

## A Spark Ignites a Flame – Small Christian Communities in Germany

Klaus Vellguth

After the Second Vatican Council, Europe witnessed the emergence of a movement inspired primarily by the search in Latin American countries for ways of living as a committed Christian. From the 1970s onwards Christians began to form Basic Ecclesial Communities in response to this movement. A look at their evolution in the different European countries makes it clear that the momentum generated by the movement varied from country to country. The development of Basic Ecclesial Communities in Germany at this time was of only marginal significance compared to other European countries. Looking back, Norbert Mette writes: “In comparison with other countries in Europe [the development of Basic Ecclesial Communities] in Germany was on a modest scale. In fact, Basic Ecclesial Communities were formed relatively late. A considerable influence on the situation in Germany was exerted by the changes taking place at the time in the Catholic Church in the Netherlands [...].”<sup>308</sup> A look at the book *Die andere Kirche: Basisgemeinden in Europa*<sup>309</sup>, published in 1982, is revealing in this respect. It contains reports on the development of Basic Ecclesial Communities in the Netherlands, Belgium, France, Italy, Spain, Portugal, Poland and Hungary. There is no separate report in this European survey on grass-roots developments in the Church in Germany, however. The book merely reviews the situation in the German-speaking countries at the end of the national reports.

---

<sup>308</sup> Mette, N., Der europäische Kontext (Lecture given at the conference “In the Modern World? The Church on the way through History in Basic Ecclesial Communities.” International Consultations in Aachen, 14-16 December 2010.

<sup>309</sup> Copray, N. / Meesmann, H., / Seiterich, Th. (ed.), *Die andere Kirche, Basisgemeinden in Europa*, Wuppertal 1982.

In his article on the situation of Basic Ecclesial Communities in Germany Thomas Seiterich proposes the following as a definition of what a Basic Ecclesial Community is considered to be in Germany: "Groups and communities are being formed that exist outside the institutional parish structures and beyond the scope of ecclesiastical law. These groups and communities call themselves 'Basic Groups' or 'Basic Ecclesial Communities'. They read the Bible, celebrate Communion or the Eucharist, intervene in political conflicts and make their views heard with an increasing degree of self-confidence among the Church-going public."<sup>310</sup> These groups called themselves Projektgruppe konkrete Theologie (Lauffen), Laurentius-Konvent (Wethen), Oskar-Romero-Haus (Bonn), Teestubengemeinde (Würzburg), Gastkirche (Recklinghausen), KABA (Hannover), Dessauerhausgemeinde (Frankfurt am Main) or simply Basisgemeinde (Darmstadt, Marburg, Bonn, Wulfshagenerhütten, etc.). Since these groups tended to regard themselves as part of a reform movement or a changed practice and not as a substructure within the Church, Hermann Steinkamp favoured treating the Basic Ecclesial Communities not as a 'social form' but as a 'practice form'<sup>311</sup>. He warned against the expectation that Basic Ecclesial Communities could be transplanted as "living cells into the ageing organism of the European people's church"<sup>312</sup>, considering it to be unrealistic.

During the Grassroots Catholics Day in 1980 a map was put up on which Basic Ecclesial Communities could be entered. A total of 40 groups or communities were identified. Writing about the members of these Basic Ecclesial Communities, Thomas Seiterich said they were generally between the ages of 18 and 60 and that marginal social groups were barely represented. The members "come from that section of the population in which the younger and middle generation has, with the exception of a small minority, turned its back in

<sup>310</sup> Seiterich, Th., Basisgemeinden, in: Copray, N., / Meesmann, H / Seiterich, Th. (ed.), o. cit., 135-148, 135.

<sup>311</sup> Cf. Steinkamp, H., Selbst wenn die Betreuten sich ändern, Theologie im Ringen um Geschichte und Gesellschaft, in: Schillebeeckx, E., Mystik und Politik, Johann Baptist Metz zu Ehren, Mainz 1988, 354-363, 355.

<sup>312</sup> Steinkamp, H., Prozesse der Gemeindebildung, Exemplarische Schwierigkeiten in der Bundesrepublik, in: Metz, J.B. / Rottländer, P. (ed.), Lateinamerika und Europa, Mainz 1988, 110.

disappointment on the churches over the past twenty years.”<sup>313</sup> These Basic Ecclesial Communities in the Federal Republic of Germany regarded themselves initially as personal communities, membership of which rested on a conscious decision in favour of a Christian life involving greater personal commitment. Their high level of binding personal commitment was also manifested in the vehement resistance of the Basic Ecclesial Communities to the pastoral practice of a ‘Church of dependents’ or a ‘service Church’. Instead, the members of the Basic Ecclesial Communities generally attached importance to political involvement. Many of their members played an active role in the political disputes over the NATO double-track missiles decision, the nuclear power plant at Brokdorf and the plans to build the western runway at Frankfurt Airport.

In addition to the political slant that characterised many of the Basic Ecclesial Communities they adopted a new approach to the Bible: “Small groups get together in an effort to interpret the Word of God, who topples the mighty from their thrones and lifts up the downtrodden, in their own specific occupational, family and political settings. [...] Basic Ecclesial Communities endeavour to jointly re-appropriate the Word of God; and in these difficult attempts at re-appropriation, which in many cases are hindered by the middle-class practice of steering clear of unfamiliar developments, the members experience what they regard as a key element of living and working together in a Basic Ecclesial Community.”<sup>314</sup>

Many Basic Ecclesial Communities consciously saw themselves as a living part of a universal Church and maintained direct, personal relations with parishes or Basic Ecclesial Communities in countries of the southern hemisphere. In addition to their universal Church aspirations these Basic Ecclesial Communities asserted the right to ecumenical openness, which manifested itself in the accessibility of the Basic Ecclesial Communities to members of different denominations. The Basic Ecclesial Communities which emerged in Germany at this stage regarded themselves either as groupings on

---

<sup>313</sup> Seiterich, Th., *Basisgemeinden*, o. cit., 138.

<sup>314</sup> *Ibid.* 143. Cf. Metz, J.P., *Im Aufbruch zu einer kulturellen polyzentrischen Welt*, in: Kaufmann, F.-X./ Metz, J.B., *Zukunftsfähigkeit, Suchbewegungen im Christentum*, Freiburg 1987, 110-111.

the fringes of the institutional (Catholic) Church, as non-denominational groupings or, in some cases, as groups that deliberately wished to form a contrast with the 'established Church.' The governing body of the Church reacted in different ways to these new developments. There were numerous constructive attempts to commend the Basic Ecclesial Communities as an innovative movement of awakening propelled by dedicated Christians who offered considerable potential for the renewal of the Church as a whole. The last Lent Pastoral Letter written in 1981 by the then Bishop of Limburg, Wilhelm Kempf, contained welcome words of respect for the nascent Basic Ecclesial Communities: "There are Christians who feel called upon to give more than what they currently experience in their parishes in terms of commitment and dedication. However, they also take the message of the Bible seriously that you cannot be a Christian all on your own. They feel that now, more than ever before, it is inconceivable to be a Christian and not be part of a community. They, therefore, gather in small groups and strive to find common ways of living that are in harmony with the Gospel and the following of Jesus Christ. They hold discussions on the faith and the Bible, celebrate Mass together, donate a large part of their earnings to the poor and the persecuted in the Third World, stand up for the defenceless and in some cases also take political sides. Most of these groups have not been founded by a priest. They have been formed by lay people acting on their own free will. [...] They aim to give a new, more vocal expression to the radical demands made in the Gospel of mediocre or introverted Christians. They suffer if the parish does not give them sufficient room to pursue their own initiatives. They criticise the fact that Christians, and often enough the clergy too, are insensitive to social and political problems. They are disgusted by the new 'look after and care for me' mentality that is to be found among many members of the Catholic Church."<sup>315</sup> It was thanks to such words of esteem that many Christians active in the Basic Ecclesial Communities continued to regard themselves as part of the Church and decided not to break off contacts with other Church circles, which had often become very fragile.

---

<sup>315</sup> Kempf, W., Für euch und für alle, Brief des Bischofs von Limburg zur Fastenzeit 1981 an die Gemeinden des Bistums, besonders an die Fernstehenden, Limburg 1981.

In the 1980s and 1990s many Basic Ecclesial Communities in Germany revealed a high level of commitment, although the movement itself never gained the momentum it achieved in some other European countries.<sup>316</sup> In fact, most of the Basic Ecclesial Communities disbanded after a few years. There were many reasons for this. The dissolution process was attributed in part to personal conflicts within the groups, which have a substantial explosive force in personal communities. On the other hand, many Basic Ecclesial Communities failed to live up to the high ethical expectations they set themselves. Finally, the late 1980s and early 1990s saw the end of the political disputes that had served as a source of identity for many Basic Ecclesial Communities. The end of the political arguments meant the loss of an important point of focus and identification for the Basic Ecclesial Communities. Another problem was that the approach adopted by the Basic Ecclesial Communities came about “because of the upheavals in Germany, out of a sense of frustration and with an idealising look at ‘the others’”<sup>317</sup>. Moreover, from the 1990s at the latest Germany underwent a phase of social cocooning that was less conducive to the political involvement experienced the late 1970s and early 1980s, favouring a return to familiar structures instead.<sup>318</sup> The new grassroots movement emerging in German local churches today can be attributed to a later development.

### **New learning experiences in Africa and Asia**

The start of the third millennium has witnessed the emergence of a new Basic Ecclesial Community movement in Germany.<sup>319</sup> There are two reasons for this. Firstly, the disadvantages of the territorially ever larger pastoral units in the German dioceses are readily apparent. Secondly, the spiritual and community-based approach of the Small Christian Communities, as seen from the universal Church perspective, is regarded as having the potential to serve as a social form

---

<sup>316</sup> Cf. Höhne-Sparborth, J., Länderbericht „Niederlande“, in: Copray, N. / Meesmann, H. / Seiterich, Th., (ed.), o. cit., Wuppertal 1982, 37- 49.

<sup>317</sup> Cf. Lutz, B., Small Christian Communities – ein weltweites, aber sehr heterogenes Phänomen, in: Pastoraltheologische Informationen 26 (2006) 1, 22-37, 23.

