

BURIED SEEDS

LEARNING from the
VIBRANT RESILIENCE
of MARGINALIZED
CHRISTIAN
COMMUNITIES



**ALEXIA SALVATIERRA
& BRANDON WRENCHER**

Foreword by ROBERT CHAO ROMERO
Afterword by WILLIE JAMES JENNINGS

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Introduction

Longing for More

The Church has to be so much more. The Church has to be the light. The Church has to be the salt. We have to be the difference. We have to bring hope. We have to bring love. We have to show them that God is out there . . . actually practice what we preach. . . . “Hey, I didn’t see you last Sunday. How are you doing?” or “Hey, I heard you got a promotion, let’s go celebrate you” or “Hey, I heard you need a gallon of milk. Can I buy your groceries for the week?” (Research subject, “Latinx Millennials in the U.S. and Theological Education,” by Alexia Salvatierra 2019)

Belonging is a fragrance of change. Millennials and other emerging generations particularly value community, from socializing to community service to public policies that support the well-being of communities. They also value authenticity; young adults do not hunger for the pretense of community. They are not the only generation with the longing to connect; many of us in our fragmented and divided society wish for a deeper experience of community. At the same time, we ideally want our community to also satisfy our souls. The hunger for community is often connected to a deep desire for communion with God as well as with other human beings. Millennials, according to a 2015 Pew study, are also spiritually oriented, with 80 percent believing in God and increasing numbers identifying with statements like “I feel a deep sense of spiritual peace and well-being” or “I experience a deep sense of wonder about the universe” (Pew Research Center 2019).

Yet congregational participation, membership, and leadership are declining, particularly among younger generations. According to the Pew Research Center, the number of Christians in the US is projected to drop over twelve percentage points from 2010 to 2050, while the population of the unaffiliated is expected to

double (Pew Research Center 2019). In 2010 the average age for a Christian was thirty-nine years old in comparison to thirty years old for an unaffiliated person. Increasingly, the church is not seen as a place to find holistic spiritual community.

During the same period, we have also seen an ethnic and racial transition in the United States. In the 2013 census, 72 percent of boomers were non-Hispanic whites in comparison to 57 percent of millennials and 53 percent of Generation Z; by 2045, the majority of the US will belong to an ethnic minority (Frey 2018). Both younger generations and ethnic minorities tend toward a greater commitment to social justice than the general population on multiple indexes. Without encouraging the integration of personal and social transformation, the church will not meet the need young people of color have for holistic spiritual community.

On the one hand, most young people of color are not looking to older white people to provide the inspiration or guidance they need in order to create the kind of community they seek. On the other hand, they long for mentors and models. In our recent study of Latinx millennials at the Centro Latino of Fuller Theological Seminary, we found that roughly half of the subjects explicitly articulated that one of their most important needs was for a mentor from their community (Salvatierra 2019).

The base ecclesial communities¹ in Latin America and the Philippines in the late twentieth century and the hush harbors of the US Deep South during the antebellum era offer two models of vital Christian community created by ancestors and elders from Black and Brown communities. Both were grassroots models of church, an organized and vibrant network of dedicated disciples engaged in worship and justice. Both models arose at times of great cultural transition, were designed for religious and social transformation, and were led by Black and Brown poor laity.

The Gospel in Solentiname (Cardenal 1976), a collection of transcripts of Bible studies that took place in a base ecclesial community in Nicaragua, shares a group reflection on the miracle of the loaves and fishes in the Gospel of Luke that encapsulates the spirit and flavor of the movement.

PANCHO: I'm just catching on to what this means here! They didn't have enough—right?—to feed the five thousand people. But then [Jesus] says to them:

1. A number of terms are commonly used to describe this movement, including *base communities*, *base Christian communities*, and *base ecclesial communities*. We have chosen the latter (abbreviated as BEC) as our general language because it is the most common term used in Latin America. However, when the sources use BCC or CEB (the abbreviation in Spanish), we use their terms. The word *base* refers to the majority of the people who reside in a community. In Latin America and the Philippines, the majority of the people were (and continue to be) economically poor and politically marginalized. In the base ecclesial community movement, the word *base* began to be used as a synonym for the poor.

It doesn't matter, share it. And they shared it, and with his power he made it stretch out. The lesson is that no matter how little we have we always have to give.

FELIPE: The teaching is also that if we come together to hear the message we're not going to be hungry, because with a united people, there are no problems. Maybe I won't have food, but my neighbor will. If we're together, something can happen to us like what happened to those people with Jesus Christ. If we're together it doesn't hurt to share. And then we're practicing the message of God.

OLIVIA: Here [Jesus] shows that we must all do the sharing and make the increase of the five loaves that were so few and that is to share love. Food and medicine are abundant in the underdeveloped countries but in the hands of the poor, nothing is abundant, and that's because love is lacking. The first thing is the education of the people. . . . And I see now if we have that knowledge with love, then there is food, there are medicines for everyone. When there is brotherhood among everybody, it seems to me that the miracle will occur, and then nobody will be in need of anything, because the people will be giving things through love. And that's what Christ wants, that is the kingdom of God. (Cardenal 1976, 222)

In the documented narratives of enslaved Africans and in other oral tradition, we see the powerful worship and witness of hush harbors:

The folks would sing and pray and testify and clap their hands, just as if God was right there in the midst of them. He wasn't way off in the sky. He was a-seeing everybody and a-listening to every word and a-promising to let His love come down. (Faulkner 1993, 54).

Aunts and mothers were all part of a network of slave women that helped to provide stability and support for the entire slave community. One of the significant contributions of these Christian slave women was playing an active role in the formation of secret prayer meetings. Slaves would "steal away" or "turn the pot down" in secret meetings and to keep their activities quiet. These prayer meetings constituted an important aspect of African American Christianity. . . . Prayer meetings would occur in private . . . away from the supervision of white people. Often meetings happened in brush arbors or "hush harbors" which were private, secluded areas that slaves designated for worship. (Abbott 2003, 48)

The excitement and hope that exude from the words of the *campesinos* (tenant farmers) in Solentiname and the oral tradition of enslaved Africans testify to the possibility of the kind of vibrant, holistic, and authentic Christian community that many of us long for.

In this book, we look closely and deeply at the principles and practices that undergirded and built these communities. We have identified five key themes: kinship (*familia en comunión*), leader-full (*participación*), consciousness (*concientización* and *el mensaje de liberación*), spirit-uality (*sanidad* and *la teología de las abuelas*), and faith-full organizing (*alma y fermenta de la sociedad*). We reflect together as coauthors on how to use these principles and practices to cultivate vibrant, resilient, integral Christian communities led by marginalized people, the contextualization of base ecclesial communities and hush harbors for the twenty-first century.

As we explore these principles and practices in the experiences of BECs and hush harbors, we use a methodology that was a core element of the process of *concientización* (which involved analyzing the structures and systems that impacted the lives of BEC members and their neighbors)² in light of *el mensaje de liberación* (the message of liberation): *ver*, *juzgar*, and *actuar*. *Ver* means “to see.” A BEC would start out by seeing its reality. *Juzgar* means “to judge” or “to interpret.” A BEC then had to interpret its reality, allowing the lies of society to be exposed by divine truth. Last, *actuar* means “to act on what you have understood,” especially in the context of an ongoing circle or spiral of action and reflection. A modern-day version of this BEC process involves asking the questions “What?,” “So what?,” and “Now what?”

