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PROPOSED PATHWAYS FOR RENEWAL: FABC RESTRUCTURING IN THE LIGHT OF SYNODALITY

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Abstract. Church organizations, like secular ones, face ageing, inertia, and the need for reform. Management scholars argue renewal is best pursued during an organization's prime, when it is thriving. The Synod on Synodality offers such a pathway, continuing the vision of Vatican II. Renewal is urgent today, given shifting mission contexts and declining religious participation, with many Christians among the religiously disaffiliated. In the build-up to the FABC 50 assembly (November 2022), bishops' conferences in Asia raised concerns about the Church's internal life—its structures, ministries, relationships, and governance; and called for a review of the organizational framework of the FABC. For the Church, structures are never neutral; they embody theological and anthropological principles. Insights from Christian anthropology, Vatican II ecclesiology, and the interplay of theology and canon law highlight the importance of structural reform. Synodality, understood as the living Church of one People of God, represents a new stage of consciousness. These raise pressing questions: how would relationships, practices, processes, structures, and policies be reshaped in a truly Synodal Church? The paper acknowledges its limitations, as the author writes from outside the FABC, yet it underscores the urgency of renewal for the Church's mission today.

Keywords: renewal, synodality, structures, Ecclesiology, FABC

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Introduction

We know that change means "dying:" it requires leaving behind what is known to embrace the unknown, and that can be very difficult. Pop songs and musicians have struggled with change as much as churches and disciples. David Bowie's 1971 track, "*Changes*," perfectly captures this dilemma of change – to move forward, what is known must be left behind. It addresses the generation's divide and resistance from those who cling to tradition. The consolation is that while everything shifts and evolves, some fundamentals—like the "stream of life"—remain. The iconic Michael Jackson's "*The Man in the Mirror*" (1988) places the responsibility for global change on each one, and the struggle to initiate personal transformation for the greater good.

Handling the Seasons of Life

Life has its recurring seasons, and we are aware of our life cycles embedded in this flow of time – from conception and birth to growth, peak, regression, and ultimately, death. The same is true for an organization's life cycle – birth, life, peak, and death – much like a bell-curve. Many civic and church institutions founded in the 1960s and 1970s in Asia are struggling to keep themselves going or attract the resources they once did. Now in their late 50s or 60s, the prime of life is over, and they are challenged to reinvent themselves or become part of history's flow. Why is it important to be aware of the organization's life cycle? Because, like any organic entity that grows and evolves, we need to accompany each phase of growth intelligently. No two organizations are ever the same, nor are their needs. Therefore, care and resources must be allocated differently. As Pope Francis would say, it is easy to become fossilized, saying "we have always done things this way" (EG 33). Groupthink or "closed circles" of management of "the elect" few set in.[1] The very structures that once helped the organization grow

[1] Robert Mickens, "Letter from Rome," 01 May 2017, *Commonweal*, https://www.commonwealmagazine.org/letter-rome-122 (Accessed on 7 September 2025).

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and take form now inhibit the organization's ability to respond to the evolving challenges or its missionary mandate. There is a disconnect between the center and the field, be it a lay movement, diocese, or Rome (*cf.* EG 16). Physical and emotional exhaustion set in.[2]

The former President of the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences (FABC)[3] and convener of the FABC 50 assembly, Cardinal Oswald Gracias from Mumbai, India, called for restructuring during their assembly in November 2022, after helming the institution for nearly a decade. He said a restructured federation would help make the Churches in Asia "relevant and responsive" to the people of Asia, and "to renew and revitalize our pastoral thrust," making it "a vibrant Church working for a better Asia." It was reported that the call to restructure the FABC comes amid criticism that the federation has remained practically inactive for almost two decades.[4]

[2] For further reading, view Judith Sharken Simon with J. Terence Donovan, https://www.nationalforests.org/assets/pdfs/Tool-Building-Your-Organization-Five-Life-Stages-of-a-Nonprofit-Organization_NFF.pdf; John W McCoy, "Organizational Life Cycle: Definition, Models, and Stages," https://www.aihr.com/blog/organizational-life-cycle/ (both accessed on 7 September 2025).

[3] The Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences (FABC) is a voluntary association of episcopal conferences of the Catholic Church in South, East, Central, and Southeast Asia. It was established with the approval of the Holy See in 1970. Its purpose is to foster solidarity and co-responsibility among its members for the welfare of the Church and society in Asia. The decisions of the Federation are without juridical binding force; their acceptance is an expression of collegial responsibility. The FABC comprises 17 Episcopal Conferences, 2 Synods of Oriental Churches, and 3 Associate Members. There are 28 territories included in the FABC membership from the four sub-regions of Asia. They are: Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Brunei, Cambodia, Hong Kong, India, Indonesia, Japan, Kazakhstan, Korea, Kyrgyzstan, Laos, Macau, Malaysia, Mongolia, Myanmar, Nepal, Pakistan, Philippines, Singapore, Sri Lanka, Taiwan, Tajikistan, Thailand, Timor Leste, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Vietnam. For more details, see FABC, "The Beginnings of the FABC," https://fabc.org/history/ and FABC ACAS Final document, 16 March 2023.

[4] UCANews, "FABC gathering urged to adopt South American model," October 13, 2022, UCANews.com/news/fabc-gatherings-urged-to-adopt-south-american-model/99075 (accessed 9 February 2026). Pope Francis appointed

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When is the best time to rethink or reinvent an organization? Management scholars tell us that it is at the prime of life, that is, at its peak, while basking in its glory, that consolidation and revitalization plans need to be put in place. The leadership must map out the processes of institutional regeneration, mentoring of the next generation, and transition plans, which will include decentralizing decision-making and team leadership.

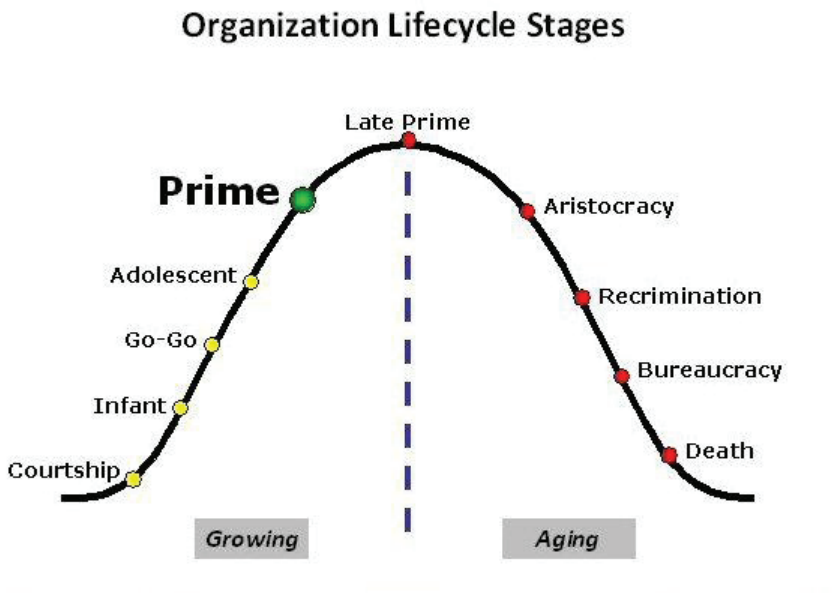


Diagram 1: Organizational Life Cycle Stages[5]

In the Gospels, Jesus tells us repeatedly, "Go," "put out into the deep," "cast your net together," and he adds, "do not fear... I am with you." Any change process requires everyone's participation – even the critics and slow coaches! Synodality affirms this clearly. Francisco Claver tells us, "Any socio-cultural change (change involving whole peoples)

Cardinal Gracias as President of the FABC to the Council of Cardinals (or C9) in 2013, to help him with reforming the Church's central administration.

[5] Cf. https://continuolearning.wordpress.com/2012/07/22/organizational-life-cycle-the-importance-of-training-development/.

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will not catch unless it is understood, decided on, acted on, in a word, participated in, by as wide a spectrum as possible of the members of the society undergoing change."[6]

Evolution of Organizations

In addition to the Organization's life cycle, management researcher Frederic Laloux[7] writes on the evolution of organizations, which reflects the evolution of human consciousness. The five levels are designated colors – red, amber, orange, green, and teal or turquoise, depending on how "evolved" they are.

- The first real organizations emerged about 10,000 years ago and are analogous to wolf packs or street gangs. Like the small groups of hunter tribes *organized for survival* against various external dangers, they are effective in chaotic environments and focused on the short term. Power is highly concentrated in a few and exerted through fear and exploitation.

- About 4,000 years ago, as human beings settled into communes, sedentary agrarian life, organized religion, and fundamental forms of hierarchy were established. The amber has a *strict hierarchy with formal roles and reporting lines*, requiring compromise, and thriving in stable, predictable environments. Examples are government agencies, the military, and traditional churches.

[6] Francisco Claver, "The Church in Asia Twenty and Forty Years after Vatican II. Personal Reflections: 1985 and 2005," *Exploring the Treasures of Vatican II,* ed. James Kroeger (Quezon City, Philippines: Claretian Publications and Jesuit Communications, 2011) 126.

[7] Frédéric Laloux, *Reinventing Organizations: A Guide to Creating Organizations Inspired by the Next Stage of Human Consciousness* (Herefordshire: Nelson Parker, 2014). See "Book Summary – Reinventing Organizations," *Reading Graphics*, https://readingraphics.com/book-summary-reinventing-organizations/

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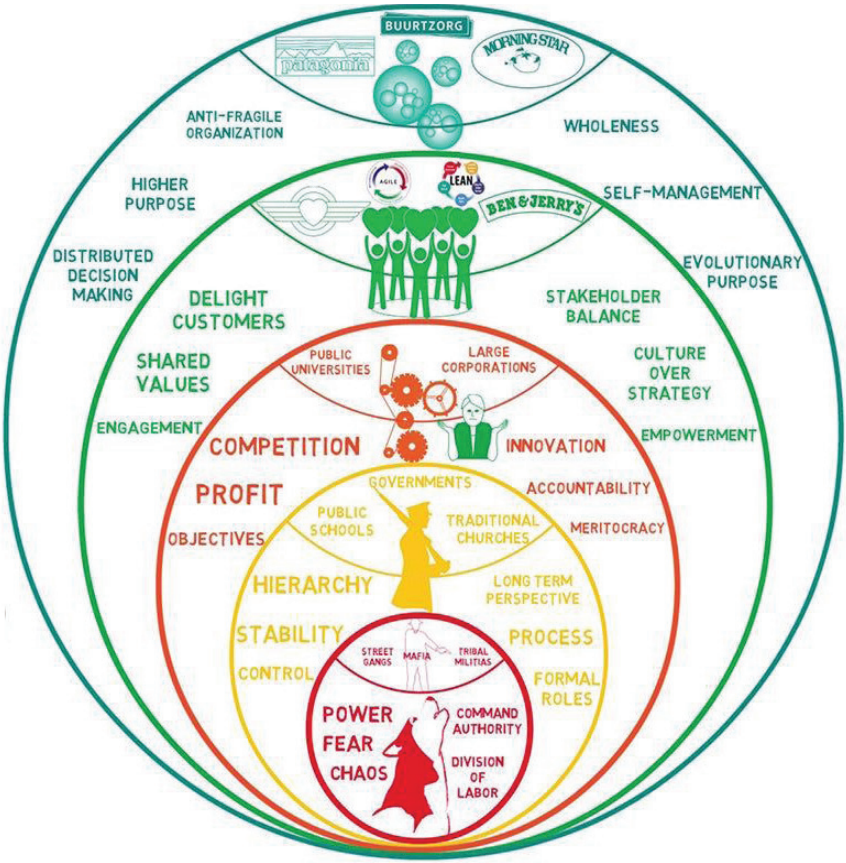


Diagram 2. The Laloux Cultural Model

- This is followed by the industrial revolution about 250 years ago, which focused on *mass production, results, efficiency, and profits*. Large multi-national corporations (MNCs), investment banks, and public universities are examples. They are objective-led and competitive, promoting innovation, accountability, and meritocracy, but can also be soulless machines.

