

The Lasallian charism is no longer just that of the Brothers. It has become a shared charism and, in doing so, is perhaps one of the greatest successes of all. The Lasallian expression *together and by association* expresses the very vibrant and authentic relationship that exists between Brothers and their partners in the mission. The fruits of this are evident in the manner in which the mission has been conducted and continued. Genuine participation in and for the mission is seen globally.

However, in acknowledging that, how then does that sharing in the mission translate to shared responsibility at all levels and can that be seen within Institute structures? There is the obvious matter that the Institute must comply with Canon Law and its mandates.⁵ However, perhaps we should be mindful of not seeing that as an impediment to progressive options.

To Promote New Leadership among Brothers and Lasallians

As called for in *Circular 470*, we have been asked,

to promote new leadership among Brothers and Lasallians, capable of boldly and creatively discerning Institute responses in view of society and the Church of the 21st century.⁶

It is widely acknowledged, and backed up by research, that diversity in attributes, skills, gender, and race is key to good governance and performance.

It is important also to consider how Lasallians (Brothers and partners) are readied for their roles within the structures required. There is much stated in my own District about both the diminishing number of Brothers and their aging – and with respect, I would suggest that it is spoken about too frequently. Yet where there are younger Brothers, they appear to lack awareness of the skills and attributes that they will need if they are to be leaders in the future.

An example of this was when I was in Pakistan in late 2017. I was meeting with a group of Brothers. There was discussion about their likely responsibilities in the future. One of the younger Brothers challenged me with the question, “how can we be readied for those responsibilities if we don’t even know what is required to be a Brother Visitor or on Councils?” It is a very valid point. How are they and partners to know what is necessary if there is not a defined criteria or, for lack of a better term, position descriptions?

It is important to consider that for any structure to be successful, there must be clarity as to what is required from within the leadership roles, both for those who are in them now, but also for those who will need to fill them in the future.

The promotion of leadership requires us also to consider how such leadership aligns with structures. How sustainable is it to have distinct and separate District Councils (Brothers only) and more broadly inclusive Mission Councils? How do we determine if separation of functions is a better option than one governance body, equipped with skills as well as being diverse in its make-up?

Why is the continuation of Mission Assemblies at District and International levels to which Brothers and their partners are invited, and which are then followed by Chapters for Brothers only, a better option than a combined Assembly or Chapter? Ultimately, the needs of the mission – those it serves as well as those who share in its delivery – should be the determining factors of any structure.

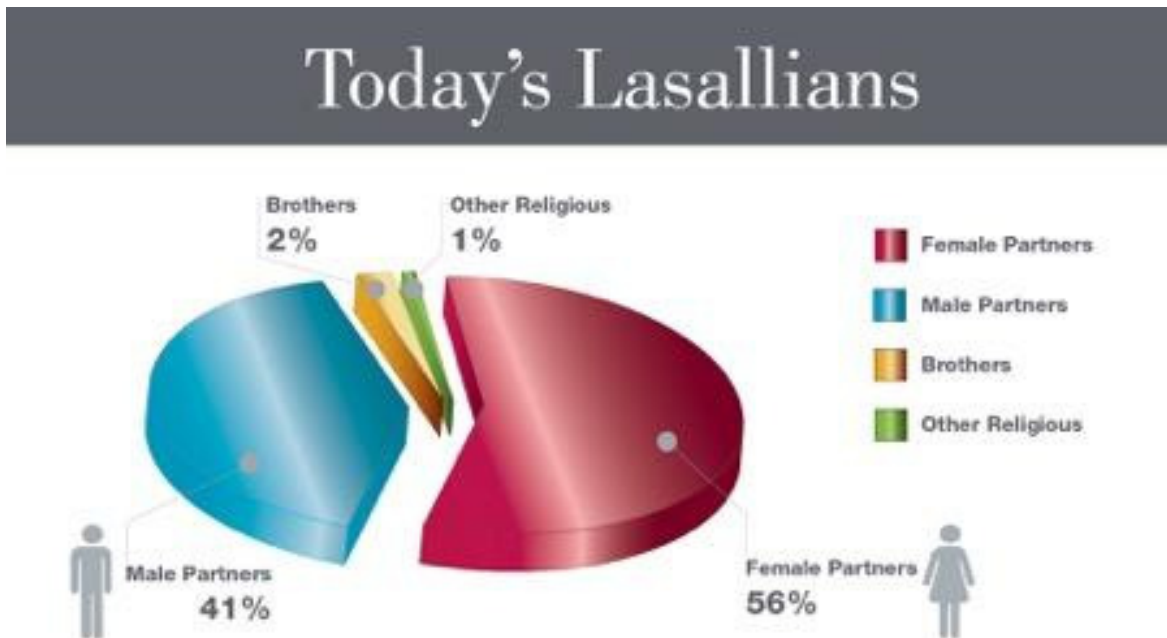
And in the context of the needs of those who share in the mission, we must acknowledge the role of women and consider how their contribution has evolved and what that will also mean for the future, for leadership, and for structures.