<sup>318</sup> Cf. Horx, M., Trendbuch 1, Berlin 1996.

<sup>319</sup> Cf. Lutz, B., o. cit. 22-37.

for the Church at the local level.<sup>320</sup> The experience gained in earlier decades during the initial phase of the Basic Ecclesial Communities, which ultimately lacked long-term viability, has been analysed and the lessons learned from the lack of acceptance, attachment to the Church and spirituality witnessed during that early period.<sup>321</sup>

Small Christian Communities, which emerged from the mid-1970s firstly in East Africa, then in southern Africa and finally in Asia, have proved to be an important source of learning for the universal Church.<sup>322</sup> From the 1980s onwards, *missio* monitored the processes of awakening in Basic Ecclesial Communities in the churches of the South, which were regarded initially as places where there was a lively biblical apostolate. In its project work *missio* gave special support to publication of the Lumko materials<sup>323</sup>, which encompassed both the Bible-sharing method and the Small Christian Communities approach.<sup>324</sup> In the 1980s, *missio* published a workbook introducing the Seven Steps method of Bible sharing in Germany, where this form of biblical apostolate found numerous supporters.<sup>325</sup> In contrast to the papers that were very often presented in Bible study groups, the newly introduced Bible sharing method rested on a different approach. “Whereas Bible study groups and Bible methods very often – and justifiably – rely on the superior skills of the person leading the group

<sup>320</sup> Cf. Körber, M., Sehnsuchtsorte, Small Christian Communities, in: Pastoralblatt 59 (2007) 81-85.

<sup>321</sup> Cf. Weber, F., Gewagte Inkulturation, Basisgemeinden in Brasilien, Eine pastoralgeschichtliche Zwischenbilanz, Mainz 1995, 38-65.

<sup>322</sup> Cf. Velluth, K., Eine neue Art Kirche zu sein, Entstehung und Verbreitung der Small Christian Communities und des Bibel-Teilens in Afrika und Asien, Freiburg 2005.

<sup>323</sup> Cf. Lobinger, F., Building Small Christian Communities, No. 19 in the series “Training for Community Ministries”, Lady Frere 1981. Hirmer, O. / Broderick, R., Neighbourhood Gospel Sharing, No. 20 in the series “Training for Community Ministries”, Lady Frere 1985. The first edition of this publication was entitled “Neighbourhood Gospel Groups”. The title chosen for the new, revised edition in 1985 was “Gospel Sharing”. The second revised edition published in 1991 was called “The Pastoral Use of the Bible”. The title has remained unchanged since then.

<sup>324</sup> Cf. Tewes, D., AsIPA – Small Christian Communities, Ein weltkirchliches Lernprojekt für die Pastoral im deutschsprachigen Raum, in: Ordenskorrespondenz 48 (2007) 1, 62–69, 63f.

<sup>325</sup> Cf. Rappel, S., Eine neue Art, Kirche zu sein, Pastoral aus Afrika und Asien – eine Inspiration für Deutschland?, in: Anzeiger für die Seelsorge 115 (2006) 9, 5-8, 6f.

[...], the point of Bible sharing is to experience the practical updating and full expression of the truth of the Council, which stems from the fundamental equality and dignity of all who have been baptised – a dignity which can also be interpreted as meaning that all are called upon equally to listen to God's Word.”<sup>326</sup>

In 1989, the last Diocesan Synod in Germany, which was held in the Diocese of Hildesheim, addressed the issue of “A New Way of Being Church”.<sup>327</sup> One of the main things the Synod Fathers learned at that time was that meetings and working groups were not just technically and bureaucratically efficient ways of working, but also “a self-realization of the Church and self-evangelisation. Bible-sharing proved to be a practical way of appreciating what God wants for the Church today.”<sup>328</sup> In the 1990s, *missio* invited Oswald Hirmer to give seminars on Bible-sharing in Germany. In doing so, it drew on the experience that had been gathered in the Small Christian Communities in Africa.<sup>329</sup> In both the Diocese of Hildesheim and, in particular, in the Diocese of Rottenburg-Stuttgart an awareness had developed at an early stage that a process of Bible-based community development was taking place in the Small Christian Communities.<sup>330</sup> In the meantime the first Asian Integral Pastoral Approach (AsIPA) texts were available in a German translation supplied by Oswald Hirmer. In 1998, a workbook on Bible-sharing was published in a new, completely revised edition.<sup>331</sup> In Germany, reception initially concen-

<sup>326</sup> Hennecke, C., Mehr und anders als man denkt: Small Christian Communities, in: idem. (ed.), *Small Christian Communities verstehen, Ein Weg, Kirche mit den Menschen zu sein*, Würzburg 2009, 10-28, 21. Alexander Foitzik, *Neue Formen gemeindlichen Lebens, Ein Gespräch mit Regens Christian Hennecke über Kirchenbilder*, in: *Herder Korrespondenz* 64 (2010) 4, 177-181, 180.

<sup>327</sup> Cf. Leder, G., *Auf neue Art Kirche sein ...? Laienhafte Anmerkungen*, Münster 2008.

<sup>328</sup> Kaune, M., / Hennecke, C., Mehr als Bibel-Teilen, Auf dem Weg zu einer “Kirche in der Nachbarschaft” im Bistum Hildesheim, in: *Anzeiger für die Seelsorge* 115 (2006) 9, 16-19, 16.

<sup>329</sup> Cf. Nagler, N., *Spiritualität und Gemeindebildung – eine neue Art Kirche zu sein*, in: *Lebendige Seelsorge* 56 (2005) 4, 211-218, 211f.

<sup>330</sup> Cf. Diözese Rottenburg-Stuttgart, *Der Samen ist das Wort Gottes, Bausteine für eine biblisch orientierte Gemeindeentwicklung (Materialhilfe 11 des Instituts für Fort- und Weiterbildung der kirchlichen Dienste in der Diözese Rottenburg-Stuttgart)*, Rottenburg 1998.

<sup>331</sup> *missio* (ed.), *Bibel-Teilen, Bekannte Texte neu erleben*, Aachen 1998.

trated on the Seven Steps of bible-sharing as a form of Bible study.<sup>332</sup> The strong focus on the biblical apostolate also found expression in the book *Gemeinschaft im Wort* published in 1999. It presents Bible-sharing primarily as a form of spiritual Bible reading in which no account is taken of the ecclesiological context.<sup>333</sup> But Bible-sharing is more than just that: "In actual fact, Bible-sharing is the spiritual foundation of the Small Christian Communities. Where Bible-sharing is conducted properly, it turns a Small Christian Community into a 'mystagogical community', whose members help each other to grasp the secret of Christ's presence in their midst."<sup>334</sup>

The introduction of Bible-sharing in Germany paved the way for a new, nationwide initiative that enabled Small Christian Communities to be launched in Germany at the outset of the third millennium. This initiative ultimately had its origins in the journeys undertaken by two *missio* members of staff to Sri Lanka and India respectively in preparation for the *missio* campaign on World Mission Sunday in 2000. In the summer of 1999 Dieter Tewes travelled to India and Klaus Vellguth to Sri Lanka. In the course of these journeys it turned out that not only was a form of Bible-sharing practised in the Small Christian Communities that was of interest to Germany, but also that in the Small Christian Communities in Sri Lanka and India, which had been set up in Asia as part of the Asian Integral Pastoral Approach (AsIPA), there was an intrinsic ecclesiological potential that changes churches in the spirit of the Second Vatican Council and leads to a new way of being Church.<sup>335</sup> It became clear that this pastoral approach offered interesting prospects for Germany in shaping the Church at

<sup>332</sup> Cf. Kaune, M./ Hennecke, C., Mehr als Bibel-Teilen, Auf dem Weg zu einer 'Kirche in der Nachbarschaft' im Bistum Hildesheim, in: AnzSS 115 (2006) 9, 16-19, 17. Vellguth, K., *Gemeinschaft im Wort*. Das Bibel-Teilen erschließt Christen auf der ganzen Welt neue Wege zum Glauben, in: *Im Blickpunkt*, Munich 2004, 10-12.

<sup>333</sup> Cf. Hirmer, O./ Steins, G., *Gemeinschaft im Wort*, Werkbuch zum Bibel-Teilen, Munich 1999.

<sup>334</sup> Hirmer, O., Small Christian Communities, Ein starkes Werkzeug zur inneren Reform der Kirche, in: *Anzeiger für die Seelsorge* 115 (2006) 9, 20-21, 21.

<sup>335</sup> Cf. FABC, *Journeying Together Towards the Third Millennium*, The Final Statement of the Fifth Plenary Assembly of FABC, Bandung, Indonesia, July 17-27, 1990, in: *FABC Papers* (1990) 55-59, 57d, 26f. Cf. Vianney, E., Our Vision of Communion and Solidarity in the Context of Asia, in: *Colloquium on Churches in Asia in the 21st Century*, Manila 1998.

the local level.<sup>336</sup> An application to present this approach in Germany stated the following: “The AsIPA programme [...] addresses the pastoral and spiritual needs in the communities and forms viable basic ecclesial structures. The pastoral strength of the AsIPA approach resides in the dovetailing of spirituality and community building; it convincingly implements the communion ecclesiology. The different cultural context notwithstanding, this concept also offers a vision for local churches in Germany.”<sup>337</sup> Norbert Mette subsequently wrote the following about this method of drawing attention to the experience of Small Christian Communities in Asia and implementing a learning community in the universal Church: “A look at other regions within the universal Church can give cause for hope and provide confirmation that there are other ways of proceeding.”<sup>338</sup>

### **Launching the Spirituality and Community Building project**

Missio decided to introduce the pastoral approach of the Small Christian Communities to audiences in Germany as part of a multi-year project. In September 2000, the newly established Working Group on Spirituality and Community Building, headed by Norbert Nagler, met in Aachen to map out the prospects for such a project.<sup>339</sup> Once again it became clear that the strength of the AsIPA approach derives from the fact that full-time pastoral staff, in particular, learn a new, participatory style of leadership and lay people are invited to share responsibility. Emphasis was also put on the spiritual and pastoral opportunities this approach had to offer for the Church in Germany: “For the German dioceses and parishes, which in the present circumstances

---

<sup>336</sup> Cf. Vellguth, K., *Am Anfang steht die Vision*, in: Fürstenberg, G. von / Nagler, N. / Vellguth, K. (ed.), *Zukunftsfähige Gemeinde, Ein Werkbuch mit Impulsen aus den Jungen Kirchen*, Munich 2003, 60-64. Vellguth, K., *Die Sonne geht im Osten auf*, in: *Pastoralblatt* 54 (2002) 10, 251-254. Tewes, D., o. cit., 64.