The following chapters begin by describing how BECs and hush harbors carried out a certain practice, under headings “*Ver* (See) / What?” Then we move to an interpretation of that practice for the modern era, comparing it with similar practices and exploring relevant theory, under headings “*Juzgar* (Judge) / So What?” Last, we focus on practical recommendations, under headings “*Actuar* (Act) / Now What?”

We recognize that these movements were essentially for and led by marginalized, oppressed, and poor people. In the antebellum period and in the 1970s and 1980s, at the height of these movements, it was crystal clear whether that description fit a potential member or leader of those communities. In the US in the twenty-first century, our economic, racial, social, and political boundaries are complex and contested. Still, we believe that the legacy of BECs and hush harbors is relevant for us all, but relevant in different ways depending on social location and background.

We offer three sets of recommendations for adapting the insights and practices of the BECs and hush harbors to the modern context. For people who experience and define themselves as marginalized, oppressed, and economically

2. This process was both encouraged and used in the Second Vatican Council in Medellín in 1968. According to Laurel Potter, twenty-first-century BECs in El Salvador have continued to use this process while adding “evaluate” and “celebrate” to the traditional triad “see,” “judge,” and “act” (Potter 2021).

poor and who live and worship in a community that shares that identity, there is one set of recommendations. These people fall into the Amos category, and their experience of oppression and marginalization is profound and formative. In the Bible, Amos, a prophet and shepherd, is a homegrown leader who shares the perspective and background of those he leads. Shepherds were among the poorest and most marginal members of the community in ancient Israel.

Some who interacted with BECs and hush harbors came from a place of greater privilege but wanted to be part of and help build communities in which a critical mass of oppressed people were in leadership. In BECs, pastoral agents—those who helped to start BECs—were often from a different class or had risen to a certain level of economic and social status (priests, nuns, college students). For these people, their privileges formed their perspectives and decisions. They fall into the Lydia category, named after the businesswoman who was a key leader in the early church, as she used her money and power to support the ministry.

The differences between an Amos and a Lydia are not hard-and-fast but rather reflect a complex continuum; you decide what ideas are most relevant for you. We are also aware that Lydias may offer support at different distances. Some Lydias may intend to integrate into a community that is marginalized and oppressed, others may want to partner, and still others may merely want to learn from the vital Christianity created by those communities. We hope to offer useful insights to all of you.

We also offer a third category of recommendations to people referred to as Ruths. When we are first introduced to Ruth in the biblical narrative, she is a widow, a gentile, and an immigrant—three groups with little to no societal power in ancient Israel. By the end of the story, she is married to an Israelite landowner and in the process of becoming the ancestor of King David. She experiences both sides on the continuum from oppression to privilege. The Ruth group contains people who are in-between—who have had real and formative experiences of both oppression and privilege. In the hush harbors, these oppressed yet more privileged persons tended to be clergy and any enslaved Africans who gained access to reading and writing. Perhaps you were born or raised in a marginalized community, but you have been able to move into wider circles and exercise more social power than your family has. Maybe you are mixed—one parent more privileged and one more oppressed. You may have been born into privilege but lost your status and found yourself pushed to the margins. Being a Ruth involves both a different set of burdens and a different set of gifts. In our “*Actuar* (Act) / Now What?” sections, we speak to Amos, Lydia, and Ruth.³

3. The Christian Community Development Association uses similar categories, phrased a little differently: relocators (those who come from outside to be part of a community), remainers

In the final chapter, we lift up modern-day examples of Christian faith communities that use similar principles and practices. In the postludes, two of the leaders of these communities reflect on the meaning of this book for their ministries. Reverend Marcos Canales is the lead pastor of La Fuente Ministries, a bilingual, intercultural, and intergenerational ministry in Los Angeles County, California. La Fuente Ministries' purpose is to "connect with Christ through Worship and Word, grow with Christ through a nurturing sense of *familia*, and serve with Christ through our vocations and community organizations" (La Fuente Ministries 2021). La Fuente Ministries is committed to the integration of evangelism and justice and to bilingualism (Spanish/English) as a catalyst for spiritual, congregational, and missional formation.

Reverend Anthony Smith is the lead co-pastor of Mission House Church, an African American-centered multicultural church in Salisbury, North Carolina. Mission House's mission is to "mobilize an army of love for the good of our neighborhoods and city." Missioners—what members are called—are committed to a DNA of incarnation (being sent into the community), mission (joining the Spirit's work of renewal in the community), and reconciliation (being agents of peace in a divided world) ("Our Mission" 2021).

Most members of both churches are millennials of color, but all generations and multiple cultures are well represented. We are deeply grateful for the witness of Anthony, Marcos, and their communities, and for the contribution they've made to the book. This book would also not have been possible without the support of Rose Archer—pastor, chaplain, and doctoral student in sociology—for her role as a research assistant for this project. I (Brandon) want to express appreciation to Rev. Nelson Johnson and Mrs. Joyce Johnson, and Bishop Tonyia Rawls for their affirmation and support of this project. And I am deeply grateful for Rev. Wesley Morris, Dr. Oluwatomisin "Tomi" Oredein, and Greg Jarrell for being readers and giving feedback on the project!

Before we jump in, we would like to share a little about who we are as authors and how we came to write this book.

Our Stories

Rev. Dr. Alexia Salvatierra

I was born to a family of semisocialist immigrants from Mexico and Russia and grew up in a working-class neighborhood in Los Angeles, made up of

(those who are of and from the community), and returners (those from the community who have increased their personal prosperity and opportunities and have moved out of the community but who come back to rejoin and serve). People in the final category may experience themselves as insiders or as outsiders.

Hispanic pre-Vatican II Catholics and white Baptist fundamentalists; I was consciously on strike against God from the age of nine. I came to accept Jesus as my personal Lord and Savior in the Jesus Movement of the early 1970s when I was introduced to the God on the cross who suffered with us and for us, ultimately uniting love and power. The Jesus Movement built on the base of the hippie movement; young people in those movements felt a strong sense of community with each other. We experimented with profoundly vulnerable worship, sharing life together, and acts of radical generosity, but we had little to no knowledge of the broader picture of Christian community. Shortly afterward, I encountered the Catholic Worker, an intentional community movement started by Dorothy Day and Peter Marin in the 1930s. I volunteered with the Catholic Worker on skid row in Los Angeles and was a full member of the Oakland Catholic Worker from 1991 to 1996, when its focus and constituency were asylum seekers from Central America. I had previously been involved with the Central American Sanctuary movement and with the peace process in Central America. The BEC movement in El Salvador informed our work in Oakland, and many of our members had been part of a base community. Years later, I also built a program for low-wage immigrant workers in Los Angeles's Inland Empire with a colleague who had been taught to lead base communities by the Jesuits, whose murders were a major turning point in the civil war in El Salvador in the 1980s and early 1990s.

However, my deepest experience of base communities took place in the Philippines from 1984 to 1987. As a missionary, I became part of the pro-democracy movement and participated on a regular basis in a BEC. Coming back to the United States from that experience, I sought to incorporate the insights and practices of that movement into a variety of contexts, starting with a peer chaplaincy program that built a BEC-style community among homeless people and continuing in my work as a pastor and a nonprofit ministry director with Hispanic farmworkers, with an African American church in an increasingly Central American neighborhood, and with a statewide organization engaging faith leaders and congregations in broader initiatives for economic justice and immigrant rights (which led to a book on faith-rooted organizing). Along the way, I became a leader in the Christian Community Development Association, which trains primarily evangelical Christians in a multiracial model for intentional communities that work to transform their neighborhoods. Over the past decade, I have been teaching, practicing, and training others in Christian community development, faith-full organizing, and the development of base ecclesial communities around the world. In the process, I have become the *madrina* (godmother) to a network of *puentes* (bridges)—Latinx millennial Christian leaders. (I am also the actual mother of a puente.) In my work as a professor at the Centro Latino and School of

Intercultural Studies at Fuller Theological Seminary, I have been the primary investigator for a study of Latinx millennials and theological education, which has served as a more objective test of my intuitive sense of how important the BEC heritage could be for their vocation and vision.