The Role of Women in the Mission

At the post World War II General Chapter when reflecting on the difficulties of keeping the schools in France working, the following remark was made: “Women have become an unfortunate necessity.”⁷ We may look at that quote and think, well that was some time ago and a lot has changed; but has it? Research undertaken by Dr. Sue Hines of Saint Mary’s University of Minnesota entitled “The Lived Experience of First-Generation International Lasallian Women Leaders,” released in late 2018, highlights that we may not have progressed as far as necessary.

A participant involved in the study shared, “I can remember the first day of the first meeting I went to when one of the Brothers got up and walked out just because of my presence in the room. It was quite shocking to many. I think about the second or third time, one of the Brothers in the group said to me, and I will never forget this because I can remember it verbatim, “The reason we are losing the Brothers’ vocations is because of people like you who are taking all of the good jobs. So, what is there for a young Brother to aspire to?”

I am sure we would all challenge the narrowness of that thinking, for there is of course another way to be looking at that. What mission would there be today without women?



Why should women not have the same rights to aspiration as others? Fifty-six percent of those involved in the mission are women. They have been and continue to be the fastest growing demographic of Lasallians.

Women have always been involved in the mission. After all, who was it that sent Adrian Nyel to seek out the Founder? Madame de Maillefer. Who was it that advised, or rather told, the Founder to return to his ministry when he was disheartened, exhausted, ill, and sick of battling the bishops? Louise Hours of Parmenie. The Founder acknowledged that his connection with Louise was one of the greatest graces God ever gave him.⁸

As Louise stated, “You must not abandon the family whose father God made you. This work is yours. You must persevere in it until the end of your life.”⁹ We might consider if we would be here at all if the Founder had not listened to Louise.

So why then when women have been involved with this ministry from the very beginning, when women have become the single biggest group of Lasallians, why then do we continue to see them significantly under-represented in leadership at all levels? Why is it that when compared to national and international statistics, women in leadership roles within Lasallian ministries are lower, and not just by a small margin? I would suggest that there are a number of reasons.

The structures of the Institute have not kept pace with contemporary best practice. When we consider global organizations the size of the Institute, it wouldn't be accepted to have all male leadership and governance at the highest level, indeed at any level. But that is what we have, as do other male religious congregations.

It may be that is the way things are because of Canon Law or the by-laws of the Institute; but they were developed at a different time and in a very different world. It would surely be wrong not to at least look to how things can be changed. After all, Pope Francis has asked the global theological community to reflect upon ways in which the inclusion of women in the decision-making of the Church can be advanced.

Such openness to change may well have been driven by significant breaches of trust within the Church, in particular those related to child sexual abuse. Whilst there are multiple reasons as to the contributing causes to this painful reality, it has been acknowledged that they include: the Church's hierarchical structure, poor governance, lack of women in leadership roles, and a culture of secrecy.

It may be that women, by their nature, have what are known as feminine or soft behaviors – that is, they can be quiet, nurturing, co-operative, non-competitive, and wait to be invited to participate. These attributes may mean that they lack visibility – that their skills and competencies are not recognized. Such lack of recognition can be by women themselves as well as others. But we must recognize and acknowledge that women are often more competent than men with emotions and communication, essential elements when dealing with young people and also in leadership.

It might also be that women have not yet reached a place of truly seeing this as a shared mission. In some cultures or contexts women may more readily defer to Brothers, or elevate the views or opinions of a Brother or Brothers out of respect.

We must also acknowledge that in an international context we have very real cultural barriers to equality for women. We must ensure this is taken into consideration when we seek to engage with those involved in the ministry. We cannot apply a one-size-fits-all approach to structures and models. In doing that, we will continue to leave behind those who are mission critical, and who are mission critical in some of the countries and regions where the need is great.

Women must be encouraged to bring their unique individual skills and attributes forward, to use their voice, and ensure that others don't speak for them without consultation. At a time when there are tools and resources to enable connection, we must ensure that we use them. A failure to engage women, especially young women, may have major consequences for the mission in the future. Women who have roles in leadership now should consider what they are doing to mentor and guide those who will come after them.

Brother and Sister

Brother and Sister – human education – we must focus on what unites us and not on what separates us. Today, gender remains a separator. Surely we need to recognize that the best man for a position may be a woman. Women should aspire to the same levels of influence and recognition in the mission as their male peers. The statistics and lived experience of many women in the mission showcase that gender bias continues to exist. With acknowledgment that the journey of change becomes a reality.

