

BROTHERS OF THE CHRISTIAN SCHOOLS

LASALLIAN WOMEN-
LEAVEN FOR THE JOURNEY
OF ASSOCIATION FOR MISSION

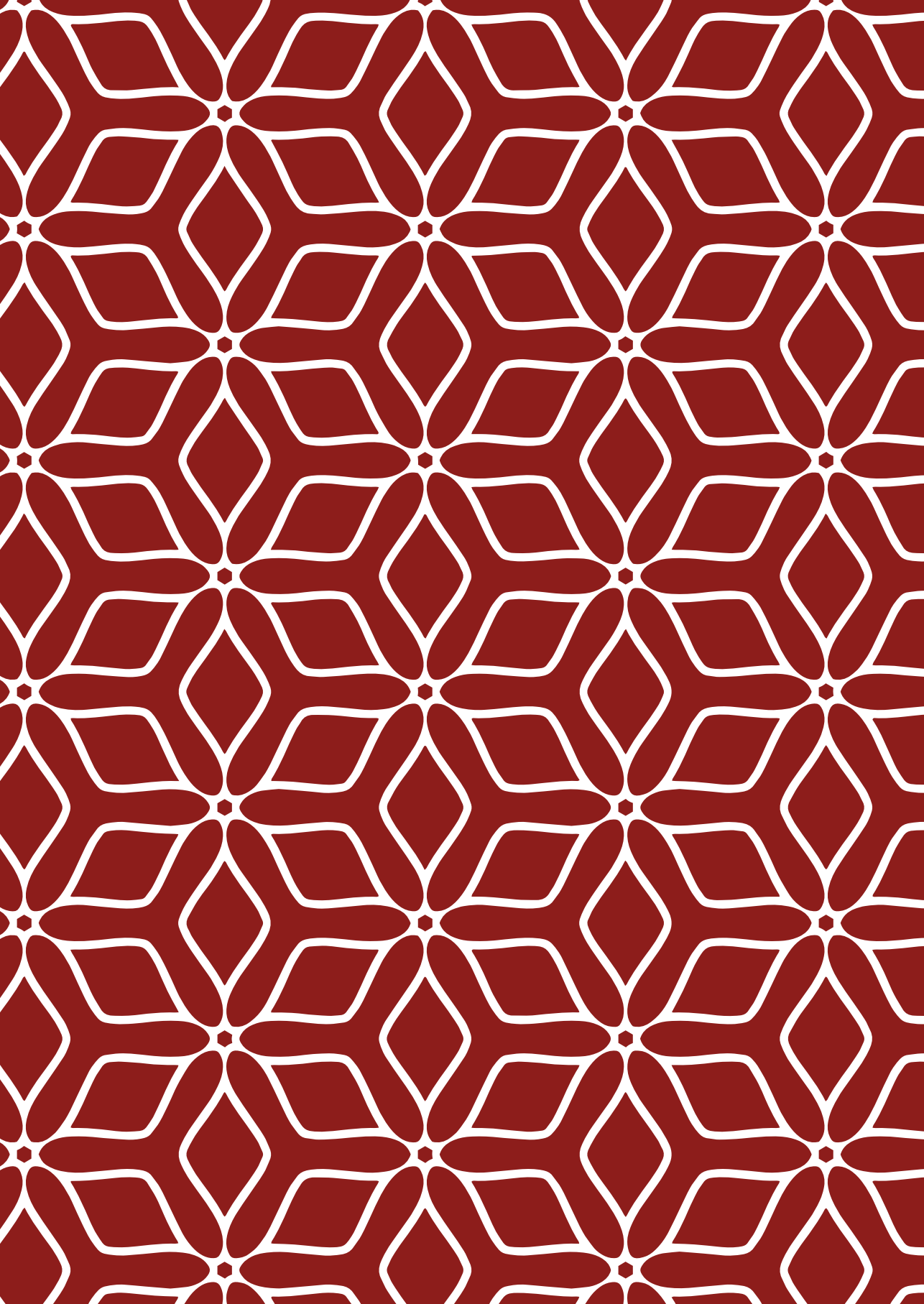
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61



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of Association for Mission**

HEATHER M. RUPLE GILSON, MEd.

October 2024



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Institute of the Brothers of the Christian Schools

Lasallian Women-Leaven for the Journey of Association for Mission

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PRESENTATION

Everyone can admit what quite obvious today: women are the majority in the field of education. And the Lasallian world is no exception. Some insist on the threats they perceive in this new reality. Others prefer to see, here too, a blessing.

The last fifty years have progressively led us to discover difference as a relevant feature of human reality. And through differences, the fascinating nuance of what is fundamentally equal, there is always a gift offered to humanity. This MEL Bulletin that we are presenting today seeks to help us appreciate the progressive and significant path women have played in Lasallian Association in the 20th and 21st centuries.

Heather Ruple has experienced a long Lasallian history in which she has been building leaven-like leadership: from hidden littleness can come a fruitful and abundant creation. This image, so often repeated among us lately, is the one she wanted to use to connect the story of Lasallian women and their contribution towards the creation of a more fraternal world.

Our prayer is that the reading of this Bulletin will lead all to appreciate the differences and complementarity that are at the foundation of the different genders that coexist in Lasallian educational ministries, sign and leaven of a more fraternal world and, therefore, an effective sacrament of a new creation.

Br. Santiago Rodriguez Mancini

Director of the Office of Lasallian Heritage and Research



Heather Ruple Gilson

has been involved in the Lasallian Family for over 25 years. A graduate of St Mary's College of California, Heather served a Lasallian Volunteer, teacher, Administrator at the San Miguel School of Providence, Rhode Island in the District of Eastern North America. Heather also served as Director of Young Lasallians for the District of San Francisco New Orleans and was involved in formation

and vocation ministry in the District and RELAN. Most recently she served as Co-Secretary of Association for the Institute. Currently she is President of the Institute Commission on Association and the Coordinator of Lasallian Vocations for the District of Ireland, Great Britain and Malta. She lives in England with her family.

1. INTRODUCTION

“**W**e are one Lasallian Family, with diverse vocations; leaven for a more fraternal world, sent forth to encounter God in those who are poor, and to promote justice” (Brothers of the Christian Schools, 2022b, p. 13). This was the dream Capitulants put forth to the Lasallian Family from the 46th General Chapter in May 2022. It is a dream which invites all engaged in the Lasallian Educational Mission to personal, communal and ministry/school transformation at the service of those at the peripheries and to radical availability to those most in need. The lived experience of our history from our foundation, to the expansion of the Institute, to the growing understanding of the Lasallian Family as a Charismatic Family within the Church, has taught us that our mission, and the dream of the Chapter, will be best accomplished “together and by Association”.

From the dream of the 46th General Chapter, Brother Armin Luistro, Superior General, and his Council have offered the *Leavening Movement (The Leavening Project)* as a vehicle to turn the dream and Pathways of Transformation from the Chapter, as well as the Strategic Axis Proposals from International Assembly for the Lasallian Educational Mission (AIMEL) in 2022 and the outcomes of the International Young Brothers Assembly in 2021 into a reality (Brothers of the Christian Schools, 2022c). Inspired by the parable, “The kingdom of heaven is like leaven that a woman took and mixed with three measures of wheat flour until the whole batch was leavened”,¹ the Leavening Movement invites the Lasallian Family to a worldview with our gaze and hearts at the peripheries and an invitation to walk together on this journey of transformation and justice. Leaven, like small imperceptible steps, when incorporated together provides conversion to effect change to the whole. For many Brothers, Partners, Associates and others who comprise the Lasallian Family, even for De La Salle himself, the journey of conversion is a journey of Association for mission. Each comes with our own calling, our own gifts, our own fragility and finds points of entry to our sense of belonging, community, vocation and commitment. The invitation

1 *New American Bible*, Revised Edition, 2011, Matt. 13:33.

is open to all in the Lasallian Family to be leaven for each other and mission on this journey which binds us to each other and to mission.