- Then came a new way of thinking in the late 20th century that emphasized *corporate culture and family-spirited organizations*. While they operate in a hierarchy, green organizations try to motivate people through empowerment, a value-driven culture, and customer satisfaction. They seek to promote participative, servant

leadership, and consensus decision-making. Examples could be the Japanese Kaizen method, Ben & Jerry's, Zappos, and others.

- The next that emerged at the turn of the century is teal or turquoise organizations, which promote *self-management, wholeness, and evolutionary purpose*. It is no longer an external authority supervising workers for productivity, but groups of people who have internalized the vision and mission of the organization and are capable of self-organizing. It is not about hierarchy and targets, rather soulful practices drawing more on human potential that make them productive and purposeful. Profits are a consequence. An example is Buurtzorg, which started in 2007 to provide home-based nursing care. Today, it engages 10,000 nurses in 850 *self-directed teams* in the Netherlands. They are now present in 24 countries, with an annual turnover of €280 million in 2014.[8] Another is Patagonia corporation, which has created a Trust, and all (100%) profits will be channeled through the Trust for environmental conservation.[9]

All these experiences and innovations tell us one thing – that we can have a more meaningful way to work and create the envisioned future if we can change our mental models or belief system, "...be transformed by the renewal of your minds, *so that* you will be able to discern the will of God" (Romans 12:2). A Synodal Church would require *a leap of faith* and rebooting structures and systems from an amber to a teal organization – from being perceived as one of *fear and control* to walking together with humanity and creation in compassion.

A Christian parallel would be the story of modern mega-churches, many of which were built around small cell groups and team efforts

[8] See their website. Buurtzorg International, "About Us," https://www.buurtzorg.com/about-us/our-organisation/. Their tagline is "Humanity over bureaucracy."

[9] Their mission statement reads, "We're in business to save our home planet." See the Case Study, https://www.causeartist.com/case-study-patagonia/.

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at evangelization.[10] A home-grown version of this would be the small Christian communities of various lay renewal movements and the Basic Ecclesial Communities that were promoted by the local churches of Asia and the FABC (known as Asian Integral Pastoral Approach or AsIPA), encouraging the faithful People of God to gather around the Word, in prayer, fellowship, and witness. Unfortunately, its early success was its limitation. Not having addressed issues of hierarchy, authority, and governance, the BECs, SCCs, and even renewal prayer groups found themselves constantly being subject to the control of the local clergy and called upon for other tasks. Eventually, many BECs and movements have dwindled or died off, losing their early energy and promise. It is a lesson to take to heart as we work out the dynamics of a Synodal Church – how to articulate the *sensus fidelium* of the People of God at every level, which is manifested in various movements of the Spirit, albeit in any limited form, with the hierarchical understanding and institutional structures?

Systems Thinking

Our faith calls for integrity between Faith, Worship, Morals, or coherence of Belief, Practice, and Values. Scripture-Tradition-Magisterium is a coherent whole; so too is Communion, Participation, Mission. Seeing the whole and the interrelationships of parts, or noticing the patterns of change, rather than a static picture or in binaries, is an integrative discipline called "systems thinking."[11] Pope Francis popularized it in *Evangelii Gaudium* (234-237) with his Bergoglian principle, "the whole is greater than the sum of the parts." It builds on the principle of *interconnectedness* and avoids quick fixes by recognizing

[10] cf. Adam Volle, "Yoido Full Gospel Church," *Brittanica*, brittanica.com/topic/Yoido-Full-Gospel-Church (accessed 9 February 2026).

[11] In academia and management, Peter Senge popularized systems thinking in his acclaimed work, *The Fifth Discipline: The Art and Practice of the Learning Organization* (New York: Doubleday, 1990, rev. ed. 2006). Systems Thinking is the "fifth discipline" that integrates and binds the other disciplines: personal mastery, mental models, building shared vision, and team learning, into a learning organization.

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deeper structural patterns and feedback. It requires deep listening and attentiveness to leverage points where small shifts can lead to lasting systemic change. Practiced consciously, with other disciplines, it promotes a "learning organization."

Another Bergoglian principle states, "Time is greater than space." We are asked to initiate processes that can generate life rather than to seek to occupy positions of power. Such changes require the Spirit's grace and human formation. Cultural shifts require us to challenge our mental models, assumptions, and beliefs that shape our behavior. Asia suffers from a culture of silence, excessive deference to leadership, passivity or being "yes-men," avoiding conflicts, clericalism, attitudes that silence the voices of those at the margins, a lack of critical thinking, human maturity, and more.[12] Pope Francis' call to practice *parrhesia* in speech would be a good antidote to help build agency in the Church and society.

What could this mean for a Synodal Church and the FABC? First and foremost, it means seeing the People of God as one body (cf. 1 Cor 12), our primordial identity as baptized. The Final Synod document proclaims there is no higher dignity than our baptismal identity (FD 21). We are each co-responsible for the life and mission of the church. It also expresses a fundamental truth that in all living organisms — human bodies, ecosystems, or churches — the whole becomes qualitatively greater than the individual parts. It is in their interconnection and shared purpose that a transformative power is unleashed, richer than what each could achieve alone. This is the synodal triptych, or *circularity*, between communion, participation, and mission—they are not stand-alone principles. "Our dependence on one another embodies the heart of synodality" (FD 13). A synodal church can flourish or become a dynamic church-in-movement at the intersections of authentic communion, participation, and mission.

[12] The author and team offer a comprehensive review of key orientations for effective ministry among all pastoral workers, including formation. See Christina Kheng, "Toward Effective Mission in Asia Pacific Today: Key Orientations for Pastoral Workers and Implications for Formation," *Asia Pacific Mission Studies* Vol. 2: Iss. 1, Article 2, (2020). DOI: https://doi.org/10.13185/2704-3339.1061.

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Diagram 3: Interconnectedness between Communion, Participation, and Mission in a synodal Church.

Shifts in Religious Participation

A recent global study using data from 111 countries (Pew Research Centre and other sources),[13] carried out across various faith groups and countries, shows a global decrease in religious participation. The model was found to fit countries with Christian, Muslim, Hindu, and Buddhist populations from the four continents. The study concludes that "secularization follows a consistent sequence: first, participation in public rituals declines; second, importance of religion drops, and third, people shed their formal belonging, referred to as the Participation–Importance–Belonging (P-I-B) sequence."

With increasing modernization and high exposure to institutional and technological innovation, the symbolic and social functions of religion decline. As people find more efficient solutions to health or welfare in modern institutions, religion loses its immediate functional relevance. This transformation, in turn, contributes to an intergenerational breakdown of religious socialization within the fabric of society as seen in many traditional Western Christian countries. The large increase in the religiously disaffiliated population, or those who

[13] J. Stolz, N.D. de Graaf, C. Hackett, et al. "The three stages of religious decline around the world," *Nat Commun* 16, 7202 (2025): 2.. https://doi.org/10.1038/s41467-025-62452-z

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choose "*No religion*," makes up 24.2% globally and is mainly due to Christians leaving the churches.[14]

Asia, too, has been undergoing rapid transformation and modernization. The findings should spur the FABC and Asian churches to the urgency of working for a Synodal Church and open new pathways and spaces to generate greater participation of the young and laity in shaping the life and mission of the church.

A Basic Intuition

What the FABC needs at this time seems to be: *greater internal coordination and collaboration* among all entities and personnel – in a reciprocal exchange of love and service (FD120-121); *external networking and communications* – to give and receive life and walk together with all peoples of goodwill; and an *existential organic openness to the People of God* from within whom the episcopacy, and thus the FABC, arises and for whom they are to exercise their ministry of unity and apostolicity – with and among their people.[15]

To develop this intuition in three parts: there is the background or management concepts underlying this paper, a quick off-the-cuff assessment of the structure (more by experience and an outsider looking in), and recommendations drawn from Catholic theology, the Bangkok document, and the Synod Final document (FD). Along the

[14] Conrad Hackett, Marcin Stonawski, Yunping Tong, Stephanie Kramer, Anne Shi, and Dalia Fahmy "How the Global Religious Landscape Changed From 2010 to 2020 - Muslims grew fastest; Christians lagged behind the global population increase," June 9, 2025, *Pew Research Report*, https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2025/06/09/how-the-global-religious-landscape-changed-from-2010-to-2020/.

[15] Pope Francis said, "The Bishop, the principle and visible basis of unity of each particular Church, cannot live out his service except within the People of God, with the People of God, leading, standing among, and following the portion of the People of God that has been entrusted to him." *Opening Address of Pope Francis at the Second Session of the XVI General Ordinary Assembly of the Synod of Bishops*, 02 October 2024, para.18.

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way, some *principles* on which to build become clearer: relationality and circularity, the People of God and *sensus fidei*, and the prophetic nature of the church.

A key question to ask ourselves would be: ***If synodality, as one People of God, is the new stage of consciousness for the Catholic Church, what would it feel and look like? What would relationships, practices, processes, structures, and policies be like in a Synodal Church?*** (cf. FD: conversion of hearts, relations, processes, and bonds/structures.) It calls our local churches, congregations, and movements to move away from static notions of hierarchy and structures to accept permanent processes of consulting, listening, and discerning as a pilgrim Church on the way to the Kingdom.

Christian Anthropology, Canon Law, and Structural Renewal for a Synodal Church

The call for ecclesial reorganization and renewal in Asia—articulated most clearly in the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences (FABC) 50th General Conference of 2022 (Bangkok Document, March 2023) and the Asian Continental Assembly on Synodality (ACAS, March 2023)—cannot be reduced only to questions of pastoral efficiency or institutional management. While these human sciences are important and necessary, the call to reform or conversion is grounded in Christian theological anthropology, the ecclesiology of the Second Vatican Council, and a renewed understanding of the relationship between theology and canon law.

The work of twentieth-century theologians such as Yves Congar, Henri de Lubac, Karl Rahner, and Joseph Ratzinger—and Asian theologians such as Felix Wilfred, Aloysius Pieris, Catalino Arévalo—articulate clearly that calls for structural reform is not a compliance with modern organisational logic but a theological imperative arising from fidelity to the Gospel, the dignity of the baptised, and the Church's mission in history. More recently, in the context of synodality, Vimal

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Tirimanna, a member of the Theological Commission of the General Secretariat for the Synod on Synodality, put in perspective the following:

> Institutions are necessary, but not the way they have been functioning. In some circles, such institutions are canonized. Let's not forget that institutions are only means or structures to work for an end – the kingdom. Even the Church is there for the Kingdom of God, as Pope John Paul II himself said so many times. Jesus appointed apostles as a means to spread the liberating message of the gospel. But what has happened is that oftentimes the Church has become the end in herself… the clergy has become an end in themselves… the hierarchy has become an end in itself. Structures become a doctrine and the doctrine has become an end in itself. Doctrines are to help us reach Jesus of Nazareth. If we are worshipping the doctrines, that's heresy.[16]

Christian theological anthropology begins with the affirmation that the human person is created in the image and likeness of the Triune God (Gen 1:26–27). Because God's own being is communion, the human person is intrinsically relational, dialogical, and oriented toward participation—and "exercising synodality makes real the human person's call to live communion." Against the horizon of integral human development and ecclesial becoming, the Trinity remains the "source, model, and horizon" for the People of God, in pilgrimage.[17] Vatican II retrieves this anthropology by presenting the Church first as mystery and communion (People of God), before addressing hierarchy, offices, or juridical order.[18] Such a change in order broke the long-held division of the *Ecclesia docens* (teaching Church) and *Ecclesia discens* (listening church), or the unequal society between clergy and laity, and reinstates the People of God as the hermeneutical key

[16] Christopher Joseph, "Interview with Fr Vimal Tirimanna. Bishops should teach continental theology in Asia," Part 2, *RVA News*, October 28, 2022. https://www.ucanews.com/news/bishops-should-teach-continental-theology-in-asia/99228

[17] International Theological Commission, Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church (ITC 2018), no. 43.

