learn to work with women and respect the contribution of women in all aspects of Church life.

The contributions of women have all too often been undervalued or ignored, and this has resulted in a spiritual impoverishment of humanity. The Church in Asia would more visibly and effectively uphold women’s dignity and freedom by encouraging their role in the Church’s life, including her intellectual life, and by opening to them every greater opportunities to be present and active in the Church’s mission of love and service (*Ecclesia in Asia*, 34).

Change can come only with a sincere introspection on the very concept of power and hierarchy in the Church. “One of the severe tensions we have in the church today is between the vision we have of community and governance that is monarchical.”¹¹ While there is apparent ‘progress’ after Vatican II in women’s participation in the Church, the fundamental problem of women’s subordination rooted in patriarchy and hierarchy is not addressed. The early tradition of women deacons in the Church can be restored. Since “Sacred orders” includes diaconal ordination, women could then be included in decision-making.

¹⁰Paul M. Zulehner and F. Lobinger, “A Corinthian Type and Pauline Type of Priests,” in “Priests for Tomorrow” by F. Lobinger & P.M. Zulehner, Quiezon City: Claretian Publications, 2004, 2.

¹¹Sr. Theresa Kane, “A Knock at Midnight, Celebrating Christ in Urgent Times,” talk given at the second annual Celebration Conference on Effective Liturgy, in Chicago. Accessed online on May 27th 2015 <http://ncronline.org/news/sr-theresa-kane-speaks-effective-liturgy-celebration-conference-chicago>

Lay leaders need to be trained to understand the Vision of the New Way of Being Church so that they are able to lead the people to experience God in community and witness the Risen Lord by living the values of the gospel in their neighbourhood. They should animate people to take on responsibility for mission in the Church and the world in partnership with the clergy.

For the lay faithful to understand the importance of their mission they have to change their understanding of "Church". The new way of being Church moves us

from a fortress mentality to the large spreading tree with long branches, shady, supporting, welcoming and inviting — rooted in the Trinity and reaching out in dialogue, listening to people of all faiths and working toward unity. This kind of church means that we move from an over emphasis on orthodoxy to greater emphasis on participation and community.¹²

This would call for lay leaders who are sensitive and open to read the signs of the time. They will have to be non-judgemental and inclusive so as not to marginalize anyone on grounds of marital status, class, caste or gender.

This New Vision is Relevant to Our Time

This vision conforms with Pope Francis' dream of "'a missionary option' for the transformation of today's world" (EG, 27). It is "faithful to the reforms of the Second Vatican Council, fully engaged in the modern world and its economic and social struggles; a pastoral church reaching out to the suffering and neglected people at the margins of society;"¹³ Addressing one of the gravest issues of our time of Climate Change in his encyclical *Laudato Si'*, Pope Francis points out that,

Around these community actions, relationships develop or are recovered and a new social fabric emerges. Thus, a community can break out of the indifference induced by consumerism. These actions cultivate a shared identity, with a story which can be remembered and handed on. In this way, the world, and the quality of life of the poorest, are cared for, with a sense of solidarity which is at the same time aware that we live in a

¹²Louis Wendy, "Women's Participation in the Mission of the Church Based on the Vision of FABC," in ed. Virginia Saldanha, *Discipleship of Asian Women at the Service of Life*, Vol. II, Bangalore: Claretian Publications, 2011, 268.

¹³Pat Marrin, "Does Romero's Beatification Signal Where Francis is Leading the Church?" *National Catholic Reporter*, May 19, 2015, accessed online on 26th May, 2015, <http://ncronline.org/news/global/does-romeros-beatification-signal-where-francis-leading-church>

common home which God has entrusted to us. These community actions, when they express self-giving love, can also become intense spiritual experiences (LS, 232).

