

## **LASALLIAN WOMEN: PATHWAYS ON THE VOCATIONAL JOURNEY TOWARDS ASSOCIATION**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Lasallian Women have increasingly taken up the whole idea of the association for the mission. Women now compose 55% of all Lasallian collaborators working in education. This study offers a reading of Lasallian association based on the experience of Lasallian women who lead animation processes in the Institute of the Brothers of the Christian Schools, within instances such as the International Council for the Lasallian Association and Mission (CIAMEL). Some opportunities and recommendations are offered in the face of upcoming assemblies of discernment and government of the Lasallian Family as a whole.

**Key-words:** Lasallian Association for mission, Lasallian Family, Lasallian Women, CIAMEL, vocational journey, future of association, witness, empowerment. Meaningful formation, community experiences, Lasallian schools, Lasallian ministries, structures of governance, leadership, Lasallian charism.

### **Context for the Study**

Lasallian association for mission has been a topic of study, reflection and debate for a number of years. There continues to be a diverse understanding of association around the globe today. The 43rd General Chapter identified the need for a period of “a multiplicity of experiments” regarding the practice of association (Brothers of the Christian Schools, 2000, p.9). As a result, during these intervening years, some Districts have developed a clear path and plan for association, some are comfortable with informality, others have not addressed association at all. (Brothers of the Christian Schools, 2010, 2014) The understanding of the word itself: *association* has often been found to be imperfect and has created stumbling blocks for being explicit about fostering understanding and action (Johnston, 2004).

There is now an extensive corpus of research that has studied the history and development of association that provides 21<sup>st</sup> Century Lasallians with a direct connection back to De La Salle and the first Brothers (Botana, 2005). However, there is a need for more scholarly work to grasp the

present-day experience of association, especially as lived by lay people. In fact, it has been only less than a decade since the Institute's Lasallian Research and Resource Service initiated the first type of formal studies of the lay experience of association (Muñoz, 2010; 2011a; 2011b). A handful of more studies (Delaney, 2016; Hines, 2018; Kopra, 2012) concerning various aspects of the lived experience of association by different groups of lay people have since emerged.

Another development in recent years within the Lasallian Family is the overdue recognition of the role of women in the founding story and the growing appreciation of the contribution of women in the Lasallian Family today (Donohue-Lynch, 2018a; Eubank, 2017). "Women funded schools, gave shelter and provided food, offered guidance and sent their own children to the schools. The contributions of these women were instrumental in helping the early schools survive" (Eubank, 2017, p. 37-38). Women make up over half of Lasallian Partners (55%) within the Lasallian Family (Brothers of the Christian Schools, 2018). Young women and girls attend Lasallian schools and ministries around the globe, although statistics on the exact numbers are not readily available or reliable. There have been several important gatherings of Lasallian women since 2012. These gatherings have been an opportunity for women to come together to share their experience of vocation and mission, build networks and communities of support, and vision and plan for the role of women into the future.

There is also a growing attentiveness to young women entrusted to our ministries and initiatives like the Lasallian Women of Hope and The Association of Lasallian Mothers of Education which provide explicit outreach and support to women and girls in the Lasallian Family (Donohue-Lynch, 2018b). Poverty, human trafficking, child marriage, migration, and other social justice issues are exacerbated by gender inequality and have a devastating impact on women and girls and their access to education (UN Women, 2018). With a commitment to reaching the most vulnerable, it follows that the Lasallian commitment to women and girls will grow if there is truly an attentiveness to reading the signs of the times. In fact the 2017 Lasallian Global Women's Symposium final report brings to the Institute's attention that "women are the world's poorest and most oppressed citizens, and this is a reality to which our mission must respond" (2017, p.10).