<sup>337</sup> Vellguth, K., *Antrag zur Etablierung eines Projekts „Small Christian Communities“* (unpublished document), Aachen 1999.

<sup>338</sup> Mette, N., *Situation der Gemeindepastoral in Deutschland*, in: Fürstenberg, G. von / Nagler, N. / Vellguth, K. (ed.), o. cit. 12.

<sup>339</sup> In 2000 the members of the Working Group on Spirituality and Community Building were Gabriele Eichelmann, Werner Meyer zum Farwig, Helmut Gammel, Max Himmel, Rainer Kiwitz, Annette Meuthrath, Hadwig Müller, Norbert Nagler (as project leader), Werner Schmitz, Harald Strotmann and Dieter Tewes (who later took over as project leader).

are seeking pastoral prospects for the future, AsIPA offers a special opportunity to counter the threat of exclusively structural thinking by supporting the congregations in their search for a sound spiritual basis and accompanying them effectively down this road.”<sup>340</sup>

To learn more about the development of Small Christian Communities in Asia two *missio* representatives, Armin Ehl and Norbert Nagler, took part in the Second AsIPA General Assembly in October 2000 in Sam Phran (Thailand). During this conference Oswald Hirmer stressed that Small Christian Communities focus on Christ and made it clear that the practice of Gospel-sharing is just one way of placing Christ at the heart of the community or the Church.<sup>341</sup> This line of argument was taken up shortly afterwards by Ottmar Fuchs, who wrote the following about the connection between a focus on the Bible and a focus on Christ: “References to the Bible and references to Christ belong together in these communities. First of all, Christ is positioned at the centre. He is given a presence so that he can be experienced as the person who speaks to the faithful through the biblical texts. The faithful regard their own interpretations of the texts as an answer to this word. There is no discussion of the texts; instead they become the medium for the encounter with Christ.”<sup>342</sup>

### **A journey with consequences**

A few weeks after this AsIPA General Assembly a second meeting of the Working Group on Spirituality and Community Building was held in December 2000. Representatives of the dioceses in Aachen, Osnabrück, Rottenburg and Trier reported on the pastoral situation in their respective dioceses and identified points of departure for a grassroots model of Small Church Communities.<sup>343</sup> One of the key

<sup>340</sup> Working Group on Spirituality and Community Building, minutes of the meeting of 14 September 2000 (unpublished minutes), Aachen 2000.

<sup>341</sup> Cf. Hirmer, O., AsIPA, A Tool for Implementing Our Vision of Church as a Co-Responsible Community of Brothers and Sisters, in: AsIPA General Assembly II, A New Way of Being Church in the New Millennium, Taipei 2002, 26-31. Cf. Nagler, N., Meditation in Gemeinschaft, Bibel- und Leben-Teilen als Gemeinde am Ort, in: *Anzeiger für die Seelsorge* 114 (2004) 7/8, 18-23.

<sup>342</sup> Fuchs, O., Immer noch: Neue Impulse aus der Weltkirche, in: Fürstenberg, G. von / Nagler, N. / Vellguth, K. (ed.), o. cit. 17-27, 25.

<sup>343</sup> For related aspects concerning a contextualisation in Europe cf. Spielberg, B., *Wo lebt*

steps agreed was that in the following year pastoral staff should be offered the opportunity to travel to India and Sri Lanka so that they could observe the Small Christian Communities approach in practice. The journey was undertaken in March 2001 with participants from the (arch)dioceses of Aachen, Hamburg, Osnabrück, Trier and Rottenburg-Stuttgart.<sup>344</sup> The participants were invited “to put day-to-day business to the back of their minds and join with partners from the universal Church in a discussion and exchange of experience in order to jointly develop models appropriate to the circumstances in the respective local churches”. The following practical project objectives were formulated: “To experience the Church as a Universal Church Learning Community under the overall heading of The Future Viability of Parishes the World Over; on the basis of the AsIPA programme to find out about the development of a thriving and sustainable community spirituality; to learn from the pastoral changes in the Church in Asia and derive momentum from these for the pastoral concepts of the respective dioceses in Germany.”<sup>345</sup> The journey initially took the group to an introductory seminar in the Indian city of Hyderabad, after which the members split up and visited various dioceses in India (Mumbai, Nagpur) and Sri Lanka (Negombo, Kandy). The group subsequently met up again in the Indian city of Nagpur, reflected on the experience gathered in the various dioceses and agreed on ways in which the outcomes of the journey could be incorporated in pastoral discussions in the dioceses in Germany. After returning home, Werner Meyer zum Farwig had the following to say about the pastoral approach experienced in Asia and its applicability to the Church in Germany: “The Small Christian Communities offer the experience of a special spirituality. It is based on the Word of God, the communion in Christ and a common responsibility to look after each other. [...] We would need to inculturate AsIPA into the European cultural environment. That is the challenge we face. As our hosts frequently pointed out, this can only be done step by step and with a great deal of patience.”<sup>346</sup>

---

die Kirche? Antworten aus Asien auf eine drängende Frage, in: *Lebendige Seelsorge* 56 (2005) 4, 235-240, 240.

<sup>344</sup> Cf. *Rappel*, S., o. cit., 7f.

<sup>345</sup> *Norbert*, N., o. cit. 212f.

<sup>346</sup> *Nagler*, N./ *Meyer zum Farwig*, W., ... *Auf eine neue Weise Kirche sein*, in: *Fürstenberg*, G. von / *Nagler*, N. / *Vellguth*, K. (ed.), o. cit., 130f.

Although no precise ‘roadmap’ was available for the introduction of Small Christian Communities in Germany, a decision was taken to adopt a bold approach and “simply make a start. ‘Just do it’ were the encouraging words that were heard time and again from Africa, Asia and Latin America. The most important steps are learning by doing, experimenting, continuous reflection, exchange, networking, information and lobbying.”<sup>347</sup> Looking back, Dieter Tewes recalls the process of implementing this pastoral programme in German local churches, which now got under way: “We adopted an ‘error-friendly learning’ approach in which we looked at the repeated experiences of local churches in recent years, analysed them and examined them for their contextualisation potential.”<sup>348</sup> The strengths of the AsIPA approach were deemed to be the focus on community, the provision of a home for Christians seeking spirituality in the Church, the independence of full-time ‘Church managers’, the link between pastoral work and social welfare work, the empowering of lay people and the ecclesiological character of the approach<sup>349</sup>: “During Bible-sharing there is not just talk about the Church, but it also manifests itself, because people feel called out of their isolation by the Word of God and out of their service to their respective idols and they hear the message of salvation from the Good Father in Heaven who knows what we need and who has long provided for us (cf. Matthew 6).”<sup>350</sup>

The Spirituality and Community Building initiative launched by *missio* fell on fertile soil in a number of dioceses. During a Diocesan Day in Aachen, for example, it was noted that “The Diocese of Aachen encourages the establishment, support and development of groups which, motivated by biblical spirituality (Bible-sharing, living Gospel), support each other as faith and life communities and encourage activities.”<sup>351</sup> This resolution had been preceded by several

<sup>347</sup> Rappel, S., o. cit. 8.

<sup>348</sup> Dieter Tewes discussion on 30 May 2012.

<sup>349</sup> Cf. Working Group on Spirituality and Community Building, minutes of 6/7 November 2001 (unpublished document), Aachen 2001.

<sup>350</sup> Steins, G., *Die ekklesiogene Dimension des Bibel-Teilens*, in: Fürstenberg, G. von / Nagler, N./ Vellguth, K. (ed.), o. cit. 67.

<sup>351</sup> Bistum Aachen, Bistumstag 2001 im Bistum Aachen, Handlungsoptionen zu den Leitlinien (Beschlüsse zur Weiterführung des geregelten Dialogs), Aachen 2002.

courses given by Fritz Lobinger and Oswald Hirmer in Aachen.<sup>352</sup> In 2001, the (arch)dioceses in Hamburg, Freiburg, Osnabrück, Rottenburg-Stuttgart and Trier succeeded in projecting the experience of the universal Church into the diocesan context.<sup>353</sup> The same year representatives of the Archdiocese of Freiburg joined in the Spirituality and Community Building project. By that time other dioceses had begun to take notice of this promising pastoral initiative. The heads of the German Pastoral Care Offices invited Norbert Nagler, who was head of the working group at that time, to present the Spirituality and Community Building project at their conference in Goslar in December 2001.<sup>354</sup>

### Interest grows

In 2002, *missio* again invited Oswald Hirmer and Fritz Lobinger to give seminars in various dioceses in Germany on the subject of Small Christian Communities. Thomas Vijay and Agnes Chawadi, two representatives of local churches in India, were also recruited to report at the beginning of the year on their experiences with Basic Ecclesial Community structures in Asia.<sup>355</sup> In addition to the seminars and workshops in Germany two journeys to Asia were undertaken in 2002 by pastoral staff from the dioceses of Aachen<sup>356</sup> and Hamburg<sup>357</sup>. These journeys, together with the universal Church experiences gathered in the course of such a voyage, had a catalytic effect. After the return of the Hamburg travel group, fifty enquiries about events, information, etc. concerning the Asian approach to pastoral work were submitted to the *missio* diocesan contact point.<sup>358</sup>

---

<sup>352</sup> Further seminars with Oswald Hirmer were held in the dioceses of Trier and Erfurt in 2001.

<sup>353</sup> Cf. Working Group on Spirituality and Community Building, minutes of the 6th working meeting (unpublished document), Aachen 2001.

<sup>354</sup> Cf. Nagler, N., o. cit. 215.

<sup>355</sup> Cf. *ibid.*

<sup>356</sup> The AsIPA journey to India and Sri Lanka undertaken by the Diocese of Aachen, which was headed by Werner Meyer zum Farwig, lasted from 18 January to 8 February 2002.