1.1 The Lasallian Family: From “useful auxiliaries” to “leaven for a more fraternal world”

Association for the majority of our history was the sole remit of the Brothers. Through their vow of Association, way of life and carrying out the mission and charism of De La Salle, the Brothers live Association. Over time, reading the signs of the times and the movement of the Holy Spirit, the associative dimension of our mission and charism has been shared with lay people, women and men, who feel a deep connection and resonance at a vocational level with the Brothers and each other for the sake of our shared mission.

Our Lasallian Family began in many ways out of necessity. In the late 19th Century, the Institute was obliged “in a number of places to have recourse to lay assistants in teaching ... to prevent the closing of important schools, by which the Christian spirit is maintained in certain parishes” (Tidd, 2009, p. 324). At the Chapter of 1897, these first non-Brothers (predominantly lay men) were described as “useful auxiliaries” who taught technical subjects and filled in for missing Brothers. Interestingly, research by Brother Alain Houry (1999) brings to light the presence of religious sisters (25 of them) in some schools in the United States as far back as 1894.

As recently as 1946, at the first General Chapter after the horrific years of the Second World War, the Institute “bolted the door against history and the world” (Sauvage & Campos, 2014, p. 35) and sought “a religious reorganisation of our schools: (a) By the immediate removal of the feminine element employed in certain places in consequence of the war, (b) by progressive reduction of the lay element and by the Superiors refusing to open any new school which might mean an increase of the lay personnel in a District [local province of the Institute]” (Brothers of the Christian Schools, 1946, p. 67).

However, by the 38th General Chapter in 1956, the Institute was already starting to experience and consider these “auxiliaries” differently. The Chapter acknowledged that for some Brothers lay teachers were a “necessary evil”. However, it also stated clearly that others “see them as a necessary good that has been providentially arranged for. The Chapter is inclined to share the second opinion. They need not be considered mercenaries preoccupied with their own personal material interests provided we know how to make them our associates in the pursuit of the work of Catholic education” (Brothers of the Christian Schools, 1956, p. 72). Superior General, Brother Nicet Joseph, in 1958, in a letter to Christian Brothers Education Association (CBEA) of the United States pointed out “that lay teachers have come into our schools to stay, and that... most of the laymen who work at our side have come, particularly in recent years, to look upon their teaching career as a God-given vocation” (Tidd, 2009, p. 327).

This remarkable progression and conversion then takes further form in *The Brother of the Christian Schools in the World Today: A Declaration* in 1967 when lay teachers are described as a source of richness who contribute “from their knowledge of the world, their experience in family life, civic affairs, and labour organisations” and who should be “involved in the whole life of the school: with the catechesis, apostolic movements, extra-curricular activities, as well as in administration and matters of policy” (Brothers of the Christian Schools, 1967, p.33). This then paved the way to the wider use of the phrase which we are now most familiar with, the Lasallian Family, during the subsequent Chapter in 1976.

Over the last 50 years the number of lay people across the Lasallian Educational Mission has continued to grow to 107,827, 60% of whom are women (Brothers of the Christian Schools, 2023). Part of our statistical reality as well are the groups of women Religious who are part of the Lasallian Family: Guadalupana de La Salle Sisters, the De La Salle Sisters of Vietnam, the Lasallian Servants of Jesus. Of course, within that 60%, women have varying degrees of commitment and vocational identity. Nevertheless, it is profound

to realise that imperceptibly and over a long period of time “our 300 [plus]-year-old Lasallian global network, originated by men for the education of boys, is now predominantly made up of women” (Hines, 2018).

1.2 Leaven for the Journey of Association for Mission

We begin with the critical understanding that “Association exists for the mission, the human and Christian education of young people who are ‘far from salvation’. The immediate and ultimate goal of all Lasallian association is our educational mission. There is no point in talking about association unless the discussion focuses on this mission” (Brothers of the Christian Schools. 2010. pgs. 23-24). The journey of Association of course includes important elements like community, identity, formation, and spirituality; but all discernment and structures to foster Association must bring us back to mission and the sustainability of that mission. A mission of sharing the Good News, and working for justice, peace and integrity of Creation which ultimately builds and contributes to God’s mission.

In the spirit of understanding the unfolding story of Association, it is important to reflect on the reality of the presence of women in the mission today. With 60% of Lasallian Partners being women, the following will create a deeper appreciation of the role of women as protagonists and agents of leaven in mission and Association for the Lasallian Family. Through their commitment, communal leadership style and vocational identity women have and continue to be critical for mission sustainability and growth.

It is important to note that this focus on women does not in any way undermine the great contribution and commitment of lay men or of the Brothers, whose vocation and identity are critical for mission and Association. The focus on women could be dismissed on the basis of cultural realities or indifference, but stories of women from all Regions of the Institute and realities which will be shared demonstrate the universality of this issue. In addition, the Lasallian Family has calls

from the Church to reflect on representation, removing gender bias and promoting women.

With these calls, and our own demographic reality, the reflection on the contribution and experience of women in the Lasallian Family is needed; not at the exclusion of other reflections on the various realities that exist in the Lasallian Family, but one that requires consideration in the “kaleidoscope of experiences” of Association (Brothers of the Christian Schools, 2013a, p. 11). In order to further understand Association and the experience of Lasallian women, three documents will serve as the basis of this reflection:

- *Lasallian Women’s Needs Assessment Survey Report* (Heather Ruple Gilson, MEd; Susan R. Hines, EdD; Elizabeth E. Seebach, PhD; and Mary Catherine Fox, AFSC, PhD, 2022);
- *The Lived Experience of First-Generation International Lasallian Women Leaders* (Susan R. Hines, EdD, 2018); and
- *Lasallian Women: Pathways on the Vocational Journey* (Heather Ruple Gilson MEd, 2019).

To fully understand and appreciate this work, and the threads and trends that will emerge from these studies, this paper will initially highlight the key roles women have played since the inception of the Institute; highlight some key findings and outcomes of the first phase of the XVI Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops; explore commitments of the Global Compact on Education regarding women and girls; and reflect on the evolution of discourse in Institute publications concerning women and their contributions to mission, Association and the Lasallian Family.

1.3 Women as Leaven from the Founding Story

While this paper focuses on women in the Lasallian Family today and their needs for the future, we must consider that the contribution of women is not a post-World War II phenomenon. Women of

influence, leadership and inspiration have been present throughout our history with a growing body of work and research happening currently on the topic.

To understand the influence of women in the Lasallian founding story, one needs to reflect on the Council of Trent's mandate for clergy reform, but also the Council's role in the evolution of women religious venturing beyond their traditional role as cloistered figures of prayer to active participants in education and social service (Fox, 2024). These seventeenth-century women in different parts of Europe set precedents that John Baptist de La Salle would later incorporate into his work in establishing Christian schools and a lay community of male teachers. Thus, linking these two movements of clergy reform and formation as well as a renewed call to mission and ministry which women religious had been among the first to respond to.

Additionally, the contributions of De La Salle's contemporaries, Blessed Nicolas Barré and Blessed Nicolas Roland, particularly their collaborations with women are key in De La Salle's own experience and introduction to education.

Fox (2024) quotes historian Elizabeth Rapley (1990) as she highlights this point. Rapley writes:

“Among the impressions which the new charity schools made upon their society, none was more important than that which carried Roland's friend and executor, Jean-Baptiste de La Salle, into his life's work. In 1679 charity schools for boys, modelled upon the sisters' schools, were opening in Reims and in 1688 the Institute of the Brothers of the Christian Schools took shape.