[18] Second Vatican Council, *Lumen Gentium*, Dogmatic Constitution on the Church (21 November 1964), §§1–13.

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to interpret all subsequent roles and offices.[19] Ecclesial structures—including canonical norms—must therefore foster participation, shared discernment, and co-responsibility. When legal or organizational forms inhibit participation or marginalize voices within the community, they fail to correspond to the anthropology they are meant to serve.[20]

This anthropological vision can be traced at the heart of the FABC 50 Bangkok Document, which places synodality at the center of the Church's self-understanding in Asia. Communion, participation, and mission are identified not as optional emphases but as constitutive dimensions of ecclesial life.[21] Implicit in this vision is an understanding of the baptized as moral and ecclesial subjects capable of discernment and responsibility, rather than passive recipients of clerical decision-making. The document's repeated insistence on "journeying together" challenges ecclesial structures that concentrate authority or reduce collaboration to mere consultation.[22] (*Amoris Laetitia* reinforces a similar

[19] For the Biblical theology of the ITC 2018 document, see García Fernández, Marta. 2024. Notes on the Biblical Foundation of the Document of the International Theological Commission, "Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church." *Religions* 15: 1244. https://doi.org/10.3390/ rel15101244.

[20] ITC 2018, no. 46 states, "The gift of the Holy Spirit, which is one and the same in all who have been baptised, is manifested in many forms: the equal dignity of the baptised; the universal call to holiness [LG 39-42]; the participation of all the faithful in the priestly, prophetic and royal office of Jesus Christ; the richness of hierarchical and charismatic gifts [LG 4, 12b]; the life and mission of each local Church." These also provide some of the foundations for Catholic Social Teachings and human rights – the right to association, to free speech, to respect, and autonomy.

[21] Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences (FABC), *FABC 50 General Conference: Final Document* (Bangkok: 2022) §§16–19.

[22] FABC, *FABC 50 General Conference: Final Document*, §§20-26. The need for journeying together with all the peoples of Asia in humble and loving dialogue and storytelling was re-emphasized at the Asian Mission Congress/ Great Pilgrimage of Hope. See https://www.rvasia.org/asian-news/gph-day-3-cardinal-ambo-david-calls-asian-church-let-jesus-reappear-and-through-us. Long before doctrine, Asian civilizations passed down truth through epics, myths,

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understanding when it states that the role of the pastor is to educate [form] consciences, and not to replace them.)[23]

This insight resonates with the ACAS Final Document, which poses a critical question: *"Which ecclesial structures need to be changed or created to enhance the synodality of the Church in Asia?"*[24] This question presupposes that structures, including canonical ones, are historically conditioned and therefore subject to reform. Structural renewal is not perceived as a threat to ecclesial identity, but rather as a condition for its faithful expression in changing historical contexts.

Here, Felix Wilfred's insights on theology and canon law can provide an important methodological key for interpreting the call to reform. Rejecting the assumption that theology and canon law are polar opposites, Wilfred argues that both must "journey together" in service of the People of God. When canon law becomes detached from theological vision, it risks degenerating into "legal positivism"—prioritizing order over communion and compliance over participation. Law, in Wilfred's view, must remain dynamically oriented toward the Church's theological self-understanding as a pilgrim people on the way to the Kingdom. He goes further to say that "the subjecthood of the community and its process of appropriation of laws" have to be respected by both theology and canon law. Just as the community has

songs, rituals, and sacred narratives. "In Asia, truth comes to us not primarily as a concept ..but as a story we enter into," according to Cardinal Ambo David.

[23] "We find it difficult to make room for the consciences of the faithful, who very often respond as best they can to the Gospel amid their limitations, and are capable of carrying out their own discernment in complex situations. We have been called to form consciences, not to replace them." — *Amoris Laetitia* §37. See also AL §§300–303 on the pastoral method or how to go about it. These paragraphs reflect the teachings of Vatican II (*Gaudium et Spes* 16): on the conscience as the "most secret core" of the person, classical Moral theology: on the principle of graduality (not "graduality of the law"), and pastoral practice of Synodality: that emphasises accompaniment, listening, discernment.

[24] Asian Continental Assembly on Synodality (ACAS), *Final Document* (Bangkok: FABC Office of Synodality, 16 March 2023), §30.

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the *sensus fidelium* in professing faith, similarly, "laws that bind them need to also vibrate with this sense of the faithful."[25]

The ACAS Final Document identifies clericalism, concentration of power, and lack of accountability as significant obstacles to synodality.[26] Wilfred's analysis helps to interpret these not merely as pastoral shortcomings but as theological distortions that arise when legal and organizational structures lose their grounding in ecclesial anthropology. A law that fails to serve communion risks undermining the *sensus fidelium* and the baptismal dignity of the entire People of God.

Yves Congar offers a foundational theological framework for evaluating such distortions. In *True and False Reform in the Church*, Congar distinguishes between the Church's immutable divine constitution and its historically conditioned forms, including legal and administrative structures.[27] Grounded in a realistic anthropology that acknowledges human fallibility—even within ecclesial authority—Congar insists that

[25] Felix Wilfred, "Theology and Canon Law: Journeying Together," *Concilium: International Journal of Theology*, (July 2022): 45-56. See 47, "For anything to qualify itself as law, it should conform to the standards of reason and contribute to the common good. This would save canon law from arbitrariness and authoritarian imposition. Applying today the standard of reason – which faith is not expected to contradict – would mean that the laws of the Church be such that they do not go against or undermine human dignity and basic human rights, that there be equality, fairness, and natural justice, and that there be no discrimination on gender basis. All these form part of universal human rights, of which humanity has become increasingly conscious. Canon law cannot argue in the name of faith and justify violation of any of these fundamental questions common to the human family."

[26] ACAS, *Final Document*, see The Experience of Wounds §§63–72, Asian Tensions §§84–115.

[27] Yves Congar, *True and False Reform in the Church*, translated and with an introduction by Paul Philibert, OP (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2010), Part I, *Why and How Does the Church Reform Itself?* (esp. p. 82 – 101), and Part II, *Conditions for Authentic Reform Without Schism* (esp. P. 229, 248). (English translation of *Vraie et fausse réforme dans l'Église*, originally published in 1950; revised edition, 1968).

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structures are provisional mediations of grace. They must be reformed whenever they obscure the Gospel or hinder participation.

Congar frames the Church within the classic theological pair *sacramentum* et *res*: the Church is both *sacrament* (a visible sign, "form"/ mediating reality) and *res* (the real, saving presence). If the Church is both *sacramentum* and *res*, then offices, structures, and roles must both *mediate* Christ's grace visibly and *realize* communion, service, and mission. Structures are not ends in themselves—they exist to make the Church's saving reality present. He *intentionally* frames ministry—especially hierarchical ministry—within the life of the *People of God*, and he calls for a pneumatological and prophetic functioning of the hierarchy. He clarifies that, "The hierarchical principle is not by itself the whole of God's design; it involves the complementing give-and-take of a community and the fullness that comes from the association of the two."[28]

Henri de Lubac affirms this perspective by insisting that the Church is fundamentally a mystery of communion before it is an institution.[29] He resists any reduction of the Church to its juridical or administrative dimensions. Because the human person is ordered toward communion and transcendence, de Lubac argues, ecclesial structures must never become ends in themselves. When institutional forms eclipse mystery, they distort human freedom and obscure the work of grace – rather, organizational and canonical forms must remain transparent to the Church's sacramental vision.

Karl Rahner's theology further strengthens the link between anthropology, history, and structural renewal. Rahner understands the human person as a self-transcending subject called to freedom and

[28] Yves Congar, *Lay People in the Church: A Study for a Theology of the Laity*, trans. Donald Attwater, rev. ed (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1965), 272.

[29] Henri de Lubac, *Catholicism: Christ and the Common Destiny of Man* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1988), 29–42. His work affirms, among others, the Asian communitarian anthropology and that salvation in Christ concerns the whole human family, not atomized individuals. The Church exists within the life of Asian peoples as a sign and servant of communion.

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responsibility. Therefore, the Church must be understood as a historical *event of grace*—always "becoming what she already is."[30] Ecclesial and legal structures must therefore evolve in response to historical change and authentic human growth, lest they inhibit mature faith and growth of responsible conscience. In summary, ecclesial structures must enable Christian *agency* and not lead to passivity or atrophy of baptismal grace.

Joseph Ratzinger, though often perceived as cautious regarding reform, likewise affirms the necessity of ongoing structural renewal. In *Called to Communion*, he insists that ecclesial structures, while necessary, are always secondary and instrumental to *communio*.[31] Authority, grounded in Christ, exists for service and must remain open to reform whenever it becomes self-referential or obstructive. This understanding aligns closely with the FABC's emphasis on leadership as accompaniment rather than control, and with Wilfred's insistence that law must serve theology.

The Second Vatican Council brought together all these theological insights and provided the magisterial framework to integrate them: *Lumen Gentium*'s presentation of the Church as the People of God establishes baptismal dignity as the foundation of all ecclesial life – in (LG 1) the Council placed sacramentality at the heart of ecclesial identity, so structures must serve that sacramental mission, not replace it. *Gaudium et Spes* calls the Church to scrutinize the signs of the times and respond creatively to historical realities.[32] *Apostolicam Actuositatem* affirms the proper responsibility of the laity in the Church's mission, and *Ad Gentes* underscores the need for adaptability and flexibility in the Church's missionary structures at the service of evangelization. Together, these documents establish a clear doctrinal mandate for ongoing ecclesial and canonical renewal.

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[30] Karl Rahner, *The Shape of the Church to Come* (New York: Seabury Press, 1974), 11–25.

[31] Joseph Ratzinger, *Called to Communion* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1996), 44–58.

[32] Vatican II, *Lumen Gentium*, §§1, and 9–13 on People of God; Vatican II, *Gaudium et Spes*, §4.

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Pope Francis has explicitly retrieved and deepened this conciliar vision by identifying synodality as "the path that God expects of the Church of the third millennium."[33] He consistently links synodality with the rejection of clericalism, which he describes as a deformation of ecclesial relationships and a betrayal of baptismal equality.[34] Structural and canonical reform, therefore, cannot be separated from spiritual conversion and cultural change.

In the Asian context—marked by religious pluralism, cultural diversity, poverty, and the minority status of Christian communities—the integration of theology, canon law, and synodal practice becomes especially urgent. The FABC 50 and ACAS documents represent a distinctly Asian reception of Vatican II, enriched by Wilfred's insistence that theology and law must journey together. Ecclesial restructuring thus emerges not as institutional populism, but as an act of theological fidelity, ensuring that ecclesial structures remain transparent to communion, participation, and mission in the life of the Church in Asia.[35] At the same time, it is also the path of becoming an Asian Church – a dream cherished by the founding fathers and peoples of the FABC.[36]

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[33] Francis, "Address Commemorating the 50th Anniversary of the Institution of the Synod of Bishops," 17 October 2015; *Acta Apostolicae Sedis* 107 (2015): 1145.

[34] Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, Apostolic Exhortation (24 November 2013), §§93, 102–105, 120.

[35] Felix Wilfred, in "Asian Christianities and Theologies through the Lens of Postcolonialism," *Concilium* 2018-1 (2 & 3), analyzes how colonialism continues to affect the theological frame of thought, epistemology, and hermeneutics in Asian theology and churches. He turns to "postcolonialism to decolonize theology and explore how ...to deconstruct missionary discourses, practices, and structures of power – an important premise for Asian theologies."

