

My Professional Growth through UCIP
Fr. Varghese Paul, SJ

My association with the International Catholic Union of the Press (UCIP) began a quarter of a century ago in 1977 when I became an active member of the Indian Catholic Press Association (ICPA). Then I came to know that the then UCIP Secretary General Fr Pierre Chevalier was keen on expanding the UCIP to Asia. Consequently the appointment of Fr Robert Astorino MM as the UCIP Coordinator for Asia paved the way to the establishment of the UCIP presence in most Asian countries.

My first contact with the UCIP was through the writings of two eminent Catholic editors, namely Fr Beny Aguiar of “The Examiner” of Mumbai and Fr James Kottoor of “The New Leader” of Chennai. They both used to write incisive articles about the UCIP and their participation in the UCIP World Congresses.

But the UCIP became personally alive to me when the first Coordinator of UCIP Asia, Fr Astorino came to India and spoke about the UCIP in the annual general body meetings of ICPA in 1978 and 1979.

The ICPA Meeting of 1979 held at Bangalore was particularly significant because there were some representatives of the Catholic Press from other South Asian countries together with UCIP Asia Coordinator Fr Astorino as observers. The meeting decided to launch a separate Church news service for the South Asian region as Fr Astorino then remarked that the South Asia was vastly different from the other two Asian regions, that is, South East Asia and East Asia.

The Bangalore meeting of 1979 was a transforming experience for me as I was put in charge together with a committee to explore ways and means of starting a Church news service at South Asia level. With my mandate to launch a Church news service for South Asia my contact with UCIP increased. The UCIP through its Asian Coordinator Fr Astorino was a source of inspiration and guidance for me in founding the South Asian Religious News (SAR News) service as its first Executive Director.

My involvement with UCIP was total when I was invited to participate for the first time in the UCIP World Congress at Rome held in 1980. The World Congress was a very enriching experience for me as a journalist and writer. During the Congress as the Executive Director of SAR News I was elected a Council Member of the International Federation Catholic News Agencies (IFCNA).

I left SAR News in 1983 and with it any position in UCIP to take up the Editorship of an integral family magazine ‘DOOT’ in Gujarati. But I continued to be an active member in ICPA and in the South Asian Catholic Press (SACPA). As an office bearer in ICPA, I played an active role in organizing the UCIP World Congress at New Delhi in 1986.

At the New Delhi Congress a new constitution was drawn up for SACPA and I was elected its first President and consequently a Bureau Member of UCIP. This position brought me to the core decision making body of UCIP. During the subsequent three year period, I am happy to note that I participated in the discussions and decisions of launching the Network of Young Journalists and the UCIP Summer University.

With the active support and guidance of the then Secretary General Fr Bruno Holtz, I was able to visit Pakistan and Sri Lanka and meet the Catholic press personnel. My visits were aimed at encouraging the Catholic press personnel to organize and professionalize themselves in the print media ministry.

UCIP through its Secretary General Fr Holtz was an immense help to me in organizing and holding the first fully represented meeting of SACPA at Kathmandu, Nepal in 1988. It was a landmark meeting for SACPA because according to its new constitution drawn up at the New Delhi Congress, all the 19 members were present and actively participated in the meeting together with the Secretary General, Fr Holtz.

Thanks to the generosity of the UCIP and other benefactors I was able to attend all the UCIP World Congresses from 1986. I also continued to be an elected Council Member of the South Asian Region or a UCIP Federation. While witnessing and contributing my mite to the growth and development of UCIP, I have grown professionally in the field of journalism and writing.

The years of the 1980s and 1990s were years of growth and development for UCIP. The International Union reached out to the third world countries of Asia, Africa and Latin America under the able stewardships of great presidents like Dr Hans Sassmann, Mr Jean-Marie Brunot and Mr Gunther Mees and the secretary generals like Fr Bruno Holtz and Mr Joseph Chittilappally.

In the growth of the UCIP as the biggest body of press media personnel in the world and also in rejuvenating it, the young journalists network under its first Coordinator and the present Secretary General Mr Chittilappilly played a great role.

When I joined UCIP, it had some six Federations and five Regions. Subsequently UCIP grew into many regions to cover the entire world and Federations to embrace all Catholics engaged in different areas of the print media. Now a new UCIP Constitution is waiting for the approval of the Holy See.

The impact and effectiveness of the UCIP were also felt around the world through summer universities and in recent years through refresher programmes held in different continents. Thanks to the UCIP, I was able to make my first trip to Africa and participate in the latest UCIP Refresher Programme on Challenges and Impact of Globalisation in Africa. It was a real exposure to the true African situation not only for me but for most of the participants in the Refresher Programme.

The African Refresher Programme held in Harare, Zimbabwe also gave me the opportunity to visit Kenya and Eritrea. Speaking to some Church personnel and a few Catholic journalists in

these African countries I feel keenly that the African countries need professionally trained print media personnel and also an African Catholic News Agency like the Asian SAR News and UCA News. A Catholic news service in Africa can be an invaluable help not only to the Church press but also the secular press in many African countries. I am sure that in these two areas the UCIP can play a very catalytic role.

The UCIP can organize regional and country-wise seminars and workshops in journalism especially in reporting for Catholic youth interested in and working in the print media in Africa. The UCIP can also offer professionals to conduct these seminars and workshops, arrange to sponsor such programmes, as well as train a few youth to specialize in journalism through college and university degrees in different fields of the print media.