

Basic Ecclesial Communities In Mindanao: A Call to Continuing Missiological Relevance

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Abstract: This essay revisits the history of the local Church of Mindanao-Sulu and how the BCC/BEC movement has evolved through the last fifty years. It follows 1) the history of the Local Church of Mindanao-Sulu from the late 1960s until today; 2) the setting up of the Basic Christian Communities (BCCs) as the core of missiological thrust; 3) the collapse of the MSPC framework owing to various reasons, primarily the ideological tensions and conflict that affected the Churches as martial rule became more repressive; and 4) the revitalization of the BECs following the mandate of the Second Plenary Council of the Philippines.

Keywords: Mindanao-Sulu Pastoral Conference, Basic Christian Communities, Base Ecclesial Communities, new way of being Church, pastoral thrust, inculturation, Muslim-Christian dialogue, martial law, conscientization, PCP II

Introduction

A new Chapter in the history of the Church of the

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Philippines was inaugurated with the Plenary Council II of the Philippines (20 January to 17 February, 1991). Taking place more than two decades after Vatican Council II, PCP II was convened by Archbishop Leonardo Z. Legazpi OP on behalf of the Catholic Bishops of the Philippines (CBCP) with the primary ecclesial objective towards “the promotion and renewal of the Filipino Christian life through Christ.”

PCP II led to the full promotion of the setting up of the BECs in the Philippines; henceforth most dioceses in the country were encouraged to move towards this pastoral direction. But it was in Mindanao in the late 1960s and early 1970s, when the initial BEC efforts began.

Since 2012, the Catholic Bishops’ Conference has exhorted Filipino Catholics to prepare for the grand 500th anniversary of the coming of Christianity to the Philippines to be celebrated in 2021. Since then, a theme has been proposed to help the faithful focus their reflections as part of the preparation for this Jubilee. For 2017, the theme is the “Parish – Communion of Communities.” Once more, just like what took place during the Plenary Council of the Philippines (PCP) II, the Base Ecclesial Communities are again in the spotlight.

For the faithful constituting the Local Church of Mindanao-Sulu, this year is opportune time to revisit the origins of BECs, assess how this “new way of being Church” has unfolded through the years in the face of its tendency towards institutionalization, identify its strengths and weaknesses and come up with ways and means to face the challenges posed by the post-modern era.¹

¹ See Karl M. Gaspar, “Will BECs Flourish or Self-destruct in the Postmodern Era?,” in *To Be Poor and Obscure: The Spiritual Sojourn of a Mindanawon* (Quezon City: Center for Spirituality –

The Origins of BECs in Mindanao

It was the Local Church of Mindanao-Sulu – specifically the Prelature of Tagum² - that gave birth to the first BCCs in the country. The Maryknoll missionaries pioneered the building of BCCs in some parts of the Prelature in the late 1960s. A few diocesan clergy later on engaged in this pastoral approach in the Nabunturan Deanery within the Prelature. There is no question that the BCCs could only arise because the Second Vatican Council II unfolded in the early 1960s. The spirit of Vatican II energized missionaries and pastoral agents especially in Third World churches, leading to the concept of a *comunidades eclesial de base* in Latin America and the *gagmay'ng Kristohanong katilingban* in Mindanao.³

Manila, 2004), 152-163, reprinted in *BECS in the Philippines, Dream or Reality: A Multi-Disciplinary Reflection* (Antipolo, Rizal: Bukal ng Tipan, 2004), pp. 303-320.

² The Prelature of Tagum was constituted by what are now the provinces of Davao del Norte, Davao Oriental and Compostela Valley (Comval). Today it is a Diocese but only covering Davao del Norte and Comval. The Diocese of Mati constitutes the province of Davao Oriental.

³ See Warren Kinne, *The Splintered Staff: Structural Deadlock in the Mindanao Church* (Quezon City: Claretian Publications, 1990). Also: Karl M. Gaspar, "Of Faith and Keeping our Faith on the Ground: The Mindanao Church in Fidelity to the Liberating Wellsprings of the Gospel Message," in *Readings on Contemporary Mindanao Church Realities* (Quezon City: Claretian Publications, 1994), and Amado Picardal, "Basic Ecclesial Communities in the Philippines: A Reception of Vatican II Ecclesiology," in *Journeying Towards a New Way of Being Church: Basic Ecclesial Communities in the Philippines* (Quezon City: Claretian Communications Foundation, Inc., 2016), 21-46. See also Karl M. Gaspar, *Mystic Wanderers in the Land of Perpetual Departures* (Quezon City: ISA Publications, 2005), p. 311.

A story that has been repeatedly told since the 1970s was this narrative: Archbishop Lino Gonzaga of the Archdiocese of Zamboanga attended an All-India Pastoral Assembly shortly after the Vatican II and thought it would be wonderful to have the same kind of assembly in the Philippines.⁴ Supposedly he proposed it to the CBCP who were not so enthusiastic about the idea. But the Mindanao Bishops were, so they decided to hold a Pastoral Conference just for the Dioceses and Prelatures of Mindanao-Sulu.