## **The Women of CIAMEL**

In light of the need for continual assessment and reflection on the state of association and in response to the need to appreciate the role of women in the Lasallian Family, it is relevant to explore the following question: How does association, as expressed by the five fundamental elements of association for mission feature and support the Lasallian vocational journey of women? The five fundamental elements, "identify the experience of Lasallian Association and promote unity in the ongoing, dynamic process of association across the Institute's Districts and Regions" (Brothers of the Christian Schools, 2010, p.23). Nuanced from the five criteria describing the characteristics of an associate laid out in the documents of the 43<sup>rd</sup> General Chapter, the elements below help to offer guidance as we as a Lasallian Family understand, through our Lasallian Vocation, how we belong to each other and to the mission. The five fundamental elements of Lasallian Association are:

1. Association exists for the mission.
2. Association implies being a member of a community for the mission.
3. Association results from experience and is a dynamic journey, not an acquired status.
4. Association stems from faith, vocation, and state of life.
5. Association presupposes a freely made commitment.

While one study cannot possibly account for every woman's experience of association, it is important to get a snapshot and sample from women from each of the five Regions of the Institute. This snapshot will offer insights and recommendations concerning the ways in which the lived experience of association can support Lasallian women on their vocational journeys. For purposes of this work, the women of CIAMEL provided their insights and experiences of association and vocation. Their experiences may not mirror the experiences of all women in their Regions and the intention is not to separate lay men and women or cause division, but rather take this unique moment in the history of the Lasallian Family, in the course of this jubilee year, to consider one group (women) and their experience. Based on survey responses collected, important themes can be culled for all Lasallians, and in particular women who continue to be underrepresented on most structures and in leadership roles globally in the Lasallian Family (Hines, 2018). This work aims to also contribute to the body of work focused on the role and experience of women in the Lasallian Family today. I am grateful for the work of Dr. Sue Hines (2018) about the experience of the first-generation of International Lasallian women leaders, and Ms. Katie Delaney (2016) and her work on the Lasallian vocational journeys of Young Lasallian women in RELAN.

The women who serve on the International Council for Lasallian Association and the Educational Mission (CIAMEL) are an appropriate representative group that addresses the demographic focus of this work. CIAMEL was established following calls for a deliberative structure animating the Lasallian Educational Mission composed by Brothers and Partners by the 2<sup>nd</sup> International Mission Assembly and the 45<sup>th</sup> General Chapter (Brothers of the Christian Schools, 2013; 2014). CIAMEL's statutes mandate that the composition of the Council be two-thirds Partner and one-third Brother. With several new appointments made by Brother Superior in the last year, CIAMEL closely represents the percentage of women in the Lasallian Family with just under 50% of its members being Lasallian women.

Worth highlighting is the fact that while each experience of association and vocation is unique and one journey cannot represent the experience of everyone, threads of commonality can inform direction for further reflection and action. For purposes of this work, the women of CIAMEL completed an electronic survey with five topics:

1. Professional background and biographical information.
2. Discovery of their Lasallian Vocation.
3. The role association and the five fundamental elements played in their vocational journey.
4. Their thoughts on women's experience of association in their Regions.
5. Their hopes for the future of association.

Their responses create a picture of the various pathways toward association they have traveled over decades of service in the Lasallian Family. They represent women from various states of life: single, married, mothers. The varied professional backgrounds and leadership roles held by the

women on CIAMEL is impressive. All of the women have served, or are currently serving, on District, Regional, international committees and councils. All are very well-formed Lasallians with multiple formation experiences. What is most striking and clear, even through written responses, is the profound level of commitment to mission they have and how this commitment is made manifest by the witness of their Lasallian Vocation. This sentiment was also shared by the Lasallian women of Hines' (2018) research. She noted that, "It is significant to see the genuine affection the women expressed for the mission and charism, as if it was a deep personal relationship with another person" (Hines, 2018, p.13). The same can be said of the women of CIAMEL.

Rose Laetitia Nanéma-Dala, from Région Lasallienne Afrique-Madagascar (RELAF), and the District of West Africa, serves as Director of La Salle Badenya Ouagadougou Primary School in Burkina-Faso. She began her Lasallian journey as a teacher and catechist. Her Lasallian Vocation is animated by her service to vulnerable children who are stateless and empowering women who lack access to education. She was a delegate to the 2<sup>nd</sup> International Mission Assembly, and is a member of the Lasallian Mission Secretariat for her District and the Association of Lasallian Mothers of Education.

