When the bishops of Asia returned to their countries after the closing of Vatican II in 1965, they were encouraged by what they had heard. Church in this new era must become sensitive to the cultures, faiths and ethnic identities of the people it served. The day of the missionary Church, totally dependent on foreign bishops and priests and on Western traditions and policies, had ended; indigenous leadership would mark the future. "The challenge for the Asian leaders was now to find those paths that would allow them to nurture the essence of their faith while separating it from the trappings of the colonial experience," said author Tom Fox, a longtime student of Asian Catholicism.

The old model of Church Asians knew was often referred to as cookie-cutter Catholicism, a one size fits all model, using the same language and same rites as Europeans had used for centuries. The conditions and needs of local culture simply played no role; they were not to be a factor in it at all. Many Catholics had become accustomed to this style of religion and preferred the European model with European saints, statues and holy cards.

Asian Catholicism was Western Catholicism transplanted to different soil, and it had not flourished. Catholics represent 1 or 2 percent of the population of most Asian countries, and the great distance between Catholic villages and cities left local bishops feeling isolated. Few had an opportunity to work cooperatively with their peers in implementing the ideas of Vatican II. An Asian bishop was more likely to know a bishop in Rome than one from another Asian country.

However, a new kind of epiphany occurred in 1970 when Pope Paul VI visited Manila in the Philippines during a long tour of Asian countries. Virtually all the bishops of South and Southeast Asia gathered for the occasion, the first time many had been together in a single body. Here in the Philippines, whose 32 million Catholics represented almost two-thirds of all Asian Catholics, Paul called for the Church to address the social needs of countless millions of Asians, to make their concerns the Church's own concerns.

Under the leadership of Cardinal Stephen Kim of South Korea and Cardinal Valerian Gracias of India, the Asian bishops began planning an innovative, collegial approach to their task. Working together, eleven national bishops formed a super-umbrella organization, the Federation of Asian Bishops Conferences – FABC. Their purpose was to find a new way of being church.

Vatican officials were opposed to any such body having binding authority on moral and doctrinal issues. Cardinal Kim assured them the new organization would confine itself to pastoral matters, such as social justice, human development and communications. This proved to be an advantage in the years to come. Because there was no binding authority, there was more willingness to work in a cooperative spirit.

In the early years the FABC bishops developed a new ecclesiological approach, one that regards promoting and furthering the Kingdom of God as the aim of all activity and ministry. According to Vietnamese theologian, Peter Phan, under this policy:

"The Church is no longer considered to be the pinnacle or center of Christian life. Rather, it is removed from the center to the periphery and from the top to the bottom. Like the sun around which the earth and the other planets move, the reign of God is at the center around which everything in the Church revolves and to which everything is subordinated. The only reason for the Church to exist is to serve the reign of God."

Activities that promote the reign, such as peacemaking, feeding the poor, witnessing to injustice in oppressive situations, and building responsible families and communities take precedence over making converts or preaching about Jesus. Making the gospel visible comes before talking about it. Only in the concrete manifestations of concern, said the Asian bishops, can life and the person of Jesus Christ be introduced. After that comes theology and the Church.
During the regular plenary assemblies over thirty years, the FABC identified certain characteristics that should mark everything the local Church does. Among them:

- A recognition of the fundamental equality of all members of the local Church and among the local Churches themselves.
- An understanding that all internal Church organization is to be participatory and collaborative and never top-down or dictatorial. According to Phan, “In the Church loyalty is owed to no one but Christ, and a bishop is not beholden to the pope for his episcopal office, nor is he the pope’s vicar. It is much more theologically appropriate to describe the relationship between the local Church and the pope in terms of collegiality and solidarity.”
- A commitment to carrying out and ongoing three-way dialogue with Asian cultures, with Asian religions, and with Asian people, especially the poor. “Being a small remnant, and likely to remain so for the foreseeable future, Christians must journey with the followers of other Asian religions, and together with them – not instead of or, worse, against them – work for the coming of the Kingdom of God,” says Phan. Tom Fox added, “Catholics were no longer to be viewed as the sole possessors of the Kingdom, which went well beyond the Church.”

The new thrust eventually caught the attention of the Vatican. In 1990 Cardinal Joseph Tomko, prefect of the Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples, arrived from Rome to FABC’s fifth plenary assembly. He upbraided the bishops for not making more converts and exerted pressure on FABC leaders to conform to the New Evangelization announced by Pope John Paul II. The bishops resisted, though the Vatican disapproval has taken a toll of their spirit. So also has the Vatican’s practice of replacing retiring Asian bishops with successors who are more conservative or even hostile to this new way of being Church.

