



# We are Church

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In many Western countries, Catholics expect to have a priest to lead them in the celebration of Mass every Sunday. Recently, however, with the shortage of priestly vocations, one hears about “priestless” parishes and the closing or merging of traditional parishes.

Many people in the Church in Oceania have never had the fortune of having Mass every Sunday. When Divine Word Missionaries landed first on the coastal regions of Papua New Guinea, many missionaries became itinerant evangelists, leaving catechists in the villages to give instruction and to lead the faithful in prayers. Similarly, when Divine Word Missionaries penetrated the Highlands some sixty years ago, there was no way a priest could be present at all the many “outstations” of a parish at the same time. Inconveniences arise, particularly with transport and communication in the difficult terrain. However, an advantage has been a sense among the Catholic faithful that “We are Church.” Lay people have become accustomed to taking responsibility in the outstation communities, and ensuring that the Good News is proclaimed in word and deed.



The term *Yumi yet i sios* (We are Church) was heard frequently after the “Self Study” of the Catholic Church in Papua New Guinea in the mid-seventies. Since then the term has gone beyond a slogan to become a reality. Lay leaders in Papua New Guinea are better educated, and the official church leadership is gradually being localized, with currently, seven out of twenty- three bishops being national Papua New Guineans.

In 1998, in preparation for the Jubilee Year 2000, the bishops of Papua New Guinea and the Solomon Islands joined with their brother bishops from other parts of Oceania to attend the Special Assembly of the Synod of Bishops in Rome. Following that Synod, Pope John Paul sent a letter to the Church in Oceania—*Ecclesia*—in Oceania. In that letter, and his letter to the universal Church at the beginning of the new millennium—*Novo Millennio Ineunte*, the



Pope called on the leadership of the Church to cooperate with the churches of neighboring countries in planning for the future.

So, in January 2003, the leadership of the Church in Papua New Guinea gathered for a week for the initial gathering of what they called a "General Assembly" of the Catholic Church of Papua New Guinea. It was only an initial gathering, because the Assembly is to continue from January 2003 to July 2004, with participation at the national, diocesan, parish, and community levels. The General Assembly is meant to be an experience of the Church as communion—living, working, praying and celebrating together with Christ at the center.



At the initial gathering ninety-one people attended, including almost all the bishops and delegates from the eighteen dioceses of Papua New Guinea. In order to ensure a better gender balance, dioceses were asked to include at least one woman with their delegates. The gathering was one of motivation, familiarization with the issues and the sharing of ideas on how best to implement the General Assembly in different areas. For example, some dioceses in Papua New Guinea already have pastoral plans guided by the principles of the Better World Movement. Such dioceses will be discussing how they can integrate their own diocesan planning with a pastoral plan together with the other dioceses of the region.

Communities have already produced catechetical videos and books in several languages with plans for group discussions of issues relevant to the Church and society in Papua New Guinea today. The following are only a few of the thirty-five relevant issues to be discussed as a prelude to developing a national pastoral plan.

*Mission as a Personal Call to Proclaim*

*God's Love and Forgiveness*

*Collaborative Ministry*

*Church and Politics*

*Sanctity of Life in a Culture of Violence*

*Children—Jesus' Friends*

*Effectiveness of Catholic Education*

*Living with HIV/AIDS*

*The Marginalized: Gifts to the Community*

*Sacraments: Meeting the Very Person*

*of Jesus Christ*

*Church Groups and Charisms: From Competition to Communion*

*Men in the Church: Bystanders or Participants?*

*Christian Leadership: A Call to Service*

*Liturgy with and without a Priest in*

*Papua New Guinea*

The prayer and discussion will continue until July 2004, when the leadership of the Church will meet again to develop a vision, mission and priorities for pastoral work for the Catholic Church of Papua New Guinea. The bishops believe that by inviting all the Catholic people of the nation to participate in shaping the Church of the future, the Church will be renewed, and better prepared to fulfill its task of evangelization in the new millennium. The faithful are responding with typical enthusiasm, since, after all, "We are Church." ♦