<sup>357</sup> The journey to India undertaken by pastoral staff of the Archdiocese of Hamburg headed by Guido Brune lasted from 14 to 29 September 2002. Cf. Nagler, N., o. cit., 215.

<sup>358</sup> Cf. Working Group on Spirituality and Community Building, minutes of the meeting of 3 December 2003 (unpublished document), Aachen 2003.

Moreover, the members of the Working Group on Spirituality and Community Building were repeatedly asked to report on their experiences to interested people in Germany. In March 2002, Dieter Tewes talked about his AsIPA experience at an in-house conference of the Pastoral Care Office in the Diocese of Osnabrück and combined the approach of the Small Christian Communities with a five-week training course for pastoral assistants in celebrations of the Word of God in the diocese. 2002 also saw the setting up of a cross-departmental project group called Spirituality and Community Building – Small Christian Communities. Its task was to build up Small Christian Communities in the parish associations and so gather experience with this dedicated form of being Church at the local level.<sup>359</sup> In Rottenburg-Stuttgart the linking of spirituality with the building of communities was discussed at numerous meetings of the Ordinariate. Max Himmel, who was active in community development in the Diocese of Rottenburg-Stuttgart, began passing on the experience gained in Asia to the community renewal animators on the basis of the Rottenburg model. In the Diocese of Trier the issue of spirituality and community building was dealt with at the meeting of deans in January 2002.

### **Bible sharing is more than Bible study even in the Year of the Bible**

The Year of the Bible was held in Germany in 2003. In the run-up, numerous members of the Working Group on Spirituality and Community Building were asked to hold meetings on Bible-sharing to mark the Year of the Bible. This enabled individual aspects to be addressed in the dioceses of Essen, Hamburg, Osnabrück and Trier. The plan in the Diocese of Osnabrück was to announce Bible-sharing in many groups in a parish and to train leaders for these groups. After an intensive period lasting several weeks the aim was that as many as possible of the existing groups and circles, together with groups specially trained for the purpose, should meet once a week or once a fortnight to engage in Bible-sharing. Dieter Tewes wrote of this project: “The intensive period was intended to function as a

---

<sup>359</sup> Cf. Tewes, D., Kirche in der Nachbarschaft, Von AsIPA zu Small Christian Communities in Deutschland – Erfahrungen im Bistum Osnabrück, in: *Lebendige Seelsorge* 56 (2005) 4, 228-234, 230.

‘spiritual renewal of the parish’. The project group combined the intensive period with the hope that groups would continue to meet if their experience of Bible-sharing proved to be positive and that they would thus gradually develop into Small Christian Communities.”<sup>360</sup> However, it turned out that longer preparation was needed for such an intensive period. This meant that the latter could not be carried out in the Year of the Bible in 2003. The efforts undertaken bore initial fruit in 2004, however, when the first parish associations began work on the programme in the Diocese of Osnabrück. It turned out that the initiative led to the strengthening of Bible study groups rather than to the building of Small Christian Communities. “It is apparently very difficult to convey the inner connection between Bible-sharing and sharing services in the parish.”<sup>361</sup> The members of these groups were less interested in the building of a community or church. The emphasis was very much on Bible study and spirituality. Looking back, Dieter Tewes concedes: “At that time we succeeded in initiating or strengthening spiritual self-help groups. However, these groups were more interested in doing something for their own spirituality and less focused on the community.”<sup>362</sup> It did not prove possible either to subsequently persuade these groups to become more involved in community development. “Each of these groups had a ‘genetic code’ that was incapable of change later on. We found out that the groups who were prepared to embrace a process of change ultimately disintegrated.”<sup>363</sup> In only one parish in the Diocese of Osnabrück did it prove possible to transform the original Bible-sharing group into a Small Christian Community. This continues to exist and sees itself as a lively sub-structure of its parish.<sup>364</sup>

---

<sup>360</sup> Ibid, 231.

<sup>361</sup> Foitzik, A., Kirche in der Nachbarschaft, Impulse aus der Weltkirche zur Gemeindeerneuerung, in: Herder Korrespondenz 60 (2006) 9, 463-468, 467.

<sup>362</sup> Dieter Tewes, conversation on 30 May 2012. Cf. Lutz, B, o. cit.

<sup>363</sup> Dieter Tewes, conversation on 30 May 2012. Cf. Tewes, D., Kirche unter den Menschen, Small Christian Communities in großen pastoralen Strukturen, in: Unsere Seelsorge 3/2011, Münster 2011, 48-51, 51. For similar experiences in the Archdiocese of Hamburg cf. Leittersdorf-Wrobel, L., Small Christian Communities in Deutschland, Eine andere Art, Kirche vor Ort zu leben, in: missio konkret 1/2007, 13-15, 14.

<sup>364</sup> A Diocesan Working Group on Spirituality and Community Building was set up in Trier in 2003. Cf. Working Group on Spirituality and Community Building, o. cit.

Bavarian dioceses also showed an increasing interest in the Small Christian Communities model. The strength of this pastoral approach was considered to be that it focused on the community, practised a non-dominant leadership style and led to an 'amateurisation of pastoral care'.<sup>365</sup> In 2003, workshops on Small Christian Communities and on a participatory leadership style were held in many Bavarian dioceses. The meetings with Sister Tshifiwa, a member of the South African Lumko Institute, met with a great deal of interest, especially in the Diocese of Würzburg. Good neighbourliness, spirituality, social commitment and connectedness with the Church<sup>366</sup> were seen as the key pillars of this Basic Ecclesial Community-oriented approach to pastoral care.<sup>367</sup>

### **The search for a context-related designation**

At this stage there was an intensive discussion of how best to describe the process of building Small Christian Communities that had been initiated in many dioceses. Agreement was reached in the debate that expression should be given to the connection between spirituality and community building and that the aim was to arrive at a viable model of community formation.<sup>368</sup> There was, however, a general awareness that to use the terms Basic Ecclesial Group or Basic Ecclesial Community was to risk entering a minefield. In theological debates these terms were closely connected with the disputes over liberation theology in Latin America. Hence they would not prove helpful for the development of Basic Ecclesial Community structures in Germany. There was also intensive discussion of whether 'groups' or 'communities' should be formed. It transpired in the course of the debate that, in contrast to the numerous Basic Ecclesial Communities that had been formed in Germany in the 1980s, the Small Christian Communities were not interested in setting up an 'alternative Church'. The communities regarded themselves much more as an integral part of the Catholic Church or as part of the parish in which the Eucharist was celebrated in communion. Referring to the

<sup>365</sup> Cf. Spielberg, B., o. cit., 39f.

<sup>366</sup> Cf. EN 58.

<sup>367</sup> Cf. Tewes, D., *Kirche in der Nachbarschaft, Von AsIPA zu Small Christian Communities in Deutschland – Erfahrungen im Bistum Osnabrück*, o. cit., 230 f.

<sup>368</sup> Cf. The workbook of the same name "Zukunftsfähige Gemeinde" published in 2003.

connection between Small Christian Communities and the Church or parish as a Church structure, Dieter Emeis wrote: “The smaller communities must consciously seek communion with each other. This distinguishes them from self-contained circles of friends or groups of like-minded people devoted to the common pursuit of certain pleasures. By bringing together kindred spirits, smaller communities always run the risk of supporting or even reinforcing differences and distinctions between people. The community, however, should by its very nature be a sign of the power of the faith that brings together what is different and reconciles what has been rent asunder. The larger community, which assembles on Sunday for the Lord’s Supper, is also the place for those who live their faith in family and society without any involvement in a group.”<sup>369</sup>

Among the possible descriptions for the pastoral process in Germany under discussion at that time were “Joint community life in spiritual communities” and “New Church – kindling a fire together”. While these proposals did not prove acceptable, there was agreement that the subtitle for the Basic Ecclesial Community-oriented pastoral process should be “Kindling a fire together”.<sup>370</sup>

### **German National AsIPA Team**

Two representatives of the Working Group on Spirituality and Community Building, Norbert Nagler and Simone Rappel, took part in the Third AsIPA General Assembly in Seoul in September 2003 which addressed the issue of “SCCs/BECs Empowering People to Serve”.<sup>371</sup> During this meeting Orlando Quevedo stressed that Small Christian Communities, especially those in secularised societies, offer a pastoral opportunity to bring Christians together in a network.<sup>372</sup> Responding to Quevedo’s remarks, Thomas Dabre developed an ecclesiology of Small Christian Communities that was founded in

<sup>369</sup> Emeis, D., *Realistische Treue zur Vision der Gemeinde*, in: Fürstenberg, G. von / Nagler, N. / Vellguth, K., (ed.), o. cit., 13-16, 15.

<sup>370</sup> Working Group on Spirituality and Community Building, minutes of the meeting of 16/17 September 2003 (unpublished document), Aachen 2003.

<sup>371</sup> Cf. Vellguth, K., o. cit.

<sup>372</sup> Cf. Quevedo, O., *SCCs/BCCs, Empowering People to Serve*, unpublished lecture given at the Third AsIPA General Assembly on 4 September 2003, Seoul 2003.

Trinitarian theology.<sup>373</sup> Norbert Nagler later wrote the following about the status accorded to the representatives from Germany at this AsIPA General Assembly: “The learning community of Asian and German theologians had in the meantime advanced to such an extent that the German delegation no longer participated in the General Assembly as sponsors and ‘observers’, but was rather welcomed as the German National AsIPA Team and treated as such.”<sup>374</sup>

In February 2004 the first network meeting of all the Small Christian Communities in the German-speaking countries was held in Georgsmarienhütte near Osnabrück. This paved the way for the later founding of the German National Small Christian Communities Team in 2005. On the fringes of this meeting a SWOT analysis was carried out of the situation of the Small Christian Communities in Germany. It was also established that the introduction of Small Christian Communities would trigger a paradigm shift in pastoral work in line with the spirit of the Second Vatican Council and the Würzburg Synod<sup>375</sup>: Small Christian Communities transform the Church from a hierarchically structured system into a service-based system. They develop a mode of communication that rests not on preaching but on dialogue. The faithful become the subjects (and not the objects) of pastoral care. In the communities there is less teaching and more listening. Visionary work is performed. The Church is wrested away from actionism and transformed into a Church of the present. Last but not least, what emerges is a Church in which the focus is on the spiritual experience of the individual. “This means moving away from the service-based community to a community which derives from the Bible the strength and the inspiration it needs for its ecclesiastical and social work; a community that consists of a number of communities acting on their own responsibility, which are networked with each other and in which there are very specific rules for cooperation (including with the priest

<sup>373</sup> Cf. Dabre, Th, Pastoral Imperatives of Forming Small Christian Communities, lecture given at the Third AsIPA General Assembly from 3 to 9 September 2003 in Seoul; unpublished document.

