

# It Was the Vicar Who Did It

By Sahlan Diver

I was enjoying watching an Agatha Christie murder mystery story on the TV when I suddenly felt disturbed.

The plot had got to the point where a miscellany of village characters had assembled in the vicarage sitting room to try to ascertain who had 'done the 'orrible murder'. Wild accusations were flying about, crackpot theories were being put forward, other characters were trying to display some common-sense, and, amidst it all, there was the heroine, Miss Marple, the placid, white-haired old lady, knitting away quietly, the only one who had any idea of who the murderer really was. It was probably the vicar who did it, we think. It usually does turn out to be the most unlikely character.

What was it about this scene that disturbed me? Something from my past, it felt like. England... the English... middle class people... posh middle class accents... some people trying to be excessively polite and calm while others displayed anger... everyone throwing in their uninformed and ill-considered two-penneth worth... That was it, the Subud group meeting! The resemblance was uncanny.

If Subud had been formed purely to promote the latihan, one would expect group meetings to be parochial affairs without much of significance happening over and above discussion concerning the latihan arrangements, the organisation of social occasions, and the maintenance of premises.

But Subud as directed by Bapak from the 1970s onwards was not like that. Bapak was asking us to change the world by starting enterprises on the large scale with the aim of financing charity projects, developing culture, founding Subud schools and so on. Unfortunately the organisational model that Bapak chose to facilitate these enormous ambitions was the amateur, unqualified, 'volunteer' committee, a model more suited to running a cricket club or philatelic society.

It was inevitable that this couldn't work. No wonder our tested-in officials often seemed bemused, taking most of their term of office 'learning the ropes', eventually departing after 'heartfelt congratulations' to hand over the rigmarole of newsletter shuffling and post-latihan announcements to the next unfortunate incumbent. The rote is still going on today — SICA rep, SD rep, SES rep, SIHA rep. What's it all for?

One thing I noticed when I came to live in Ireland was that there was a dominant subset of members who obviously adored long committee meetings, not because they were the least bit interested in what was being discussed, but because it gave them an opportunity just to enjoy the company of other members.

I tried to fight against this habit, at least in the context of Congresses, when I became Congress organiser, by introducing a new kind of Congress, with just one shortened committee meeting and the rest of the time filled with latihan-related workshops and a wide variety of imaginative and enjoyable cultural activities, the emphasis being very much on member participation. I hoped this might activate a new spirit in

Ireland. From the point of view of numbers attending Congress, the new formula was a great success, with attendance going up from twenty to eighty by the end of my third year as organiser. However, from another point of view the experiment was an utter failure. I remember turning up the year following my last Congress to find we were firmly back to the same tired old formula and the same tired old faces, to long, inefficient, inconsequential meetings and small numbers of attendees.

There have always been two types of Subud member: those who just want to do latihan, socialise and use the benefits of latihan in the context of their individual lives, and those who believe that there is something in Bapak's advice for us to 'put the latihan into practise' in an organised way in the world. Can these two types co-exist? I believe they can, but a new organisational model is needed, one that recognises and feeds off the difference, rather than trying to force everyone into the same collective, happy-family basket.

Instead of the group model, why not organise the latihan through a collection of local projects? Each project is initiated by a team of dedicated people who seek to set up facilities for latihan, but also to promote the other aims Bapak recommended: enterprise (perhaps using the micro-credit model), local charity work, and the sponsoring of cultural activities. Unlike in the past, the enterprise efforts would be on a meaningful local scale, not pouring millions into questionable and risky remote big-business ventures. As well as the dedicated organising team for each 'project', there would be the others, the people who just want to do latihan and get on with their own lives without obligation or commitment to anything else.

