

MODELS OF SYNODALITY OF THE CHURCH IN INDONESIA

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Abstract

Synodality of the Church takes place when its members journey together, gather in assembly and take an active part in her evangelizing mission, and journey together with the entire human family. This understanding of synodality has been put into practice by the Churches in Indonesia through structure, leadership, as well as events and process. Parishes in Indonesia are structured into *Lingkungan* (Basic Ecclesial Communities). Leadership in the level of parishes and dioceses is carried out by parish pastoral council and diocesan pastoral council, which comprise of ordained and non-ordained members. Their main responsibilities are to formulate Guidelines for Pastoral Ministries for the parish and the diocese. These Guidelines pay attention to the situations of the nation and the country in order to be able to respond to them. At the national level synodality is expressed in the plenary assembly of the Bishops' Conference as well as its annual meeting. All decisions at the *Lingkungan*, parishes, dioceses, the plenary assembly of the Bishops' Conference and the annual meeting are made using local wisdom, *musyawarah untuk mencapai mufakat* (deliberation to arrive at consensus). The Indonesian Catholic Churches also journey together with Indonesian Protestant

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Churches through two collaborations: the issuance of joined Christmas pastoral letters as well as joined translation and publication of the Bible. Synodality requires leaders who have deep knowledge of Church's teachings. There are three challenges: how to attract more young people to get involved, regeneration of leaders of the *Lingkungan*, and helping young priests to understand their responsibilities as educators in faith and defenders of the common good.

Keywords: Synodality; Structure; Leadership; Events and Process; *Lingkungan*; Local Wisdom

The synod on synodality of the Church has already been taking place for more than a year. The Preparatory Document of the synod has mentioned that "the synodal path is rooted in the concrete life of the People of God."¹ Furthermore, quoting the work of the International Theological Commission,² it described synodality as "the specific *modus vivendi et operandi* of the Church, the People of God, which reveals and gives substance to her being as communion when all her members journey together, gather in assembly and take an active part in her evangelizing mission."³

This simple article will describe how synodality has been put into practice by the Church in Indonesia through structure, leadership, as well as events and process⁴ and how the Church in Indonesia positively respond to the call for building up a synodal Church. It will conclude by offering three challenges ahead.

Structure

To help members of parishes to get to know one another more personally and to participate in the life of the parish more effectively the parishes in Indonesia are organised into small communities consisting of 20 to 40 families, called *Lingkungan* (basic Christian communities).⁵ This practice started at a parish in Yogyakarta in 1941. In 1980 all parishes in seven Dioceses in Java used similar structures.⁶ Then, it spread to the whole country.

¹Preparatory Document for the 16th Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishop, no. 25.

²International Theological Commission, *Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church* (2 March 2018), no. 6.

³Preparatory Document, no. 10.

⁴Preparatory Document, no. 27.

⁵A. Heuken, *Ensiklopedi Gereja*, Jilid V (Jakarta: Yayasan Cipta Loka Caraka, 2005), 141.

⁶A. Heuken, *Ensiklopedi Gereja*. Jilid V, 141-142.

The *Lingkungan* is described as “a community of the faithful enkindled by the spirit of the Gospel and fully involved in their society.”⁷ Under the guidance of a leader of the *Lingkungan*, members of the *Lingkungan* gather once a week, for around two hours. They pray together, sharing their faith based on scriptural readings, discuss issues they encounter in the *Lingkungan* and in the society and find solutions to solve the problems. Being mindful of their cultural context, they use the method of deliberation to arrive at consensus (*musyawarah untuk mencapai mufakat*) in the decision-making process and in taking decision.⁸

