

«OHD helps Asian Church become a Church of the poor»

**Interview: Brother Anthony Rogers,
Secretary, Office for Human Development**

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KUALA LUMPUR – La Salle Brother Anthony Rogers is a Malaysian of Indian origin. After teaching school for seven years, Brother Rogers moved to non-formal education. For the past 10 years he has been working with the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences (FABC). He is currently the executive secretary of FABC's Office for Human Development (OHD).

Brother Rogers also works with the Malaysian bishops' National Office for Human Development.

Asia Focus:

– Would you please explain the work of FABC's Office for Human Development?

Brother Anthony Rogers:

– OHD's task is to help the Church of Asia to become a Church of the poor. This is done through information, research and service.

In 1974, the first Bishops' Institute for Social Action (BISA) was held to sensitize bishops to the needs of the poor.

– How does OHD help bishops relate to the needs of the poor?

There are already Church organizations and groups working with various marginalized people. OHD endeavors to promote greater participation of bishops in the lives of marginalized people through consultations, coordination and documentation.

Through our publications, OHD brings the experience of local people into the awareness of the whole Church. This is an important educational process with-

in the Church, in order to work with them (the poor) for greater justice.

– What concrete method does OHD follow?

When BISA was introduced we had only exposure programs. But after several years of BISA programs, we realized that exposure alone was insufficient.

Thus we introduced a new methodology of "immersion," which requires that one not only observes poverty but also experiences poverty in one's own country.

For example, we had bishops experiencing the lives of garbage collectors, cobblers and even hard physical labor in quarries.

By working with the poor, the bishops began to discover rich human and spiritual values amid the people's poverty. It was the people's religio-cultural values that helped them live in dignity.

This was during BISA VII. Here the phrase "Pastoral Spiral" was coined. It has four aspects: exposure-immersion, social analysis, theological reflection and pastoral planning.

– What effect did this method have on the bishops and their Churches?

The BISA programs with the "Pastoral Spiral" brought Asian Bishops together in collegiality, sharing a common faith and common problems that transcend national boundaries.

This experience showed that through their bishops, local Churches could also reflect together and be in solidarity with workers.

When the immersion program was introduced, the reflections became less intellectual, more experiential and therefore more understanding of the situations.

The experience of mediation and contemplation with people of other faiths helped bishops to develop a new spirituality through silence and meditation in the context of Asia.

The spiral approach came from the realization that growth in faith is not a linear process, but that it comes through human experience of reality, prayer-reflection and action; and then again experience and so on.

From the start, meetings of Asian bishops included priests and laity who were collaborators with the bishops.

We as Church became aware of the serious problems in Asia. Thus BISA exposed the bishops and their collaborators to the different poverty groups in their countries. For the first time, bishops had direct contact with situations of poverty.

– Have there been any further developments in the (Asian Institute for Social Action) AISA approach?

Yes. After BISA VII, we began a second phase. As a result of greater contact and links with national (episcopal) commissions, the whole process was translated into AISAs.

The difference now is that the program identifies a bishop with a particular pastoral need in his diocese. For example, the bishop of a diocese in the Philippines brought his priests and laity together with bishops from other countries. They then went through the Pastoral Spiral experience. At the end of the process, the diocese had a concrete pastoral program for itself.

We have held a number of AISA programs. They focus on growing in integral faith as a community.

AISA I programs were held in Bangladesh, on tribal groups; Indonesia, on farmers; Macau, on migrants; Seoul, on slum dwellers; Taiwan, on migrant workers; Thailand, on victims of tourism; and Yokohama, on migrant workers.

Centers and pastoral programs catering to the needs of these groups to share their life experiences were set up after each AISA program.

So far there have been seven AISAs and the bishops have expressed their wish to continue these programs and to express solidarity with workers.

– Is your outreach limited to Church structures?

We have now come to a point where we realize that the promotion of integral human development and justice cannot be done solely by ourselves and therefore we see the need to work closely with others.

Thus, FEISA has been born (Faith Encounters in Social Action).

Six days a week, people work and interact with people of other faiths. We have identified four groups,

Buddhists, Hindus, Muslims, and believers in East Asian religions such as Taoism and Shintoism.

We realize that a dialogue of life is already taking place in various countries. In Indonesia, for example, Muslims and Christians live and work together.

We try to learn how to communicate with people of other faiths. We try to find a common model. If it is possible in one country, then it must be possible in other countries. Our common faith experiences are a sign of hope.

We want to see how we can promote interreligious dialogue through social action. We are planning two forums for 1991, probably in Indonesia for Muslim-Christian dialogue and in Thailand for Buddhist-Christian dialogue.

Although we work directly for the bishops, we are in touch with interreligious and ecumenical bodies involved in development. We are at their service and we exchange information and experiences.

– Do you have any future plans?

Our biggest challenge is to bring to the grassroots all the beautiful reflections and conclusions the bishops arrive at after each colloquium.

These teachings must be seen as "nourishment" that we need to nurture our faith.

But first we must find a means of communicating them to the faithful right down to the base.

It is the people of God that have to be the sign and instrument of God's salvation.