[36] "We need to be Asian, but as things stand today, the Church in Asia is not yet fully Asian. The FABC should continue to work, and it has a lot of ground to cover. In the initial three decades of the FABC, it was bubbling with Asianness. But that Asianness has been gradually waning. However, we cannot and should not go back to the 1970s and 1980s. We have to face today's reality and respond.

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A Synodal and Missionary Church

The Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences (FABC) *studies* ways to advance the apostolate in Asia in light of Vatican II, *works to intensify* the Church's role in the holistic development of Asian peoples, *helps* examine shared challenges and *investigates* coordinated solutions, *promotes* communication and cooperation among local Churches and Bishops, *renders service* to Episcopal conferences to better respond to the needs of the People of God, and *fosters* both the ordered development of international Church organizations and movements as well as ecumenical and inter-religious dialogue and collaboration.[37]

While the FABC's long-standing tradition of dialogue, consensus-building, responsiveness to the signs of the times, and fostering a "Church of the poor" aligns with synodal principles, structural issues and *status quo*, including the entrenched culture of clericalism and *hierarchology*, can inhibit full participation.

First, how are the FABC structures conducive to synodality and mission?

Embracing dialogue and discernment:

- **"Triple Dialogue:"** For over five decades, the FABC has promoted a "triple dialogue" with Asia's peoples, cultures, and religions. This has fostered an intrinsic culture of listening and encounter, which is foundational to a synodal approach.

Today's Asia is not the Asia of the 1970s or of the 1980s. So, we have to be Asian according to today's Asia." Cf. Christopher Joseph, "Fr Vimal Tirimanna: Asian Church should become 'more Asian, less Roman.'" *Catholic Outlook*, 26 December 2022. https://catholicoutlook.org/fr-vimal-tirimanna-asian-church-should-become-more-asian-less-roman/

[37] *The Functions of the FABC*, see https://www.fabc2020.org/functions-of-the-fabc. To put it in a motto-like form, it could read: "The FABC studies, works, helps, investigates, promotes, renders, and fosters the Church's mission in Asia" – a *rosary* of verbs to promote the mission.

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- **Spirituality of harmony:** Silence and contemplation, communal sensitivity, and consensus have been part of the Asian ethos – and such Asian cultural values, with their emphasis on harmony and relationality, resonate deeply with the synodal journey.

- **Commitment to the poor and marginalized:** A consistent call in FABC's theologizing has been *with* and *for* the "Church *of* the poor," prioritizing solidarity and advocacy for the vulnerable of Asia, and a call to serve those at the peripheries.

- **Collaborative culture:** FABC meetings have often included significant participation from non-bishops, including priests, religious, and laypersons (men and women). This has created a culture of consultation and shared responsibility that predates the recent Synod on Synodality.

- **New Commission for Synodality:** In March 2025, the FABC established a Commission for Synodality specifically tasked with strengthening collaboration and promoting synodal principles within and among the FABC Offices, animating synodality at all levels of the Asian Church. Formation programs have been put in place for bishops, seminary rectors, and Synod teams across member countries.

How are the FABC structures not yet fully conducive to synodality and mission?

Challenges in practice and implementation:

- **Layers of Clericalism:** The FABC's Document for the Continental Stage (ACAS) acknowledged a "divide" within the Church between the clergy and laity. In many parts of Asia, decision-making is often by the clergy, with little consideration for the voices of the laity and minority groups. Authoritative and domineering leadership styles persist across clergy, religious, and laity, festering a divide and exclusion. The clergy are apprehensive

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that empowering the laity would weaken their role and Church structures.[38]

- **Structural and Systemic Inertia:** Despite various recommendations from FABC assemblies over the decades, implementing the vision of an Asian Church at the diocesan and parish levels has faced resistance or inertia. As scholars and critics have noted, without intentional conversion of hearts and structures, the call to synodality could become a mere "grand conference with fine words but little consequence."[39]

- **Lack of Inculturation and Communication:** Asian and Indigenous cultures are living textbooks or resources for synodality.[40] Nearly all country reports from Asia (*Responses to the Guide Document for the FABC 50 General Conference*) highlighted the need to deepen Inculturation. Yet many countries and Bishops' Conferences faced challenges in making available timely translations of official Synod documents in the vernacular. This logistical and structural issue limited the understanding and involvement of grassroots communities.

- **Lacking Critical Self-reflection:** Episcopal Conferences have pointed to an "absence of a critical reflective look at the Church *ad intra* in Asia in the last 50 years," suggesting that while the FABC has excelled at external dialogue, its internal structures and functioning leave matters wanting. (*See the following section below.*)

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[38] See Justin McLellan, "Fighting clericalism means empowering laity," *Natianal Catholic Reporter*, 19 May 2023, https://www.ncronline.org/vatican/fighting-clericalism-means-empowering-laity-cardinal-says.

[39] Sandra Ann Inbaraj, "Synodality demands conversion, not business as usual", *Herald Malaysia*, 06 Sept 2025, https://www.heraldmalaysia.com/news/synodality-demands-conversion-not-business-as-usual/84563/1?utm_source=chatgpt.com (Accessed on 08 September 2025).

[40] Charles Bertille, *"Pastoral Ministry at the Intersections of Life – towards a Synodal Church in Asia,"* 16 August 2025, Keynote Address, 60th Anniversary of the EAPI, Manila.

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There is a need for better coordination and cooperation among the various FABC offices, partners, and donors.

- **Uneven efforts and reception:** Some Conferences, over the years, have invested in the education of the laity and involved many people from diverse backgrounds in Synod assemblies locally, regionally, and even sent them to Rome. Others carried out quick online surveys without any animation or organized assemblies, where the clergy still held the dominant voice. Such efforts, implemented unevenly, limited the continental experience, and the faithful wonder what changes they can hope to see.

New Pathways for the FABC

In the FABC Papers No. 167, *Responses to the Guide Document for the FABC 50 General Conference*)[41] Part 1 on *Emerging Realities and Trends of Concern in Asia*, the Catholic Bishops Conference of the Philippines (CBCP) wrote under (i) "Church *ad intra* in Asia. There is a serious attempt at reflecting on the Church *ad extra* on the present realities; however, there appears to be an absence of a critical reflective look at the Church *ad intra* in Asia in the last 50 years." (pg. 22).

In Part 3, *Envisioning Possible "New Pathways" for the Church in Asia and the FABC*, the CBCP commented, "On the Organizational Structure of the FABC. It is an opportune time to re-look at the organizational structure of the FABC in order to serve better in the midst of the emerging realities-challenges." (pg. 27).

While acknowledging many contributions to dialogue with cultures, religions, and the poor (the famous "triple dialogue"), the CBCP response on the FABC's journey since its founding (1970–2020),

[41] *FABC papers* No. 167 cover the Southeast Asia responses to the FABC-50 guide document. It was published in August 2021 by the FABC-OTC. Due to constraints of time and space, only four reports from the Philippines, Malaysia-Singapore-Brunei, Indonesia, and Myanmar have been scanned to survey the feedback on organization matters.

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noted that the internal life of the Church in Asia—its structures, ministries, internal relationships, and governance—had not been subject to equally sustained theological or pastoral reflection. The observation was meant as a call for the FABC-50 General Conference (2022) to give greater attention to ecclesial self-understanding and renewal "*ad intra*" alongside its mission "*ad extra*."

The Catholic Bishops' Conference of Malaysia-Singapore-Brunei (CBCMSB) had related comments with a clear call for deeper internal formation, discipleship beyond sacramental focus, theological grounding, and ecclesial identity, which echoed the CBCP on the need for self-understanding and internal renewal.

The *Konferensi Waligereja Indonesia* (KWI) or the Catholic Bishops' Conference of Indonesia, highlighted in Part 1, that the Guide document fails to mention internal problems and challenges within the Church—such as clericalism, inculturation, and pastoral engagement with children and youth—and urges that these be elaborated. Like the CBCP, the Indonesian bishops point to an internal deficit—that resonates with the idea of an under-examined Church "*ad intra*."

The Catholic Bishops' Conference of Myanmar (CBCM) emphasized urgent themes, including governance, threats to indigenous peoples, the rights of migrants, ecological justice, and pastoral accompaniment. It urged the Church to reflect internally on its structures and adapt pastoral responses amid the external crises. Today, with millions displaced in Myanmar due to the civil war, pastoral care and accompaniment take on a very different tone and urgency. Religious, clergy, catechists, and lay leaders continue to accompany the displaced in complex and volatile situations. These are pastoral learning points for the Church in Asia.

In the FABC Paper 186,[42] FABC acknowledges:

[42] FABC, "TOWARDS OCTOBER 2024: The Asian Response to Deepening Aspects of the Synthesis Report of the Synod, October 2023 – Guided by the question: 'How can we be a synodal Church in mission?'" *FABC Papers* 186 (October 2023). The FABC articulates the experiences of the churches in Asia

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"Some bishops and priests who feel 'threatened' to lose their relevance, authority, income, and privileges: …there is an unwarranted fear among the clergy to recognize and empower the charisms and ministers of the lay people." (26).

"Synodality in the cultural context of Asian countries "requires an approach that is sensitive to the rich diversity of cultures, languages, religions, and traditions present within the country." (27).

"Parish structures, seminary formation, presbyteral, and episcopal bodies must be reviewed to integrate a synodal spirituality that promotes the journeying together of all the members of the People of God living in an evangelical way—*modus vivendi* and *modus operandi*." (39)

The Final FABC-50 document

How did these critiques and concerns shape the FABC-50 General Conference in November 2022 and the Bangkok document of March 2023? Using the journey of the Magi (Mt 2:1–12) as its guiding framework, the Bangkok Document organizes its response into five parts following the See–Judge–Act *pastoral method*: Journeying Together, Looking, Discerning, Offering Our Gifts, and Opening New Pathways.

Under Section V, *Opening New Pathway*, it outlines the responses as "New Pathways": *Pathway 1* (BD 141 – 147) from Foreign expressions to inculturated proclamation of the Gospel, *Pathway 2* (BD 148 – 149) from Basic Ecclesial Communities (BECs) towards building Basic Human Communities (BHCs), *Pathway 3* (BD 150 – 153) from Triple dialogue to Fourfold synodality including with Creation, *Pathway 4* (BD 154 – 155) from Proclamation to Storytelling in Asia, *Pathway 5* (BD 156 – 162) from Beaten track to New Pastoral priorities.

This paper does not intend to analyze the full spectrum of concerns and critiques that were raised, nor the responses given. Suffice here to state that the Bangkok Document addresses the issues raised above by the four Conferences (FABC Papers 167) as well as

to the Synthesis Report based on the reports received from the Conferences across Asia.

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the concerns of human formation, cultures, and structures (FABC Paper 186). It now requires *follow-through* for implementation at the Asian and local levels:

1. **Renewal of Ministry and Internal Formation**: "We will work towards renewing our ministries in all our local churches in Asia towards mission by nurturing our communities in the dynamics of communion and participation. By doing so, we hope to reorient our faithful from self-referentiality to truly living out our calling…from merely serving the Church to serving the world, as part of the mission of a servant Church." (BD 157).

    a. This responds to the lack of self-reflection raised by the CBCP, with a renewed commitment to ministries, communion, and participation — i.e., internal renewal as a foundation for mission.

2. **Maintenance mode to Mission Parishes:** "We commit ourselves to transforming our parishes from maintenance to mission, by fostering Basic Ecclesial Communities that build Basic Human Communities." (BD 158)

    a. The document adopts this shift, from an explicit sacramental maintenance model raised by Malaysia-Singapore-Brunei to moving parishes to be missionary, with BECs as the framework for renewal of church and society around.

3. **Contextualized Formation in Asia:** To adapt the formation of our clergy to the Asian context and culture, "we have to come up with programs and structures of formation that are contextualized in our specific cultures and worldviews in the different countries of Asia…The ordained must learn to share roles of leadership with the laity and consecrated..." (BD 117).

    a. This responds to the KWI or Indonesia's call for better formation and inculturation by pledging contextualized clergy formation, an explicit intra-ecclesial reform.