Antuaneth Jessica Ortega García, from Región Latinoamericana Lasallista (RELAL), serves in the District Bolivia-Perú. She is the Executive Secretary of the Lasallian Educational Mission (MEL) and her multiple responsibilities include participation on the MEL council and monitoring and accompanying processes of management, academics and formation in the Lasallian schools of Peru. Her involvement began as a teacher at De La Salle, Arequipa City and has grown from there. She was a member of the planning committee for Lasallian Women's Symposium of RELAL.

Alisa Macksey, Région Lasallienne de l'Amérique du Nord (RELAN), serves as the Executive Director of the First Generation Initiative at St. Mary's University of Minnesota and is Associate Editor for the AXIS: Journal for Lasallian Higher Education. She is also Chair of CIAMEL. An alumna of St. Mary's College of California her journey of association began as a Lasallian Volunteer living in a shared community with Brothers and other Partners. This led her to serve as Director of the Lasallian Volunteers program in RELAN and as Program Director for the Region. She was a delegate to the 2<sup>nd</sup> International Mission Assembly and participated in the International Women's Symposium in Thailand in 2012.

Fritzie Ian P De Vera, from the Pacific-Asia Regional Conference (PARC) and the Lasallian East Asia District (LEAD), serves as Vice President for Mission at De La Salle University (DLSU) in the Philippines and is responsible for Lasallian mission programs. She has also served as Dean of Students and was the head of Campus Ministry and Social Action at DLSU. She is an alumna of La Salle. She was a delegate to the 2<sup>nd</sup> International Mission Assembly and is a Lasallian Partners' Council member of the Philippine Lasallian Family.

Colette Allix, from Région Lasallienne Européenne-Méditerranéenne (RELEM) and the District of France, serves as Delegate of the Brother Visitor for Lasallian institutions in the west of France. Her responsibilities include monitoring all aspects of mission in nearly forty ministries in ten Dioceses in the District. She began as a teacher in a Lasallian School and has served in school

administration as a Director. She was a delegate to the 2<sup>nd</sup> International Mission Assembly and also instrumental in developing the La Salle Educational Fraternity launched in 2011.

### Threads that weave the story

The stories of these five women leaders in the Lasallian Family share threads that make up the diverse fabric of the Lasallian Vocation and its manifestation in association for mission. The themes which will be highlighted and discussed in this work are:

- *Entry-points*: The role of welcome, witness, and invitation as empowerment to foster belonging.
- *Formation*: The fundamental role of formation experiences, mentors, and faith development to foster commitment and co-responsibility.
- *Alignment with the mission*: The internalization of the shared Lasallian Educational Mission as one's life purpose.

*Entry-points: The role of welcome, witness, and invitation as empowerment to foster belonging.*

Reflecting on their Lasallian journeys, the women identified the moment they felt welcome and accepted at a ministry or a community to be central to their developing sense of belonging and commitment to the mission. Alisa shares, "as someone who was not raised Catholic, I was pleasantly surprised at my acceptance in the Lasallian community in Kansas City." This is echoed by Colette who recalls how she was "welcomed with [her] husband to the community" in Garges-lès-Gonesse. In Jessica's story it is the welcome of the educational community at De La Salle, Arequipa City that moved her. She recalls how she "found teachers who guided [her] and introduced [her] to the meaning of Lasallian pedagogy and spirituality."

These experiences of welcome and acceptance are then imbued with more meaning when supported by authentic witness. Alisa shared that, "it was this witness of support that always made me feel welcome as I am, into the Lasallian mission." In the case of four of the women, they refer to the witness of the De La Salle Brothers as a key element contributing to their journey, and in most cases they name a specific individual. For instance, Colette highlights her first director at Issy-les-Moulineaux in Paris, the late Brother Jean-François Morlier. She recalls, "as a young teacher I then realized that every day he witnessed to his vocation and to what Lasallian education is all about by acting with kindness, trust, joy, by always being present with our students who were very challenging." However, it is important to emphasize the fact that witness and inspiration can come from fellow Partners too. Jessica named a colleague from her early days within the Lasallian Family as one of those key figures and mentors. Jessica recounted, "I came to know my Lasallian Vocation when, upon arriving at De La Salle Arequipa City, Perú, I met a teacher, Hilda Guevara, who would work with me in the grade; she shared with me her lived experience and lessons learned throughout her teaching life alongside the Brothers. I received from her by osmosis the charism, the Lasallian spirit and pedagogy."