At last, school teaching by itself, without the benefit of the priesthood, became a fit religious vocation for men. But it should be remembered that they followed a path that women had already trodden”. (Fox, 2024, p.154)

Eubank (2017) stresses how various Lasallian histories illustrate the influence of women on De La Salle both personally and their

contributions to the early establishment and success of the schools. She writes: “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).

Eubank (2017) also singles out the impact and involvement of other women:

1. Perrette Lespagnol, De La Salle’s maternal grandmother and godmother;
2. Madame Jean Debouis Maillefer, a benefactress from Reims who was keen on the setting up of schools for poor boys in her native city of Reims and providentially became the conduit between Adrien Nyel and De La Salle;
3. Sister Françoise Duval, Head Mistress of the Sisters of the Holy Child Jesus and a “catalyst in the founding of the first school for boys in Reims” (Eubank, 2017, p.39);
4. Madame des Croyères, a benefactor of the Sisters of the Holy Child Jesus who insisted that De La Salle be personally involved with the schools and the schoolmasters as a condition to the funding necessary to open the second school in Reims. Would De La Salle have taken personal charge of the schoolmasters’ preparation if she had not done so? Would we have the Institute of the Brothers of the Christian Schools if not for that condition?
5. Sister Louise Hours, shepherdess who was the foundress of the retreat house at Parmenie and is instrumental in advising

De La Salle to honour his vow of obedience and return to the governance of the Society in Paris;

6. And the mothers of the early students who “turned over their most prized possessions to the Brothers and the great unknown” (Eubank, 2017, p.41).

Women have been catalysts supporting the flame of zeal of the Lasallian enterprise since the very beginning. The list above is not exhaustive and the Lasallian Family should look forward to further research focused on women in the Founding story. The 21st Century is full of promise to experience the unshackling of the barriers that hinder women’s full potential and contribution to all areas of society and a more serious and genuine role in the life of the Church.

**2. LEAVEN FOR A MORE
FRATERNAL WORLD: OUR
BROADER CONTEXT**

We recognise that our mission and Lasallian Family exist in the cultural and Church context of our time. Consequently, it is beneficial to situate ourselves in this context by exploring the report of the first phase of XVI Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops (the Synod on Synodality 2021-2024) held in Rome in October 2023 and the Global Compact on Education. We can reflect on these significant initiatives and what they highlight about the current and future role of women in society and the Church.

2.1 The Synod on Synodality and Women

The first session of the XVI Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops held in Rome in October 2023 featured a record-breaking number of 54 women, lay and Religious, participating. It is important to note that we have two Lasallian women who are participating in the Synod. Both have leadership roles in the Lasallian Educational Mission in their respective Districts.

The Synod has recognised that “laymen and laywomen, those in consecrated life and ordained ministries have equal dignity” (XVI Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, 2023, p.19). It stressed that men and women are created in God’s image underscoring their shared nature and destiny. In the Synthesis Report, the Assembly included references to biblical figures, interactions and passages to highlight the significant roles women played in Jesus’ ministry and the early Church. It is evident from the report that the Assembly wants to promote the equal dignity of men and women in Christ, advocating for a non-competitive and co-responsible relationship within the Church.

The synthesis report also stressed the positive reciprocity between the Assembly’s men and women members. Women expressed a wish to share their spiritual journeys and address societal issues such as sexual violence and economic inequality. The report stated clearly that, “pastoral accompaniment and vigorous advocacy for women should go hand in hand” and that the Church must undergo significant spiritual conversion to address power abuses, ensuring

justice, healing, and reconciliation for all its members” (XVI Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, 2023, p. 21).

It is worth highlighting how the report acknowledged the significant role of women in parishes and congregations. The report stated that “women make up most of those in [the] pews and are often the first missionaries of the faith in the family” (XVI Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, 2023, p. 21). This echoes the statistical reality of the Lasallian Family. Furthermore, the report called for greater recognition and value of women’s contributions and to seek increased pastoral leadership roles for them. There is a need to discern how to include women in existing and potentially new ministries, when responding to pastoral needs.

At this juncture in history, gender justice is crucial for the credibility of the Church’s mission. Synodal pathways indicate the need for relational renewal and structural changes to fully integrate women’s contributions in mission work. The Church, including the Lasallian Family, is being urged to enhance its efforts to listen to and support marginalised women within the communities at the local level. There is also an urgency to ensure and strengthen women’s participation in decision-making processes and pastoral roles.

One of the clearest statements regarding the future role of women in the Church is the request of the Synod Assembly “that we avoid repeating the mistake of talking about women as an issue or a problem. Instead, we desire to promote a Church in which men and women dialogue together, in order to understand more deeply the horizon of God’s project, that sees them together as protagonists, without subordination, exclusion and competition” (XVI Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, 2023, p. 22).

Such focus on gender equality and the promotion of all women and girls is a path which reflects the efforts of the global community beyond the Synod, particularly thanks to the UN’s Sustainable

Development Goals (SDGs).² The SDGs are shared horizons and aspirations for all, and while the Catholic Church has not officially declared the SDGs as its own formal agenda, it supports and promotes many of the same objectives through its teachings, statements, and initiatives like the Global Compact on Education.

2.2 The Global Compact on Education: A Lasallian Commitment

The Global Compact on Education is an initiative launched by Pope Francis in 2019 with the goal of creating an alliance of educators, religious leaders, policymakers, researchers and other key stakeholders which aims to create an “educational village” that fosters a holistic approach to education that fosters integral human development, social justice, environmental sustainability, justice and peace (Brothers of the Christian Schools, 2022a, p. 5). This global alliance, through the Global Compact on Education, is committed to shaping a better, more sustainable, future through education. The Lasallian Family has been invited to endorse and work to support the Global Compact on Education (Brothers of the Christian Schools, 2022a). The Compact encourages the promotion of female role models and leaders in education. The Global Compact on Education underscores the critical need for gender equality in education as a means of fostering a more just and equitable society. It calls on educators, policymakers, and communities to work together to ensure that every girl and woman has the opportunity to reach her full potential through education.

Currently “50% of the students in the Institute are female” (Brothers of the Christian Schools. 2023). We have inspiring examples of formal and informal educational works which are supporting women and girls. The Lasallian Family, through the support and efforts of

2 <https://sdgs.un.org/goals>

the La Salle Foundation,³ is working tirelessly to support schools and programmes for those who are most in need.

For example, we have the Kunda Dia Zayi school in the Democratic Republic of Congo. In the Democratic Republic of Congo half of girls are out of school and are at risk of becoming a child bride and teenage mother. Kunda Dia Zayi school provides much needed education and, for girls who do drop out of school, they have a programme to teach sewing and horticulture (<https://www.lasallefoundation.org/project/all-girls-at-school/>). Or the Sainte Famille Mahamasina in Madagascar which offers girls accommodation so they can pursue their academic goals (<https://www.lasallefoundation.org/anjarastory/>). Another example is the Fratelli Project in Lebanon which is a joint venture with the Marist Brothers. “The Fratelli Project is a socio-educational centre committed to fostering the inclusion of the most vulnerable through personalised programs for each individual” for “refugee children and youth who have sought refuge from the war in Syria and religious persecution in Iraq” (<https://www.lasallefoundation.org/project/fratelli-project/>). The Fratelli Project also provides support and professional training for the mothers of students and special attention to mothers and new-borns.