When such a model is described, people seem unable to free themselves of habitual ways of thinking. They refer the model back to the Subud group, the only model with which they are familiar. 'Wouldn't this create a two-tier group?', they say. 'Wouldn't there be inevitable pressure on the "latihan-only" group members to support the wider activities?' And so on. Reasonable questions in the context of a group membership model, but let's be clear that what I am proposing is very definitely *not* a group membership model. There would be no social unit called 'the group' whose members latihan together and who can then consider whether to become active in or lend support to projects. Instead the model works the other way round. There is the project and its organisers, and there are those who just want to turn up and do latihan at the facilities provided by the project. There is no membership, so the question of whether the members feel obliged to support the project does not arise, because there are no members.

The proposed model is not so unusual. Take Eastern practises like Qi-gong, Yoga and so on. There are many enthusiasts who dedicate time and effort to running classes in these practises. You can turn up and take part in the classes without feeling that you need to become a member of anything, to sign yourself up to a particular organisation or philosophy. Neither do the enthusiasts pressure you to assist them in their wider efforts of promoting and spreading these practises.

Ironically, freeing people from the burden of feeling they have to be supportive might lead to very much more support and appreciation being offered for the project's activities, and there is no reason why pure latihaners might not cross over and become active in each project's wider aims. And dropping the requirement for people to become members, to identify themselves with and participate in the organisation's

aims would have one major advantage: The clubbish, religious and cult-like tendencies of Subud would be unable to flourish in this more informal, relaxed environment. Consequently, the latihan could then open out to the majority of the populace: you know — the ones who don't want to be seen getting involved in anything 'strange'.

Think about it. And, by the way, we were fooled again, it wasn't the vicar who did the murder, it was the vicar's wife.

Footnote:

One of my editors asked some questions about the proposed new organisational model. I have tried to avoid turning my article into a complete exposition of an alternative system, though obviously there would be many issues needing to be thought about. In brief, I would answer my editor's questions as follows:

Q: It is still not clear to me whether there is one team per project, or if the same team is responsible for the latihan premises and all the other projects that might be initiated.

A: I see there being one team per 'centre', which has the aim of establishing facilities, publicising the latihan, and also trying to establish sub-projects in enterprise, charity, culture, education, depending on local conditions and resources. The sub-projects would be run by one or more specialists in the relevant field.

Q: Without a local organisation, how would social events be organised?

A: This is not a group/membership model, so there is no reason per se why people should want to socialise. Would you, for example, feel an immediate need for organised socialising with the people in your yoga class? However, given that at least some people would be attending latihan for the long-term, there is no reason why on an ad hoc basis they couldn't form a committee for these kinds of activities. But there would still be retained the advantage of a clear separation between the organisation of those kinds of parochial low-commitment activities and the organisation of the project development.

Q: What about helpers?

A: We would probably agree that newcomers to the latihan need advice and help in the early stages, and that the introduction of the latihan to new people needs to be handled well and not in a careless manner, and that people of any level of experience with the latihan sometimes need to test, and so on. So some system is needed. What should be different, I believe, is that there should be no political influence from the helpers or their equivalents, through the means of testing organisational appointments and decisions made. Compared to Subud, the helpers would have greatly reduced status in the organisation. They would be appointed/voted-in solely for the purpose of maintaining the good practise of the latihan.

Q: What about raising funds to pay the rent and upkeep? Would people just pay a fee determined by the organising team?

A: Again, local conditions will influence how this is best done. I have one particular idea on this but it is too detailed to explain effectively here — a future article is needed.

Q: How would the latihan-only people get to hear about the other activities of the organising team(s)?

A: These would be publicised in the normal way: newsletters, web-sites, and so on.

Q: It's not clear to me also whether it's an all-or-nothing deal. Can you support the latihan premises project without supporting the charity project, or support enterprises but not charity, etc.?

A: The individual latihan attendees are free to take an interest in whatever they want, or not. There is no membership and therefore no sign-up to an agreed set of aims. It is the project organisers who establish the aims, for which they alone are responsible, and their primary aim should always be the provision of facilities for latihan.