The participants in the study also identified how this notion of entry-point is lived multiple times along one's journey as they were invited and empowered to take on new roles and responsibilities.

Like the participants in Hines' study (2018), the women of CIAMEL shared how some of these invitations were sometimes a surprise to them, but also critical in helping them discover their gifts and talents. These invitations included "daring to propose new initiatives," or moving to a new school, or taking on a new leadership position, or changing the nature of one's ministry altogether. Some of these invitations were also described as completely coincidental. Colette spoke about being asked to deliver a seminal presentation at the launch of the La Salle Educational Fraternities just because "the group had decided that the two youngest ones should present the text." These opportunities to move beyond the present and take on new roles and responsibilities also present an invitation for introspection and interiorization. Jessica expressed this clearly when she reflected on her invitation to leadership through the lens of vocation. "At each stage, I was assuming more responsibility in the work and for the work; these instances were always a motive for internal questioning. 'What does God want to say to me in this mission that He puts in my way?' " This type of soul-searching and profound reflection is usually most effective within the context of quality transformative formation experiences.

*Formation: The fundamental role of formation experiences, mentors, and faith development to foster commitment and co-responsibility.*

If acceptance and the power of authentic witness at entry-point are pivotal to one's attraction and sense of belonging to the Lasallian Educational Mission and the Lasallian Family, the formative experience is essential to the development of the notion of commitment that spans deeper and broader than one's duties. For Fritzie, it was thanks to "Lasallian formation programs and gatherings of Lasallian partners all over the world" that she acquired "a deeper understanding of faith, service and communion." Jessica describes the most significant formation programs in her life. She recalls how the 10-day long experience was "filled with profound reflection" and allowed her to "look interiorly at the Lasallian world around [her], concretizing the step of intense revival of the call to live the mission, a profound renewal of [her] Lasallian Vocation." When the time was right, formation programs have allowed Colette to "deepen [her] understanding of the Lasallian project in today's world" and "to put words, ideas or insights into the light of our constantly renewed educational tradition to meet the needs of today." Jessica and Alisa highlight the experience of retreat work. In particular Alisa identifies how "women in RELAN have collaborated to support one another through women's retreats in the various Districts within the Region." This points toward another key aspect of the formative process, namely: accompaniment. In her account, Alisa elaborates on the role of "peers and Brothers encouraging, supporting, and helping [her] realize [her] vocation." Rose references the "sharing of Lasallian spirituality" with Brothers and the parents of students. Faith and faith formation are important aspects of the vocational growth of this group of women.

Jessica highlights the "formation in religious practice" she received from her family during her upbringing and how this was the foundation on which her exposure and commitment to mission "brought back to [her] the spiritual fire... like a path that God set out for [her]." The Lasallian Family is broader than those who profess a Catholic and Christian faith. Alisa, says she "was grateful for the Brothers, as they explained they wanted to help [her] to grow in [her] faith life... they wanted [her] to seek ways to explore and deepen [her] faith." Colette, paraphrasing the Founder, calls attention to her faith development as she responded "from commitment to commitment." For instance she shared the role Brother Georges, from the community in Garges-

lès-Gonesse, played in her Confirmation. For the group, prayer and faith are essential supports, “especially if prayer is communal.” Rose expresses this best when she points out that her Catholic Christian faith is strengthened “through the contact with children, young people and parents.” This sense of self-alignment with the mission is described by all five women.

*Alignment with the mission: The internalization of the shared Lasallian Educational Mission as one's life purpose.*

For these five leaders in the Lasallian Family, at some point their involvement in the mission has seemed to overflow from one aspect of their lives to leave a mark on who they are personally, professionally and spiritually. Fritzie expressed this in the following way, “I have a deeper understanding and appreciation of what I should do, my purpose and meaning in life. I see my work as something that makes me a better person, a better mother, a better wife and a better friend. I see my work to have more meaning and purpose.” Jessica goes on to say that the “Lasallian heritage was becoming part of [her] work and part of [her] state of life.” Rose comments on how her practices visibly give expression to her prayer and mission-driven decisions like making “education of fragile and disadvantaged children a priority and a personal challenge.” The Lasallian educational mission, in all its diversity of expression and unity of purpose, is also a strong source of inspiration and drive for these women. Colette sees the Spirit at work and finds meaning in the mission through “the number of educators who quietly engage themselves simply touched by the difficulties and distress of young people.”