Another example of leaven in the Lasallian Family today is Lasallian Women of Hope.⁴ A programme supported by the Lasallian Region of North America (RELAN) and the La Salle Foundation. “The mission of Lasallian Women of Hope (LWH) is to ensure girls and women enjoy full access to Lasallian education. A project of the Institute of the Brothers of the Christian Schools’ Solidarity and Development Secretariat, LWH began as a small project providing grassroots female empowerment while developing sustainable solutions to mitigate obstacles impeding educational access. Through

3 <https://www.lasallefoundation.org/>

4 <https://lasallian.info/lasallian-women-of-hope/>

its grants, LWH delivers creative, effective and durable solutions to educational inequities for girls and women” (<https://lasallian.info/lasallian-women-of-hope/>). An example of the work of LWH, are grants given to help Lasallians end “period poverty” which can hinder academic achievement by providing girls with feminine hygiene products. Grants also help support programmes for advancement of women through education and leadership development.

Such initiatives, together with various programmes in the last decade are creating spaces and the intentionality in the search for women’s voice and harnessing their contribution in leadership. This has given rise to more articulate and direct references to this reality in key texts of the Lasallian Family.

**3. LEAVEN FOR A MORE
FRATERNAL WORLD: OUR
LASALLIAN CONTEXT**

In 2020, the Institute published four key documents. All four, in their own way, sought to deepen an understanding of the various participants involved in the Lasallian Educational Mission today. While they were written by different groups of scholars or contributors, they all had something to say about women as leaven for a more fraternal world.

The Identity Criteria for the Vitality of Lasallian Educational Ministries acknowledges that at the present time, “the Lasallian network extends to all continents of the world and to all educational levels, expanding its ministry to all kinds of educational establishments in the service of the most vulnerable: street children, single mothers, literacy centers, training for women, migrants and drug-dependent people, rural training centers for the mentally ill, marginalized ethnic minorities and the disabled, among others” (Brothers of the Christian Schools, 2020c, p.10).

The *Declaration on the Lasallian Educational Mission: Challenges, Convictions and Hopes* calls the Lasallian Family “to promote intentionally, from a spirit of fraternal communion and apostolic zeal, the presence, voice, action and representation of women in all areas of the Institute, especially in the areas of leadership and decision-making” (Brothers of the Christian Schools, 2020a). It also states:

“It is a reality that, from a perspective of fraternity and justice, [women] provide fundamental reflection within the interior of our Community on themes of equality, equity, parity and inclusion, such that the integration of men and women to the Lasallian Educational Mission is, regardless of gender, full and is defined by their personal qualities, including the professional, vocational and spiritual.

The contribution made by women has added great richness and potential to the realisation of the Lasallian Educational Mission. It is necessary to take deliberate steps to empower the presence, the voice, the action and the representation of women in all areas of the Institute”.

(Brothers of the Christian Schools, 2020a, p. 2.2.1)

Also, in 2020, CIAMEL published *A Conversation for the Lasallian Family: Deepening our Identity*. The document invites those who plan for the future of the Lasallian Family to reflect, in the spirit of creative fidelity, on the question: “As women make up the majority of Lasallian Partners, how can the Lasallian Family ensure that their voice, contribution and skills are utilised in structures at every level?” (Brothers of the Christian Schools, 2020b).

In 2019 the Secretariat for Formation issued a document designed to assist those engaged in the formative process as they accompany others along their vocation. *Lasallian Formation for Mission: The Pilgrim’s Handbook* was written with the aim to re-frame Lasallian formation for mission for all and provide helpful tools and considerations for the ongoing renewal of formation programmes and the vitality of the mission.

On reflecting on the role of Lasallian women in formation, the authors of the Pilgrim’s Handbook describe their presence and role as “essential” and “a great gift to the world of education”. They go on to write, “Women must continue to fully participate in and take leadership roles in the formation of all Lasallians, including Brothers, to ensure that the fullness of God’s vision for the world continues to unfold. Authentic Lasallian mission formation can never ignore the perspective or wisdom that women bring to the ministry of education. Lasallian formation must proactively develop content and structures that enable women to take on important roles of leadership in both formation and ministry” (Brothers of the Christian Schools, 2019, p. 54).

The Handbook explicitly asks its users to consider the question: “How does [their] community support the ongoing vocational needs of all members, including the development of the next generation of leaders, especially women?” (Brothers of the Christian Schools, 2019, p. 58).

3.1. Naming a Reality in Shared Mission and Association:

Three publications, the *Declaration on the Lasallian Educational Mission*, *A Conversation for the Lasallian Family*, and *Lasallian Formation for Mission: A Pilgrim's Handbook* elaborate on an earlier publication which named the contribution and role of women to shared mission and Association. In 2010 the Secretariat for Lasallian Family and Association conducted a comprehensive Institute-wide survey which informed the writing of *Circular 461: Associated for the Lasallian Mission ... an Act of Hope* (Brothers of the Christian Schools, 2010). The survey “has documented a great variety of experiences and perspectives in association” (Brothers of the Christian Schools, 2010, pg. 23). *Circular 461* remains a seminal document in the area of Association.

After presenting the statistical reality of the Lasallian Family, *Circular 461* named, for the first time in such an Institute document, the contribution of women to the Lasallian Educational Mission:

... We would like to specifically note the contribution of Lasallian women who now compose over half of the total personnel involved in the Mission. Just as more recently the education of both young men and women became the focus of the Mission so has the participation of women in the Lasallian educational network become essential. Their presence, undoubtedly, will help to construct a more humane and community-centred society; help to re-examine ways of thinking; help to situate the entire Lasallian world a bit differently in history and help to organise social, political, economic and religious life in a way that can be more intuitive and relational (Brothers of the Christian Schools, 2010, p. 19).

Naming this reality likely served as a spark to empower women in the Lasallian Family to begin to find their voice and name for themselves their experience and contribution to mission. It was also a spark to encourage researchers to study the role of women in the St. John Baptist de La Salle's life and the women of influence in the founding story. Since the publication of *Circular 461* various gatherings,

retreats and symposia of women at local, District, Regional and International levels have taken place which will be overviewed in the following section.

3.2 Signs of Hope: Gatherings of Women

The first Symposium of Lasallian women was organised by the Pacific Asia Regional Conference (PARC) in Pattaya, Thailand in 2012. Fifteen countries were represented by the women present and there were several Brothers who accompanied the gathering. The Symposium allowed time to learn about women in the Founder's life and fostered networking and sharing of best practices. Mission priorities were established which included formation, advocacy, health and well-being.

The following year the Lasallian Region of North America (RELAN) held a Symposium with representatives from all school/ministry types in the Region and again accompanied by a group of Brothers. The gathering fostered a deeper appreciation of the role of women in the Founding story and the needs today.

In 2017, two International Symposia were held. The Lasallian Region of Latin America (RELAL)⁵ held its gathering in Mexico with over 100 participants from nineteen different countries coming from eight Districts in the Region. Women were present from other Regions as well. At the conclusion of this Symposium, Districts created specific lines of action to move forward on the themes regarding women in their Districts. Participants considered: "What challenges do we identify in our District and Communities with regard to the Lasallian educational mission? How can we respond creatively from our feminine gaze and our vocation to these challenges in the short, medium and long term? What potential do we have in our Districts and Educational Community that are dormant and that we can

⁵ *Simposio de la Mujer Lasallista en América Latina 2017*: (<https://relal.org.co/index.php/recursos/memorias/memorias?start=8>)

energise? What commitments can we make to share in our District and Educational Community the reflection and experience of this symposium?” (*Simposio de la Mujer Lasallista en América Latina, 2017*). Other conclusions and opportunities included: responding to the spaces of trust that are opening up to women; working in collaboration and co-responsibility; and to offer a feminine contribution to the Lasallian Educational Mission with courage and creativity.