<sup>374</sup> Nagler, N., o. cit., 216.

<sup>375</sup> The Würzburg Synod said: “A community whose pastoral need are served must turn into a community which puts its life at the common service of all and in the non-transferrable responsibility of each and every individual.” Synod resolution “Pastoral Services” in the community, Würzburg 1974.

and the full-time team).<sup>376</sup> This goes hand in hand with the emphasis on, and actual experience of communion ecclesiology and with a shift in emphasis away from the experience of ‘official priesthood’ in the direction of the experience of common priesthood on the part of all believers (LG).<sup>377</sup> This common priesthood of all believers does not see itself as being in competition with the official priesthood, but rather as constituting an essential characteristic of all Christians<sup>378</sup> (thereby easing the burden on the official priests) designed to ensure that the official priesthood and the common priesthood complement each other. “The task of priests and full-time staff in this system is, therefore, primarily the important service of unity. They will satisfy the growing need in the groups for more knowledge about the faith by organising seminars and courses. They will motivate the leaders, animators and ‘ministries; they will discover charismatic traits and encourage people to contribute. They will accompany, advise and spiritually strengthen the leaders of the groups and the representatives of the teams. They will gradually visit the individual groups, occasionally take part in their meetings, and celebrate services with them and in the communities. Together with a team of leaders (PGR) they will take charge of managing the community association.”<sup>379</sup> As the South African Bishop Michael Wüstenberg pointed out, the Small Christian Communities ultimately further the existence of priests: “Lay people give the shepherds spiritual strength (AA 10). If priests participate in the meetings of the Small Christian Communities, they directly encounter the joy and the hope, the grief and the fear of the individual members of their parish. [...] If ‘the world’ is a common place of spirituality of the so-called world priests [...], then the priest certainly meets the world – his spiritual home – here.”<sup>380</sup>

<sup>376</sup> Tewes, D., o. cit., 229.

<sup>377</sup> Cf. Working Group on Spirituality and Community Building, The German National SCC Team Meeting, Osnabrück 10/11 February 2004 (unpublished document), Osnabrück 2004.

<sup>378</sup> Cf. LG 32.

<sup>379</sup> Tewes, D., *Damit Kirche vor Ort lebendig bleibt, Small Christian Communities im Gemeindeverbund*, in: *Anzeiger für die Seelsorge* 115 (2006) 9, 11-15, 14. On the role of the full-time pastoral worker see also Dieter Tewes, *AsIPA – Small Christian Communities, Ein weltkirchliches Lernprojekt für die Pastoral im deutschsprachigen Raum*, o. cit., 69.

<sup>380</sup> Wüstenberg, M., *Small Christian Communities, Kraftvolle Zukunftsperspektive der Kirche als Familie*, in: *Anzeiger für die Seelsorge* 118 (2009) 10, 5-8, 8.

The network meeting of all the Small Christian Communities in Georgsmarienhütte was followed shortly afterwards by another exposure trip in March to Malaysia and Singapore, in which representatives of *missio* were joined by representatives of the dioceses of Aachen, Dresden, Erfurt, Rottenburg-Stuttgart and Würzburg and of the Faculty of Pastoral Theology at the University of Würzburg.<sup>381</sup> In the meantime the German Bishops' Conference had pricked up its ears and signalled its interest in this movement for pastoral change. In April 2004, the Chairman of the Pastoral Commission, Joachim Wanke, and the head of the Pastoral Conference, Manfred Entrich, met representatives of the Working Group on Spirituality and Community Building in Bensberg.<sup>382</sup> A few weeks later, several events devoted to Small Christian Communities were organised at the Catholics Day in Ulm, including a panel discussion with Oswald Hirmer, Fritz Lobinger, Wendy Louis and Joachim Wanke, which was attended by over five hundred Catholics Day participants.<sup>383</sup> That, too, was an indicator of the interest in this pastoral model that had in the meantime been aroused in broad circles in Germany. It had proved possible to communicate the pastoral relevance of this model, particularly in the light of the situation facing the Church in Germany. The documentary report on the Day of the Diocesan Councils in the Diocese of Osnabrück stated, for example<sup>384</sup>: "The movement towards a missionary Church is propelled by the fundamental concern to be a blessing for the world. The Church regards itself by its very nature as the advocate of the disadvantaged. In order to achieve these key pastoral prospects, in which devotion to God and to people, spiritual depth and a commitment to social welfare work can be very deeply experienced, we therefore strive [...] for initiatives that will spiritually renew the communities (everyday spiritual exercises, Small Christian

<sup>381</sup> Cf. Rappel, S., o. cit., 7. Nagler, N., o. cit., 216.

<sup>382</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, 215.

<sup>383</sup> This meeting revealed the potential for conflict "between critical historical exegesis and the experience gained in Bible-sharing that God says something to everybody and enables people to pass on His Word to others as the word of life" (Simone Rappel, o. cit., 8. Cf. Vellguth, K., *Die Hermeneutik des Bibel-Teilens, Wenn das Christentum sich an seine Wurzeln faßt*, in: *Anzeiger für die Seelsorge* 116 (2007) 5, 20-23.

<sup>384</sup> Shortly beforehand, in March 2004, four Small Christian Communities had been set up in the *Wesergemeinden* Community Association in the Diocese of Osnabrück.

Communities, preparing the way seminars, prayer schools, etc.; support and care for people who can be the agents of these processes of evangelisation.)”<sup>385</sup>

### **Setting up a National Small Christian Communities Team**

The first Annual Meeting of Small Christian Communities in the German-speaking Countries was held in Hünfeld in December 2004. Organised by *missio* in the form of a future workshop, it was attended by representatives of 14 German dioceses, which had gained initial experience of Small Christian Communities and had come to regard this pastoral approach as an opportunity for the Church in Germany, particularly in the light of the decline in financial and personnel resources that was keenly felt at the time.<sup>386</sup> Proceeding from the consideration that had been given to a common ‘vision of the Church’, it was decided to set up a National Small Christian Communities Team.<sup>387</sup> This was a significant step towards institutionalisation. Another important decision taken in 2004 was to shore up the work of the Working Group on Spirituality and Community Building and of the later National Small Christian Communities Team. Dieter Tewes, who had been closely associated with the project from the very outset, was officially entrusted by *missio* with the supervision and support of the Basic Ecclesial Community pastoral concept in Germany. In committing this personal resource, *missio* ensured that the movement for pastoral change that could be observed in Germany was underpinned in institutional terms.

The year 2004 had been devoted largely to consolidating the process of spirituality and community building.<sup>388</sup> In early February

---

<sup>385</sup> Bistum Osnabrück, *Suche nach den Suchenden*, Tag der diözesanen Räte im Bistum Osnabrück, Dokumentation zum Tag der diözesanen Räte, 10 and 11 September 2004, Osnabrück 2004, 19.

<sup>386</sup> Cf. Nagler, N., o. cit., 217. Tewes, D., *AsIPA – Small Christian Communities*, Ein weltkirchliches Lernprojekt für die Pastoral im deutschsprachigen Raum, in: *Ordenskorrespondenz* 48 (2007) 1, 62-69, 65. Vellguth, K., *Kirche und Fundraising*, Wege einer zukunftsfähigen Kirchenfinanzierung, Freiburg 2007, 328-332.

<sup>387</sup> Cf. [http://www.missio-aachen.de/angebote-medien/bildungsangebote/asipa/Jahreskonferenz\\_2005\\_Kleine\\_Christliche\\_Gemeinschaften\\_im\\_deutschsprachigen\\_Raum.asp#0](http://www.missio-aachen.de/angebote-medien/bildungsangebote/asipa/Jahreskonferenz_2005_Kleine_Christliche_Gemeinschaften_im_deutschsprachigen_Raum.asp#0); accessed on 7 June 2012.

<sup>388</sup> Cf. Nagler, N., o. cit. 216.

2005, the National Small Christian Communities Team met in Frankfurt am Main to agree on the next steps to be taken. The minutes of this meeting record that it was a meeting of the National AsIPA Germany Team. This newly introduced designation in the minutes was an indicator that it had so far proved impossible to find a viable designation for the process in Germany. "Hitherto no satisfactory translation has been found for the English word 'community'; the German word 'Gemeinschaft' can trigger false associations and expectations. Small Christian Communities are by no means cosy, self-sufficient groups characterised by great emotional closeness. Even the key term of good neighbourliness can be misconstrued [...]"<sup>389</sup> Although a generally accepted designation for the process had yet to be found, specialist theological journals<sup>390</sup> had begun to take note of the movement for change and so agreement was reached on how articles for the various publications could be compiled. In addition, preparations were made for a Federal Conference of Small Christian Communities that was to be held at the end of the year in Hünfeld. Here again it turned out that interest continued to focus on questions of identity and self-discovery. The intention was that the Federal Conference should deal with the issue of what Small Christian Communities in Germany are and what Small Christian Communities in Germany aim to achieve.<sup>391</sup>

Three weeks after the meeting of the National Team a day of study on Small Christian Communities was held for multipliers in Würzburg. This day of study can be regarded as the launching of the AsIPA project group in the Diocese of Würzburg. In the summer, *missio* invited Wendy Louis, another advocate of the AsIPA process, to come to Germany and give seminars in the (arch)dioceses of Aachen, Berlin, Cologne, Dresden, Hildesheim, Mainz, Osnabrück and Rottenburg-Stuttgart. In the summer of 2005, too, participants

---

<sup>389</sup> Foitzik, A., o. cit., 466f.