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4. **Human Formation and Theology of Communion:** Such an approach to formation would also require "Bishops, Priests and Religious [ ] to be trained to empower the laity to live their baptismal commitment, both in the Church and Society" (BD 115), and "to restore the ministerial priesthood's grounding on the common priesthood of the faithful" (BD 116), the "participation of lay people, including women, in their human, spiritual, pastoral, and intellectual formation ..will raise 'shepherds with the smell of the sheep'" (BD 118).

    a. This will help address the 'unwarranted fear' of some bishops and priests who feel threatened by the laity and help integrate a synodal spirituality that promotes the journeying together of all the members of the People of God (FABC Paper 186, nos. 26 and 39).

5. **Institutional Awareness and Pastoral Conversion:** While not responding directly to Myanmar's concern, the Bangkok document commits to strengthening synodal governance in solidarity with the poor and marginalized (BD 158), and to pastoral and ecological conversion (BD 159).

    a. A study of the BD shows it denounces certain practices of Asian Churches, and affirms the equal dignity of the baptized, rooted in Communion, opposing exclusion and clericalism. Participation opposes the monopolization of leadership by clergy, while calling for the promotion of *sensus fidei* and shared discernment (BD 18).

    b. It presents mission not as a self-referential church, but a Church for the Kingdom of God engaged in "multilogues that promote critical thinking and communal disciplines of discernment" (BD 19, 162).

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6. **From Triple Dialogue to Multi-prong Synodality**

Both the Bangkok Document and the FABC Paper[43] outline the development from FABC's Triple Dialogue to the *Four Pathways to Synodality*:

1. Synodality with Culture – Beyond Inculturation to Interculturality, Greco-Roman to Local (BD 18-21),
2. Synodality with Religions – From "Other" to Neighbor Faiths (BD 24),
3. Synodality with Poor – From "For" to "With," BECs to BHCs (BD 148 – 149),
4. Synodality with Creation – Ecclesial Call (BD 104).

All these presuppose a posture of openness and learning for the Asian churches, not only seeing ourselves as a teaching church but more importantly a *listening* church, welcoming people of different cultures, faiths, the poor, and Creation as partners in our common pilgrimage towards God's Kingdom. Indeed, the "need of the hour" calls for a "comprehensive worldview, [with] viable ethical and moral guidelines" (BD 65).

Structural Changes

Based on the above analysis and commitments of the Bangkok document, the FABC is mandated to draw forth concrete recommendations in evolving its structures and functioning towards a more synodal and missionary Church. Taking a cue from the Bangkok document, "How do we *strengthen synodal governance in solidarity with the poor and marginalized*?"

[43] The FABC Paper 193 titled: *Follow-Up of FABC 50 Bangkok Document Workshop for Rectors of the Major Seminaries*, 28 April–1 May 2025, outlines the development from FABC's Triple Dialogue to the *Four Pathways to Synodality* (p. 10-13). More details can be read in UCA News reports on the presentations made at the Great Pilgrimage of Hope, 2025.

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As the Fathers of the Church, Vatican II, the recent Synod documents, and Popes have situated the episcopacy within and at the service of the People of God, they encourage the inclusion of the People of God in various offices and decision-making instances. It does not alter the identity of the FABC as a body of Asian bishops but clearly projects its role from *within* and at the *service of* the entire People of God. Thus, the mandate, tasks, and communications of all the FABC Offices must flow from such a situatedness.

The recommendations below are subject to further study and discernment among the bishops and offices:

1. **Strengthening Synodal Governance**

   - **Global initiatives:** As part of the Synod process, the Vatican convened the five federations of bishops' conferences from America, Europe, South America, Africa, and Asia-Oceania. Complementing this, the South-South Conference gatherings have fostered mutual learning and exchange. On September 25, 2024, bishops from the Global South issued a joint letter to the United Nations addressing the climate crisis. And a delegation of bishops and young indigenous representatives from Asia-Oceania took part in COP 30, held in Belém, Brazil.

   - **Regional Asian Synodal Council**: Drawing inspiration from Latin America and REPAM, Asia could establish a permanent ecclesial assembly—comprising bishops, clergy, religious, and lay members, including women and youth—that would provide counsel, foster co-discernment, and support the FABC in its pastoral mission. An Asian Synodal Council could be created to serve this role.

   - **Rotating Leadership Roles**: Adopting shared leadership models, supported by mentoring from experienced individuals, would allow laity, women, religious, and youth to take on entrusted leadership and decision-making responsibilities within commissions and task forces. (This inclusivity is important given that, for example, the Asian delegation to the

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Synod Assembly in Rome consisted solely of clergy—bishops and priests—alongside women religious and consecrated members, but notably excluded male laypersons and young people.)

- **Continental Listening Structures**: There is a need to institutionalize regular "listening assemblies" at continental and sub-regional levels to keep the synodal spirit alive between plenaries and avoid becoming insular. (The Asian Mission Congress, with its wide representation, can be re-oriented to become a listening assembly.)

    - **Safeguarding:** For the credibility and well-being of the Asian Church, a special Commission could be created under the FABC President's Office (cf. BD 94). They can liaise with the regional delegate of the Pontifical Commission and the various Conferences in Asia, to gather information on ongoing initiatives and resources, promote communication of these, and extend support to local Conferences where needed. A *sacred space* is needed among bishops to exchange and discern the way forward at the national and regional levels.

    - **Instituting Memory:** Christian faith is memory, "*Do this in memory of me*." Communication is storytelling and transmitting communal memory. Like the recent global joint letter on Climate, the FABC can institute *a day of remembrance*, with memorial services, calls for peace, and prayer for the many countries and numerous victims in the region, without politicizing them: Sri Lanka, Myanmar, Gaza, the uprising in Bangladesh, Indonesia, and Nepal all warrant our solidarity (cf. BD 27, 34). Here, Indigenous rituals of remembering, forgiveness, and reconciliation among our Asian peoples can be researched and used as resources.

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2. **Deepening Missionary Engagement**

- **Cross-Border Mission Teams**: Small missionary teams of clergy, religious, and laity across Asian cultures modeling synodal collaboration in mission and exchange of gifts (FD 120 – 121), reflecting the *missio inter-gentes,* would be wonderful to behold. Pooling missionary experiences and resources is so much needed today. Mechanisms can be worked out around specific time-bound projects. (Churches in Germany and America have been practicing these to support the Church in Asia.)

- **Digital Mission Hubs**: FABC-led digital platforms for evangelization or missionary outreach, dialogue, and formation—in vernacular languages—particularly for migrant workers, youth, and those in remote areas, would have an impact. The structural challenge requires Safeguarding-driven frameworks and transparency (cf. FD 98, 149-150) to be built in.

- **Casting the Net Together**: There are opportunities to network with Pastoral centers and Institutes of Formation that promote synodal formation, such as the Network of Institutes for Formation and Studies-Asia (NIFSA) in Manila, Philippines. This would be one way of "casting the net together" (Jn 21:5 – 6). And in Asia, casting the net together would require 'weaving the net together,'" moving away from some of our silos and closed circles.

- **Calling and Training Volunteers and Disciples**: Many Asian Churches need more volunteers and disciples, especially young people. Social services and all ministries have to be animated by faith reflection and pastoral accompaniment to form inculturated disciples (BD 81, 117, 146). Some lay movements and missionary societies are forming young and lay people for mission work. A little encouragement and coordination with the FABC can go a long way.

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- **Interreligious Dialogue Units**: Promote studies to understand and overcome identity politics and the raging neo-fundamentalism. Establish permanent structures for dialogue with other religions, rooted in Asia's pluralism, and link them more closely to social justice and peace-building efforts (BD 147-153). This includes skills for spiritual listening and conflict transformation (FD 112 - 118).

3. **Enhancing Inclusivity and Co-Responsibility**

- **Lay and Women's Participation**: Establish a *Council of Lay Advisors* or sub-group of lay advisors to the Asian Synodal Council at the continental level, ensuring representation of women theologians, leaders, and grassroots voices in FABC discernment and decision-making processes (cf. BD 40, 41, 42, 84, 85).

- **Youth Synodal Forum**: Integrate a standing "Asian Youth Synodal Forum" into FABC's structures so that youth concerns are not episodic but continuously heard. Space can be opened for them to innovate new ways of being church in mission (cf. BD 46-48, 51, 90-93). The institutional church offices do not have to appropriate every initiative—all can learn to *walk together* as groups and movements are part of the charismatic dimension of the church.

- **Grassroots Linkages**: Many Catholics and Christians across Asia are engaged in civil society and NGOs working for the common good. The FABC can help bridge such networks by requesting that each Episcopal Conference develop synodal "base networks" with these individuals and entities, for they are the Church's partners in working for the coming of God's Kingdom. These can be for conversations and goodwill, or collaboration on common issues such as natural disasters, poverty alleviation, and peacebuilding (cf. BD 159 – 162). The updates can be reported to an office of the local Conference and picked up at the FABC, so that local voices genuinely shape continental priorities.

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4. **Reforming Structures for Flexibility and Responsiveness**

- **Issue-Based Task Forces**: Establishing *task forces* with a clear mandate and flexibility with a mixed team of experts from the field can help deepen the understanding and respond to urgent issues (climate crisis, migration, digital ethics, interreligious conflict). The Commissions and Task Forces can be part of an FABC Office or the Secretariat. (The practice of being accountable vertically only to a president or bishop chair can never resolve far-reaching societal issues or build a Synodal church, for socio-pastoral issues transgress ministry boundaries and require a transboundary and transdisciplinary approach.)

- **Climate response**: A partnership document exists between the FABC Office of Human Development (OHD), Caritas Asia, and River Above Asia Oceania Ecclesial Network (RAOEN)[44] – and all three are mandated by the FABC with specific roles, as no one entity can offer a complete response to the climate crisis and the ground realities of vulnerable communities. (The Catholic Bishops' Conferences of Australia, New Zealand, and Oceania can also be invited to participate in some of these listening assemblies around ecology and pastoral challenges as we share a common biome.)

- **Decentralized Hubs**: Instead of centralizing or over-bureaucratizing one secretariat, *Praedicate Evangeliium* invites us to consider decentralization,[45] which could be sub-

[44] See RAOEN, "Church Groups in Asia Launch Regional Alliance to Tackle Social and Environmental Crises," https://www.raoen.org/2025/03/06/church-groups-in-asia-launch-regional-alliance-to-tackle-social-and-environmental-crises/ (accessed 9 February 2026).

[45] Josef Sayer, FABC Paper 194, *Praedicate Evangelium — Development Process, Hermeneutics, and Significance for the Church*. Part V of the above paper highlights how the drafting of *Praedicate Evangelium* was shaped by a broad, dialogical process rather than an isolated committee. The Council of Cardinals incorporated perspectives from bishops' conferences across continents, lay organizations, curial officials, and even pontifical universities, ensuring the Constitution reflected

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regional hubs (South Asia, East Asia, Southeast Asia, etc.). Such a mechanism could better animate and accompany the shared history, cultural similarities, resources, and missionary opportunities within and among countries in the sub-regions that reflect Asia's diversity. It can also serve as a mechanism for listening and discerning the voice of the Spirit.

- **Synodal Audits**: Leadership must exemplify the political will to move critical areas. Instituting periodic "synodal audits" to evaluate whether a diocese or FABC's structures themselves embody listening, participation, and shared discernment is vital. As any ecclesial office, the FABC is also accountable to the People of God. As such, it needs to become *more present* in the lives of people and churches, and not be seen as on its own.

    - **Feedback Loops:** Feedback loops are important to help balance or reinforce processes. Consultation, dialogue, and discernment are part of such feedback processes. The FABC must build channels for open feedback from grassroots, BECs, SCCs, migrants, and young people with the bishops. Such listening will help deepen appreciation for the People of God and the *sensus fidei* and nurture the prophetic voice of the church.