Let us be open to models of governance and leadership that recognize skills and attributes before gender or religious life context. Let us acknowledge Canon Law and other mandates, but not use those as “excuses” for not doing anything in this regard. Enabling voice and ensuring genuine representation and acknowledgment of the skills of women needs to continue and increase.

It is important to acknowledge that I have highlighted the barriers and challenges we must overcome regarding the role of women in the Institute and that some progress has been made. We have seen an increase in women engaged within Institute committees and representation on Mission Councils; but there is more work to do at a local, national, and international level. My own experience has been one of being supported, of being granted space to become a leader, and of genuine participation. I hope that will become the way for many more women.

In the 2013 “Report to the 45th General Chapter” from the International Young Brothers Assembly, it was noted,

We dream that our association for the educational service of the poor will . . . continue to integrate the treasured gift that is our Lay Partners and affirm their identity and role within the mission.¹⁰

I suggest to you that we need not dream. It is easily within our grasp. Inclusion for *all* is the way to make it reality.

Conclusion

In closing it seems fitting to revisit what Louise said to the Founder, especially during this year as we celebrate the life of Saint John Baptist de La Salle and his death 300 years ago.

You must not abandon the family whose father God made you. This work is yours. You must persevere in it until the end of your life.¹¹

What would he expect from all of us? I would suggest that, as he did, De La Salle would expect us to turn our minds and our hearts to what more can and should be done for the poor and for those living on the periphery. To never give up, and to always remember that this mission is a mission we share together – all Lasallians.

We must see ourselves as agents of change, responding to needs and creating structures that are inclusive and demonstrative of the skills necessary to continue this mission of ours. And, not just to continue the mission, but to ensure that it flourishes.

We must draw strength from what has come before and use that to have courage to forge a new path. It may be uncomfortable; and it may come with loss, hardship, and challenge. Might that not be the very best tribute we can offer to the life of the Founder? And we must ask ourselves that if now is not the time for such courage, then when; and if not us, then who?

Endnotes

1. This text was delivered as a keynote address at the World Congress of Lasallian Education that was held at Universidad La Salle in Mexico City from 14 to 16 March 2019 in commemoration of the 300th anniversary of the passage of John Baptist de La Salle (1651-1719) from this world into eternity.

2. Tracy Adams serves as the chief executive officer of *yourtown*, an agency that provides a range of face-to-face and virtual services to children, young people, and families seeking support. She is a graduate of the Harvard Business School General Management Program, a Fellow of the Australian Institute of Management (AIM), and an Affiliated member of the Institute of the Brothers of the Christian Schools.

3. ANZPPNG is the acronym used in the worldwide Lasallian educational network when referring to the District of Australia New Zealand Pakistan & Papua New Guinea.

4. As used in this text, the word Institute refers to the Institute of the Brothers of the Christian Schools and its international network of Lasallian schools, universities, and agencies.

5. Cf. *Letter to the Lasallian Family* by Brother Superior and General Council (Rome: Brothers of the Christian Schools, 1989).

6. The *1983 Code of Canon Law* is the fundamental body of ecclesiastical laws for the Latin Church of the Catholic Church. Promulgated in 1983 by Pope John Paul II, it replaced the *1917 Code of Canon Law* promulgated by Pope Benedict XV in 1917.

7. *Circular 470: Toward the Year 2021: Living Together Our Joyful Mission* by Brother Superior and General Council (Rome: Brothers of the Christian Schools, 2015), page 49.

8. Cf. *The Lasallian Mission of Human & Christian Education: A Shared Mission* by Brother Superior and General Council (Rome: Brothers of the Christian Schools, 1997): “If the 37th General Chapter in 1946 appeared to be dismissive in relation to the ‘emergency role’ played by lay teachers in many schools during the Second World War, it was probably because . . . there was . . . a hope, perhaps even an expectation, that the Brothers would continue to maintain and even increase their numbers” (page 35); and “This is the movement followed by the Institute in its development from ‘tolerating’ the presence of lay teachers in the emergency situation of the Second World War to considering and esteeming them as *partners* in a common mission in the General Chapter of 1993” (page 93).

9. Jean-Baptiste Blain, *The Life of John Baptist de La Salle*, Book Three, translated by Richard Arnandez, FSC and edited by Luke Salm, FSC (Landover, MD: Lasallian Publications, 2000), page 638.

10. Jean-Baptiste Blain, page 637.

11. “Report to the 45th General Chapter” from the International Young Brothers Assembly 2013, #3.1.3.

12. Jean-Baptiste Blain, page 637.