<sup>390</sup> This was indicated not least by the fact that *Lebende Seelsorge* published as many as three articles on the subject of Small Christian Communities in October 2005. Cf. Nagler, N., o. cit.; Tewes, D., *Kirche in der Nachbarschaft, Von AsIPA zu Small Christian Communities in Deutschland – Erfahrungen im Bistum Osnabrück*, o. cit.; Spielberg, B., o. cit.

<sup>391</sup> Cf. National AsIPA Germany Team, minutes of the meeting held on 2 February 2005 (unpublished document), Cologne 2005.

in the Spirituality and Community Building process from the (arch) dioceses of Hamburg, Hildesheim and Osnabrück met to launch the metropolitan project on the construction of Small Christian Communities.<sup>392</sup> Guido Brune, Ludmilla Leittersdorf-Wrobel, Dieter Tewes and Christian Hennecke had become the pacemakers in the building of Small Christian Communities in these north German dioceses. It was planned that in future there should be a regular exchange of experience between the dioceses on the question of Small Christian Communities and that, in addition, joint training courses should be provided for participants from all three dioceses.

Another important milestone was the launch of the AsIPA website [www.asipa.de](http://www.asipa.de) in July 2005. Since then up-to-date information, reports on events, experiences, etc. have been published online on this site. At the end of the year Thomas Vijay gave seminars in the dioceses of Hamburg, Hildesheim, Osnabrück and Würzburg.<sup>393</sup> During the second Diocesan Day of the Small Christian Communities in Hildesheim, in which Thomas Vijay participated in November 2005, it transpired that the grassroots pastoral approach, which was being increasingly well received, provided an answer to several challenges faced by local churches in Germany. It became clear, firstly, that the traditional form of community building would no longer be the sole form of Christian life in Germany and that, in view of the expanding pastoral areas and structures, there was a need to strengthen the Church at the local level. In addition it turned out that the catechism in Germany has a very strong focus on children and adolescents, while ever greater urgency attached to the question of how adults could be introduced to the faith and given support in their belief.<sup>394</sup>

Thomas Vijay also participated in the Annual Conference of Small Christian Communities in the German-speaking Countries, which was held in December 2005 in Hünfeld. This conference

---

<sup>392</sup> Cf. Tewes, D., *AsIPA – Small Christian Communities, Ein weltkirchliches Lernprojekt für die Pastoral im deutschsprachigen Raum*, o. cit., 65. The Diocese of Münster joined this metropolitan project in 2011 and the Archdiocese of Paderborn in 2012.

<sup>393</sup> Cf. Foitzik, A., o. cit., 466.

<sup>394</sup> Cf. Kaune, M. / Hennecke, C., *Mehr als Bibel-Teilen, Auf dem Weg zu einer „Kirche in der Nachbarschaft“ im Bistum Hildesheim*, in: *Anzeiger für die Seelsorge* 115 (2006) 9, 16-19, 18.

was attended by representatives of eleven German and two Swiss dioceses.<sup>395</sup> Under the supervision of Thomas Vijay a clarification of the term Small Christian Communities was undertaken, the contours of which were still regarded by the participants as being too hazy. There was discussion of how Small Christian Communities can be distinguished from other groups; what the specific characteristics of a community (*communio*) are; how contacts with the neighbourhood in Germany should be assessed; what the indispensable fundamental elements of this pastoral approach are; and how the success this grassroots-based, participatory and spiritually oriented pastoral model has achieved in Asia and Africa can help to revitalize and reform the Church in Germany so as to ensure its future viability.<sup>396</sup> Essential characteristics of a Small Christian Community were considered to be their neighbourhood character and self-image as local level church; the common celebration of a liturgy of the word in Bible sharing; social and charitable activities; and the connection between the parish and the universal Church.<sup>397</sup> Among the other subjects discussed in Hünfeld were the extent to which the role of a priest or of full-time pastoral carers changes following the introduction of Small Christian Communities. The experiences in Asia made it quite clear that the role of the priest is enhanced: “The Asian experience shows that the work of the priests and pastoral staff is changed in this system. They are no longer essentially organisers and managers but rather spiritual and theological teachers and, of course, carers. While there is no increase in the amount of work they do, its character changes, because many of the tasks performed in the past are taken over by active members of the community in the groups as well as in the networking bodies of the groups. [...] The priest is somebody who fans the fire so that it burns more brightly. Christ

<sup>395</sup> Whereas the annual meetings of Small Christian Communities in the German-speaking countries in the period from 2005 to 2008 were directed at the representatives of the dioceses, the annual conferences from 2009 onwards were open to all those interested in building up Small Christian Communities in Germany.

<sup>396</sup> Cf. Rappel, S., o. cit. [http://www.missio-aachen.de/angebote-medien/bildungsangebote/asipa/jahreskonferenz\\_2005\\_Kleine\\_Christliche\\_Gemeinschaften\\_im\\_deutschsprachigen\\_Raum.asp#0](http://www.missio-aachen.de/angebote-medien/bildungsangebote/asipa/jahreskonferenz_2005_Kleine_Christliche_Gemeinschaften_im_deutschsprachigen_Raum.asp#0). Accessed on 7 June 2012.

<sup>397</sup> Cf. Leitersdorf-Wrobel, L., o. cit. Viecens, G. / Hußmann, W., Eine Heimat finden ... Erfahrungen aus den Small Christian Communities, in: *missio konkret* 4/2008 10-12, 10.

will ignite this fire himself.”<sup>398</sup> Looking back, Matthias Kaune and Christian Hennecke had the following to say about the experiences and reactions of the participants in this second Diocesan Day of the Small Christian Communities: “The participants are spellbound, because here they are witness to the emergence of a Church that responds to the deep-seated yearnings of many people. At the same time they are impressed by the simplicity and practicality of this model. None of the participants had anticipated that such a powerful and modern theological vision would be at the heart of the concept of Small Christian Communities.”<sup>399</sup>

### **First expert symposium**

Interest in the process of Small Christian Communities in Germany continued to grow the following year. In February 2006, the Working Group on Fundamental Issues of Pastoral Care of the Central Committee of German Catholics organised a study block on this topic in Frankfurt am Main. In March, Simone Rappel offered a day’s training on the subject of Small Christian Communities for pastoral assistants in the Diocese of Augsburg. At the Catholics Day in Saarbrücken in May a panel discussion was held with Cora Matteo, Ottmar Fuchs and Christian Hennecke. The East German dioceses also began to show an increasing interest in the movement for pastoral change. On 30 May 2006, a day of study at the Pastoral Care Office in Magdeburg was devoted to the pastoral opportunities for building Small Christian Communities at local church level. A workshop was held especially for priests in the cities of Hamburg, Hildesheim and Osnabrück in early June and at the same time there was a two-day introductory course for multipliers at the convent in Marienrode (Hildesheim).<sup>400</sup> A further three-day training course for multipliers was held in June in Hamburg and at the end of that month the pastoral model of the Small Christian Communities was presented at a plenary session of the German Catholic Missionary Council in Würzburg.

---

<sup>398</sup> Tewes, D., *Damit Kirche vor Ort lebendig bleibt*, Small Christian Communities im Gemeindeverbund, in: *Anzeiger für die Seelsorge* 115 (2006) 9, 11-15, 15.

<sup>399</sup> Kaune, M. / Hennecke, C., o. cit. 19.

<sup>400</sup> For the developments in the Diocese of Hildesheim in 2006 see: *Viezens, G. / Hußmann, W.*, o. cit. 10-12.

In September 2006, the specialist journal *Anzeiger für die Seelsorge* published four feature articles on Small Christian Communities and in the same month *Herder Korrespondenz* published an article on the development of this pastoral approach in Germany. Networking also intensified at the international level. Simone Rappel and Dieter Tewes were the German delegates at the Fourth AsIPA General Assembly in the Indian city of Trivandrum, where the development of the ecclesiology of the Small Christian Communities and the relationship between these grassroots Church groups and the sacraments were discussed.<sup>401</sup> In December 2006 the first expert symposium on Small Christian Communities took place in Schmerlenbach, which was attended by over one hundred participants.<sup>402</sup> The symposium was intended to provide an answer to a number of questions: whether the method of pastoral care on which the Small Christian Communities are founded might also point the way forward for the Church in the German-speaking countries of Europe; what requirements a model of this kind should satisfy; what specific circumstances it would need to address in Europe; and which cultural, socio-political and ecclesiastical conditions would need to be taken into account.<sup>403</sup> The approach adopted by the Small Christian Communities was regarded in Schmerlenbach as an important field of experimentation for the future viability of the Church. Its strength resides in the incorporation of all Christians; the communication and networking system in the parishes and parish associations; its spiritual approach, which makes mystical experiences of God possible; its social and ecclesiastical activities at the local level; and its missionary potential.<sup>404</sup> Reflecting on the symposium Dieter Tewes later wrote: “The entire symposium reflected the situation in which the pastoral approach of the SCCs finds itself at present. Initial experience is being gathered, which gives considerable cause for hope, but questions are also being raised which will only be able to be answered in practice.

---

<sup>401</sup> Cf. Tewes, D., AsIPA – Small Christian Communities, Ein weltkirchliches Lernprojekt für die Pastoral im deutschsprachigen Raum, in: o. cit. 66.

<sup>402</sup> The symposium was followed by the annual meeting of the National Small Christian Communities Team.

<sup>403</sup> Cf. Tewes, D, o. cit.

<sup>404</sup> Cf. Ibid. 68.

There are fears and uncertainties amongst the full-time staff and the parishioners in view of the pending changes in the nature of their work which will come about as a result of the restructuring of the parishes throughout Germany. There are almost no perceptible alternatives to the SCCs when it comes to the pastoral reshaping of the new large-scale structures in parishes and pastoral areas. Many full-time staff still fight shy of embracing this new model; however, it will mean switching to a new 'operating system' that will entail changes in the lives of the staff members affected."<sup>405</sup> It was agreed that an expert symposium should subsequently be held every two years.