Rev. Brandon Wrencher

I came to faith in the 1990s as an adolescent in Black Holiness-Pentecostal and small, working-class Baptist churches in the rural South. I come from a long lineage of ministers and community workers in both of these traditions. Passionate, expressive worship; dynamic preaching; pride in African American culture; and service in community were central to my spiritual formation. I carry my daddy's name and the sense of duty and responsibility to your people that he instilled in me. I was also formed by a freethinking, Jesus-following Black mother whose critical consciousness of oppression enabled her to survive as a single mother of three children in a world that put targets on all our backs. My mom inspired and encouraged my questions about the world. Many of those questions were theological and moral. Why is there so much evil in the world? Why are so many people poor and so few rich? How is God loving if God also sends people to hell? Do my friends who dress and talk differently and who aren't like "us" have to change before being welcome at church? Where is God in the midst of all this? Most of what I learned about faith from the churches of my youth satisfied my curiosity and deeply shaped my character. But I was very unsatisfied with how my youthful faith failed to help me grapple with these questions. I married a Black woman who is also a freethinker and creative rebel in her own right. Together we have sought to be faithful to the internal dissidence, to follow the questions, the longings, even when it takes us off the beaten path of traditional ministry.

Grappling with these tensions and questions animated my call to seminary and ministry in parachurch, nonprofit, higher education, and local church contexts. My ministry has also included local leadership, organizing, and activism with many groups for social and spiritual change, such as the Christian Community Development Association, the Movement for Black Lives, the Carolina Federation, the Historic Thousands on Jones Street (HKonJ), and People's Assembly Coalition. Over the last fourteen years in North Carolina and Chicago as a pastor, teacher, and prophetic catalyst, I have formed communities and fought for justice with the spiritually and socially marginalized. In service to my experiences in grassroots ministry and my upbringing, I rediscovered and claimed the antebellum hush harbors as a revolutionary model of church and missional engagement.

More recently, in 2016 hush harbors became a direct inspiration for me in catalyzing two projects: *Liberating Church* and the Good Neighbor Move-

ment. Funded by the Louisville Institute, *Liberating Church* is a book project I co-edited with my friend Venneikia Williams and a team of clergy activist contributors who researched how the antebellum hush harbors can inform vitality in Black-centered faith communities in the twenty-first century. The project entailed generating eight marks of a hush harbor church:

1. Steal Away—hidden in plain sight
2. North Star—building a new world
3. Joy Unspeakable—Holy Spirit power and mysticism
4. Talking Book—communal biblical interpretation through the lens of Jesus’s teachings and ministry, the exodus, and the Spirit
5. *Sankofa*—rooted, embodied, and ancestral practices
6. *Ubuntu*—intimacy, healing, and trust among an intergenerational village
7. All God’s Children Got Shoes—egalitarian leadership
8. Stay Woke—a practice of remembering and re-membering

We used these marks to produce questions to survey and interview six Black-centered faith start-ups (Wrencher 2022). With neighbors, family, and friends, I founded Good Neighbor Movement, a faith justice start-up that is a network of multiracial, queer-affirming, Black-centered contemplative activist groups in neighborhoods across Greensboro, North Carolina, engaged in liberationist worship and activism. Shaped by hush harbors, each contemplative activist group is laity-led, and sacred texts and artistic expression are engaged dialogically for personal and social transformation in local neighborhoods.

Conclusion

Black and Brown communities have often been in tension in the United States. In 1992, I (Alexia) was the pastor of a primarily African American church in East Oakland. It was a community in transition, with recent Central American arrivals joining Mexican residents to make Hispanics the most populous ethnic group in the area, displacing the previously dominant Black population. When the Los Angeles riots/uprising started in 1992, our church (St. John’s Lutheran in East Oakland, CA) called the neighborhood together to try to unite around a more constructive response to racial injustice. At one point during the meeting, African American and Hispanic residents began to exchange barbed comments; we thought that violence might kick off right there in our church hall. Then Moses Walker, council president of our church, said in his deep bass voice, “The Man has us fighting over crumbs.” Everything

changed. We laughed. We breathed. We realized that we were called together to do a great work that neither group could do alone.

In the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, police violence captivated the attention of the US and communities across the globe like never before. A video went viral of a Black man, George Floyd, being choked to death by a Minneapolis police officer. Black Lives Matter uprisings sparked across the US and around the globe. Young leaders of color protesting in the streets were asking, “Where is the church?” With sanctuaries closed due to the pandemic, most churches were limited to pastoral leadership. The needs of local uprisings required more than what most pastors could offer on their own. The distributed network of small contemplative activist groups that I (Brandon) co-lead with a multiracial laity team in Greensboro, North Carolina, was poised for this moment. I remember looking at them and saying, “We are essential workers for this movement.” We deployed our leaders and their groups to meet multiple needs of local uprisings, from canvassing and logistics to leading rituals and music. Many of us organized healing stations at demonstrations to accompany people experiencing racialized trauma, grief, and conflict. In response to the vital presence of our faith community, local secular activists asked us to help organize thousands of people who were new to activism into long-term commitment beyond the moment. Our faith community organized four learning groups that studied liberation theology and abolitionist politics to welcome nearly one hundred people from diverse backgrounds to deepen the soul of their action for Black lives.

These glimpses of creative unity often fade when tensions rise, resources feel scarce, or justice is no longer a popular headline. Our hope for you as you read this book is that it offers you a solid framework on which you can build BIPOC-led,⁴ vibrant, resilient, integral Christian communities that will fulfill the dream of our ancestors and slake the longing of our young people.

In the last days, God says, I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your young men will see visions, your old men will dream dreams. (Acts 2:17)

4. BIPOC stands for Black, Indigenous, and People of Color.



Base Ecclesial Communities

The Lord Hears the Cry of the Poor

We learned that we have been called to serve and live collectively, searching for the common good. We learned to be “us.” The participants were all very poor but we saw that God was calling the people. (Ana Ortiz [a longtime leader of a base ecclesial community in El Salvador], October 8, 2020)

Small Christian communities have existed since the church began. One could say that Jesus’s initial band of apostles and friends had all the characteristic features of a small Christian community. Small communities allow for intimacy and mutual responsibility, core components of authentic and profound relationships. Vital churches provide their members the option of belonging to a small Christian community and encourage their participation.