In 1998 the Asian bishops were summoned to Rome for a synod with John Paul II. As the title of the event, the pope chose “Jesus Christ the Savior and his mission of love and service in Asia that they may have life and have it more abundantly.” But the bishops held firm to their new model of Church. The Indonesian delegation said, “Jesus Christ is best preached as the Savior by a Church that is in solidarity with the people whose lives are marked by poverty, oppression, discrimination and all kinds of injustice." The Japanese bishops said, "I few stress too much that Jesus Christ is the one and only Savior, we can have no dialogue, common living or solidarity with other religions.”

The Japanese delegation also contended that the synod agenda should not be determined by the curia but by the Asian bishops themselves, that the chairpersons be chosen by the Asian bishops and not the curia, and that women and leaders of other Asian religions be invited. During the actual synod sessions, the bishops got little that they wanted, but they succeeded in presenting a united face in defending the value of the triple dialogue. They were also candid in protesting the micromanagement tendencies of Vatican officials, particularly their handling of translations of liturgical texts. An Indonesian bishop said it makes no sense for bishops’ conferences to translate these texts into their local languages, only to then submit them to the Vatican for approval from “people who do not understand our language. What we need is trust: trust in God and trust in each other.”

In response to the almost two hundred contributions from Asian bishops during the synod, John Paul II repeatedly drove home one major point: “Jesus Christ is humanity’s one and only Savior.” He took no formal action against the FABC approach, but soon after did censure two Catholic theologians, Tissa Balasurya and Jacques Dupuis, whose vision had helped shape the Asian approach. And less than two years later the pope approved the document Dominus Jesus by Cardinal Ratzinger’s Congregation of the Faith. Through the Church alone, it states, the message of Christ comes to all of humanity in a form that is complete, definitive, absolute, total, exclusive, full and unique.

Since the synod, the work of the FABC (including fourteen Asian bishops’ conferences and eleven auxiliary member conferences) moves steadily ahead through books, documents, seminars, assemblies, and news releases. It is not just the Vatican’s lack of approval but the stark economic condition of the continent, the increasing gap between the rich and poor due to globalization, that present the greatest obstacle to further progress at this point.
1/ Adapted from As It Was in the Beginning, by Robert McClory, Crossroad Publishing Company, NY, NY; © 2007 by Robert McClory.

2/ Thomas C. Fox, Pentecost in Asia: A New Way of Being Church, Orbis Books, Maryknoll, NY; © 2002.

3/ Thomas C. Fox, Pentecost in Asia: A New Way of Being Church, Orbis Books, Maryknoll, NY; © 2002.

4/ Thomas C. Fox, Pentecost in Asia: A New Way of Being Church, Orbis Books, Maryknoll, NY; © 2002.

5/ Peter C. Phan, A New Way of Being Church: Perspectives from Asia in Governance, Accountability and the Future of the Catholic Church, ed. Francis Oakley and Bruce Russett, Continuum; NY, NY, © 2004.

6/ Peter C. Phan, A New Way of Being Church: Perspectives from Asia in Governance, Accountability and the Future of the Catholic Church, ed. Francis Oakley and Bruce Russett, Continuum; NY, NY, © 2004.

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8/ Thomas C. Fox, Pentecost in Asia: A New Way of Being Church, Orbis Books, Maryknoll, NY; © 2002.

9/ Following a 1975 synod of bishops, Paul VI asked Cardinal Wotyja to draft a document on evangelization. When submitted, Paul VI expressed his disappointment on the draft and requested an Italian priest, a liberation theologian, to prepare the document that became Evangelli Nuntiandi. When Cardinal Wotyja became John Paul II he took steps to replace Evangelli Nuntiandi with the New Evangelization, citing that the Paul VI’s encyclical was too much based on liberation theology, which in his mind was too communistic in its application.

10/ Thomas C. Fox, Pentecost in Asia: A New Way of Being Church, Orbis Books, Maryknoll, NY; © 2002.

11/ Thomas C. Fox, Pentecost in Asia: A New Way of Being Church, Orbis Books, Maryknoll, NY; © 2002.

12/ Robert McClory, Will Catholics Be Happy in Heaven?, U.S. Catholic, September 2001