Later in 2017, the District of Australia, New Zealand, Pakistan and Papua New Guinea held the Lasallian Global Women’s Symposium in Auckland, New Zealand. The international gathering brought together over 100 women from around the world. The Symposium aimed: to recognise the distinct role and identity of women in the mission, especially as catalysts of change; to raise awareness that women are critical to enabling the achievement of mission goals and are essential to the future sustainability of the mission; to empower Lasallian women to have a confident collective voice; to develop ongoing relationships that support Association between women, and provide opportunities for mutual growth and support; and to promote the Lasallian vocation as a desirable and accessible option for young women and girls.

Outcomes from the unpublished report from the Lasallian Global Women’s Symposium (2017) included: the call to create an International Lasallian Women’s Council; that Institute policy development to ensure inclusivity, a collective Lasallian voice and gender parity in leadership roles at all levels; and that a global and regional women’s mentoring program would be established via a variety of structures (through technology and face to face) covering both short and long-term needs of participants. While not all of the outcomes have come to fruition yet, Brother Robert Schieler, former Superior General, did intentionally appoint more women to the then newly developed International Council of Lasallian Association and the Educational Mission (CIAMEL) in the years that followed and an appointment of a woman to serve as Co-Secretary of Association when the Secretariat of Association and Mission was made.

In addition to these important International Symposia, retreats for Lasallian women followed in various Districts and Regions where women could share their spirituality and foster vocation and identity. In 2021, in Madurai, South India women gathered for a Symposium focused on women's contribution to mission, well-being, and safety of young people.

The most recent gathering focused on women was held in Papua New Guinea in June 2024. This Symposium entitled, *Women in the Lasallian Family: Leavening in Synodality for Vitality and Transformation of Lasallian Ministries* was open to women, men, and Brothers.

3.3 Centro Internazionale Lasalliano (CIL) 2023: Women in the Lasallian Family: Moving Forward Together as Leaven for Transformation.

In April 2023, the Secretariat of Association and Mission, in collaboration with other Secretariats and Services of the Institute hosted a programme at Centro Internazionale Lasalliano (CIL) for Partners and Brothers in Rome. The organisers felt it was important to have lay women, lay men and Brothers to listen and engage with the topic of women in the Lasallian Family.

Fifty-four “women, laymen, and Brothers from every Lasallian Region in the Institute, together with speakers on women's role in our history, spirituality, ministries, and mission, gathered in Rome” (Fox 2024). This was the first CIL “programme to be focused on Lasallian women [and] was created with careful consideration and scaffolding, resulting in clear critical thinking, thoughtful dialogue, and creative synergies across our global Lasallian Family. Participants of both sexes, lay and Brother alike, opened themselves to the broad spectrum of female experience in devotion and service to the mission we all share” (Fox, 2024).

During the CIL, participants heard from experts on a variety of topics including women in the Founding story; women in the early

Church; Feminine Spirituality; realities of women and girls today; women's leadership; and women in the Lasallian Family. Projects were developed by participants to be implemented in their Districts with the hope that the leaven of the experience continues to grow.

3.4. Creating Space for Leaven

In our current call to Synodality and deep listening, these spaces for women, men and Brothers rooted at the service of the mission have been important for fostering Association and commitment. They have been spaces for women to freely share their experiences, their commitment and their dreams. They have provided opportunities to build community which is so critical for vocation and mission sustainability. They have been spaces of promotion and leadership development with most being organised by groups of women. Beyond professional development and exchange, they have been spaces to share faith and spirituality and to provide deep formation for mission. They have also been spaces to identify critical social justice issues facing women and girls today in our rich and diverse reality.

These initiatives have also been complimented by scholarly endeavours. We will now explore three of these.

**4. WOMEN AS LEAVEN FOR THE
JOURNEY OF ASSOCIATION:
LESSONS IN LEADERSHIP,
COMMITMENT AND
OPPORTUNITY**

Efforts to give voice and opportunity to women in the Lasallian Family have been the focus of the *Lasallian Women's Needs Assessment Survey Report* (Heather Ruple Gilson, MEd; Susan R. Hines, EdD; Elizabeth E. Seebach, PhD; and Mary Catherine Fox, AFSC, PhD, 2023); *The Lived Experience of First-Generation International Lasallian Women Leaders* (Susan R. Hines, EdD, 2018); and *Lasallian Women: Pathways on the Vocational Journey* (Heather Ruple Gilson MEd, 2019).

4.1 Where are we Now: A Summary of the Lasallian Women's Needs Assessment Survey Report

In 2021 the Co-Secretaries of Association undertook a global study of the needs of Lasallian Women. They opted to study what women needed in order to fulfil their commitment to mission. They wanted data, in light of the outcomes of various gatherings referenced above, to understand best how to support women on their journey of Association. The hope was that the study would offer the Institute, Regions and Districts insight into the vocation and identity of women in the Lasallian Family. They sought expertise in the area of survey research and established a research team composed of Sue Hines, Ed.D., Elizabeth E. Seebach, Ph.D., L.P., Mary Catherine Fox, AFSC, Ph.D., Heather Ruple Gilson, MEd.

The research team went through a comprehensive and collaborative process to create a valid and reliable needs assessment survey. The International Council of Lasallian Association and the Educational Mission (CIAMEL) endorsed the project. Focus groups were conducted with women (CIAMEL members or their delegates) from each Region of the Institute using open ended questions to inform the design of the needs assessment survey (Ruple Gilson, et al, 2023).

From these conversations, questions were created that fell into the following six categories:

1. Contribution – The need for an awareness of the contributions made by women in the Lasallian Family to Mission.
2. Formation and Professional Development – The need for formation and professional development to support women's abilities to fulfil their commitment to the mission.
3. Accompaniment – The need for support and promoting a sense of belonging.
4. Representation- The need to have a voice and representation on decision-making bodies.
5. Cultural Aspects – The need for cultural inclusion, relevancy, and dignity.
6. Work-Life Balance – The need for supporting and maintaining a healthy work-life balance, including the effect of the COVID-19 Pandemic.

A 30-question survey was created using 29 Likert scaled (strongly agree- strongly disagree) questions, and one open ended response along with demographic information. The survey was tested for validity and received IRB (Institutional Review Board) approval from Saint Mary's University of Minnesota (Ruple Gilson, et al, 2023).

On 1 November, 2021 the survey was launched via email. The email inviting participation was sent to Visitors, Regions, District Offices, the network of Association contacts, and to other groups and stakeholders encouraging wide distribution. The link was also shared on Institute social media platforms and the Institute website. Participants were encouraged to forward survey invitations to other women in the Lasallian Family to expand reach (Ruple Gilson, et al, 2023).

The survey closed on 22 November, 2021. 4,520 women responded to the survey invitation. The largest number, 50.5%, of responses were from women in the Lasallian Region of Latin America (RELAL), followed by 18.4% of responses from the Lasallian Region of

Europe and the Mediterranean (RELEM), the Pacific Asia Region Conference (PARC) was 15.6% of responses, the Lasallian Region of North America (RELAN) made up 12.0% of responses, and the Lasallian Region of Africa-Madagascar (RELAF) made up 3.5% of responses (Ruple Gilson, et al, 2023).

A report of the needs assessment was published in April 2022. It highlighted responses concerning what women who responded to the survey felt they could contribute, what they felt they needed, and what they have experienced as they fulfilled their commitment to mission. The survey report presents a comprehensive analysis of the experiences, challenges, and commitment of women in the Lasallian Family who responded to the survey. There are several things to celebrate from the findings. For example, 94% of respondents said that they felt a sense of belonging to the Lasallian Family. 89% of those who responded felt the Lasallian Family promotes the dignity of women. Open-ended comments like, “I am a very proud woman to be part of the great Lasallian Family, first as a student and now as a teacher and mother!” and “La Salle is my home”, captured the deep commitment and gratitude of some of the respondents of the survey (Ruple Gilson, et al, 2023).