This book is not about small Christian communities in general. Between the 1960s and the 1990s, certain Latin American countries and the Philippines experienced the emergence and dramatic growth of a movement called base ecclesial communities (BECs). This movement’s core achievement was the organization of widespread networks of small groups of poor and marginalized people whose spiritual, personal, and communal transformation

resulted in remarkable advances in peace and justice in their communities and societies. The objective impact of BECs ranged from immediate changes in poor communities—government provision of electricity and water, recovery of land rights, collective enterprises that raised families out of economic misery, protection from predators—to the support of broader social movements that threw off the yoke of dictators. At their best, BECs also lifted individuals and families out of despair and self-destruction through mutual care and radical power-sharing that was rooted in Scripture and prayer. This seamless integration of the spiritual, therapeutic, communal, economic, and political arenas by and for the benefit of a poor community has fascinated observers and provoked critics. In the foreword to Pablo Galdámez’s book *Faith of a People*—a detailed account of ten years in the life of a BEC in El Salvador—well-known Salvadoran theologian Jon Sobrino describes the book as revealing a profound truth about the potential of oppressed communities:

The truth about the poor appears in this book with their names, their lives, their problems, and yes, their shortcomings, their “booze” and their male chauvinism, their lottery and their moneylenders—all the demons that have to be expelled. But this is why the “other truth” about the poor is so resplendent in these pages—their creativity and solidarity, their dedication and heroism, their faith and hope, their commitment and charity. The most profound truth that this book has to communicate is that the poor have given of their best, and have embarked on an incredible adventure—the adventure of their own liberation and that of a whole people. (Galdámez 1986, xii)

While BECs established a legacy and a foundation that continue to impact the Catholic Church around the world, there is no question that the movement’s size and power have diminished, in spite of recent efforts to revive it.¹ Yet the powerful insights and practices forged by the movement in the cauldron of the struggles of the time have enduring value for those who seek, in any time and place, to create a church that liberation theologian Leonardo Boff describes as “a Church of and with the poor” (Boff 2011, 9), a church that incarnates and achieves holistic justice.

BECs “erupted messily and painfully into the world at a precise moment in time, as a result of a particular combination of historical circumstances” (Hebblethwaite 1994, 3). To understand the universal significance of BECs, we must first understand them in their historical context.

1. As recently as 2016, the Bishops’ Committee for the Accompaniment of the BECs at the Catholic Bishops Conference of Latin America and the Caribbean called for the strengthening and renewal of the movement. The Catholic Bishops Conference of the Philippines issued a similar call in 2007.

Los Principios²

In her comprehensive overview of the BEC movement, Margaret Hebblethwaite states that “they [BECs] are the church context from which liberation theology has sprung, and to which liberation theology in turn leads” (Hebblethwaite 1994, 2). While there are many interconnections between liberation theology and BECs, the roots of the BEC movement predate liberation theology by a decade. The stirring in the Catholic Church that troubled the waters of tradition and led to the Second Vatican Council (1962–65) was evident in Latin America in the 1950s. The lack of priests in rural Brazil (Barra do Piraí) in 1956 led to the formation of a network of lay catechists. Two years later, the Basic Education Program (MEB) in Brazil built on Paulo Freire’s work by using radio programs and directing popular education to raise social issues and encourage engagement in addressing poverty and injustice. BECs in Brazil were first reported in 1960 (in the Rio Grande del Norte and Rio de Janeiro states). Simultaneously, pastoral experiments began in Central America. San Miguelito Church in Panama started its first base community with the support of three priests from Chicago who had been utilizing the methods of Brazilian educator Freire with urban, poor residents of informal barrios.³ San Pablo Apóstol in Nicaragua sought advice from San Miguelito when it began in 1966.

The document on the role of the Catholic Church in the modern world (*Gaudium et spes*), which emerged from the Second Vatican Council in 1965, called for the Catholic Church to act as the soul and leaven of the society. This document articulated a profound shift in the formal doctrine of the Catholic Church toward a holistic, missional orientation and commitment, which fueled the growth of the BEC movement. Father Niall O’Brien, who accompanied and observed the birth of the BEC movement in the Philippines, describes his eagerness as a young missionary from the Irish Columban Fathers to put into practice in his ministry the changes of Vatican II: “In 1964, the Second Vatican Council was in full swing. Pope John had issued two startling encyclicals. Both had taken the side of the poor and were hopeful about doing something about poverty. I was excited about the changes and frustrated that I could not get any information on what was now happening at the Council” (O’Brien 1987, 5). While it took him several years to become a key leader in initiating and supporting BECs, the seeds sown by Vatican II were already beginning to bloom.

2. The word *principio* in Spanish means both “beginning” and “principle.” Therefore, it is a good word to use for a section that examines both the historical beginnings of a movement and the principles it embodied.

3. In the Philippines and Latin America, *barrio* refers to a small town or village.

The two subsequent conferences of Latin American Bishops, at Medellín in 1968 and at Puebla in 1979, both resulted in documents that affirmed and further encouraged the growth and vitality of BECs. The document “Pastoral de Conjunto,” produced by the Medellín conference, states that “the Christian base community is the first and fundamental ecclesial nucleus, which on its own level must make itself responsible for the richness and expansion of the faith, as well as of the cult which is its expression. This community, then, is the initial cell of the ecclesial structure and the focus of evangelization, and at present it is a fundamental factor in human promotion and development” (Hebblethwaite 1994, 180). It also refers to BECs as “a sign of the presence of God in the world.” Conservative forces in the Catholic Church sought to utilize the Puebla conference as a vehicle for backing away from these sanctions and commitments. While the Puebla documents do include the concerns of Catholic leaders about the loss of BEC leaders to “ideologically radical” political social movements, they also continued the official affirmation of BECs: “Small communities, especially the CEBs [BECs], create more personal interrelations, acceptance of God’s word, reexamination of one’s life, and reflection on reality in the light of the gospel. They accentuate committed involvement in the family, one’s work, the neighborhood, and the local community. We are happy to single out the multiplication of small communities as an important ecclesial event that is peculiarly ours, and as the ‘hope of the church.’”

The Latin American Bishops Conferences (CELAM) did not lay out a specific program or a curriculum for BECs. While BECs exchanged tactics and instruments (e.g., certain popular education strategies and exercises—*dinámicas*, such as the Seven Steps Bible Study and leadership development modules created by the Lumko Institute of South Africa), they were rooted in the common commitment to creatively live out a set of core concepts and visions. BECs were committed to the preferential option for the poor, building the family of God, and becoming the soul and leaven of the society.

These principles led to a set of practices. To make the preferential option for the poor real, it was necessary to build the capacity of the poor to become subjects instead of objects, to become creative agents in their lives and world. The two practices that shaped the leadership of the poor were *concientización* and *el mensaje de liberación*. While the word *concientización* can be translated as “awareness” or “consciousness,” in the BEC movement, it referred to the practice of fearless social, economic, and political analysis of the structures and systems that impacted the lives of BEC members and their neighbors. This practice drew on the liberating pedagogy of Paulo Freire as well as on the insights of the social sciences. The insights arising from the process of conscientización were then analyzed using the Scriptures read from

a liberation perspective. In this book, we refer to this practice as *el mensaje de liberación* (the message of liberation).⁴

The BEC movement was not a movement of individuals; each BEC had to become a microcosm of the family of God. This required two distinct practices. First, all the members of the community had to participate democratically in the life and work of the community, bringing all their gifts and wisdom and sharing responsibility for the tasks required to build their community and carry out their mission. In this book, we refer to this practice as *participación* (participation). Second, they had to take responsibility for caring for each other's needs, sharing their resources generously, and living in empathy with each other's hopes, joys, and sorrows. We call this practice *familia en comunión* (family in communion).

The mission of BECs always included going beyond merely caring for each other to working for the transformation of their communities. The founding documents of Medellín called for BECs to become the soul and leaven of their communities—organizing, advocating for justice and peace, and working for economic and social changes that increased the opportunity for all to flourish and experience abundant life. They used a reflection-action model that continually strengthened their capacity and commitment. We refer to this set of practices as *alma y fermenta de la sociedad* (soul and leaven of the society).