Leadership

Leadership in a parish is carried out not only by a parish priest but also by parish pastoral council.⁹ What is special about the parish pastoral council in Indonesia is its membership. They are composed of the parish priest, the assistant parish priest(s), leaders of *Lingkungan*, leaders of *Wilayah*,¹⁰ leaders of several groups in the parish, including Catholic mass organizations, such as Catholic Youth Organization, Association of Indonesian Catholic Students, Indonesian Catholic Women Organization, and Association of Indonesian Catholic Scholars. This council adapts local wisdom, namely using deliberation to arrive at consensus (*musyawarah untuk mencapai mufakat*), in the decision-making process as well as in taking decision on matters that are important for the life and mission of the parish, including vision and mission of the parish. Hence, the parish pastoral council is deliberative not consultative.¹¹

⁷*Kebijakan-Kebijakan Dasar Keuskupan Agung Semarang tentang Pastoral Lingkungan dengan Catatan* (Semarang: P3J KAS, 1991), # 1.3. [Note: It is a booklet published by the Secretariat of the Archdiocese of Semarang (KAS). Its purpose is to develop and mentor Church's leaders.

⁸Indonesian people use deliberation to arrive at consensus (*musyawarah untuk mencapai mufakat*) in their decision-making process as well as in making decision. This cultural practice had spread all over the archipelago long before the Independence of the Republic of Indonesia was proclaimed in 1945. Based on this practice, the founding fathers of the Republic of Indonesia incorporated this method of the decision-making process and taking decision into the Constitution of the country. Hence, it is appropriate that the Church in Indonesia adopts this method as part of inculturation.

⁹*The Code of Canon Law*, canon 536 § 1.

¹⁰A *Wilayah* is a community of faith composed of several *Lingkungan*. See A. Heuken, *Ensiklopedi Gereja*, Jilid IX (Jakarta: Yayasan Cipta Loka Caraka, 2006), 143.

¹¹This is in line with the *Code of Canon Law*, canon 27, which says that “Custom is the best interpreter of laws.”

At the diocesan level, the presence of diocesan pastoral council is a very significant form of leadership. The diocesan pastoral council is chaired by the Vicar General. Its members comprise of chairpersons and members of different commissions, both ordained and non-ordained, and several people chosen based on their expertise. In the archdioceses of Semarang and Jakarta, the main responsibility of the diocesan pastoral council is to design five yearly Guidelines for Pastoral Ministries of the diocese, which includes Vision and Mission of the diocese. The process of designing these Guidelines starts from the *Lingkungan*, goes up to parishes and deaneries and culminates at the diocesan level. The process of the decision making and in taking decision uses deliberation to arrive at consensus (*musyawarah untuk mencapai mufakat*).

What is striking is the fact that the formulation of the Guidelines for Pastoral Ministries of both dioceses always pay attention to the situation and the needs of the nation and the country. Hence, through their Guidelines for Pastoral Ministries the two archdioceses always walk together with the nation and the country as it is mandated by the second Vatican Council (cf. GS 40).¹²

These two different pastoral councils were established in 1966, just one year after the closing of the second Vatican Council.

Events and Process

At national level, the synodality of the Church in Indonesia is clearly expressed in Plenary Assembly of the Indonesian Bishops' Conference. Until the year of 1995, the Plenary Assemblies were only attended by Bishops and secretaries of the commissions of the Bishops' Conference. But in 1995, to celebrate the 50th Anniversary of the Independence of the Republic of Indonesia, the Bishops initiated a new tradition: they invited lay leaders and representatives from all dioceses and Catholic mass organizations to attend and actively participate in their meetings. This event became the birth of the Plenary Assembly of the Indonesian Catholic Church (*Sidang Agung Gereja Katolik Indonesia*—abbreviated as SAGKI), which convokes every five years starting in the year of 2000. Due to the break of Covid-19 pandemic, the fifth Plenary Assembly which was planned to take place in 2020 was postponed to further notice.