The report also details areas of need and opportunity for consideration of how to support women to fulfil their commitment to mission. Some areas of need were specific to a particular Region or demographic reality. For example, women from RELAN and RELAF who completed the survey reported a need for more effective professional development opportunities. “Significantly, a high percentage (83%) of respondents reported a desire to participate in a women’s Lasallian Leadership Program with the highest interest among those in administrative positions (chief administrators and mid-level administrators)” (Ruple Gilson, et al, 2023). In open-

ended responses experiences of misogyny and machismo were shared as well as the ever-present challenge of work-life balance.

4.2 Lessons from Women who have Led the Way: Leaven on whose Shoulders we Stand

The Lived Experience of First-Generation International Lasallian Women Leaders (Hines, 2018)

In her 2018 article on the lived experience of first generation leaders, in addition to sharing insights from women in leadership in general, Hines shares valuable lessons learned from an international group of Lasallian women who held or still hold significant leadership roles in ministries, Districts, Regions and the Institute. To uncover the experience and insights Hines undertook a “qualitative, phenomenological, Research Review Board (RRB) approved study using one-on-one interviews to answer the following research question: What has been the lived experience of women, as the first to lead at the international level, in the modern Lasallian Institute?” (Hines, 2018).

The women who were interviewed participated in a 45-minute interview and were selected by the “following criteria: 1) served at the District, Regional, and International level of the Institute; 2) been part of the Lasallian ministry for 25 years or more, and 3) well respected by De La Salle Brothers and international leaders within the Institute. Participants were selected from three different Regions: the Pacific Asia Regional Conference (PARC), the Lasallian Regional of North America (RELAN), and the Lasallian Region of Latin America (RELAL), in order to gather a global perspective” (Hines, 2018). The women who participated were Joan Landeros, AFSC, PhD (RELAL); Carmelita Quebengco, AFSC, PhD (PARC); Trish Carroll, AFSC (PARC); Mary Fox, AFSC, PhD; Carole Swain, AFSC, PhD (RELAN); Roxanne Eubank, EdD (RELAN).

Hines surfaced six common themes on their journeys as Lasallian leaders which she explores in the article. They were:

1. Deep commitment led to invitation to lead
2. Unanticipated climb into leadership roles
3. The newcomer treatment
4. Experiencing gender differences
5. Communal leadership behaviours and characteristics
6. Advice for emerging women leaders in the Lasallian organisation

The women shared their deep commitment to mission beyond just professional responsibilities and that their commitment touched all parts of their lives including the personal and spiritual. “All of the women expressed a deep commitment to, and sincere love for, the mission and charism” (Hines, 2018). Hines continued, “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).

All women found themselves in leadership roles they did not initially set out to have and felt surprised by the invitation to serve in leadership capacities. “It is interesting to see that while the potential for leadership was evident to others” (Hines, 2018), it was not self-evident for the women themselves.

The interviews highlighted the crucial role of mentorship and formation experiences in shaping their vocational journeys. Mentors and advocates, especially Brothers, provided significant support and guidance. There are beautiful testimonies from the women interviewed which spoke of the deep trust and respect they were shown by key Brothers in their lives. “All seven women were quick to remark on the relational behaviors of the De La Salle Christian Brothers they encountered, noting their kindness, warmth, openness, person-

centeredness, and inclusive nature; similar to what the literature refers to as the communal behavior of women leaders. Several attributed this behavior to the De La Salle Christian Brothers' vocation and community lifestyle" (Hines, 2018).

Their journeys were not without challenges though. The women leaders faced gender-based bias and suspicion by some Brothers and laymen and faced some obstacles of "Brothers' Boys" mentality. "When describing Laymen or "Brothers' Boys," the characteristics that emerged from the interviews were similar to what the leadership literature refers to as 'agentic' male behaviour highly confident, competitive, dominant, and dismissive of women" (Hines, 2018). The women interviewed, however, exhibited communal leadership characteristics in their roles. "When describing themselves in their leadership roles, all seven women described behaviors congruent with communal behaviors. They were motivated by purpose, not power. Priority was placed on cultivating relationships, not self. Decision-making was a collective process, not individual" (Hines, 2018).

When invited to offer advice for the "Lasallian Organisation", which could be understood as organisational structures within the Lasallian Educational Mission, the women offered important insights which Hines summarised. These include:

"Heighten the awareness of our Institute's current realities". We need to deal with the real situation of inequality in society that women face in order to address them appropriately. Hines quoted Trish Carroll, "Gender issues are universal issues for women". And, "If we, as Lasallians, really take those messages about justice and dignity of the person, then we need to advocate for people in our own organizations. I don't think there's a great deal of awareness in our organization, and the first step to change is awareness" (Hines, 2018).

"Change organizational structures to allow more women to enter into leadership roles". Again, quoting Trish Carroll, "I think that the organization we have is a treasure, but I think it's a flawed treasure ... in governance and the role of women – who's sitting at the table, whose voices are heard, and who's making decisions. I think if the

organization is not ready to tackle these issues and prepared to crack open some of [the] old hierarchical structures, then it's really hard to see how the Institute will flourish into the future". Hines quoted Tracy Adams who said "I think that we've got to, firstly, free up positions that allow women to have experiences that can showcase their great capacity for this mission and skills that they bring" (Hines, 2018).

"Advocate for and invite more women into all levels of leadership within the Institute". The women in Hines study developed this idea with comments like Roxanne Eubank's, "Continually advocate for the presence of women at the table" (Hines, 2018). "Tracy [Adams] concurred adding, 'My recommendation is to seek out diversity, celebrate diversity, and welcome differing opinions to the table. Don't set your councils up to be people who are very similar to each other who come from similar backgrounds who have come from similar experiences. Group-think won't do this mission any good'" (Hines, 2018).

"Create and sustain a supportive community for women throughout the Institute" and structures for a collective voice. This network of support would be important for Young Lasallians who are women and for women who may not have a voice in their local reality.

The women Hines interviewed also offered insight directly to the next generation of Lasallian women leaders. These were:

1. "Work hard while striving to maintain a healthy work-life balance.
2. Seek a supportive female community.
3. Learn Lasallian leadership through open-minded involvement in and love for the mission.
4. Strive to lead in a way that is integral to yourself and the Lasallian mission" (Hines, 2018).

4.2.1. Reflection on First Generation Women Leaders

Circular 461: Associated for Mission ... an Act of Hope eloquently shares an important invitation which the women in Hines' article accepted. "History reveals that Brothers and all other Lasallians have committed themselves some for now and some forever to Christ's mission in the Church as entrusted to the Institute. Now, more than ever before, the call goes out to all Lasallians to ensure the future of the Mission" (Brothers of the Christian Schools, 2010). The women highlighted in Hines' article answered that call to ensure the future of the mission.

They served, and continue to serve, as mentors and guides for the next generation of leadership of Brothers, women and men. They have been leaven for the women who have followed them having broken the proverbial glass ceiling that exists which the Lasallian Family is not immune from. They have modelled and advocated for ideas of shared mission and Association and have spoken openly about inclusion and gender equity in the Lasallian Family. They have used their voice and opportunity so that others coming after them have those same opportunities. Of course, they are not alone in their commitment, other Partners, women and men, have led the way in Shared Mission and Association.