Thus was born the Mindanao-Sulu Pastoral Conference (MSPC). An excerpt from Joint Pastoral Letter of the Bishops of Mindanao-Sulu provides the rationale why they were keen to convene this conference:

(I)n the spirit of the times, we must examine ourselves as Christian Community, about our responsibilities in Community, about our part in the integral development of our people...More in particular: What new structures must be set up in the Church of Mindanao-Sulu to meet modern demands? What should be the roles of clergy, religious, laity in these new structures? How are we to educate ourselves, both clergy and laity, both rich and poor, all classes of society, to new responsibilities and leadership functions in the renewed Christian Community? More specifically in the Church as a worshipping and serving Community? These, and many more like them, are crucial questions, and they must be asked honestly at all levels of the Church Community...Towards this end, we have been planning for a year now to hold a four-day Pastoral Conference... During these four days of

⁴ See Bishop Jesus Varela, "A Brief History of MSPC," in *What Is the MSPC* (Davao City: MSPCS Publications, 1976), pp. 12-13.

prayer and dialogue, we trust we will be able, in the free interchange of ideas and experiences, to come up with some guidelines... for the building up of the Christian Community in these southern-most islands of the Philippines.⁵

A number of reasons have been surfaced to explain why it was in Mindanao-Sulu where the BCCs first arose.⁶ Most of the bishops were younger than those of the rest of the country and they would have gone through formation as priests when changes were beginning to take place in the Church. A number would have attended Vatican II. Thus they were more open to an idea such as a pastoral conference involving the laity. Most of the priests in Mindanao in the 1960s were still members of religious congregations as there were still few diocesan clergy.⁷ With their international character,

⁵ "Joint Pastoral Letter of the Bishops of Mindanao-Sulu issued on 1 August 1971: *Mindanao-Sulu Pastoral Conference Workbook*, mimeographed document (Davao City: Mindanao Development Center, Davao City, 1971), pp. 1-3. Signatories included Archbishop Lino Gonzaga, Archbishop Clovis Thibault, Archbishop Antonio Mabutas, Archbishop Patrick Cronin, Bishop Charles Van Den Ouwelant, Bishop Carmelo Morelos, Bishop Felix Zafra, Bishop Gerard Mongeau, Bishop Antonio Nepomuceno, Bishop Jesus Varela, Bishop Reginald Arliss, Bishop Joseph Regan, Bishop Jose Ma. Querexeta, Bishop Francisco Claver, and Bishop Bienvenido Tudtud.

⁶ See Karl M. Gaspar, "The Growth and Development of MSPC," in *What Is the MSPC* (Davao City: MSPCS Publications, 1976), pp. 14-17.

⁷ Some of the religious men congregations involved in parishes were those of the Columbans (mainly in Western Mindanao), the Maryknollers (mainly in the north and eastern part of Davao), the MSCs (in Surigao/Agusan), the OMIs (Cotabato and Sulu) and Claretians (Zamboanga and Basilan). Many of these congregations were in China up to the time when Mao Tze Tung's revolution took place. Expelled out of China, they relocated to the Philippines and were assigned to administer the nascent Dioceses, Prelatures, and Apostolic Vicariates. The first missionaries who came to Mindanao

they would have been attuned to new pastoral initiatives especially in Latin America. There were also a number of women religious congregations very open to new pastoral initiatives.⁸ Most of the Catholics in Mindanao were descendants of migrant settlers coming from various parts of the country, especially Cebu, Bohol, and Leyte. Having moved away from their hometowns with strong faith traditions, they embraced the changes that came with migration. Thus, by and large, most of them were open to new ideas, including those introduced by the Church. As Cebuano-Bisaya is the *lingua franca* of a majority of the Mindanao Catholics, it is easy enough for the laity to come together and understand each other. Except for the Sulu archipelago, most of Mindanao belong to one island (unlike the Visayas) and even if infrastructure had not developed to be at par with Luzon, still transportation and communication was facilitated by the accessibility of local churches to one another.

And finally, there were the “pre-existing key social and religious practices” including “prevalent devotional traditions”.⁹ When the migrants settled in their new homes in Mindanao, they brought with them some of these practices back home. Once they were settled down, they put up a chapel, decided on a patron saint (usually the one from their own hometown or village)

were the Jesuits who established mission stations in the Caraga region, including Butuan City, beginning in 1582, followed by the Recollects. See, Karl M. Gaspar, *Davao in the Pre-Conquest Era and the Age of Colonization* (Davao City: Aletheia Publications, 2015).

⁸ Especially the members of the RGS, MSM, OND, FMA, Maryknoll, and Columban Sisters.

⁹ Ferdinand D. Dagmang, *Basic Ecclesial Communities: An Evaluation of the Implementation of the Acts and Decrees of the Second Plenary Council of the Philippines (PCP II) in Ten Parishes in the Philippines* (Under the auspices of missio-Munich Germany, Philippine copyright of author, 2016), pp. x-xiii.

and scheduled a fiesta Mass. The first model of BCCs pioneered by the Maryknoll missionaries began their organizing through the network of chapels. Thus, the first model of BCCs were chapel-based. All Catholic households living within a village or town district with their own chapel were listed down as members of the GKK, no matter how big or small was the total household population.¹⁰ The popularity of the *Barangay Sang Birhen* in the late 1950s and early 1960s—which facilitated the gathering together of clusters of neighbors for the nightly recitation of the rosary—also served as a devotional pre-existing practice that made possible the regular coming together of a few households.