The process of the Plenary Assembly of the Indonesian Church is exactly the same with the process of the Synod, which Pope Francis

¹²See *Preparatory Document*, no. 29.

asked us to do now. The main purpose of SAGKI is to help the Indonesian Church to get more involved in dealing with social problems faced by the nation and the country. Hence, the Church in Indonesia can journey together with the whole nation and the country of Indonesia.¹³

The synodality of the Church in Indonesia is also clearly expressed in the annual meetings of the Indonesian Bishops' Conference.¹⁴ At the end of their annual meetings, the bishops issue a *Nota Pastoral* (Pastoral Notes) for the whole dioceses in Indonesia. Among those documents, the one that strikes the writer's attention is the *Nota Pastoral* issued in 2018. In that document the bishops, paying attention to the situation of the nation and the country, gave emphasis on the importance of having an awareness that "the Church is called to present herself as an integral part of the nation and the country of Indonesia."¹⁵ As such, the Church in Indonesia has given and is "to give real contribution to the struggles for achieving the independence of the country as well as to make the independence become a real experience for every citizen. This contribution can be offered especially in the field of education, health, economics, culture, politics, and social charity."¹⁶ Following the steps of Pope Francis,¹⁷ the Indonesian Bishops also emphasize the importance of every member of the Church to get involved in politics, because "Politics is the highest form of love because politics is directed towards the achievement of the common good."¹⁸

Synodality also means journeying together with other Churches.¹⁹ In Indonesia this is done especially in two forms. First, the issuance of joined Christmas pastoral letters by Union of the Indonesian Protestant Churches and the Indonesian Bishops' Conference to respond to the situation of the nation and the country. The first joined Christmas pastoral letter was issued at Christmas 1980.

¹³Cf. *Preparatory Document*, no. 29 & 30L.

¹⁴Cf. *Preparatory Document*, no. 28.

¹⁵Koferensi Waligereja Indonesia, *Nota Pastoral Konferensi Waligereja Indonesia 2018: Panggilan Gereja dalam Hidup Berbangsa, Menjadi Gereja yang Relevan dan Signifikan* (Jakarta: Obor, 2018), 2.

¹⁶Koferensi Waligereja Indonesia, *Nota Pastoral Konferensi Waligereja Indonesia 2018*, 2.

¹⁷Talk given by Pope Francis to members of the Christian Life Communities in Vatican on 30 April 2015.

¹⁸Koferensi Waligereja Indonesia, *Nota Pastoral Konferensi Waligereja Indonesia 2018*, 25.

¹⁹See *Preparatory Document*, no. 28.

Second, joined translation and publication of the Bible. After the Independence, in the fifties and sixties both Protestants and Catholics translated the whole Bible separately. The Catholic translation, which was done by a team lead by Fr Cletus Groenen, OFM, was published as a Study Bible in nine volumes with extensive introduction and notes between 1960–1966. Since the Second Vatican Council asked for easy access to the Bible for all faithful and also mentioned the possibility of working together with other Churches on Bible translation and production so that all Christians using the same language can read the same translation (DV 22), Fr Groenen and his team advised the Indonesian Bishops' Conference to adopt the Protestant translation for their one volume Bible (in Catholic edition it is supplemented with their Catholic translation of the Deuterocanonical Books). This proposal was accepted by both the Indonesian Bishops' Conference and the Protestant Indonesian Bible Society in 1968. After 1968 the Indonesian Bible Society is no longer Protestant but ecumenical, with increasing number of Catholics on its board and on all its committees. After some years of working together on the finishing touch to this common translation, it was published in 1974–1975.

In the following ten years another Bible translation in everyday language (sort of *Good News Bible*) has been undertaken together and was published in 1986. Thereafter, a revision of the 1974–75 translation had been worked on together and was published in February 2023.

For the synodality at the level of the *Lingkungan* to take place, they need facilitators who understand the teachings of the Church well and live them out in integrity. Unfortunately, not every parish priest can and is willing to help them earn knowledge of the Church's teachings. Responding to this need, in 2014 the writer founded a community of catechists and pastoral lay leaders in Yogyakarta. This community gathers every month for five hours to study documents of the Church. Within eight years we have studied *Apostolic Exhortation Evangelii Gaudium* on the Proclamation of the Gospel in Today's World, Dogmatic Constitution on the Church (*Lumen Gentium*), Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World (*Gaudium et Spes*), Social Teachings of the Church, and Apostolic Exhortation *Gaudete et Exultate* on the Call to Holiness in Today's World.