4.3 Women in leadership today: The Journey of Association for the Women on the Inaugural International Council of Lasallian Association and the Educational Mission (CIAMEL)

Lasallian Women: Pathways on the Vocational Journey
(Ruple Gilson, 2019)

As the Institute awakened to the budding understanding of mission and Association not exclusively the experience of the Brothers, the 43rd General Chapter in 2000 named five criteria for those Partners who have and desire a deeper sense of Association. The Chapter

named them Associates. They have a “long record of collaborating in the Lasallian Mission, and who feel:

1. a vocation inspired by the charism of Saint John Baptist de La Salle and his values;
2. a life of faith which discovers God in everyday life understood in the light of Scripture and, for persons of other religions, in the light of their own sacred texts;
3. a community experience of some form or other suited to the identity of its members;
4. a mission of some duration which associates persons with the educational service of the poor;
5. an openness of mind which makes it possible to see beyond the individual and his immediate environment (Brothers of the Christian Schools, 2000, p. 4).

Subsequent International Mission Assemblies and General Chapters have also addressed the role of Association in mission today. The 43rd General Chapter identified “the need for a multiplicity of experiments” regarding the practice of Association (Brothers of the Christian Schools, 2000, p. 9). As a result, during the last few decades, some Districts have developed a clear path and plan for Association responsive to local realities.

Circular 461: Associated for the Lasallian Mission ... An Act of Hope, referenced above, deepened reflection on Association. The Circular stated that Association is “the link that unites all those committed to the Lasallian Mission, i.e. those who see themselves responsible for it and who contribute to its vitality. This link can be expressed in diverse ways:

1. For the Brothers, it is a vow that forms part of their religious profession.

2. Some Lay Lasallians will choose to express it publicly after a process and according to the customs of their District.
3. Other Lay Lasallians will live it out implicitly through their commitment in the Lasallian Mission lived according to the characteristics described in this Circular. They are associates *de facto*” (Brothers of the Christian Schools, 2010, p. 39-40).

The Circular also offered five fundamental elements of Association that “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). They are nuanced from the five criteria describing the characteristics of an associate laid out in the documents of the 43rd General Chapter.

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 (Brothers of the Christian Schools, 2010, p. 23).

“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 was 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?” (Ruple Gilson,

2019, p. 18). Ruple Gilson sought reflection from the women on the inaugural International Council of Lasallian Association and the Educational Mission.

The International Council of Lasallian Association and the Educational Mission (CIAMEL) was established following calls for a deliberative structure animating the Lasallian Educational Mission composed by Brothers and Partners by the 2nd International Mission Assembly and the 45th General Chapter (Brothers of the Christian Schools, 2013b; 2014). The inaugural CIAMEL's statutes mandated that the composition of the Council be two-thirds Partner and one-third Brother. As just under 50% of CIAMEL's inaugural members were women, it was an opportune time to use the group of women, representing each Region of the Institute, to unpack their journeys of Association and commitment in order to glean commonalities and lessons which may be applicable to others (Ruple Gilson, 2019).

“While one study could not possibly account for every woman's experience of Association, it was important to get a snapshot and sample from women from each of the five Regions of the Institute who were serving the Lasallian Family at a global level. This snapshot offered insights and recommendations concerning the ways in which the lived experience of Association can support Lasallian women on their vocational journeys” (Ruple Gilson, 2019, p. 19). Their experiences may not mirror the experiences of all women in their Regions, but by virtue of their role on the first CIAMEL, are worth consideration.

The five women who served on the inaugural CIAMEL were: Colette Allix, MS, (RELEM), Rose Laetitia Nanéma-Dala, BA, (RELAF); Fritzie Ian P De Vera, MS (PARC); Mg. Antuaneth Jessica Ortega García, (RELAL); Alisa Macksey, EdD Candidate, who served as the President of CIAMEL (RELAN). They represented women from various states of life: single, married, mothers. At the time of writing, all of the women had served on District, Regional, international committees and councils. All were very well-formed Lasallians with multiple formation experiences (Ruple Gilson, 2019).

The women on CIAMEL completed an online 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 created a picture of the various pathways toward Association they have travelled over decades of service in the Lasallian Family and how the elements of Association resonate with the personal experience” (Ruple Gilson, 2019, p. 19). The shared threads of their experiences highlighted the diverse fabric of the Lasallian vocation and its manifestations in Association for mission. Commonalities of their reflections were:

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 internalisation of the mission as their life's purpose (Ruple Gilson, 2019, p. 19).

“What was striking and clear in the reflection from the women was the profound level of commitment to mission they have and how this commitment is made tangible by the witness of their Lasallian Vocation” (Ruple Gilson, 2019, p. 20).

The common elements that emerge from the reflections of the women suggest that “pathways toward Association need to feature meaningful formation and community experiences that can foster deeper understanding and authentic commitment to the mission” (Ruple Gilson, 2019, p. 24). “These pathways should accompany all Lasallians toward a sense of alignment between their life’s purpose and faith on one hand and how these contribute to the mission on the other through structure and sustainability. 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” (Ruple Gilson, 2019, p. 24).

“A continued call for all in the Lasallian Family and an area for local realities, Districts, 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” (Ruple Gilson, 2019, p. 25).

**5. WHERE ARE WE GOING AND
HOW DO WE GET THERE?
COMMON THREADS IN THE
THREE STUDIES**

The three papers collectively highlight the multifaceted experiences of Lasallian women, underscoring several key themes. A foundational aspect of the vocational journeys of those who have participated in the research underpinning these papers was the quality and impact of invitation and welcome to the Lasallian Educational Mission they experienced. Initial acceptance and continued support from both Brothers and fellow Partners were crucial in fostering their commitment to the mission. We can see navigating gender biases remains a significant challenge, but with the right support and perseverance, women have been able to attain leadership roles and find their voice and contribution. There is here a reinforced focus on the power of invitations, including when taking on new roles or initiatives. These are pivotal moments that often lead to personal and professional growth, encouraging introspection and a deeper connection to the Lasallian mission. Ongoing formation and mentorship are essential for the growth and development of Lasallian women. Formation and mentorship programmes provide the necessary tools and support for women to thrive in their roles and contribute meaningfully to the mission.

In looking at the themes and the recommendations coming from each study, we can highlight common trends which can help shape future action as well as areas for growth which some may find challenging.

5.1 Recommendations

Foster an Inclusive Environment: Ensuring that women feel welcomed and accepted within the Lasallian Family is crucial. Efforts should be made to create an inclusive and supportive environment that values the contributions of women. All have a role to play in this.

Enhance Mentorship and Formation Programmes: Ongoing formation and mentorship programmes are essential for the professional and spiritual growth of Lasallian women. These programmes should be expanded and tailored to meet the specific needs of women in different contexts and realities. There are also great benefits to

investing in women who can take more central and leading roles in the formation of all Lasallians.

Address Gender Biases: Conscious and unconscious gender biases must be recognised and addressed. This includes creating more inclusive policies and practices that promote gender equity within the Lasallian Family and in structures of mission and governance.

Create Supportive Networks: Supportive networks and communities should be developed for women at all stages of their journeys. These networks can provide a platform for women to share experiences, seek advice, and support each other on their journeys of Association and commitment.

Recognise and Value Women's Contributions: The contributions of women to the Lasallian mission should be recognised and valued. This includes incorporating the historical and ongoing role of women into the Lasallian narrative and ensuring that their achievements are acknowledged and celebrated.

Leverage the strengths and opportunities of women as communal leaders: Lean more intentionally into the latent potential of communal style of leadership that favours cooperation, collaboration, and maintaining healthy relationships. As we look at the future of Association, the Lasallian Family will increasingly need to rely on such or similar styles of leadership. It can be argued this has been a part of the Lasallian story since its inception. Moving forward, unless held back by policy or practice, women will play a key role in that because of this general disposition towards such a style and also because they are a majority group in the Lasallian Family.