Before the rise of BCCs, the traditional structure of the parishes and its constitutive elements in Mindanao-Sulu were no different than those in the rest of the country. Before Vatican II and the changes that took place after, the church was highly institutionalized with a very hierarchical and clerical character. The power, authority and influence of the Bishops and parish priests were absolute; they were seen to possess absolute power over the laity. Culturally, the notion of *gaba* (curse, could also be divine retribution) remained

¹⁰ I was part of the parish team of Mati, Davao Oriental in the early years of BCC organizing. I joined the team in March 1972, just a few years when the first BCCs were formed and remained with the team until 1974. The usual process we followed in organizing a BCC involved a few steps: hold a chapel assembly months before their fiesta, explain the pastoral concept of a BCC, ask the people if they agreed to setting up a BCC in their village (naturally, they usually agreed given the presence of the parish priest), schedule and then conduct a week-end seminar so they are better able to understand what a BCC is, elect three BCC officers (President, Prayer Leader and Secretary-Treasurer) which was a model that replaced the traditional set of chapel officers. These officers were then exhorted to attend the parish regular monthly assembly to assess how the BCCs were doing.

quite strong. Thus, no one would dare contest decisions they made on behalf of the faithful even if on the side they would have complaints, e.g. the practice which categorized the sacraments into first and second class.

With its theology founded on the dichotomy between body and soul, as well as earth and heaven, the parish's thrust was more towards the sacramental and devotional practices. Hardly was there an attempt to go beyond the confines of the church and the convent, to reach out to the poor and the oppressed among the faithful. Because there was usually only one priest covering a vast area, most of the time, the parish priest remained in the poblacion, going out to the hinterland villages only once a year to celebrate the barrio fiesta Mass. Thus, the segment of the laity that had some involvement in parish affairs tended to be from the middle and elite classes living in the center. They were often the members of the mandated organizations. But even as they constituted the parish council, their participation was quite limited. They hardly took an active part in the most important decision-making processes. Financial matters were of course mainly taken care of by the parish priest.

Things would begin to change and the changes first took place among the dioceses of Mindanao-Sulu and these would have been facilitated by the conduct of the regional Pastoral Conference following the bishops' clarion call that there was need for "a strong sense of urgency and concern ...to see what we can do and must do to renew ourselves as a people, and more specifically, as a Christian people...because of problems confronting us in these parts that are unique to their migrant condition and cultural diversity."¹¹

¹¹ Joint Letter of the Bishops of Mindanao-Sulu, p. 2.

So how did this vision of renewal play out? It was the convening of this conference that led to the setting up of a “unique institution: a body of bishops, diocesan clergy, religious and lay leaders, -Sulu, representing the 18 ecclesiastical jurisdictions of Mindanao-Sulu, meeting every three years or so, dissolving but continuing nonetheless through its own creations – the MPSC Board and the Secretariat.”¹² A unique feature was that many of the laity participating in the conference were grassroots GKK leaders. In time, MSPC’s identity was clearly articulated, as follows:

To talk on the MSPC is to talk essentially of the Mindanao-Sulu Church and the Mindanao-Sulu Region, and of the vital and ongoing interactions between the two. The conference is an ongoing attempt by the Mindanao-Sulu Church, to achieve a clearer definition of itself – and more so, to serve as an authentic and effective transforming Church in the service of the region’s people.

This attempt at defining the conference as an ongoing vital relation between the Church and the Region is important. For it shows, on the one hand, a renewing Church at once outgoing and reflective. On the other hand, the Mindanao-Sulu region stands for the objective concrete world where the Church is really situated posing vital and anxious questions to the Church: asking it really to respond and define itself in terms of total and integral service, in terms of human and spiritual transformation.¹³

¹² Bishop Francisco Claver, “The Mindanao-Sulu Pastoral Conference: The Pains of Growth,” in *What Is MSPC*, p. 8.

¹³ “Perspectives on Mindanao-Sulu,” in *What Is MSPC*, p. 6.

From 1971 to 1976, three MSPCs took place which helped to cement the growing reputation of the Mindanao-Sulu Church as truly serious with its call for renewal and participation in human and spiritual formation. The themes of the first three MSPCs show how serious the Local Church was in pursuing its intent towards this pastoral thrust and how the BCCs would be the instrument towards reaching this goal. Thus the following matrix showing the dates of the conferences, the venues and the themes:

NO.	DATE	VENUE	THEME
MSPC I	November 17-21, 1971	Davao City	The Christian Community of Mindanao-Sulu
MSPC II	March 28-April 1, 1974	Cagayan de Oro City	BCCs: Towards self-nourishing/sustaining/governing communities
MSPC III	April 14-17, 1977	Ozamis City	BCCs towards Justice & Love

At these MSPCs, the delegates agreed that everyone must be involved in the promotion and strengthening of BCCs. Within a period of just five years since 1972, BCCs would sprout in the majority of parishes in Mindanao-Sulu. Naturally, there were also parish priests not interested, reluctant or not very supportive of the BCC pastoral thrust. And even if there was an expansion of initiatives in BCC building, the strength of these BCCs varied from diocese to diocese, from parish to parish, from chapel to chapel. For a while it was the Tagum model that almost everyone tried to adopt. Eventually another model arose which was not chapel-based but rather the BCC constituted by clusters of households. This model got implemented in the Diocese of Marbel and Prelature of Ipil, known as *Kristohanong Kasilinganan* (Christian neighborhoods).