Community experiences that bring those who share a commitment to this common mission can become moments that offer insight and awareness of one's call, and as Colette put it, allow one to express the educational mission “through word and prayer.” This sense of belonging to community also brings a sense of additional responsibility. Jessica explains how she feels « an ever greater responsibility within the work that commits and impels [her] to work hard so as not to disappoint those who trust in [her] performance as a person and as a professional. In some way one has to wonder if that reflects the weight of the realization that, like Professor Hilda Guevara was a source of inspiration and guidance for her, she is now a point of reference for others. »

In fact, a number of the women commented how they now find themselves inviting and welcoming others along their vocational journeys toward association. One of Colette's core responsibilities is to “bring the spirit of our Founder as close as possible to the heads of schools, management bodies and educational communities” she accompanies. She breaks that apart and describes how she supports those she works with “to stimulate, to give a soul, to help find the words to express the spirituality that is expressed through [their] work in the Lasallian school.” Jessica sees herself as “a guide” and a “guardian angel” for young people. Rose is actively involved in the accompaniment of former students.

The participants' experience of association has been marked by a warm welcome, authentic witness and empowering invitations from the onset of their journeys. Through transformative formation experiences, community, and accompaniment, they have since been able to foster a deep sense of commitment and co-responsibility for the Lasallian mission and vocation. They now find themselves and their lives' purpose aligned with the Lasallian Educational Mission. Their witness

affirms the presence of the five elements of association as threads weaving throughout their Lasallian vocational stories.

## **Women and Association**

In reflecting on the experience of other women in their Regions and the future of association the responses were more varied. In France, Colette explains that with De La Salle Educational Fraternities gender is not taken into account and women are actively involved in leadership roles. More than the need to be attentive to gender, she feels there is a need to be attentive and invitational to those with little or no faith life. Jessica also mentioned the generational challenge of engaging young people and faith as a priority.

Several of the women acknowledged that there are women in leadership roles around their Regions, but there is still more work to be done in this area. In RELAN, for example, Alisa feels there is still a “glass ceiling for women, very few hold the top leadership positions in Lasallian ministries.” Fritzie recognizes that “more women are being recognized for the work that they do for the mission. They are Lasallian women who are change makers and initiators of the Lasallian mission.” For Rose, association in RELAF “is slowly experienced by women and remains a priority and a common challenge.” She feels a network and structure for association will help and sees the benefit of future Regional and International gatherings of Lasallian women. This is echoed further by Fritzie; “Development of association will help Lasallian women deepen their commitment to the mission. They will see their roles in the family and in the school to be integrated.”

## **Reflection**

The reflections offered by the women of CIAMEL at times explicitly connect with the five fundamental elements of association and at other times implicitly reflect them. More research and continued dialogue is necessary to clarify and hone the understanding and experience of Association in each Region. This will ensure the Lasallian Family can effectively articulate what is meant by Association effectively. As stated in Circular 461, “new adaptations and experiences will continue to enrich these five fundamental elements” (Brothers of the Christian Schools, 2010, p. 23).

The highlighted threads that emerge from the reflections of the women of CIAMEL, suggest that pathways toward association need to feature meaningful formation and community experiences that can foster deeper understanding and authentic commitment to the mission. These pathways should at all times aim to accompany all Lasallians toward a sense of alignment between their life’s purpose and faith on one hand and how these are sustained through the mission on the other. These pathways ought to remind all that the mission is shared and lived with others locally and globally and therefore are dependent on human relationships which are open, welcoming and empowering. The goal of these experiences and structures is to sustain individuals along a continuous process of self-discovery leading them toward wholeness and salvation.

These threads echo the results of other research into the experience of lay people and association.