To carry out this mission, BECs needed spiritual fuel, the full integration of the spiritual and the material. The practice of *el mensaje de liberación* gave hope, comfort, and guidance as well as insight and empowerment. At their best, BECs were also vehicles for the movement of the Holy Spirit, conduits for personal and relational healing, places where members shared mystical joy in prayer, song, and ritual. They also re-formed rituals to highlight the essential sanctity of daily life activities of poor and marginalized people, including their cultural roots. We call the set of spiritual practices that sustained the movement *sanidad* (healing), and we call the integration of culture *la teología de las abuelas* (the theology of the grandmothers).

All these principles and practices were rooted, in the contemporary language of the BEC movement, in the foundational concept of the preferential option for the poor, a concept that was explicitly stated at both CELAM conferences.

The First Foundational Concept: The Preferential Option for the Poor

The preferential option for the poor was essentially the choice to prioritize the perspective and leadership of the marginalized in the name and Spirit of

4. The term *concientización* in the BEC movement incorporated the component/process of *el mensaje de liberación*. We are separating the two steps for greater clarity, as secular groups have used the first term without including the scriptural reflection.

Jesus for the ultimate benefit of the whole. Liberation theologian Gustavo Gutiérrez explains the concept:

The gospel read from the viewpoint of the poor,⁵ the exploited classes and their militant struggles for liberation, convokes a church of the people (*iglesia popular*). It calls for a church to be gathered from among the poor, the marginalized. It calls for the kind of church that is indicated in Jesus's predilection for those whom the great ones of this world despise and humiliate (see Matt. 22:1–10; Luke 4:16–24). In a word, it calls together a church that will be marked by the faithful response of the poor to the call of Jesus Christ. It will spring from the people, this church. And the people will snatch the gospel out of the hands of their dominators, never more to permit it to be utilized for the justification of a situation contrary to the will of the God who liberates. (Gutiérrez 1981, 111)

In this church of the poor, members were encouraged to see the world and the Word through their own eyes and to honor the full participation and gifts of all those whose contributions were not historically recognized (supported through the practices of *el mensaje de liberación, concientización, and participación*). Formal education or position was no longer the only standard for respect and authority; the historic wisdom of the grandmothers in the context of the culture of the community was also received and integrated.

The preferential option for the poor can be understood only in the context of the nature and impact of poverty in Latin America and other areas of the world affected by the legacy of colonialism. This includes the impact of the historical domination of the church by the wealthy and the relative objective and internalized powerlessness of the poor and marginalized in these contexts.

“The Social Panorama of Latin America 2019” is a report by the United Nations Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (UNECLAC); it estimates that in 2018 almost 60 percent of Latin America still qualified as poor and another 21 percent met the standard for lower-middle income (at risk of falling back into poverty) (UNECLAC 2019). Of the 185 million poor Latin Americans in 2018, 66 million suffered extreme poverty. These figures were projected to rise to 191 million and 72 million in 2019. Statistics are insufficient to communicate the level of human misery that they represent. A common saying among liberation theologians is that poverty means an early and unjust death. The following is a vivid account from O’Brien, early in his time in the Philippines:

5. Gutiérrez clarifies on various occasions that poverty is not simply economic in Latin America. “The poor” is a category that includes different forms of oppression and marginalization, including race- and gender-based inequities.

I had taken shelter from a passing tropical shower in a shack several hours into my journey. In the hut were some adults and some children. The children were bloated from what I now know was lack of food and probably infestation with intestinal worms. The children had no clothes except for T-shirts.

I took out my food and thoughtlessly began to eat it when I noticed all eyes upon me. It dawned on me that they were all hungry and there was no food. I shared what I had, regretting that I had not brought more. The adults refused, allowing the children to take it, and the children wolfed down the little I had to offer, making me ashamed that I had begun to eat without thinking of them in the first place. When we finished I was still hungry. (O'Brien 1987, 17)

When I (Alexia) was a missionary in the Philippines from 1984 to 1987, I served as a chaplain in the National Children's Hospital, a job that included visiting the "Mal Ward," the room where they kept the malnourished children on intravenous feeding until they were ready to go back to their barrios—where they would then fall back into malnutrition.

The situation these children were in would have been painful enough if it had been due to natural causes. In Latin America and the Philippines, typically historic land inequities and modern illegal land grabs force the poor off their subsistence farms either onto plantations (including plantations operated by Dole and other multinational businesses), where they are paid "malnutrition wages," or into informal settlements in the city, which are regularly destroyed so the land can be used for commercial purposes. Court cases trying to recover land can last for many years, and the verdicts are not enforced because of public corruption and/or the private armies of the wealthy. At the National Children's Hospital, children who were allergic to penicillin died because it was the only antibiotic on hand, even though one mile away at a middle-class Christian hospital, over twenty antibiotics were available. (The discrepancy did not apparently provoke the Christian hospital or its denominational overseers to explore a partnership in which their resources could be shared with the poorer medical providers.)

O'Brien tells many stories about rural areas with little to no access to health care where people died in transit to the nearest hospital. When I was in the Philippines, the structures of feudalism and plantation capitalism were reinforced by Ferdinand Marcos's regime, which also terrorized and assassinated those who tried to protest or seek justice. Marcos was able to stay in power for over twenty years largely because of the blind support of the US (see Bonner 1987).

While various armed revolutions have simmered in the Philippines since it was first conquered by the Spaniards in the sixteenth century, the average poor Filipino before Vatican II was consoled by a Christianity steeped in magic ritual and the mystical transcendence of suffering. Theologian Nancy

Bedford calls this phenomenon in the Latin American context “dolorismo”—the understanding that suffering is good and earns spiritual merit if borne patiently (Bedford 1998, 321). During the same period, the hierarchy of the Roman Catholic Church acted as chaplains to the elite classes of society, being supported by them and ignoring the suffering caused by systems that privileged them. Before the 1950s, the idea that God could see through the eyes of the poor or call the poor to become agents of change in the name and Spirit of Jesus would have been completely alien. This spiritual and social reality was characteristic of Latin America as well. How did such a deeply ingrained system open up for a new movement by and with the poor?

Samuel Escobar, in his book *In Search of Christ in Latin America*, points to two central provocations (Escobar 2019). First, the successful revolution in Cuba, which began in 1953 and attained victory in 1959, echoed throughout Latin America. The apparently invincible and ordained structures of feudalism and economic imperialism had been upended. “Armed guerrilla forces, representing the possibility of gaining power and transforming the world, suddenly became a highly attractive idea and practice. . . . As the theme of revolution came to dominate the cultural life of the continent, significant sectors of youth in various Latin American societies abandoned their normal life and embraced various revolutionary causes” (119). Second, at the same time, “the presence and growth of Protestantism were and continue to be an incentive and undoubtable stimulus that forced Catholics to seek self-critique and renewal” (147). Certainly, the break in support networks created by the move from rural areas to the informal settlements of the urban poor may also have made intentional community more attractive and thus an effective strategy for evangelization (although BECs were rural as well as urban). Yet there is still an element of the miraculous movement and power of the Holy Spirit in the transition. Powerful and well-established institutions do not typically transform under pressure; rather, they tend to rigidify and defend themselves. While sectors of the Roman Catholic Church certainly acted this way, from the pope to the poor, the church changed. Priests, nuns, and lay catechists refocused their energy from maintaining and indoctrinating traditional ritual to the spiritual and social empowerment of the most marginalized communities.