Even as the BCC thrust got solidified through the MSPCs, the delegates also identified what would be the priority ministries to be actualized by the different local churches; these include: Lay Leadership, Social Action, Catechesis, Catholic Schools, Family Life, Media, Tribal Filipinos and Muslim-Christian dialogue. But all these ministries were supposed to be at the service of setting up and strengthening BCCs. In many dioceses, the bishops were determined to fulfill the MSPC's mandate. This meant allocating funds for the activities that needed to be implemented, hiring the necessary personnel (both at the diocesan and parish levels, involving both religious and laypeople), and promoting regular meetings in-between conferences to assess how the BCCs were doing and to plan out how to strengthen them further.

BCCs during Martial law

The declaration of martial law by the then President Ferdinand Marcos – who would rule as dictator for 16 years – made a major difference in the development of the BCCs. Already the theological discourses arising out of Vatican II were impacting on the pastoral approaches of the Local Church in terms of broadening the ecclesiological concept of Church, lay empowerment and participation, inculturation in liturgy and catechesis, engagement in social justice issues and the like. The social ferment across the country just before 21 September 1972—instigated by strong resistance movements especially among landless peasants, workers and students—already convinced many churchpeople to leave their ivory towers and be immersed with and take an option to be with the poor, deprived and oppressed. Peasant organizations such as the Federation of Free Farmer (FFF), trade unions and student activist groups

were pushing for State response to the major problems of landlessness, corruption in government, inequality, unemployment and massive poverty.

With martial rule, the citizens' right to freedom of speech and assembly were heavily curtailed. Any action considered as a resistance to martial law was suppressed, the press was censored, those opposed to martial rule were arrested, tortured and eventually disappeared. The only institution that remained unvanquished by the State was the Church, given the symbolic power and social capital of the bishops and parish priests. As there were already established Social Action Centers (SACs) in most dioceses of Mindanao-Sulu, there were still Church centers that could monitor human rights violations, document military abuses and conscientized the people to remain vigilant and exercise their rights. When the Major Religious Superiors of the Philippines established the Task Force Detainees, Philippines (TFDP), this human rights body could link up with the local dioceses through the SACs.

When the MSPC II took place in Cagayan de Oro in the first quarter of 1974, the organizers were cautious as to how to deal with martial rule as there was fear of a backlash from the authoritarian regime. Besides early on there were still segments of the population who were still in favor of martial rule believing that Marcos' "New Society" will truly bring peace and order, progress and prosperity to the nation. The choice of the theme of MSPC II was very safe—building BECs that are self-nourishing/sustaining/governing communities. As part of the preparation, local diocesan groups were asked to prepare a report to the conference, giving updates on the economic, political, social, cultural and religious realities of their local churches.

As the reports got a hearing among the conference delegates, it became clear that almost two years after

martial law was imposed, the situation of the country had worsened. Instead of bringing about peace and order, there were more dislocation and insecurity (especially of Moro and Lumad communities) given the twin evil of corporate incursion into the countryside and the ensuing militarization that usually led to abuses committed by the armed and para-military forces (e.g. the Ilaga and ICDHF) against the civilians. There were reports of massacres and endless occurrence of human rights violations on the ground level, especially in the hinterlands. Many GKKs were subjected to harassment, their leaders persecuted.¹⁴

When the summary of the reports was presented at the conference, it was made clear to the conference participants that there was need to discern how they should collectively respond to this social reality. This discernment process led to the decision to come up with a statement demanding of Pres. Marcos to lift martial law. A group was commissioned to write a statement, which was then presented to the body for comments. Once approved, it became an official statement on behalf of the conference. As local media was censored, this statement could not appear in any national broadsheet; instead it was the Hongkong-based *Far Eastern Economic Review* that printed a summary of the statement. This was the first ever public statement issued by any church body in the Philippines denouncing martial rule and demanding its lifting. But, of course, the conference did not expect that the dictator would be so pressured as to respond favorably.