The vocational journeys of Lasallian women are rich with experiences of acceptance, challenge, and growth. By addressing the identified challenges and implementing the recommended changes, the Lasallian Family can foster a more inclusive and supportive environment for women, ensuring that their contributions continue to enrich the mission and the broader Church.

6. CONCLUSION

As the Lasallian Family continues to grapple with the future unfolding pathways of transformation and needs of our mission, it is critically important to support deeper and more authentic Association for mission. It is travelling together on the shared journey of belonging and commitment which will lead women, men, Brothers, and all in the Lasallian Family to Association in order to meet the needs of our time and build God's Kingdom. Women will continue to become stronger protagonists and agents of heaven in mission and Association for the Lasallian Family if invited and given the space to fully contribute. We need to do our utmost to harness their leadership, commitment, communal leadership style and vocational identity to steward the mission, its sustainability and needed growth.

I have used three prior publications as the launching pad for this exploration: *Lasallian Women's Needs Assessment Survey Report* (Heather Ruple Gilson, MEd; Susan R. Hines, EdD; Elizabeth E. Seebach, PhD; and Mary Catherine Fox, AFSC, PhD, 2023); *The Lived Experience of First-Generation International Lasallian Women Leaders* (Susan R. Hines, EdD, 2018); and *Lasallian Women: Pathways on the Vocational Journey* (Heather Ruple Gilson MEd, 2019).

The common threads and trends that emerge from this reflection are aligned with the key findings and outcomes of the XVI Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, the commitments regarding women and girls as part of the Global Compact on Education, which the Institute is a signatory to, as well the development the discourse in key Institute publications with relevant sections pertaining to women and their contributions to the effectiveness and authenticity of mission, Association and the Lasallian Family.

There is also opportunity for future research and study about women. These topics could include:

1. What are the needs of women in specific Districts and cultural contexts?

2. What intersectionality, or multiplicity of bias, do women face that hinder full participation in mission and Association?
3. How can women use their skills and abilities to build intentional communities and fraternities called for in the 46th General Chapter Pathway five and the Third International Mission Assembly Strategic Axis three to support the journey of Association and belonging?

Brother Armin Luistro, Superior General, in his address to the CIL session on Lasallian Women in 2023 had the following recommendations and hopes for the role of Lasallian women moving forward. He shared three hopes. First, to “let Lasallian women lead and create Leavening [Movement], ministries or communities where Brothers and Lasallian men are welcome to participate” (Luistro, 2023, p.16). Second, to “let Lasallian women turn the chains that enslave us to linked in a chain that gifts us all with the freedom of the children of God” (Luistro, 2023, p.19). Third, Brother Armin hopes that the Lasallian Family is able to “let Lasallian women colour the world and revitalise our charism with brightness and joy by simply being themselves and enhancing the Lasallian Mission with the feminine touch (Luistro, 2023, p.23). Brother Armin concluded his address by reminding all Lasallian women, represented in that meeting hall in Rome in Spring 2023, not to be afraid.

As we lock our hopeful and committed gaze to the uncharted future of our charism and our Family’s effort to keep it relevant and ablaze with the spirit of faith, service and community, may we reflect on the words of Sister Louise Hours to De La Salle as he felt disheartened and discerning whether it was time to let go of his life’s work in 1714 in Parmenie. She directly challenged him and said, “In no way should you abandon the family God has given you” (Burkhard & Salm, 1983, p. 53). May we, like the Founder, at our darkest hours, find wise counsel and someone to hold out a light for us, as we discern our next steps together and by Association. May we, as one Lasallian Family, leaven for a more fraternal world, respond as the Founder did on his return to Paris and boldly say, “Well, here I am. What do you want of me?” (Salm, 1996, p. 163).

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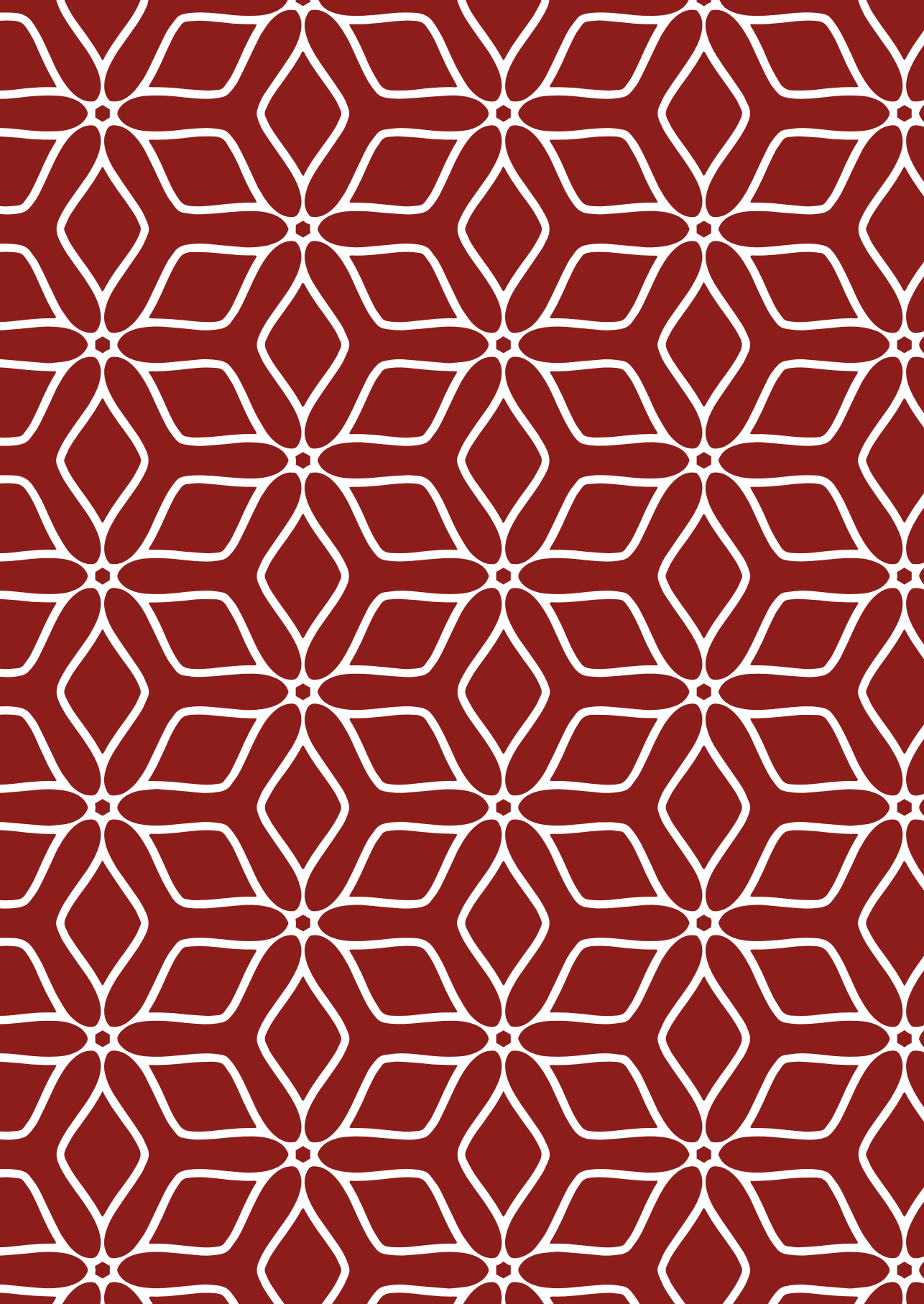
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