In an age when materialism and technology is driving individualism, the SCC is a powerful instrument to remind the faithful of their call to live their faith intentionally and actively within their neighbourhood in such a way that the reign of God is hastened. The SCCs are dynamic in nature because through reflection on the Word of God they make their faith relevant to contemporary experiences and concerns.

When people begin participating in its (Church) life, they bring into its ambit of concern their own life concerns. This has the effect of both broadening and narrowing the Church's pastoral outlook: broadening it, that is, beyond its explicitly spiritual concerns; narrowing it to the specificities of the people's life as they see it and as they try to live it in a Christian way... What eventually happens in a truly participatory and discerning Church, given the change of focus and the acceptance of social transformation and inculturation as legitimate tasks in the over-all mission of the Church, is a new way of being Church.¹⁴

Pope Francis stressed the importance of *sensus fidei* when he called for the Synod on the Family. The structure of the new vision of Church which links the family, neighbourhood community, parish, diocese, regional and universal Church with the Pope facilitates a "listening" and "responsive" Church.

Demands of modern life have fragmented the family. There are a growing number of single parent families for various reasons. There are grandparents caring for children, increase in the number of senior citizens who live alone, single persons, etc. The SCC/BEC can become the extended family for these persons who need the support of a caring community.

SCCs/BECs can be instrumental in reaching out to, nurturing and strengthening the faith community in various situations that have arisen in different parts of the world where a number of people being disillusioned with the way the ordained leaders conduct themselves just drop away from the Church; where numerous people finding themselves in circumstances that are not approved by the Church feel they do not fit in and decide that the Church is no place for them. The

¹⁴Francisco F. Claver, SJ, "The Church in Asia, Twenty and Forty Years after Vatican II," (Personal Reflections 1985–2005) in Gen. ed., James H Kroeger MM. *FABC Paper No. 117: The Second Vatican Council and the Church in Asia, Readings and Reflections*, Hongkong: Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences, 2006, 77.

change in number and demographics of vocations throws up questions with regard to the genuineness of vocations. In the West vocations have dried up almost completely leading to a crisis of a lack of priests to keep parishes running. In places where parishes that are very large or spread wide geographically and priests are few the SCC helps to keep the faith community alive and active.

The archdiocese of Semarang, Indonesia comprises several hundred small islands where it is impossible for a priest to reach every island for Mass even in a month. The leaders of the SCC are the ones who organize the Sunday liturgy, conduct baptisms, funerals, and give pastoral care to their communities.¹⁵

Even in Catholic Philippines, the parishes are so large, that the few priests in the parish are unable to go to all the sub-stations every Sunday of the month for the celebration of the Eucharist. So the SCC leaders travel to the main parish Church and bring the Eucharist each Saturday to their community. They conduct the Sunday liturgy in the community whenever the priest is not present. They conduct catechesis for the children and prepare the children/adults for the sacraments.¹⁶

The SCCs have provided women in the Church with the opportunity to catch up with the secular world in claiming their space in leadership roles to a certain extent. “Women are trainers, facilitators and the most reliable and regular participants — in short, women build and maintain SCCs.”¹⁷ Women have moved from passivity to active participation in the mission of Church in Asia through this new way of being Church. They are aware that their participation in the mission of the Church is making their faith come alive and that they are responding to the call of God. They believe it is their vocation. One Japanese Bishop commented “If women go, we have to close the Church.”¹⁸

Women are more easily able to take up social issues with much success. They are connected with the issues that affect the

¹⁵Abp. Ignatius Suharyo, paper presented at the International Seminar on Communities and Ministries, at Torhout, Belgium, May 30 – June 3, 2005.

¹⁶Abp. Antonio Ledesma of the Philippines, sharing at the International Conference on Communities and Ministries at Torhout, Belgium, 2005.

¹⁷ Mateo Cora, “Women in SCCs or BECs”, in “Discipleship of Asian Women at the Service of Life” Vol I Edtd. Virginia Saldanha, Claretian publications, Bangalore, India, 2007.