To understand how the preferential option for the poor operated on the ground, it is important to first face the common critique that BECs were a political movement in the guise of a spiritual movement. It is true that BECs in Chile grew rapidly when the coup closed political spaces for discussion and the only spaces available for working for justice were religious. However, this does not in itself negate the spiritual dimension of BECs. It is also true that when the Catholic hierarchy shifted to a position less affirming of the

political dimension of the BECs' work, members left for the secular revolutionary social movements. However, the case can be made that BECs offered much more to their members than a secular social or political movement. It is important to examine the integration of the spiritual and the political in BECs, particularly for the sake of twenty-first-century church plants or renewal efforts that seek a similar integration.

Cecília Loreto Mariz carried out a comparative study of BECs, Pentecostal churches, and Afro-Brazilian spiritual communities in Brazil, published as *Coping with Poverty* (1994). She concluded that the BECs were losing in the competition with Pentecostals for the participation of the poor because (1) they were initiated by pastoral agents who were not poor, and their leadership was less poor than the bulk of the community, (2) their focus was on communal and societal change instead of on helping individuals in the group with their personal needs and lives, and (3) they were rational and secular in their approach, beliefs, and concerns rather than spiritual or mystical. By this last critique, Mariz does not mean that BECs were not spiritual communities. She notes that they were centered on Scripture study, prayer, and worship. However, she questions whether these activities were goals in themselves or instruments for social change. She also claims that other studies of BECs and literature about BECs were written either by "theologians and religiously committed people who tended to emphasize descriptions of CEB [BEC] projects, rather than the everyday reality of the CEBs," or by people who "had no practical experience in CEBs" (Mariz 1994, 16–17).

Mariz's description of the authors and content of BEC materials is not true of the two primary accounts of life in BECs: O'Brien's *Revolution from the Heart* and Galdámez's *Faith of a People*. Both of these texts give the intimate details of the twists and turns, successes and failures, struggles and accomplishments of BECs. O'Brien focuses on his deep and extended experience of BECs on the island of Negros in the Philippines over a twenty-year period (1964–84). Galdámez details the life of a BEC community in El Salvador over a decade (1970–80). Interviews of Salvadoran BEC leaders and my (Alexia's) personal experiences in the Philippines match the stories told by O'Brien and Galdámez. These accounts do not support the findings or conclusions of Mariz. It is possible that the movement in South America had significantly different characteristics than the movement in Central America or in the Philippines. A more recent account from a BEC leader in Bolivia, while including stories about personal and social transformation, reflects that BEC leaders "have not evaluated how the persistence of the community aspect might affect the personal aspects or how the social aspects can function to the detriment of ecclesial and the immediate loss of the eschatological" (quoted in Healey and Hinton 2005, 11). At the same time, although arriving at an

accurate assessment of the number of BEC communities is difficult to impossible, the general understanding of researchers is that roughly half of BECs were in Brazil. As a result, we need to take seriously the variations between South and Central American experiences as we analyze the potential insights of the BEC movement for the future.

By examining Mariz's three conclusions in light of the detailed, long-term accounts of daily life in BECs, we can seek to determine whether her conclusions are correct. First, were BECs initiated by pastoral agents who were not poor and led by leaders who were less poor (Mariz 1994, 45, 50)? The pastoral agents who started the first BECs in both accounts (O'Brien's and Galdámez's) were religious professionals, primarily priests and nuns. However, both long-term accounts describe in detail the process through which the people took charge of their own communities and then went on to start new communities without any support from the original missionaries. O'Brien talks about going on furlough to Ireland for a year and leaving BECs to run the parish. He also relates a funny story about going to the home of a friend in the evening and completely forgetting that he was supposed to be leading an urgent and delicate all-night vigil focused on a critical community problem. When he remembered in the morning and ran to the church, he discovered that they had not missed him at all. BEC leaders had taken over. Galdámez shares about the multiplication of the communities: "A friend of Father Chepe's, a person who worked in a co-op, started meeting with some fellow workers of his. A new married couple found out about our groups and offered their home as the 'synagogue.' . . . On the south side was a slum we hardly knew about. A member of our community who worked in a clinic discovered it and started a little group there. . . . Another group started working twenty kilometers from the parish, directed by a member of our own community" (Galdámez 1983, 7).

Mariz paints the typical BEC member as someone who achieved significant gains in income on their own and then hit a ceiling based on societal structures. In comparison, a significant percentage of BEC leaders in El Salvador and the Philippines were living in extreme poverty when they joined. Galdámez and O'Brien tell stories about individual leaders who entered the BEC from a background of miserable poverty in which family members had died from malnutrition, illness, and lack of access to health care. Ana, a leader of a BEC in El Salvador for over twenty years, shares how they started in a *colonia* (a poor area on the outskirts of an urban area) of San Salvador and then worked with a group of urban, poor squatters to start a collective farming project. The BEC that ran the project was from the informal settlement. Reflecting on the different levels of poverty in her BEC, Ana says that they had to intentionally work on the self-esteem of those whose situation

required constant assistance until it improved. She notes that while they lost some members because of their shame at their initial dependence in contrast with the relative economic status of other members, the majority of the poorest members stayed in the community and grew in their participation and leadership (Ortiz, October 8, 2020).

Second, did BECs focus on communal and societal change instead of on helping individuals in the group with their personal needs and lives? Mariz claims that while the Pentecostals saw their task as missionary work, BEC pastoral agents thought of their work as popular education. She says that “missionary work is basically religious. It emphasizes the transformation of values and moral assumptions. . . . Educational work, in contrast, places emphasis on the transformation of cognitive assumptions” (Mariz 1994, 63). She goes on to say that “the CEB view assumes the individual’s dependence on his society or group and therefore does not emphasize personal morality or individual transformation in the process of working out God’s plan in this world” (68). On the contrary, Galdámez describes the first phase of BEC work by likening it to an exorcism: “Hardened drunks were delivered from demon booze, men who had lost their feelings for their wives were freed from their machismo, women who had lost their dignity in prostitution were liberated from the misery that had driven them into the hands of this demon. The people, so many people, who had been under control of the demon of individualism, began to join hands with their neighbors. Their deliverance was at hand” (Galdámez 1983, 6). This new moral and spiritual power in their lives extended to their marriages and families: “Couples were finding that for their work to be credible they had to declare their fidelity before the community. They were discovering that not only were they wife and husband, but they were support for one another in the Christian task. And they wanted to be happy. What was soon to be loyalty to the people to the death, began by loyalty and fidelity in married life” (17).

Both O’Brien and Galdámez tell remarkable stories of violent criminals who were preying on the villages whose characters and lifestyles were transformed by conversions brought on by acts of nonviolent confrontation by their victims seeking reconciliation. The process of evangelism and discipleship in BECs (at least in certain contexts) integrated missionary work and popular education for personal and social transformation.