### **The spark ignites a flame**

In February 2007, a group of people from the dioceses of Hildesheim and Osnabrück travelled to the Indian city of Nagpur to attend a seminar on Small Christian Communities.<sup>406</sup> The process of building up Small Christian Communities was consolidated in the Diocese of Hildesheim from 2007 onwards by the setting up of a special project office for the purpose. A training course for full-time staff was held in the Diocese of Augsburg in May, while an SCC workshop was held in June for the metropolitan group comprising Hamburg, Hildesheim and Osnabrück. This was attended by members of Small Christian Communities from Hildesheim, Hanover, Celle and Braunschweig, who reported on their experiences. Oswald Hirmer took part in this workshop, at which the debate centred on the ecclesiology of the Second Vatican Council, which finds practical ecclesiological expression in the Small Christian Communities.<sup>407</sup> The participants were impressed by the meetings organised in the Small Christian Communities of their region. Christian Hennecke wrote the following about the SCC workshop: "The experiences in the Small Christian Communities were moving and overwhelming for the participants. The genuine welcome, the sharing of the Bible together, the tangible manifestation of the Church through the Word

---

<sup>405</sup> Ibid. 68f.

<sup>406</sup> Cf. *ibid.* 66.

<sup>407</sup> Cf. [http://www.missio-aachen.de/angebote-medien/bildungsangebote/asipa/Copy\\_of\\_Workshop\\_KCG\\_Hirmer\\_Juni\\_2007.asp#0](http://www.missio-aachen.de/angebote-medien/bildungsangebote/asipa/Copy_of_Workshop_KCG_Hirmer_Juni_2007.asp#0).

and the surprising moments of awakening in these groups were very impressive.”<sup>408</sup>

The Small Christian Communities approach was presented at a forum held during the Diocesan Day of the Archdiocese of Freiburg. The Diocese of Eichstätt also showed an interest in this new form of being Church. A meeting with 15 Indian experts to explain the method of Bible-sharing was held in the Diocese of Eichstätt in July and was followed there in November by a training course on Small Christian Community Management and Leadership in Pastoral Units. In December an information meeting was organised for all the parish councils in the Diocese of Eichstätt, at which the Small Christian Communities model was explained.

In November 2007, a diocesan Small Christian Communities team was constituted in the Diocese of Hildesheim and in early December a day of study was held at the Halle/Saale Conference of Deans in the Diocese of Magdeburg, at which the grassroots pastoral model was introduced. Early December also saw the Annual Meeting of the Small Christian Communities in the German-speaking Countries, which reviewed the situation of the Small Christian Communities a few years after their foundation. This meeting was attended by representatives of 15 dioceses.<sup>409</sup> At this annual meeting Christian Hennecke emphasised that the Small Christian Communities approach involved far-reaching prospects for Christian life, in which the focus was on the quest for God’s Kingdom. He drew attention to the importance of universal Church contacts as a key resource in the global learning process.<sup>410</sup>

### **Small Christian Communities – A new way of being Church with people**

When the National Small Christian Communities Team met three months later in Würzburg for its next meeting, it once again became

<sup>408</sup> Ibid.

<sup>409</sup> This Annual Meeting of the Small Christian Communities in German-speaking Countries (3/4 December 2007) was attended by representatives of the (arch)dioceses of Osnabrück, Augsburg, Würzburg, Hildesheim, Rottenburg-Stuttgart, Berlin, Trier, Cologne, Münster, Eichstätt and Bamberg.

<sup>410</sup> Cf. National Small Christian Communities Team, minutes of the annual meeting of 3/4 December 2007 (unpublished document), Munich 2007.

apparent that the process of building up Small Christian Communities had begun in many dioceses. Participants from Augsburg, Cologne, Eichstätt, Hildesheim, Hamburg, Magdeburg, Münster, Osnabrück, Paderborn and Würzburg reported on the experiences in their dioceses. Information was also provided on the first movements for reform in neighbouring Switzerland.

In early 2008, a training course on Small Christian Communities was held in the Diocese of Würzburg and a workshop on “Small Christian Communities and the Church” in Marienrode in the Diocese of Hildesheim. This was followed in February by a workshop for priests and full-time staff on the subject of “Small Christian Communities and the Role of Full-time Staff” at the seminary in Hildesheim. The topic of Small Christian Communities was also dealt with during four events at the Catholics Day in Osnabrück. There was a panel discussion on “The Church grows locally – What we can learn from India”<sup>411</sup>, a workshop on “The Church grows from the Word: Practising Bible-sharing as a method of community building” and a workshop on “How does the Church grow at the local level? Small Christian Communities as Church in the neighbourhood”. In addition, the Catholics Day hosted the first meeting of all the members of Small Christian Communities in Germany, which served as a forum for exchange between the participants. The position paper on “Small Christian Communities – A new way of being Church with people”, issued in the run-up to the Catholics Day, represented an attempt to assess the status quo. In this document the National Small Christian Communities Team wrote: “For over 25 years now, various impulses from the universal Church concerning Small Christian Communities have been received in the German-speaking countries. The efforts to inculcate this approach have shown that it contains pastoral and theological options and principles that are important for the further shaping of the Church. We are talking here about a Church which, in all its endeavours, strives to ensure that human beings can live an abundant life, which finds expression in their relations with the poor, with God and amongst each other. We are talking about a Church that focuses on the fundamental equality of all believers, as was emphasised

---

<sup>411</sup> The Catholics Day in Osnabrück also had a panel discussion on “How does the Church grow at the local level? Small Christian Communities as Church in the neighbourhood”.

at the Second Vatican Council. In this Church everyone is among the called and the sent; everyone gathers in a specific community in a specific place; everyone is capable of performing a certain service. We are talking about a Church in which various charismatic talents can fully unfold. It is the task of all priests, pastoral workers and full-time staff to discover and foster them. That is the service they provide for all the People of God. We are talking about a Church in which all those who bear responsibility or hold office adopt a serving style of leadership. This leadership style is inspired by the Gospel and finds its clearest expression in the person of Jesus. Small Christian Communities are not an end in themselves. They are a manifestation of the Church in miniature which is at the service of the coming of the Kingdom of God.”<sup>412</sup>

### **Small Christian Communities in Germany – Kindling a fire together**

The Second Expert Symposium on Small Christian Communities, held in November in Hildesheim, focussed on the ecclesiological dimension of Small Christian Communities.<sup>413</sup> In his lecture on “The Conciliar Vision of a New Kind of Church” Hermann J. Pottmeyer said that the mystery of the Church is founded in the mystery of God, whose love gave life to the Church, the new People of God, in order to begin the establishment of His Kingdom. The real mystery of the Church is the mystery of its divine mission, which corresponds with the vocation and mission of all believers. This mission is closely related to the community of the Church: *Communio* and *missio*, gathering and sending, belong together.”<sup>414</sup> In conclusion, Pottmeyer referred to the apostolic letter *Novo Millennio Ineunte*, in which Pope John Paul II states that the great challenge is to “make the Church *the home and the school of communion*”<sup>415</sup> and that communion is inseparably bound up with the experience of spirituality: “Let us have no illusions: unless

<sup>412</sup> National German Small Christian Communities Team, *Small Christian Communities – Ein neuer Weg, Kirche mit den Menschen zu sein, Ziele-Entwicklungsstand-Grundsätze*, Osnabrück 2008, 3.

<sup>413</sup> Cf. Hennecke, C. (ed.), o. cit.

<sup>414</sup> Pottmeyer, H.J., *Die konziliare Vision einer Kirchengestalt*, in: Hennecke, C. (ed.), o. cit., 39.

<sup>415</sup> NMI 43.

we follow this spiritual path, external structures of communion will serve very little purpose. They would become mechanisms without a soul, “masks” of communion rather than its means of expression and growth.”<sup>416</sup> Referring to these deliberations on communion and spirituality, Pottmeyer recalled that John Paul II had shown the Church the way forward, “which will enable the Church to become a communion of communities. That was, of course, the aim of the Council, which regarded the Church as a *Communio Ecclesiarum*, as a community of local churches, and wished to see it develop along those lines. Such a restructuring – and this was the Pope’s main objective that he shared with the Council – can only succeed in connection with a spiritually motivated and guided process of rethinking.”<sup>417</sup> Medhard Kehl also referred to the rooting of the Small Christian Communities model in the ecclesiology of the Second Vatican Council and the considerable potential it harboured for renewal: “My impression is that it is largely unclear at present what importance the SCCs will have here in the German Church in the foreseeable future. Nevertheless, as a staunch supporter of the communion ecclesiology of the Second Vatican Council, I urge that a closer look be taken – in an open and unbiased, but purposeful way – at the opportunities offered by SCCs in the current processes of restructuring and that this project be driven forward.”<sup>418</sup>

Finally, a meeting of the National Small Christian Communities Team was held in December in Würzburg, at which a process of discussion lasting several years was brought to a conclusion. It was decided that the pastoral method known in Asia as the Asian Integral Pastoral Approach (AsIPA) should be contextualised in Germany under the heading of “Small Christian Communities in Germany – Kindling a fire together” and communicated accordingly.<sup>419</sup>

---

<sup>416</sup> Ibid.

<sup>417</sup> Pottmeyer, H.J., o. cit., 46.

<sup>418</sup> Kehl, M., Sind die Small Christian Communities eine Zukunftsperspektive für die Kirche in Deutschland?, in: Hennecke, C. (ed.), o. cit., 262. Cf. Kehl, M., Zukunftsperspektive für die Kirche in Deutschland? Small Christian Communities, in: *Anzeiger für die Seelsorge* 118 (2009) 10, 18-23.

<sup>419</sup> Cf. National Small Christian Communities Team in Germany, minutes of 2 December 2008 (unpublished document), Osnabrück 2008.