Convinced that this turn of events have brought about a new political landscape to which the Church

¹⁴ A good example would be what took place among the BCCs of the Diocese of Kidapawan. See Peter Geremia PIME, *Church Persecution: A Test Case – Kidapawan Diocese* (QC: Claretian Publications, 1988).

was prophetically challenged, it was decided that the MSPC's thrust in the next three years would be - Education for Justice. "Consequently (the MSPC) Board and the Secretariat encouraged and facilitated deeper involvement in conscientization as they took on added vigor to fulfill their responsibilities."¹⁵ However, "this push towards a greater involvement in justice became far more threatening that the call for pastoral renewal of MSPC I."¹⁶

The radical shift of the MSPC's pastoral orientation did not sit well with five bishops who wrote the Chair of MSPC Board that "the MSPC was no longer what they envisioned it to be."¹⁷ However, two other bishops responded in a manner to convince them that this orientation was required by the new pastoral realities. In Bishop Claver's words: "But if what we said about the church of Mindanao-Sulu growing in self-awareness is valid, our continual reflecting on our collective faith-experience and our issuing forth from this reflection into concerted pastoral action that is truly relevant to the life of our people at any given time or place is indeed striking out in a new direction and hence developing a distinctive, if not new, concept of the Church."¹⁸ Bishop Morelos added: "Vatican II Opened new vistas for the Church. It offered the fresh wines of participative leadership and co-responsibility in the Church. The Mindanao-Sulu Church savoured this fresh wine, tentatively perhaps at first. But she decided that if

¹⁵ Gaspar, *Readings on Contemporary Mindanao Church Realities*, pp. 18-19.

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 19.

¹⁷ Ibid. These bishops were: Antonio Mabutas, Francisco Cruces, Gerard Mongeau, Joseph Regan and Reginald Arliss.

¹⁸ Ibid.

allowed to age and mature in new wineskins it could become vintage wine.”¹⁹

Because the majority of the bishops remained in favor of this articulated MSPC thrust, preparations were made towards MSPC III in 1977. As martial rule continued to play havoc on the lives of the Mindanawons, it was made clear that justice remained the core value for the BCCs even as Love would be its accompanying virtue. With the widening influence of liberation theology, the popular usage of structural analysis, the preferential option for the poor, and the conscientization program deepened. Along with this priority task was the organizing of the poor, deprived and the oppressed (PDOs) along sectoral lines (peasants, workers, tribal Filipinos, youth, etc.).

In the process the BCCs became even more militant and its grassroots leaders even more assertive in denouncing the abuses of martial rule. This phenomenon rattled the military establishment to the point where a high-ranking military official wrote this text in 1979: “What is now emerging as the most dangerous form of threat from the religious radicals is the creation of the so-called Basic Christian Communities (BCCs) in both rural and urban areas. They are practically building an infrastructure of political power in the entire country.”²⁰ Given this black propaganda, it is no wonder that GKKs got more harassed; and more leaders were on the run trying to evade arrest and imprisonment. For some, it meant going up the hills. But as greater suppression took place from the despotic rule, there arose a greater mobilization of the forces of the progressive elements of

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Galileo Kintanar, “Contemporary Religious Radicalism in the Philippines,” *National Security Review* (NDCP, June 1979); in Ibid., p. 27; also, in Kinne, p. 157.

the church. This surge of militancy within the Church led to a clash of pastoral orientations. This would ultimately make the bishops decide to dissociate themselves from the MSPC Board and the Secretariat. The first moves took place in 1978-1979...

...a time when the liberation struggle was creating far greater impact in the countryside as well as in the consciousness of those immersed in the people's life realities. On one hand it struck a chord in the prophetic stance of those immersed among the PDOs. On the other hand, it triggered off strong reactions among those who refused to see any faith value in the people's movements. The net result was the closing of the doors which used to welcome the MSPC thrust and a retreat to the safety of what is orthodox. The first victims of this enclosure were the MSPCS staff, who were viewed as leftist infiltrators and were therefore barred from entering some dioceses. The enclosure scheme was followed by a suggestion that the MSPCS be closed.²¹

When the MSPC V was to be convened in 1983, the bishops already decided to dissociate from the MSPC Board and Secretariat. However, the remaining members of the Board (less the two bishops) and the members of the MSPCS convened a parallel conference, baptized as Mindanao Inter-faith Pastoral Conference (MIPC), envisioned as a "group of faith-motivated people seeking to concretize...discipleship in the context of the people's struggle for life whether as Catholics, Christians, Muslims, animists."²² On the other hand,

²¹ Gaspar, *Readings on Contemporary Mindanao Church Realities*, p. 21.

²² Kinne, *The Splintered Staff*, p. 179.

the Bishops convened an MSPC V with the theme – The Building up of Ecclesial Communities in Mindanao-Sulu: Faith & Reality.²³ From then on, all decisions related to the conduct of the MSPC were in the hands of the bishops with very little lay participation. As there was no Secretariat to provide the continuity as well as the implementation of the recommendations, it was left to the local diocese to decide on how they can deal with the recommendations agreed upon by the delegates.

Many of the key personalities leading the MSPC and running the MSPCS gave their analysis as to the reasons behind the bishops' dissociation from the MSPC Board and Secretariat as they were interviewed by Kinne for his study. These reasons ranged from the manner that the bishops insisted on non-violence in the face of the people's option to participate in the armed struggle, the ensuing witch-hunt – which took place not just in the Mindanao-Sulu church but throughout the country that impacted a number of Episcopal Commissions especially NASSA – as well as power dynamics as “the bishops saw what was happening in the Church as a threat to their ecclesiastical power.”²⁴ Perhaps, it is Kinne's analysis that has the edge when he wrote:

I conclude that basically the crisis was a crisis of leadership. A ‘hermeneutic of suspicion’ tells me that the Bishops have to be principally to blame because they are the leaders. Not that they were not sinned against. But they should have been more reasoned and enlivened by a perspective of long-suffering hope, especially given the obvious commitment of the lay-people

²³ Note that the word “Ecclesial” appears before Communities. This would led to the shift of BCCs to Base Ecclesial Communities, further reinforced with the convening of the PCP II.