Mariz accurately writes that the improvements in the economic well-being of BEC members were not the result of individual achievement alone but rather of changes in the services and opportunities available to the community as a result of the activities of the BEC. However, as she notes in one case, many BEC members obtained new positions and/or paid employment as a result of these new opportunities. Here are a few examples from a BEC in Bolivia:

Abdias, an Ayamara farmer, 42 years old, married with three children, had to migrate from a rural area to the city. For many years, he lived as a small vendor. Later, as a result of his experience in the Community of Villa Pagador, he became a leader of the BCC as well as of the town. Today, he coordinates a trash collection and recycling enterprise. Amalia, fifty-four years old, married with seven children, wife of a construction worker. She says that her experience and formation within the BCC has opened her eyes and given her an opportunity to serve people like herself. Today, she is the coordinator of “Habitad” in Cochabamba. She coordinates, along with others, home construction projects for poor families. Ambrosio, nineteen years old, an orphan responsible for two younger brothers. The invitation he received to participate in the Community of Our Lady of Guadalupe was the beginning of a new life. Now he animates and accompanies youth who are struggling with alcoholism. (Healey and Hinton 2005, 14)

Third, were BECs rational and secular in their approach, beliefs, and concerns rather than spiritual or mystical? Mariz states that “the CEB view does not recognize miracles or supernatural occurrences in everyday lives, nor does it assume any relationship between miracles and God’s plan. God does not use miracles to help human beings carry out his plan; instead he uses human beings and relies on their abilities” (Mariz 1994, 67). BECs in Central America and the Philippines clearly believed that God works through human beings. However, that does not mean that their faith lacked a mystical dimension. *The Gospel in Solentiname* is a collection of transcripts of BEC Bible studies facilitated by liberation theologian Ernesto Cardenal in Nicaragua before the fall of the dictator Somoza. These transcripts allow a glimpse into the inner spiritual life and practices of a BEC. Here is a comment from a member of a BEC in a Bible study on an apocalyptic passage in Luke:

MARCELINO: A lot of us folks would like to see those days, to see something at least close to those days. But now, it is a little different. We can see by means of the spirit, when the spirit of God enters us, we can see the days that Jesus walked, and we can see the miracles. Other than that, we can’t see anything, we’re blind. But someday, says Jesus, it’s going to be like we see a lightning bolt, it’s going to be bright and clear, it’s not going to be seeing just with the spirit, as I was saying. Not then, we’re going to see, with our own eyes, the things that are happening. Anybody that looks and sees things is going to say: it’s clear. (Cardenal 1976, 456)

Ana, from a BEC in El Salvador, says that a key element that drew her to participate in the BEC was the experience of the Holy Spirit in the gatherings. She says that there was an atmosphere she had never experienced in more traditional religious settings, a spirit of happiness, celebration, and brother-

hood/sisterhood. Both Moises (a Salvadoran immigrant to the US who visited El Salvador at several intervals during the war and participated actively in the BEC movement) and Ana talk about the inspiring music (Moises Escalante, October 10, 2020). Moises adds that he was impressed by the peace that leaders exuded in the midst of risk and danger, which he attributes to their living faith. Gutiérrez describes the integration of faith and action for justice as follows:

We remain convinced—and the practice of the poor confirms this—that the truly fruitful and imaginative challenge lies in a “contemplation in action” that will transform history. It has to do with encountering God in the poor, in solidarity with the struggle of the oppressed, in a faith filled with hope and joy that is lived within a liberation process whose agent is the poor people. Proclamation of the Father’s love is something to be done at every moment “in season and out of season” as St. Paul put it. And evangelizing means proclaiming the Lord with words of life and acts of solidarity from the world of the poor and their struggles. (Gutiérrez 1981, 115)

A core rationale that Mariz uses for describing BECs as rational in opposition to mystical is their alteration of traditional symbols in rituals. Mariz claims that this assumes that the ritual or symbol itself had no intrinsic power. O’Brien describes the process and meaning of changing rituals and symbols differently. He talks about aligning the rituals and symbols with their intrinsic meaning, cleansing them from insertions made by those who would maintain unjust systems. For example, he describes the expansion of the promises made at baptism or confirmation into holistic pledges with a social dimension (O’Brien 1987, 167). He notes the added inspiration experienced by the hearers when it became clear, as in the early church, that the promise implied a risk that required a living faith. The placing of farm implements and other work tools on the altar and the use of tortillas for the communion bread were common symbolic statements. The use of everyday items and cultural symbols in sacramental contexts did not represent secularization but rather a recognition of the sacramental quality of people’s daily lives, which made sense in the broader context of their recognition of God’s presence with the poor.

In these stories of BEC members and leaders, we can see that the practice of *sanidad* (healing)—personal and relational healing and joy in the Holy Spirit—was a core component of their BEC experience. While the integration of traditional cultural practices was a typical aspect of the evangelical strategy of the Catholic Church in Latin America and the Philippines, BECs shifted the focus to the aspects of culture that reflected the daily lives of marginalized people, symbolically lifting up their value in the process. As mentioned earlier, we call this practice *la teología de las abuelas* (the theology of the grandmothers).

The Second Foundational Concept: Building the Family of God

The preferential option for the poor was not merely a push for the prioritization of the perspective of the poor in general society. A central mission of BECs was to build a community in which the poor were valued in every way, as givers and as receivers in relationships of mutual care and as team members for mutual ministry.

The man who cut the grass for this thatch—pointing to the roof of the convent—lives out in Na-Salayan. A few weeks ago, he walked in all the way from that place, which is about ten kilometers away, carrying his wife on his back. As he walked, his little child of three ran along beside him clinging to his trouser leg. And another child of eight carried the baby. His wife was so far gone with T.B. that she was only bones. He told me that for a year she has not been able to sleep well. They have no pillow, so at night when they lay down, he would stretch out his arm so that she would lie on it the whole night. If Na-Salayan had had a Christian community, that man would not have walked in alone. The men of the hamlet would have carried his wife in a baby's hammock, the women would have looked after the children and the community health committee would have looked for medicines for the sick woman and told us about her condition months ago. Now it is certainly too late. You have a Christian community when you can lie down at night knowing that in your village no one is sick who is not being attended to, no one is persecuted who is not being helped, no one is lonely who is not being visited. (O'Brien 1987, 128–29)

Mariz notes that mutual help among poor people is not unique to BECs, particularly in collective cultures: “The existence and esteem of mutual help among kin and neighbors, however, does not necessarily indicate the existence of a community of the poor, such as CEBs attempt to create. Poor people help one another because they have needs, not because they identify with one another. What CEBs do is reinforce this value and attribute religious meaning to it” (Mariz 1994, 71). While poor people's mutual insurance is a fact of life in low-income communities (I help you today, you help me tomorrow), desperation often also leads to stealing, abuse, sabotage, and betrayal. Commitments to mutual aid can also drain the resources that could provide capital for economic development. In BECs, in contrast, the mutual pledge of assistance became a holy pledge that built momentum over time. BECs incarnated the practice of *familia en comunión*; they became a family in communion with one another and God. Because mutual aid was an ongoing commitment, members of BECs also learned to work together to plan and implement broader and more effective solutions to common needs.

A related aspect of BECs was the fluid division of labor among the members of the community. Instead of allowing a few, better educated lay leaders

to carry out a limited number of sacramental tasks, BECs distributed all the tasks necessary for the mission among members of the community. Any task that supported the well-being of the community was viewed as a holy task. Galdámez calls the community members who took on a variety of tasks an “order of acolytes” because they made the mission possible just as an acolyte makes the celebration of a Mass possible by babysitting or taking chairs where they are needed (Galdámez 1983, 9). Religious tasks, such as leading a Bible study, were interchangeably assigned with secular tasks depending on members’ gifts and interests. The principle of *participación* describes this living out of shared responsibility in which definitions of leadership were broadened to include most of the members.

In congruence with the core beliefs and values of the movement, women were lifted up and given greater roles than in the broader society or other expressions of the church. This sometimes had the negative side effect of men withdrawing from the communities. Ana says that some men chose not to participate after a critical mass of women took positions of leadership. She tells one story of a man who was initially a leader and then pulled back after his wife became involved. While he left permanently, other men were able, over time and through intentional conversation, to come back. This principle of lifting up women, including the traditional wisdom of women, was part of the practice of *la teología de las abuelas* (Ortiz, October 10, 2020).