Challenges Ahead

There are three main challenges ahead. *First*, more and more young people are not interested in attending the weekly gathering at the *Lingkungan*. One among many reasons is many "old" leaders of the

Lingkungan are not willing to hand over their leadership to younger generation. Creativity and innovation are also absent from their leadership; hence many young people find the gatherings boring.

The parishes need to think hard in order to find ways to attract young people to get involved in the parish so that they will become full members of the parishes, since the young people, as Pope Francis says, are not the future of the Church but “They are its present.”²⁰ The parish needs to set aside “narrow preconceptions and listens carefully to the young” (CV 65). This attitude “allows young people to make their own contribution to the community, helping it to appreciate new sensitivities and to consider new questions” (CV 65).

Second, many *Lingkungan* find it difficult to get new leaders. This is due to the fact that many parishes do not offer continuous faith education to their parishioners and do not prepare their members to be willing and capable of carrying out leadership in the parish. This situation should become a strong reminder that

as educators in the faith, [parish] priests must see to it, either by themselves or through others, that the faithful are led individually in the Holy Spirit to a development of their own vocation as required by the gospel, to a sincere and active charity, and to that freedom with which Christ has made us free (PO 6).

As it was mentioned during the Plenary Assembly of the Indonesian Bishops’ Conference and the Indonesian Catholics in 1995, lay people need to get faith education as wide and as deep as possible so that they will live out their faith in their personal lives, in the Church, as well as in their social involvement.²¹

Third, more and more younger priests and candidates for priests in Indonesia understand the responsibility of a priest as simply to administer sacraments and doing administrative works. They forget that the second Vatican Council teaches that a person is ordained into priesthood to proclaim the Gospel to all people, to build up a community of the faithful, and to sanctify the faithful through sacramental and liturgical celebrations (LG 28).

There are two very important aspects of the priests’ responsibility to build up a community of the faithful. Firstly, priests are educators in

²⁰Pope Francis, Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Christus Vivit* to Young People and to the Entire People of God (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2019), art. 64. Hereafter CV.

²¹*Pedoman Gereja Katolik Indonesia: Sidang Agung KWI – Umat Katolik 1995*. Cetakan Ketiga (Jakarta: Konferensi Waligereja Indonesia, 1996), 79.

faith, whose responsibility is to help the faithful to achieve Christian maturity (PO 6). In relation to this the second Vatican Council reminds the priests that “as educators in faith, priests must see to it, ..., that... Ceremonies however beautiful, or associations however flourishing, will be of little value if they are not directed toward educating men [sic.] in the attainment of Christian maturity” (PO 6). Furthermore, the Council mentions that

To further this goal, priests should help men [sic.] see what is required and what is God’s will in the great and small events of life. Christians should also be taught that they do not live for themselves alone, but according to the demands of the new law of charity, every man [sic.] must administer to others the grace he has received. In this way all will discharge in a Christian manner their duties within the community of men [sic.] (PO 6).

Secondly, “Priests are “defenders of the common good”²² of the people (PO 9). It means that they – in collaboration with other people as well as different non-ecclesial institutions, be it civilian or public – must see to it that members of the Church and of the society live in a social condition that enable them to achieve the fullness of their lives (cf. GS 26). To carry out these responsibilities, as it was already reminded by the Plenary Assembly of the Indonesian Bishops’ Conference and the Indonesian Catholics in 1995, “priests need to understand and to follow the dynamics of political world so that they will become integral parts of societal movements.”²³ All of these are necessary in order for the Church to become synodal, to go “forward together with humanity and experience the same earthly lot which the world does” (GS 40); “the People of God journeys together with the entire human family.”²⁴

²²The meaning of “common good” is explained very clearly by the second Vatican Council in GS 26 and 74.

²³*Pedoman Gereja Katolik Indonesia*, 55.

²⁴*Preparatory Document*, no. 29.