- **Networking and Communication**: Synodality itself requires a more collaborative, relational, and network style of leadership, capable of liaising and building networks with ecclesial and civil bodies, especially at the Asian level. The work and reflections of the various offices and the Secretariat need to be communicated promptly and widely. This is part of accountability and feeding into the synodal

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global concerns. The process remained rooted in Pope Francis's vision of reform as a dynamic, pastoral, and synodal journey rather than a static legal exercise. The work that began in 2013, was promulgated in March 2022 and effective at Pentecost that year. It is not merely about curial reform but about the Church's essential mission: *Praedicate Evangelium*—to preach the Gospel.

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movement animating the Asian churches, and that could have a wider impact on our societies (BD 95).[46]

5. **Formation for Synodality and Mission**

- **Leadership Formation**: Strengthening BECs as spaces of listening and discernment, promoting digital synodality to embrace the wider diaspora and 'enlarge the tent of participation', formation of synodal leaders in critical reflection, are all necessary for structural change (cf. BD 115).

  - **Bishops' Formation –** Synodality-focused leadership training for bishops, clergy, religious, and laity can be developed in partnership with pastoral-theological institutes across Asia. We can also learn from the past – some bishop luminaries of yesteryears testify to the value of the BISA, BIRA, BISCOM, and other FABC-led programs. It tells us that ongoing *exposure-immersion learning* is critical for a synodal missionary Church.

  - **Inculturation** becomes important for a Synodal Church. Many of our Asian cultures and traditions have synodal resources embedded in them. Certain congregations have been doing significant work in this area for decades. A Task Force could network and research particular areas, e.g., Indigenous cultures and liturgy, or work in partnership with institutes, and others like the ROOTS Network.[47]

[46] The Church must be involved in efforts to effect long-term change through formation, systemic and structural changes, and advocacy in defence of the vulnerable. Many of these initiatives have to be carried out by collaborating and networking with non-governmental and civil society organizations for the good of all. These partnerships only accentuate the fact that the Church does not exist for herself but is at the service of all the peoples of Asia as she continues to announce the Kingdom of God and transform our realities in the power of the Holy Spirit (cf. LG,5)." BD 95.

[47] ROOTS is a Catholic Network among all those working with Indigenous peoples of Asia. "Asian Forum on Synodality and Indigenous Living Traditions within the Church amplify IndigenousVoices," *RAOEN*, See https://www.raoen.

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- ***Corpus* of FABC teachings:** It needs greater exposure, understanding, and implementation across Asia. How can these be better introduced in the formation of seminarians, novices, catechists, and lay leaders?

- **Asian Synodal Research Centre**: Establish a center or centers by sub-regions for theological reflection, research, and resource-sharing on synodality and mission in Asia's unique context. This could be a network of centers, like hubs, each specializing in specific fields, and accessible to Catholic scholars, pastoral workers, and professionals. (Besides theological journals from India or the Philippines, very little is known from other Churches.)

  - **ASIPA**: It will be valuable to connect with the significant work done by Offices like AsIPA (Asian Integral Pastoral Approach), a Desk of the FABC *Office of Laity and Family*. They had developed training modules for a 'Word-centered' participatory and communitarian church in more than 30 Asian languages.[48]

- **Intergenerational Mentoring**: Create mentorship programs pairing elder bishops/religious leaders with young and lay leaders to sustain continuity and innovation. Ongoing human and spiritual formation are necessary to overcome personal dysfunctions (FD 142 – 143).

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org/2024/12/10/asian-forum-on-synodality-and-indigenous-living-traditions-within-the-church-amplify-indigenous-voices/ (accessed 9 February 2026).

[48] AsIPA highlights the importance of integrating spiritual and social dimensions of life, addressing the realities faced by Asian communities, such as pluralism, poverty, and the advancement of women. It seeks to equip the People of God for their mission in the Church and world, and fosters a renewed model of leadership rooted in shared responsibility among clergy, religious, and laity alike. "What is AsIPA?," *AsIPA*, https://asipafabc.org/what-is-asipa/.

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The Inverted Pyramid

Keeping in mind the overall aim of this review of the FABC structures is to help it move from being *primarily consultative and episcopal* toward being a synodal missionary body that is *participatory, inclusive, and mission-driven*, in line with the universal Synod Final document and Asia's cultural and religious diversity. The structures must also strive to reflect and fulfil the desire of Pope Francis for an episcopacy that is at the service of the entire People of God and walks with them.[49]

The following organizational structure (see next page) shows how the FABC Assembly connects to an Asian Synodal (ecclesial) Council, which then branches into sub-regional Hubs, Offices, and issue-based Task forces, and Participatory councils (laity, women, youth, grassroots), all feeding into a Synodal Research & Formation Center or Centers locally, and regionally for reflection and capacity building. It is subject to further deliberation and discernment.

Overall Flow of the Structure

The FABC Assembly, in mutual listening with the Asian Synodal Council, welcomes and sets the strategic direction for the FABC and Churches in Asia. This can give it more strength and "bite" than the current practice of a few bishops participating, and the FABC directions and teachings are then left open-ended or subjective in implementation.

The Asian Synodal Council, in mutual listening with the Sub-Regional Hubs, Offices, Task Forces, Councils, and Forums, exercises discernment and co-responsibility in a spirit of subsidiarity.

Grassroots Networks of groups, Initiatives, Councils, and Task Forces listen to life realities as bottom-up listening and bring this for further study and reflection.

[49] Pope Francis, *Address of Pope Francis to a Group of Recently Appointed Bishops*, 19 Sept 2013, Speeches, https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2013/september/documents/papa-francesco_20130919_convegno-nuovi-vescovi.html.

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There is a need to situate our *praxis* within the concrete realities of Asian societies—marked by cultural and religious pluralism, economic marginalization, environmental crises, and the nine challenges named in the Bangkok Document (BD 71). Central to its methodology is the formation of bishops, priests, religious, and laity (BD 115), for the empowerment of Asia's laity to exercise their ecclesial and societal mission.[50] The paradigm of leadership must be characterized by shared responsibility and collaborative participation among clergy, religious, and lay members to foster a synodal church.

The Research & Formation Centers operate within a network model that connects diverse structures—such as pastoral centers, institutes of national conferences, and regional hubs of various congregations and movements. This collaborative framework fosters deeper reflection, the development and exchange of training modules, and the encouragement of local innovation. Each subregion may establish its own hubs and centers to strengthen this shared mission.

[50] For a study of the FABC Theology of the Laity and its Relevance for the Formation of Lay leaders in Asia's Local Churches, see Charles Bertille, *Empowering Asia's Laity* (Quezon City, Philippines: Claretian, 2014).

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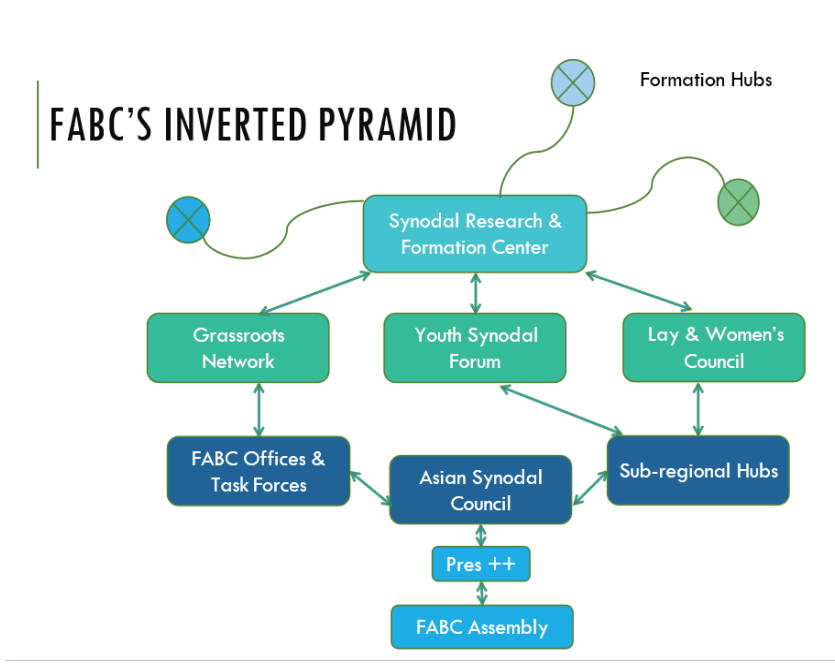


Diagram 4: FABC's Inverted Pyramid

A Proposed Roadmap for Renewal

Any change process requires facilitation and discernment. The restructuring plans need to be rolled out in a phased manner and reviewed periodically.

- In the short term, it is prudent to start small, establishing councils, hubs, and forums. The goal or keywords for structural renewal are *inclusion and experimentation*.
- In the medium term, the FABC can expand its structure, sub-regional structures, launch the synod research center, and deepen grassroots participation. The goal is to *consolidate and broaden participation.*
- In the long term, FABC can review how and how much it has helped integrate synodality into governance, decision-making,

and missionary outreach across the Churches of Asia. The goal is a fully *synodal & missionary* culture.

The matrix below lays out in summary the phases of restructuring:

Short-term (0-3 yrs)	Mid-term (4 – 6 yrs)	Long-term (7 – 10 yrs)
▪ Wider consultation & discerned restructuring ▪ Establishing Team/s & Roadmap ▪ Relaunch Offices ▪ Task Force on Migration, Climate, & Digital ▪ Asian Synodal Council ▪ Pilot Sub-regional Hubs (2 regions) ▪ Lay & Women's Council & Youth Forum formed ▪ Plan Synodal Research & Formation Centers ▪ Financial Task Force launched to study status and needs ▪ Annual evaluation of Offices, Secretariat, Synodality (participation, communion & mission)	▪ Expand Regional Hubs to all subregions ▪ Grassroots Networks established ▪ Pooling of resources & Cross-border missionary teams ▪ Ministry volunteer programs launched ▪ Synodal Research & Formation Centers opened ▪ Mentorship programs launched ▪ Financial Training launched. ▪ Regular Synodal Audits	▪ Synodality integrated into governance ▪ Promotion of FABC teachings & theology ▪ Digital Mission Hubs institutionalized ▪ Lay/Women/Youth in decision-making roles ▪ Interreligious Dialogue Units strengthened ▪ Rotating leadership models are adopted ▪ Financial sustainability plans are in place ▪ 5-year reviews for agile structures & renewal.

Proposed Restructuring of the FABC Offices

Based on the above analysis and rethinking, a reorganization of the offices is proposed.

1. Reference is made to the *motu proprio, Praedicate Evangelium* (Preach the Gospel).

   a. The FABC Offices can reflect the structure of the Roman Curia as affected by Pope Francis.

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b. *Praedicate Evangelium* clearly states that lay people can oversee offices, or even dicasteries. How could these directives be reflected and applied in the Asian context and the FABC?

c. Could there be a team of consultors or experts for each Office and Task Force? And could it consist of various sectors (e.g., lay, women, young, religious, priests) instead of solely bishops? (The Vatican is already practicing this.)

d. Can there be a non-clergy co-chair with the bishop chair? (Such a set-up is being practiced by some dioceses in the Philippines.)

2. The purpose and identity of the FABC Secretariat and Offices are to be reviewed in the light of synodality.

a. An explanatory note on the mission and function of each Office is needed.

b. Each office has a distinct task and is co-responsible with other offices.

c. It may be timely to organize the offices by 'clusters' or groupings, according to their areas of mission, to foster trans-ministry thinking.

d. Names of Offices could be brief and clear, leaving out descriptions. It is better to avoid words like "concerns," "affairs," etc.

e. The related files, accounts, and information must be handed over and signed off by each new executive secretary.