The Third Foundational Concept: Becoming the Soul and Leaven of the Society

BECs sought to embody *Gaudium et spes*’s call to the church to become the soul and leaven of the society. In addition to demonstrating an alternative community of radical democratization with accountable and principled leadership, this included two core tasks: analyzing the reality of the poor to learn the reasons for their suffering (the practice of *conscientización*) and creating communal and systemic solutions to the problems of the poor (the practice of *alma y fermenta de la sociedad*). The analysis of the reality experienced by the poor involved intentional integration of Scripture, popular education methodologies, and the social sciences. The activities of BECs to address poverty included the following:

- community development strategies such as cooperative businesses, credit unions, or collective farms and land trusts as well as public health initiatives led by the people themselves
- collective struggles with local authorities for basic rights such as electricity and potable water, available and affordable health care, respect of land rights, timely and fair legal processes, and security from violence

- participation in broader national social movements seeking to create more just structures

Mariz states that BECs consistently demonstrated their capacity to mobilize and motivate the poor to organize themselves and to participate in social movements. The accounts of BECs, both during their heyday and more recently, are full of anecdotes about the concrete results of their organization. The following story from *Faith of a People* of “the miracle of the marketplace women” is a snapshot.

In early June, the “marketplace women” came to see me. They wanted me to celebrate a Mass in honor of the Sacred Heart of Jesus in the marketplace. These women are an institution in El Salvador. They are very poor, but their courage in the face of difficulties is proverbial. Often, they get involved with the usury mechanism, the loan sharks. The situation is extremely rough, and there seems to be no way out of it. I told the community about the case, and we all thought it would be very hard to do anything about the situation of injustice these persons were living in. But these were persons of faith. I came for Mass on the appointed day. A number of the members of the communities and I went to the little square in the middle of the market. A life-sized statue of the Sacred Heart stood there. In the homily I opened a dialogue with them—on their love for one another, on the big problems they had—and soon we were talking about the biggest things that bound them together: no money to send the kids to school, to take them to the hospital or even to feed them three meals a day. And up came the subject of the moneylenders. Some of the women expressed gratitude for their services, saying it made it possible for them to survive. Then timidly, somebody said “they only make things worse.” Majestic on his makeshift pedestal, the Sacred Heart of Jesus presided over this decisive moment of conscientization when the poor had the floor, when the poor could speak out. Then one of the women shouted out “the interest sure is high!” Others seconded her, then quickly covered their faces with their shawls, reciting prayers, as if asking forgiveness for their rebelliousness. That was when the moneylender left in a huff. Then there was fear. Some of the women realized that they’d put their foot in it, that their business was done for if they didn’t have the loan sharks help. And in the midst of the anguish, God’s light shone. Couldn’t they get together and form a co-op? The next day the women met with our community to start a new co-op. We were sure the moneylender would pressure the women now. We had to make sure we had enough in our emergency fund, we had to get in contact with people who knew more about co-ops than we did. But the next day, the co-op was on its feet, thanks to money collected from the community. (Galdámez 1983, 27–29, abbreviated)

Mariz also notes the positive psychological consequences to participating in these struggles: poor people experienced hope and power as they jointly

improved their lives even when they did not attain their broader goals (Mariz 1994, 115–16). While it is clear that BECs were intimately intertwined with broader social movements for justice, it is not easy to analyze the impact of the BEC movement on broader social and economic structures. However, the famous nonviolent deposal of the Philippine dictator Ferdinand Marcos in February 1986 was arguably fueled by the nonviolent commitment and action of BECs.

What Happened to the BECs?

Both Galdámez and O'Brien emphasize that BECs require many years to reach maturity. The process of creating healing and liberating communities among marginalized people is neither fast nor easy. They also underscore that the process cannot be manipulated or forced; people have to grow out of internalized oppression and grow into their full capacity for positive change. In both the Philippines and El Salvador, BECs grew up in the context of civil wars⁶ in which the people experienced intensifying repression and violent martyrdom. The sacred ground that BECs had carved out for nonviolent action for justice was gradually eaten up by the daily reality of war. This threatened the stability of BECs. Ana, from a BEC in El Salvador, stayed through the war and describes how the members who fled the country and those who were martyred affected the functioning of the community. However, the communities continued throughout these attacks and losses (Ortiz, October 12, 2020).

In truth, BECs continue today. While BECs experienced a time when the hierarchy treated them with suspicion, both Pope Francis and the Bishops' Councils in Latin America and the Philippines have verbally supported BECs over the past fifteen years. There are BECs throughout the Global South that are linked to Catholic small-group networks around the world. However, the movement is significantly smaller and weaker than it was in the 1970s and 1980s. The BEC movement has come into competition with increasingly popular and powerful Pentecostal movements, which have offered experiences of community and spiritual power with less risk and sacrifice. Secular

6. The profound economic inequities in both the Philippines and El Salvador resulting from the Spanish land grants and the economic exploitation or expulsion of tenant farmers gave rise in the twentieth century to wide social unrest. The lack of adequate government response to these concerns spawned both nonviolent protest and revolutionary movements. The cycle of repression and reaction led to ongoing struggles that erupted finally into full-blown civil wars. The war in El Salvador began in 1979 and ended with the peace agreements in 1992. The civil conflict in the Philippines began in 1969 and ended in the country as a whole with the ouster of dictator Ferdinand Marcos in 1986. (Islamic rebel forces have continued sporadic conflict with government forces on the island of Mindanao.)

social movements and left-leaning governments have proven unable to change profound structural realities while also guaranteeing human rights. Other Protestant and evangelical movements, such as the Misión Integral movement, pioneered by René Padilla and Samuel Escobar, and the Lutheran Church of El Salvador under Bishop Medardo Gomez,⁷ have learned from the example of BECs and attempted to incorporate similar practices in their small-group and congregational contexts. They have added theological and spiritual perspectives from their faith traditions and adapted their strategies correspondingly. Guillermo Cook, a Protestant Latin American missiologist, has researched BECs from a Protestant perspective, identifying their similarities with and differences from Protestant movements. While these initiatives have not engaged most Latin American churches, in our analysis of BECs, we will include information about these parallel movements.

The heritage and legacy of the BEC movement and its parallel adaptations are full of indigenous strategies for transformation waiting to be translated and modified for young Christian leaders of color around the world.

Conclusion

The BEC movement arose at a particular point in time in the history of the Catholic Church and in the broader society in Latin America and the Philippines. BECs represented an unprecedented level of engagement by poor and marginalized people as protagonists in their common spiritual and social lives. While scholars have questioned whether BECs were fully representative of the poor and truly integrated spiritual and social dimensions, powerful evidence suggests they did create a new model of being church that has potential relevance for anyone seeking to integrate personal spiritual formation, communal care, power-sharing, and social transformation under the leadership of marginalized and oppressed people. As we seek to draw inspiration and guidance from this movement for Christian community today, we will build on the core BEC principles of the preferential option for the poor, the building of the family of God, and the mission of becoming the soul and leaven of the society.

7. Bishop Medardo Gomez was the only high-level Protestant leader directly targeted for government oppression. When the four Jesuits at the Central American University were murdered by members of a military battalion in 1989, the same soldiers proceeded to the Lutheran Cathedral to kill Bishop Gomez, who was fortunately in the US at the time (Gomez 2012). Lutheran churches in rural and urban areas often consisted of the poorest of the poor, many of whom were involved with popular movements.