²⁴ Alberto Cacayan, in Kinne, *The Splintered Staff*, p. 145.

involved. This was the expectation that one would have of church leadership. Yet one senses that uncritical and absolute loyalty was often demanded, even in the face of obvious institutional ambiguities. This uncritical loyalty is connected with patron/client culture, as corrupted by colonization.²⁵

Years later when I did my own revisiting of these events and came up with my own analysis as to how the Mindanao-Sulu church evolved during these contentious times:

It was no longer a church institution whose mandate was dictated by the hierarchy. Since it was 'infiltrated' by an ideological force, its loyalties were to that force rather than the bishops. Its agenda was no longer ecclesial and ecclesiological; but rather political and ideological. Its alignments—(were deemed)—dangerous... Unfortunately, the times—which was characterized by a suppression of the 'public sphere in terms of communicative action'—did not exactly provide for an 'ideal speech situation' promoting a sense of 'communicative rationality' among the key church agents. Consequently, there were far too many distortions in communications owing to both external (suppressed media, security risks and difficulties in communication technology) and internal factors (authority hang-ups and no internal resources who could facilitate conflict resolution).²⁶

²⁵ Kinne, *The Splintered Staff*, p. 177.

²⁶ Gaspar, *Mystic Wanderers*, 320. This analysis was based on my appropriation of Pierre Bourdieu's theory. See Ibid, pp. 302-332. Those interested to know more about Bourdieu's theory, see *The Logic of Practice* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1980) and

And so the whole MSPC structure that grew from the early 1970s to the early 1980s self-destructed by the time MSPC V unfolded. Henceforth, the conferences would still take place but until today, the bishops have continued to hold on to the belief that there is no need for a regional Secretariat, and that the implementation of the recommendations coming out of the conferences that continue to take place every three years would depend on diocesan initiatives.

New BEC Initiatives before PCP II

Without the services of the MSPC Secretariat and the absence of regular assessment of Diocesan Pastoral Coordinators, there no longer was a mechanism to continue assessing the progress of the BCCs and to find ways to sustain its vibrancy and creativity. However, there were still creative responses that developed in a few dioceses. Some of these included the following:

- a. In the aftermath of EDSA's People Power that led to the downfall of the Marcos dictatorship and Cory Aquino taking over as President, various peace initiatives took place. One involved grassroots communities asserting their right to establish "peace zones" to pressure the AFP and para-military troops and various rebel groups to refrain from staging their armed encounters in their villages. Some of those who took this route were BECs in North Cotabato (especially in Pikit) and in Zamboanga del Sur.²⁷

Daniel Franklin Pilario, *Back to the Rough Grounds of Praxis* (Leuven: Katholieke Universiteit Leuven, 2005).

²⁷ A number of cases studies are documented and included in: Karl M. Gaspar, Elpidio Lapad and Ailynne Maravillas.

- b. A number of BCCs in the Prelature of Marawi and other Dioceses with considerable Muslim population, sustained their efforts in being engaged in inter-faith dialogue. Later, this would also involve intra-faith dialogue when it was clear that among Christian migrant-settlers there was also need to have dialogue sessions in order to reach a consensus on how best to facilitate inter-faith dialogue.²⁸
- c. Ecological awareness and action also arose in the late 1980s, in the Dioceses of Malaybalay and Pagadian, specifically in the parishes of San Fernando, Bukidnon and Midsalip, Zamboanga del Sur. Led by the Scarboro Missionaries with the assistance of the Redemptorist Itinerant Mission Team and the Columban missionaries, these ecological consciousness-raising led to BCC action towards stopping destructive logging operations in these localities. The people power of ordinary peasants led to the cancellations of logging concessions.²⁹

But otherwise, there was a lull in the development and progress of most BCCs that were now being more and more referred to as BECs. Sanctions (no child would be baptized if the parents are not active in the BEC activities; young couples could not be married in church

Mapagpakamalinawon: A Reader for the Mindanawon Peace Advocate (Davao City: AFRIM Publications, 2002).

²⁸ See Mary Fe Mendoza, RGS, *Basic Ecclesial Communities, Authentic Formation and Interreligious Dialogue: A Lonerganian Perspective* (Roma: Pontificia Universita Gregoriana, Facultas Missiologiae, 2005).

²⁹ See Karl Gaspar, *A People's Option: To Struggle for Creation* (Quezon City: Claretian Publications, 1990) and Picardal, *Journeying Towards a New Way of Being Church*, pp. 117-141.

unless they and their parents are active in the BECs) got further reinforced creating negative consequences including Catholics joining Pentecostal, evangelical churches that have no rules in the dispensation of the sacraments. No continuing formation as provided to the GKK leaders making them less and less critical and more acting like “*pari-pari*” in their own localities, thereby creating a new layer of clericalism. Most BEC activities revolved around sacramental, liturgical, and devotional activities and little is encouraged to respond to urgent social and ecological concerns.