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The Present Offices of the FABC	Proposed Offices & Task Force for the FABC *
1. Human Development 2. Social Communication 3. Laity and Family 4. Theological *Concerns* 5. Education and Faith Formation 6. Ecumenical and Interreligious *Affairs* 7. Evangelization (Peace and Harmony) 8. Clergy 9. Consecrated Life	1. Integral Development a. Climate Crises Task Force (ID-CJ, Caritas Asia, RAOEN) b. Migration Task Force 2. Social Communication a. Digital Task Force b. Vernacular languages 3. Laity & Family (youth, children…) a. Revive Youth Commission 4. Theology (ecclesiology, liturgy, inculturation) a. Inculturation Task Force b. Study Forums on Ecclesiology & Synodality c. Promote FABC teachings 5. Education & Culture (culture is a hallmark of FABC theology and Asian reality) a. Indigenous Peoples Task Force 6. Ecumenism & Dialogue a. Institute joint *"Memory Days."* 7. Evangelization & Faith Formation (take *Faith Formation* from current no. 5 and assign here) 8. Clergy and Religious Others 1. Commission on Synodality a. Under Secretariat – Synodal Research & Formation Task Force 2. Commission on Safeguarding a. Under the FABC President's Office – to support & liaise with initiatives of Asian Churches

*All these proposals require prayer and discernment.

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3. Consultation on the mission and mandate of the Offices will be helpful.

    a. The consultation done in the past could be evaluated, and based on it, further discussions can be conducted.

    b. The bishops and executive secretaries of each member Conference dealing with specific sectors could be asked to comment on an online consultation. (Before the FABC 50, a similar exercise was carried out by certain offices.)

    c. There is a need for closure and continuity for Offices and personnel who have served devotedly.

4. Structures and governance norms for the Offices should be clearly laid down.

    a. These include mandatory meetings, reporting, joint and collaborative programs, and handing over charges to successors.

    b. Joint annual review and planning with other Offices is needed for shared understanding and priority during the mandate. This will enhance the energy for moving towards a common challenge.

    c. The Communication on the website needs to be enhanced. While the Offices are mentioned, there is no write-up of their plans or activities.

5. Identifying and preparing the various Executive Secretaries.

    a. Transition plans must be in place, and potential candidates identified early.

    b. Executive secretaries are to be well elected or trained where necessary.

    c. A proper induction, briefing on roles and responsibilities, and handing over must be carried out. The higher instance is to ensure that this happens.

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d. They must take the baton and continue the race, with the foundations that have been laid, without undoing everything.

e. One executive secretary per office is prudent, even when there is more than one portfolio within it.

f. All executive secretaries must be trained to make an annual Office calendar and budget.

g. They must attend the Office and common FABC events a certain number of times during their mandate for teamwork and coordination.

h. An annual review of their performance is to be carried out by one of their consultors. Mentoring is to be provided where needed.

6. Permanent Office or Desk space is to be allotted at the Central Secretariat.

a. Each office can maintain its files, documents, bank papers, etc., for smooth transfer of power and continuity.

7. Fundraising with donors can be built around common needs or challenges.

a. There can be greater transparency among the Offices and Secretariat of which organizations are supporting them, and what their plans are for the year.

b. Foresight planning is helpful for the financial viability of FABC's operations.

c. Roundtable conversations with partners and stakeholders could generate new partnerships and bring in funding.

d. With clear programs and desired impact, it will be possible to secure funds from donors and Conferences for staffing.

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8. In the light of Synodality and changes in the universal Church, the FABC Central Secretariat needs to review its role, mode of functioning, and future work.

    a. As an example, from a supporting role to the President and team, it could become more of an "open hub" for networking, communication, and fraternity in various instances.

    b. It needs to ensure greater, timely, and wider communication on the activities and reflections that are coming up from the various Offices and the ground.

    c. No one person can take on all these responsibilities effectively. Team ministry is vital.

        i. The shared vision and cooperation of the Offices and executive secretaries are necessary.

        ii. The Central Secretariat can be strengthened with volunteers and competent project-bound personnel.

        iii. The Secretariat and Offices can solicit and engage competent people to help the FABC to be creative and effective in its renewal.

    d. While respecting and honoring the contributions of the various Assistant Secretary Generals and their team members, isn't Asia ready for a layperson (man or woman) to play that role? In the same vein as *Praedicate Evangelium* (Part I, art. 10), Felix Wilfred highlights the right of the laity to governance: "Nothing then, theology, history, nor actual practice, stands against the exercise of the jurisdictional power by the laity."[51]

[51] Felix Wilfred, "Theology and Canon Law: Journeying Together," *Concilium: International Journal of Theology*, (July 2022): 49: "Canon law has little to invoke in support of its present position of negation of this power to the laity. One may try to find a theological argument in the fact that according to the teaching of Vatican II, the bishop through their consecration receive not only the office of sanctifying and teaching, but as well *the office of governance*. This is a teaching whose importance lies in the fact that the office of governance is not additionally

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A Proposed Ecclesial Verification

Human and management sciences can offer useful tools for our ecclesial pilgrimage journey – helping us discern if we are on the right path and checking in at the right milestones. For the Church, structures are never neutral: they must remain servants of the *sacramentum* in view of the *res*—the lived reality of grace, communion, and mission in the world.

The FABC 50 Bangkok Document invites the Church in Asia to journey together, reading the signs of the times through prayerful listening, spiritual conversation, and shared discernment. It calls the Church to attend seriously to *emerging realities*, to walk "as Asian peoples," and to allow structures to be continually reshaped by mission rather than preserved for their own sake. In such a spirit, the following criteria are proposed as a simple ecclesial verification applicable to any office, rule, or structure.

Mission *(oriented to the sacramentum):* We first ask ourselves, *How does this structure enable, deepen, and communicate the Church's mission and sacramental life—Eucharist, Baptism, the Word of God, and Life in the Spirit?*

- The Christian journey begins from the **encounter** with Christ. Structures that are detached from the sources risk losing their ecclesial meaning. Where no clear orientation can be articulated, rethinking, or even letting go becomes necessary.

granted by the pope, which could make them appear as officers of the pope. By rooting the power of the bishop in the sacrament, the Council has brought to balance the relationship between episcopacy and primacy. The same, however, should not be extrapolated in the relationship of the laity and clergy, to argue that because they do not have ordination, the laity therefore do not have the power of governance. This is to wrongly apply a teaching, culling it out of context, and to completely misunderstand the spirit and teachings of Vatican II." See PE, art 10. "Each Christian, by virtue of baptism, is a missionary disciple. This must necessarily be taken into account in the reform of the Curia, which should consequently make provision for the involvement of lay women and men, also in roles of government and responsibility."

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Pastoral fruits *(attention to the res): Does this structure bear recognizable pastoral fruit?* It can be a growing participation in sacramental life, deeper faith formation, greater solidarity with the poor, care for creation, the genuine empowerment of lay women and men, and more. Does it help our people grow in relation to neighboring faiths and be an inculturated church?

- Structures cannot be evaluated by internal efficiency alone or mere corporate KPIs, but rather by how they mediate grace in lived realities. The Bangkok Document (BD) urges the Church to remain close to the **concrete lives of people**, especially amid poverty, migration, family fragility, youth vulnerability, and ecological crisis.

Life in the Spirit: Planning processes, meeting agendas, job descriptions, and evaluations can begin with the question: *How does this structure and ministry serve to listen to the movement of the Spirit in the people and life realities we serve?*

- The BD emphasizes **spiritual conversation** as a method of discerning the Spirit's movement. Structures that do not make space for prayerful listening and movement of the Spirit risk becoming technocratic, even when well-intentioned. But without a praxis, spirituality risks becoming self-referential and ensnared with rubrics.

Subsidiarity and Co-Responsibility: *Does the structure foster shared discernment, decentralization, or local co-responsibility, or does it centralize authority and limit the participation of the baptized?*

- A central insight of the BD is that the Church in Asia must learn to **walk together** through listening, especially to voices often unheard. This requires structures that encourage collaboration between clergy and laity, church and civil society, and enable genuine co-responsibility rather than dependency or clericalism.

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Time over Space (pastoral processes): *Are the structures and office bearers adaptable to processes and pastoral change?* Permanence must be justified by its sustained fruits.

- Echoing Pope Francis, the BD invites the Church to privilege **processes over position** or possessions. Therefore, encouraging experimentation, time-bound task forces, locally animated initiatives, and regular reviews will serve the mission more faithfully than rigid, self-perpetuating offices.

Formation as Constitutive: *Has a real formation needs assessment been done with the various stakeholders? Do office bearers have a personalized plan of formation and a mentor or spiritual guide? Who accompanies their journey of discipleship?*

- The Bangkok Document stresses that ecclesial renewal is inseparable from **personal and communal conversion**. All office bearers are encouraged to participate in ongoing formation together with the People of God—in 'doing theology' with the people, pastoral accompaniment of lived realities, and synodal discernment. Structural reform without formation and discipleship risks superficial change.

Transparency and Accountability: *Why does this structure exist, how does it serve the Church's mission, who benefits, and what criteria will be used for its review or reform?*

- Opacity allows structures to harden into ends in themselves; it is important to reflect on the above question and publish the responses. Such transparency reflects the synodal ethos promoted in the BD. Synodality is not a technique but a **way of being Church**, marked by listening, shared responsibility, and discernment of the Spirit.

Synodal Discernment: When appointing leaders, a fundamental question can be asked: *Concretely, how will you help this office serve the faith life and synodal co-responsibility of the local Churches?*

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- Leadership, as implied throughout the BD, is not the exercise of control but a **ministry of communion**, animated by service, listening, and discernment of the Spirit. It is insufficient to listen to the voice of just one leader or clergy; rather, a wider consultation is needed.

A Final Discernment: Ultimately, the decisive question remains – the one repeatedly posed by the FABC 50 Bangkok Document:

> ***Does this journey help us choose the poor, walk with the wounded of our societies, and become ever more authentically a Church of the poor and for the poor in Asia?***

Only structures that keep this question alive can help us remain true to the memory of Jesus in Asia – and be true servants of the *sacramentum* and credible signs of the *res* they are meant to mediate.

Structures to Serve Synodality

The above points of reflection can be grouped under: *Identity (sacramentality, spirituality), Praxis (pastoral fruits, option for the poor), Communion (subsidiarity & co-responsibility, adaptability, leadership),* and *Discipleship (formation, sustainability & accountability).* (See Appendix 2 for more details). These reference poles or axes can help us hold-in-focus the various dimensions of Christian life and ministry,[52] and verify if our efforts and offices are offering a more integrated and holistic approach to *being* and *becoming* a synodal church in Asia. "The established administrative processes, standardized pathways, control mechanisms,

[52] The workshop findings and statements of the FABC Offices and Plenary Assemblies are documented in the series: *For All the Peoples of Asia* (FAPA), Vol. I – VI, covering the period from 1974 to 2016, and published by Claretian Communications, Quezon City, Philippines. These provide very rich tools and resources for dimensions of Christian life, such as prayer, spirituality, dialogue, inculturation, women, Christian priesthood, etc. For purposes of our study here, see the "triple rootedness of Asian discipleship" in FAPA III (BILA on Women II, 1998, art 3.2, 75), or FAPA I (FABC IV, 1986, arts. 4.8.2 – 4.8.8, 195-197).

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and cherished routines must now be scrutinized from the perspective of synodality, of being a synodal Church."[53]

They can be developed into a tool and used for annual evaluation: how ecclesial offices, rules, and structures serve the *sacramentum* of the Church and bear fruit (*res*) in the lived realities of the People of God. It can be laid out as per the diagram: a matrix with vertical and horizontal axes, with evaluation indices; the vertical gives a scoring on the deepening of *Identity* and *Praxis*, while the horizontal captures the growth in *Communion* and *Discipleship*.