For instance, Kopra (2012) highlights the role of mission, formation, community, and vocation as he delves into the experience of lay men and women in the Legacy District of San Francisco. These similarities and connections can contribute to a better understanding of that which is found to be at the core of the associative experience at the local level. This could possibly indicate further convergence at the macro, Institute, level than previously thought. Such convergence would give the Lasallian Family specific areas of focus as it becomes more intentional in its efforts to foster pathways toward association. Perhaps there is more that unites than divides in the Lasallian Family. The diversity expressed by the women of CIAMEL confirms that more extensive qualitative and quantitative study and reflection about the experience of association by women needs to be conducted.

### **Opportunities and Recommendations**

The demographics of the Lasallian Family continue to call us to be attentive to the number of women who are contributing to the stability, and sustainability of the mission. The time has come to ensure a representative voice of this majority is heard in structures of governance and mission at all levels. Ministry, District and Regional leadership must be more reflective of the gender representation in the Lasallian Family. Councils and governance structures also need to show gender parity to ensure that all who identify as having a Lasallian Vocation feel valued and heard (Lasallian Global Women's Symposium, 2017). Brother Superior asked the Lasallian Family to "suggest concrete ways to incorporate more women into mission-related governmental structures at the local, District, and Institute levels of transformational leadership" (Schieler, 2017, p. 32). This intentionality of promoting Lasallian women to leadership positions will inevitably have a positive effect on young women and girls in our ministries who will see women in leadership, joyfully living their Lasallian Vocation.

Young women and girls attend Lasallian schools and ministries around the globe. However, reliable statistics from all Districts are not readily available of the exact number. An accurate account should be taken of the number of women, young women and girls who are involved in the mission at all levels so as to better recognize their contribution and assess their needs. "The tremendous influence of women on modern Lasallian education is an under-researched portion of the heritage of the Lasallian family" (Eubank, 2017, p. 43). Another important voice that we have not heard from in research that is easily accessible is the that of Lasallian Religious Congregations of women. There is a need to hear their stories and glean lessons from their experience of association and Lasallian Vocation.

A continued call for all in the Lasallian Family and an area for local realities, Districts and Regions, and the Institute to be attentive to is the critical need to develop pathways toward association that fit cultural realities. Where there is clarity and structures for association, which is not the same as a call for uniformity, there will be greater opportunity for accessibility and equal representation. Where there has been little to no movement, or where growth has become stagnant, reopening the conversation about pathways toward association is needed. This is not a need to be taken lightly, but rather to be considered critical for mission survival in parts of the Institute.

## Conclusion

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The flexibility and time for experimentation regarding association that was called for by the 43<sup>rd</sup> General Chapter has been necessary and sensitive to the various cultural realities present in the Institute. The Lasallian Family needs to be attentive to the signs of the times, and be realistic about the reality of the Institute. Attention must be paid to the fact that in order to invite more people to consider the commitment of having a Lasallian Vocation, we must be attentive to creating pathways toward association. It will be those with a Lasallian Vocation, whether they be Brothers, Associates, or committed Lasallian Partners, who will be responsible for ensuring the mission in the future.

A key group planning for this future is CIAMEL. I want to thank the women who serve on CIAMEL for the witness of their vocation. They are educators, administrators, formators, mentors and leaders. They are partners, wives, mothers, sisters, daughters and friends. They are women of faith and zeal whose dedication to the Lasallian Charism is very clear. Their commitment to serving *together and by association* is a model for all Lasallians, especially their passion for service with the poor and vulnerable. They are examples of the potential that exists when women are empowered to leadership and invited to be at the table. We are blessed and grateful for their journey toward association- a journey that benefits all in the Lasallian Family.

## For Reflection and Discussion:

1. What is intentionally being done to ensure equal representation of women in leadership and structures in your District and Region? What lessons can you learn from where this is happening effectively?
2. How can well-formed, Lasallian women support other women on the journey toward association? What structures and resources are needed at the local and District level to support this?
3. How can developing pathways toward association at the local, District, Regional and International levels be pushed further to invite more people to a commitment to mission and the Lasallian Vocation? How are those who see themselves as having a Lasallian Vocation being identified, supported and accompanied?

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