## German bishops experience grassroots Church in Asia

At the invitation of the Chairman of the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences, Archbishop Orlando Quevedo, and the Korean bishops a delegation of the German Bishops' Conference headed by Archbishop Ludwig Schick, the Chairman of the Commission for International Church Affairs, travelled to South Korea in April 2009 to find out more about the concept of Small Christian Communities.<sup>420</sup> In the dioceses of Suwon and Jeju the bishops met representatives of Small Christian Communities before coming together in Jeju to attend a seminar with bishops from various Asian countries who had many years of experience in building up Small Christian Communities. "We see our mission as being to give back warmth to the believers who have grown cold", said the members of the Small Christian Community in Korea to the representatives of the German episcopate. "We wish to act as missionaries, to approach people in the places where they live, make contacts and help wherever we are needed."<sup>421</sup> Archbishop Schick described this encounter with the pastoral model of Small Christian Communities in Asia as an "impressive implementation of the universal Church learning community". Klaus Krämer focused on the specific challenges for the Church: "We must gain more practical experience of the changes that need to be made so that in Germany, too, the Small Christian Communities can become a viable way of being Church."<sup>422</sup>

In October 2009, a delegation from Germany took part in the Fifth AsIPA General Assembly in Davao City (Philippines).<sup>423</sup> This General Assembly made it clear how important it is to differentiate between the evolution of the Basic Ecclesial Communities in the 1970s and 1980s and that of the Small Christian Communities which have

<sup>420</sup> Archbishop Ludwig Schick and missio President Klaus Krämer were joined on this journey to South Korea by Suffragan Bishops Johannes Bündgens (Aachen), Hans-Jochen Jaschke (Hamburg), Gerhard Pieschel (Limburg), Thomas Maria Renz (Rottenburg-Stuttgart) and Ludger Schepers (Essen) as well as by Ulrich Pöner und Ralph Poirel (both from the German Bishops' Conference) and Dieter Tewes (missio).

<sup>421</sup> [http://www.missio-aachen.de/angebote-medien/bildungsangebote/asipa/KCG\\_Studienreise\\_Korea\\_2009.asp#0](http://www.missio-aachen.de/angebote-medien/bildungsangebote/asipa/KCG_Studienreise_Korea_2009.asp#0).

<sup>422</sup> Ibid.

<sup>423</sup> The members of the German delegation were Gabi Viencenz, Matthias Kaune, Christian Hennecke, Simone Rappel, Norbert Nagler and Dieter Tewes.

emerged since the 1990s. The good international networking practice of the National Small Christian Communities Team was also expressed by the fact that the annual meeting of Small Christian Communities in November 2009 was held not in Germany but in the neighbouring country of Switzerland. In the Maria Lourdes parish in Zurich it was possible to see how the pastoral situation changes at the local level if Christians systematically make their way down the road to a participatory Church. This parish in Zurich had been undergoing a process of transformation since 2001, which had led to the formation of the first Small Christian Communities in 2006.

Drawing on the results of the journey undertaken to South Korea by the German Bishops' Conference in 2009, a joint discussion of the Pastoral Care Commission and the Commission for International Church Affairs of the German Bishops' Conference was held in March 2010 on the contribution of Small Christian Communities to the development of pastoral care in the (arch)dioceses in Germany. Archbishop Schick pointed out that in Germany the *missio ad intra* could only succeed in conjunction with the *missio ad extra*. The point of universal Church learning processes was not simply to copy the working methods of other churches, but rather to enable the positive experiences of other churches to be adapted to local pastoral situations. Christian Hennecke provided a survey of the initiative on spirituality and community building launched by *missio* in 2000 and highlighted the development of Small Christian Communities in Germany.<sup>424</sup> In their concluding remarks Franz-Josef Bode and Ludwig Schick reiterated that the Small Christian Communities offered a dual opportunity for the Church in Germany. On the one hand, they formed a necessary substructure of the parishes or parish communities that are becoming ever larger (and ever more anonymous). On the other hand, they encourage the development of spirituality in the communities and help to overcome an excessive focus on structural matters.<sup>425</sup>

---

<sup>424</sup> Hennecke, C., Experiences up to now in Germany with Small Christian Communities. Paper given on the occasion of the joint discussions between the Pastoral Care Commission (III) and the Commission for International Church Affairs of the German Bishops' Conference on 12 March 2010, unpublished document, Hildesheim 2010.

<sup>425</sup> Joint discussions between the Pastoral Care Commission and the Commission for International Church Affairs of the German Bishops' Conference on 12 March 2010, unpublished document, Bonn 2010.

## The return of responsibility

The need for introductory courses on Small Christian Communities continued undiminished throughout the country in 2010. A course with participants from the dioceses of Augsburg, Magdeburg, Münster, Osnabrück and Paderborn was held in May in Osnabrück. A Diocesan Day of Small Christian Communities was organised in Würzburg in June. In the same month Hildesheim was the venue for the Second Small Christian Communities Summer School, at which there was a workshop for priests, a course for parish teams and a course for core teams / diocesan teams. In September there was an introductory course on Small Christian Communities in the Diocese of Hildesheim. The grassroots pastoral approach was presented at the Ecumenical Church Congress in Munich as well as during the panel discussion on “A Broad Church Needs Closeness – Small Christian Communities and Home Groups: Local Church?”

The third expert symposium on “The Return of Responsibility – Small Christian Communities and Social Initiatives as Church in the Neighbourhood” was held in Hildesheim in June. In view of the realisation that the presence of the Church must take due account of various milieus in different areas of society, the participants addressed the question of the extent to which Small Christian Communities can make a contribution to community orientation. During the symposium Klaus Dörner advocated the reunification of professional social and welfare work and civic involvement at the parish level in local churches, describing this as a strengthening of the Third Social Space. He referred to his own field research, in which it was significant that initiatives which turn their attention to others mostly take as their starting point the small communities in the context of Church parishes. He deemed this to be a sign of hope for grassroots Church groups at the local level.<sup>426</sup>

During the Annual Meeting of Small Christian Communities in the German-speaking countries in 2010 in Nuremberg interest centered on the fact that a community which has set out on the

<sup>426</sup> Cf. Dörner, K., Kirche im Sozialraum? Überlegungen zur Bedeutung und Chance sozialraumorientierter Gemeinschaft, in: Hennecke, C. / Samson-Ohlendorf, M. (ed.), Die Rückkehr der Verantwortung, Small Christian Communities als Kirche in der Nähe, Würzburg 2011, 23-36, 33.

spiritual and participatory road to the future must come to terms with a holistic process of becoming Church. This includes the development of a vibrant liturgy, the kindling of a missionary awareness among the whole community and the transition to a culture of welcome for all the members of the community.

Of continuing importance were the journeys to Asia, which enabled interested parties to gain relevant (biographical) experience of Small Christian Communities. In 2011, a group from Hildesheim flew to the Philippines to find out more about the Basic Ecclesial Communities approach there. In addition, introductory courses or workshops were held on Small Christian Communities *inter alia* in the dioceses of Eichstätt, Hildesheim, Münster and Osnabrück. The annual meeting of Small Christian Communities took place in Bad Kissingen in November 2011. Over 70 participants from 16 dioceses (from Germany, Switzerland and Luxembourg) found out more about the home groups model in Bad Kissingen, which had evolved in a ten-year process of renewal of the faith and community reform. The emphasis in Bad Kissingen was on the fact that the groups there had developed not in, but alongside, the traditional parish structure.

Encouraged by the response to the *missio* initiative on spirituality and community building and the presentation of Small Christian Communities in local churches in Germany, *Adveniat* signalled its interest in joining *missio* in holding universal Church meetings on the Small Christian Communities / Basic Ecclesial Groups in Germany in the course of 2012.<sup>427</sup> A look at the flyer published by the two welfare organisations in early 2012 shows how broad the range of courses is on the subject of “Local Church – Basic Ecclesial Communities and Small Christian Communities”. They extend from a study trip to the Philippines to workshops and specialist conferences on the subject of Local Church Development and Church at the Local Level.<sup>428</sup> At the Catholics Day in Mannheim alone the pastoral approach of the Small Christian Communities was presented at seven events.

---

<sup>427</sup> Cf. Weber, F., Eine neue Art Kirche zu sein, Was sich von den lateinamerikanischen Basisgemeinden lernen läßt, in: Herder Korrespondenz 66 (2012) 3, 128-132, 128.

<sup>428</sup> Cf. *missio/Adveniat*, Kirche vor Ort, Kirchliche Basisgemeinschaften und Small Christian Communities, Aachen 2012.

## Outlook

A concluding report on the development of Small Christian Communities in Germany cannot be written in 2012. It is only possible to look back and provide a snapshot. In retrospect it becomes apparent that the initiative on spirituality and community building at the outset of the third millennium was a response to the pastoral challenge of developing a spiritual form of being Church at the local level alongside traditional and occasionally non-committal forms of being a Christian. In this connection the crisis of the Church was seen as a propitious moment “for an original way of being Church which, as a community pastoral approach, offers a clear option for the local church”.<sup>429</sup> A conscious decision was taken to adopt an anti-cyclical approach to pastoral discussions that emphasised and favoured the development of the Church in large-scale structures. Since there are no ‘ecclesiological master plans’ in pastoral work, the inductive, bold and open-ended path of ‘trial and error’ must be pursued. In retrospect, therefore, the development of Small Christian Communities in Germany does not appear to be a linear process, but rather a meandering development propelled by a considerable momentum. “These communities are a direct response to the question of how faith can be experienced as Church in a certain place – not just as a spiritual community and not as a kind of elective spiritual community either. Hence social welfare work, the relationship with the world at large remains an essential element of this form of being Church.”<sup>430</sup> The pastoral success of this process can be attributed not least to the personal commitment of individual protagonists such as Dieter Tewes and Christian Hennecke, who provided an initial helping hand in the building of Small Christian Communities in their dioceses and well beyond. It was also helpful that an organisation such as *missio* was able to provide the institutional framework that enabled sustained learning to take place in the universal Church learning community.

The introduction of Small Christian Communities in Germany has shown that universal Church relationships are in the throes of

---

<sup>429</sup> Tewes, D. / Vellguth, K., Kirche von der Basis denken, Small Christian Communities als Modell einer Kirche im Nahbereich, in: *Anzeiger für die Seelsorge* 119 (2010) 10, 33-36, 35.

<sup>430</sup> Hennecke, C., quoted after: Foitzik, A., *Neue Formen gemeindlichen Lebens*, Ein Gespräch mit Regens Christian Hennecke über Kirchenbilder, o. cit., 180.

change. 'Donor churches' and 'recipient churches' went out of existence a long time ago. In the era of globalisation at the very latest the Church in Germany has come to realise at the outset of the third millennium that, particularly in situations of crisis, a look at what is going on in the universal Church can provide new impetus for one's own pastoral activities.