It was within this ecclesial context that preparations got underway that led to the conduct of the PCP II which later issued a most welcome document – the Acts and Decrees of PCP II.³⁰ As if providing the Church in the Philippines a wake-up call, PCP II outlined a vision that made of the BEC a new way of being Church. Theological and pastoral discourses already taken up by the MSPC Conferences in the 1970s and early 1980s found their way into the text of the PCP II Acts and Decrees including: the need for church renewal, preferential option for the poor, to be Church of the poor, engaging in inter-faith dialogue and responding to social/ecological issues, prioritizing various sectors (youth, indigenous peoples, landless peasants and the like) and evolving a spirituality so needed by the contemporary times.

To some extent the Philippine Church would be energized by PCP II. As there were already inroads of BECs in other parts of the country in the 1970s – in Dioceses like those of Infanta, Ilagan, Bacolod, Calbayog in parts of southern Luzon, central Visayas and a number of urban parishes in Metro Manila – the expan-

³⁰ *Acts and Decrees of the Second Plenary Council of the Philippines* (Pasay City: Catholic Bishops Conference of the Philippines, 1992).

sion of BECs to other dioceses grew by leaps and bounds with the push coming from PCP II. Many local churches convened a Diocesan Pastoral Assembly to re-structure their local churches to fit into the PCP II vision. Existing support groups (e.g. the BCC-CO networks, the *Bukal ng Tipan*, those set up by religious congregations with missionaries doing BEC work on the group e.g. the DC Sisters, Diocesan pastoral centers – with support from various external funding agencies) provided the needed support on the ground. Much later, the CBCP would set up its own BEC Commission. In time, the Mindanao Church was no longer providing the cutting edge in terms of evolving updated BEC models; this trend was happening in other parts of the country.³¹

Various assessments have been made through the years to identify what are the strengths and weaknesses of the BECs today, what factors contribute to their vibrancy or hinder them from becoming truly “priestly-prophetic-kingly”, what are the problems they face and what are possible prescriptions and how they can locate themselves in the evolving post-modern era (now characterized by “populism”).³² One could make the following matrix to combine all the data contributed by those who have made such assessments (Padilla, Dagmang, Picardal, Gabriel, and Gaspar):

³¹ See Dagmang, *Basic Ecclesial Communities*, for case studies on these exciting BEC experiences.

³² See Dagmang, *Basic Ecclesial Communities*, pp. 283-296; Picardal, *Journeying Towards a New Way of Being Church*, pp. 197-206; Estela Padilla, Msgr. Manny Gabriel and Gaspar, *BECs: Dream or Reality*, pp. 259-302, 303-320 and 321-344.

Note: The listing of these factors/elements are not according to degree of significance:

Factors / elements	How factors/ elements facilitate vibrancy of BECs	How these hinder the growth of BECs	Prescriptions or how to respond to these limitations/ weaknesses
1.Pre-existing key practices (e.g. prevalent devotional practices)	Could be tapped in terms of getting the people together especially in the first stage of BEC organizing. Could also provide the indigenous spirituality needed for BEC sustainability.	Could make the BEC remain at a devotional level only if formation does not progress to other integral aspects of BEC	Make sure to balance the priestly-prophetic-kingly aspects of BECs. Need initial and ongoing formation for leaders and members. Inculturate the devotional practices to connect these to faith-life concerns.
2. Rural and urban geographies	BECs in rural and agricultural communities have closer personal relationships, less distractions, stronger kinship ties	Urban settings coupled with the work schedules of the population could hinder active participation in shared activities	Make sure BEC approaches take into consideration differences in rural and urban realities; not just one model fits all
3. Role of bishops	If leadership of the Local ordinary is strong in providing moral, spiritual and	If leadership is weak, if not actually present during the main activities of BEC	Be fully convinced of all that the Magisterium have exhorted re BECs (from papal docu-

	financial support to BECs, if the bishop is hands-on from leading the Diocesan assemblies to visiting the BECs, if encourage the clergy to remain active in providing support to BECs and lay leaders	organizing, evaluation and planning, if does not have the dedication to provide continuity to make BECs continuing to grow, if impose authority to curtail autonomy	ments to FABC to PCP II and provided the needed leadership and support down to the level of the BECs and Decentralization of authority
4. Role of parish priests, both diocesan and religious clergy	Same as above for their specific parishes	Same as above	Same as above
5. Availability of back-up technical, financial and moral support	Presence of diocesan support structures, external organizations that can provide technical assistance especially in formation of leaders, making materials available, and financial assistance from both local and outside sources to back	Too much insistence on volunteerism and self-reliance especially in circumstances when local resources are far too limited	Bishops and clergy should do their best to make sure there are such resources and personnel available to provide continuing back-up support