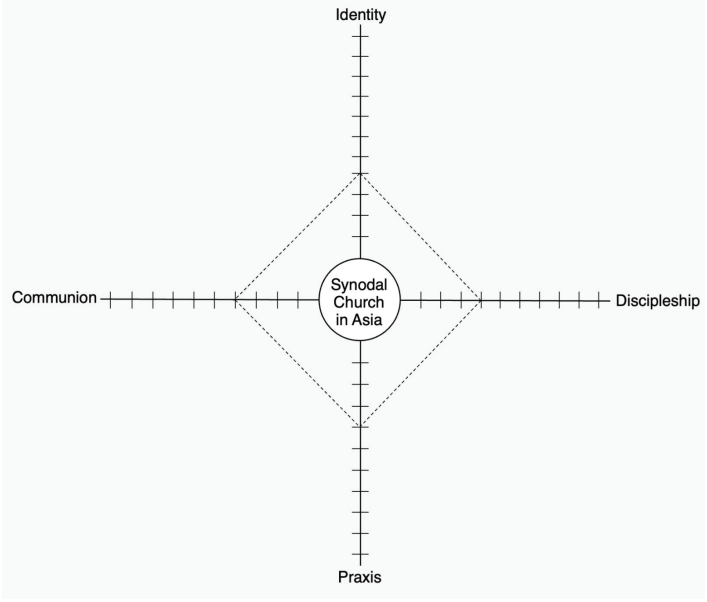


Diagram 5: Evaluation Matrix for Synodal Church

"A Change is Gonna Come"

One of the most popular songs by a black American songwriter-singer was titled "*A Change is Gonna Come*" by Sam Cooke.[54] He wrote

[53] Josef Sayers, FABC Pp 194, *Praedicate Evangelium — Development Process, Hermeneutics, and Significance for the Church*, p.10.

[54] Listen to the song, "A Change is Gonna Come," *YouTube*, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wEBlaMOmKV4.

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the song from his own experiences of being discriminated against and oppressed by the social structures of his time, and the apartheid regime in America (segregation of blacks & whites). Like Martin Luther King Jr, Sam Cooke was shot dead, and the courts never convicted the killer. His song became the anthem of the Civil Rights Movement. He sings with hope that one day, surely, change is coming. We are invited to sing and to work for renewal with that same hope.

The words of Pope Francis, "I dream of a missionary option that is, a missionary impulse capable of transforming everything…" (EG 264), and "I prefer a church which is bruised, hurting and dirty because it has been out on the streets, rather than a church which is unhealthy from being confined and from clinging to its own security" (EG 27), sings a similar song. Only by dreaming can we become prophets of a future not our own. Only by risking will we learn and trace the new pathways of mission and synodality for the Church and humanity in Asia in the 21st century. More than ever, Mother Church needs our prophetic *munera.*

From knowing, we are invited to step into the unknowing so that we may come to know in new ways; from control and domination, we are asked to let go so we can receive everything anew as a gift. There is a paschal mystery, a *kenosis* or emptying, that we are invited to live as *missionary disciples* of Jesus:

> Let us not soundproof our hearts; let us not remain barricaded in our certainties […] Jesus calls us, as he did the rich man in the Gospel, to empty ourselves, to free ourselves from all that is worldly, including our inward-looking and outworn pastoral models; and to ask ourselves what it is that God wants to say to us in this time and the direction in which he wants to lead us.[55]
>
> For 'Every new step in the life of the church is a return to the source.'[56]

[55] Pope Francis, *Homily at the Opening Mass for the Synod on Synodality, in St. Peter's Basilica,* Rome, Homilies 10 October 2021. https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/homilies/2021/documents/20211010-omelia-sinodo-vescovi.html?utm_source=chatgpt.com.

[56] This opening line from the Final document of the Synod echoes the Second Vatican Council's claim that "Every renewal of the church essentially consists

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APPENDIX 1: Proposed Roles & Interactions of the Various Offices

Here is a brief description of proposed structures and roles, explaining how various entities in the FABC structure interact in practice (This may not be exhaustive):

1. **Asian Synodal Council** (Bishops, Clergy, Religious, Laity)
    - *Role:* The main synodal governance body, ensuring prophetic listening, shared discernment, and co-responsibility.
    - *Interaction:*
        - Studies-reflects on various inputs from regional hubs, councils, and forums.
        - Proposes policies and initiatives to the FABC Plenary Assembly.(The plenary report of the Asian Synodal Council is more than 'merely consultative'.
        - Oversees alignment of mission priorities with local realities.
2. **FABC Assembly** (Bishops' Conferences)
    - *Role:* The highest deliberative body, setting overall direction for the Church in Asia, and walking with their peoples.
    - *Interaction:*
        - Mandates and commissions members of the Asian Synodal Council and receives regular reports from it.
        - Extends pastoral support to various offices, networks, and initiatives; and
        - Implements the FABC vision in their local contexts.

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in an increase of fidelity to her own calling" (*Unitatis Redintegratio* 6). (Cf. Daniel Ang, *Catholic Weekly*.)

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- The FABC Central Committee continues to play its coordinating role. (It could be open to non-bishops by invitation.)
- FABC Central Secretariat is at the service of both the Asian Synodal Council and the FABC Central Committee.

3. **Sub-Regional Hubs** (South Asia, East Asia, Southeast Asia, etc.)

- *Role:* Decentralized hubs ensuring cultural and contextual diversity is respected, while being rooted in a shared praxis as Asian churches.
- *Interaction:*
  - Facilitate grassroots consultations.
  - Relay local pastoral needs to the Synodal Council.
  - Support formation and inter-diocesan/inter-country collaboration.
  - Helps in the alignment of mission priorities with local realities.

4.**FABC Offices** (with Commissions, Task Force)

- *Role:* Driving the vision and mandate of the FABC, supporting local Conferences and the entire People of God in their care.
- *Interaction:*
  - Facilitate cross-sector and expert consultations.
  - Develop plans, programs, and budgets in alignment with the overarching vision and mission of the FABC
    - Accountable for the implementation of its mandate and activities

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5. **Issue-Based Task Forces** (Migration, Climate, Digital, Dialogue, etc.)
    - *Role:* Flexible, time-bound teams responding to urgent missionary challenges.
    - *Interaction:*
        - Report findings and proposals to the respective Office and subsequent reports for the Asian Synodal Council.
        - Collaborate with grassroots Networks for real-world insights.
        - Help articulate the voices of vulnerable people and the local church with civil bodies and authorities.
6. **Lay & Women's Council**
    - *Role:* Permanent advisory body with changing membership to ensure lay co-responsibility and women's leadership.
    - *Interaction:*
        - Provides perspective directly to the Regional Hubs and Synodal Council.
        - Partners with the Synod Research & Formation Centre for leadership development.
7. **Youth Synodal Forum**
    - *Role:* Standing structure to keep youth voices continuously engaged.
    - *Interaction:*
        - Supports and promotes new initiatives and collaboration of the young across Asia

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- Consists of persons from lay movements, congregations, and diocese offices.
- Collaborates with Regional Hubs to gather youth concerns.
- Works closely with the Synod Research & Formation Centre for youth formation programs.

8. **Grassroots Networks** (Base communities, parishes, movements)

- *Role:* Foundation of synodality—ensuring lived experience informs leadership.
- *Interaction:*
  - As a network to be a 'pulse-point' for the *sensus fidei.*
  - Provide bottom-up feedback to Task Forces and Regional Hubs.
  - Help channel innovations and good local practices to be studied continentally.

9. **Synodal Research & Formation Centre/s**

- *Role:* A continental think tank and program developer, in network with sub-regional training hubs
- *Interaction:*
  - Receives and synthesizes insights from the forums, hubs, and networks.
  - Develops resources for synodal leadership, interreligious dialogue, and pathways for mission.
  - Feedback on research, training, and best practices to the Synodal Council and Assembly.

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APPENDIX 2 – Review of Structures and Ecclesial Alignment

The grouping below helps us keep-in-view the various dimensions of Christian life and ministry and check if our efforts and offices are offering a more integrated and holistic approach to being and becoming a synodal church in Asia. It can be used as a tool for annual review-reflection.

I. Spiritual–Sacramental Grounding *(Who we are in Christ – Identity)*

CRITERION	KEY DISCERNMENT QUESTIONS	ECCLESIAL ALIGNMENT	REFLECTION
SACRAMENTAL MISSION	*How does this structure arise from and serve the sacramentality of the Church in the world?*	*Lumen Gentium* (LG) 1, 11 (Church as sacrament); FABC 50 (BD 1): journey begins from encounter with Christ.	
SPIRITUAL CENTRALITY	*Are prayer, worship, and spiritual conversation integral to planning, meetings, and review processes?*	*Sacrosanctum Concilium* 10; Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium* (EG 262); (BD 4): discernment rooted in prayer.	

II. Discernment of Lived Realities

(Reading the signs of the times – Praxis)

CRITERION	KEY DISCERNMENT QUESTIONS	ECCLESIAL ALIGNMENT	REFLECTION
PASTORAL FRUITS	*Does this structure lead to deeper participation, stronger formation, greater charity, care for creation, and empowerment of the baptised?* *Does it help our people grow in relation to people of neighbouring faiths and be an inculturated church?*	LG 33, mission of all baptised; EG 24, Church which goes forth; BD 62: engagement with emerging realities and neighbour faiths.	

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PREFERENTIAL OPTION FOR THE POOR	*Does this structure concretely help the Church walk with the poor, the wounded, and the marginalised?*	LG 8b; EG 198–201; BD 1, 4, 141: Church walking with Asian peoples... for the Kingdom of God.	

III. Synodal Configuration of Structures

(How we walk together – Communion)

CRITERION	KEY DISCERNMENT QUESTIONS	ECCLESIAL ALIGNMENT	REFLECTION
SUBSIDIARITY & CO-RESPONSIBILITY	*Does the structure decentralise authority and foster shared discernment among the People of God?*	LG 30–38; Pope Francis, Address 17 Oct 2015 (Synodality); BD 16: listening and shared responsibility	
TIME OVER SPACE (ADAPTABILITY)	*Is the structure open to change, experimentation, and learning, or does it exist mainly to preserve itself?*	EG 222–223; BD part 5, esp. 156-157: new pathways and pastoral flexibility.	
SYNODAL LEADERSHIP	*Are leaders appointed with a clear mandate to serve communion, participation, and mission – rather than control?*	LG 27; EG 24; *Praedicate Evangelium* 1, 4, 11, 12: reform & service; BD 117: leadership as service.	

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IV. Sustainability, Formation, and Accountability
(Conversion over time – Discipleship)

CRITERION	KEY DISCERNMENT QUESTIONS	ECCLESIAL ALIGNMENT	REFLECTION
FORMATION AS CONSTITUTIVE	*Do office bearers undergo ongoing formation with the People of God in theology, pastoral realities, and synodal practice? Are we missionary disciples?*	LG 12 *sensus fidei*; *Christus Vivit* 239; BD 6, 8, 15, 150: conversion of structures and the ways of ministry.	
TRANSPARENCY & ACCOUNTABILITY	*Is it publicly clear why the structure exists, who it serves, how it is evaluated, and when reform or closure may be needed?*	EG 27: missionary option, EG 95: spiritual worldliness; BD 149, 157-162: credibility, trust, and shared responsibility.	

The final integrative Discernment Question remains:

Does this structure help the Church become more clearly a sacrament of communion, a synodal People of God, and a Church of the poor in Asia?

About the Author. Charles Bertille from Malaysia is an alumnus of LST, Ateneo de Manila University, and holds a Master in Development Management degree from the Asian Institute of Management in Manila. He is pursuing his doctoral research on synodality at St. Vincent School of Theology in Manila. He has served full-time ministry – regionally and internationally – in pastoral care, social development, teaching and formation, and management, including two bishops' conferences. He is praying for a place to call home (cf. Lk 9:58, Jn 6:68) to continue serving.