¹⁸Mateo, “Women in SCCs or BECs,” in *Discipleship of Asian Women at the Service of Life*, Vol. I, ed. Virginia Saldanha, Bangalore: Claretian Publications, 2007, 254.

neighbourhood community and family and can work easily with others in the neighbourhood to address these needs.

We find women foremost in offering compassionate care, counselling, working for justice among the poor and marginalized and being with people in moments of need. The promotion of the Small Christian Community or Basic Community in the Church in Asia has developed women's leadership in the neighbourhood which provides the humane dimension in community building. This 'common priesthood' expressed by women is vital for healing and holding communities together and bring healing and wholeness to the Church and the world.¹⁹

Women's Involvement in SCCs has had Positive Impact

In a village community where drunkenness and wife beating were a regular feature, the women of the community got together to find a solution to the problem. They gave every woman a whistle. If a man came home drunk and troubled his family and/ or beat his wife, she was to blow on the whistle. This brought all the women in the neighbourhood to her house. The women would then confront the man who would be ashamed to face the crowd of women so he was forced to stop beating his wife. They left only when he assured them he would go to bed quietly. In this way they were able to control a lot of domestic violence.

In yet another village, women confronted the owners of the local alcohol shop to stop selling alcohol to their men as it was causing a lot of family problems. They used the law and forced the shop to change its business with their collective action.

In my own community, a woman who was living alone with her aged mother had been suffering from cancer. She needed to go to the hospital for chemotherapy at regular intervals. She was always accompanied by a woman from the community. Women from the community took turns and also helped her with various chores at home as well.

Women are the majority volunteers as lectors, ushers and extraordinary ministers of the Eucharist. Every Sunday, women take the Eucharist to the sick and aged in their communities. They pray and spend some time with them. They form the link between the housebound parishioners and the parish.

¹⁹Virginia Saldanha, "Priesthood and Community — The Feminine Dimension," in ed. Angela Perkins and Verena Wright, *Healing Priesthood — Women's Voices Worldwide*, London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 2003, 119.

Women are also the majority of those volunteering as catechists, preparing parishioners for the various sacraments and running the Sunday school.

The daily actions of women in their homes and workplaces, the action of groups of women in bettering their personal lives, that of their families and neighbourhoods are recognized and accepted as being an integral part of the Mission of the Church.

Conclusion

The SCC/BEC is the vision of Jesus for the Community of disciples he left behind to continue his mission of bringing about the reign of God in our world. They formed communities that met in house churches similar to the SCC/BEC. Both men and women, lived their discipleship through witness and various ministries like teaching, healing, prophesying and service to the community which later was interpreted as the exercise of their 'common priesthood.' In the early Church women shared in decision making and had leadership and liturgical roles in the community (Acts 18:26, 21:8-9; Rom 16).²⁰

With the right formation for ordained and lay leaders and proper faith formation of the faithful, the vision of Church for the 21st century as a communion of communities has the potential to be an instrument of evangelization and transformation from the personal level to the level of society at large. This model of being Church is inclusive, welcoming and focuses on love so as to draw all those who would otherwise feel marginalized and excluded.

Being Church means being God's people, in accordance with the great plan of his fatherly love. This means that we are to be God's leaven in the midst of humanity. It means proclaiming and bringing God's salvation into our world, which often goes astray and needs to be encouraged, given hope and strengthened on the way. The Church must be a place of mercy freely given, where everyone can feel welcomed, loved, forgiven and encouraged to live the good life of the Gospel (EG, 114).

When the focus of the entire Church is on nurturing the SCC/BEC in keeping with the vision of Vatican Council II for the People of God, the Church will become the sign and the path to God's reign of justice and peace in the world.

²⁰Statement of the Indian Women Theologians' Meeting 2015 on the theme "Priesthood of Women," <https://insecttheology.wordpress.com/2015/04/22/indian-women-theologians/> accessed on 5th Nov. 2015