	up needed personnel, materials, etc.		
6. Quality of lay participation in the BECs	Where BEC leaders are provided initial and ongoing formation so they continue to grow in age, knowledge and wisdom as well as technical skills; where they are provided enough autonomy and not continuously have to rely on the clergy to make final decisions	When only initial formation is provided and nothing else, leaving them to their own defenses which could make them turn authoritarian in their own ways, no moments for recollections/ retreats, no opportunity to gather together to compare notes and provide mutual support	For the clerics not to duplicate clericalism at the base among the BEC leaders and to allow them the kind of autonomy that they need in order for them to grow in terms of providing empowering leadership, develop conflict resolution skills and have the confidence to execute their tasks
7. Enhance women's and youth's participation	It is already a known fact that there is a gendered character in terms of lay participation in the church where women's presence is more dominant, but women could still take on key leadership roles; there are attempts to reach out to	When women are just seen as mainly support group to do menial tasks of the BECs, have little to say in terms of decision-making processes given the dominance of the men; when the youth are discouraged from participating	Provide women with key leadership roles in the BECs. Provide the youth with the space they need to explore how they can contribute their time and talent to the BECs, give them enough room to explore their

	the young people by giving them enough space to participate in their own terms	(leaders are strict with them, always criticizing them)	creativity.
8. Sustainability and continuity in terms of growth & development and people's participation	The BECs continue to grow and become more and more self-reliant as the BEC members own the responsibilities and are able to mobilize as many members' participation as possible, are welcoming to those who join them and make them feel at home	When BECs turn elitist and not able to grow in the number of its members and the quality of their participation, where they continue to rely on assistance from the outside	Provide the needed assistance especially as the BECs still need these but develop them towards self-reliance, continue providing ongoing formation for members and leaders, explore new initiatives in improving the quality of membership and attracting more members within the locality
9. Policies and Sanctions	When policies are approved that enhance participation and autonomy, where sanctions are no longer necessary to encourage active participation	When policies and sanctions become so strict and lacking of compassion that these will only turn off members and drive them away	Learn from the lessons of the earlier approaches to BCCs (especially some of the Mindanao experiences) and be sure not to introduce policies and sanctions that

			can only hinder the growth of maturity of BECs
10. Relationship with Lay organizations, movements and associations (LOMAS)	Where the LOMAS do not consider themselves BECs in themselves, but that they encourage members to take part in their respective BECs	Where LOMAS have no interest in terms of their members integrating into their respective BECs	Get the LOMAS to encourage their members to take active roles in their BECs and assist in providing support by taking on tasks within the BECs
11. Understanding the vision and nature of the BECs	Leaders and members have been provided the needed orientation to fully understand and appreciate the BEC being a new way of being Church vis-à-vis Vision-Mission of PCP II on BECs including its role in evangelization and mission	Where leaders and members think of BEC as just one program in the parish, no different from the LOMAS or merely involved in sacramental, liturgical and devotional activities	Need for strong, comprehensive BEC orientation in the beginning and continuing, ongoing formation of leaders and members, updated to the most current missiological discourses and pastoral approaches in BECs and providing BECs with a mission orientation both in terms of the ad intra and ad gentes dimensions.

12. Responding to Moral, Social and Ecological issues	Where the leaders and members have internalized what is meant when BECs truly become priestly-prophetic and kingly. In parts of the country with dominant Moro and Lumad communities, to be engaged in solidarity with them and inter-faith dialogue. As well as also establish ecumenical dialogue.	Where they have no interest at all in responding to current moral issues (e.g. EJKs and the like), social (poverty, inequality and the like) and ecological issues (climate justice, disaster preparedness)	Fully engaged in the urgent moral, social and ecological issues impacting on the lives of the people, especially the weak, vulnerable, wounded and oppressed. Active participation in dialogue, collaboration and solidarity work. Promotion of ecumenical and inter-faith dialogue towards building basic human communities.
13. Creativity and spirituality	Where there is serious exploration of inculturation for the liturgy and sacraments; where spirituality is enhanced that can provide healing, reconciliation and deepening of goodwill among members.	Where creativity is stunted owing to hierarchical constraints and no attempt at deep understanding of indigenous cultures; where spirituality is taken for granted	Do research in terms of peoples' world views, cultures, myths, symbols and meanings and use these for inculturation of liturgy, catechesis, formation and the like; incorporate cultural concepts like

			<i>damayan, salu-salo, bayanihan</i> and the like; explore the BEC spirituality relevant in providing leaders and members the grace to mature as Christians in terms of continuing personal conversion and deepening relationship with Jesus Christ.
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Conclusion

As the song goes, for Mindanao-Sulu Church “what a journey it has been but the end is not in sight.” Her contemporary history from the late 1960s until today has been rather checkered with its ups and downs, twists and turns. Her historical narrative will continue to unfold as she faces new economic, political, social, cultural, ecological and other realities, given the changes that are inevitable in the country and the world. There will also arise new insights into theology and missiology as old paradigms will be debunked. Pastoral approaches will also shift as new ecclesial templates are pursued. One can only hope that whatever gains the Local Church have attained in the last five decades would continue to deepen and be strengthened especially in terms of how the BECs can

truly contribute in the formation of a new way of being Church. One that has the capacity to always read the signs of the times in the light of the Gospel and respond in the best way it can to witness to the unfolding of the Reign of God in the here and now.

It will only be because all those constituting the BECs have reflexivity, adaptability, creativity and grace that the BECs will continue to flourish in the years to come.