

# Innovation in Association: The Miguel School Movement

Michael Anderer–McClelland

While **initiatives** seek to respond to problems perceived and analyzed as part of a planning process whose results are foreseeable, **innovations** commit different persons to a process in which they are prepared to put themselves at risk without being able to define all the factors in advance. . . . We accept to reorder our reasons for living, our attitudes in our contact with others who are different socially, culturally and religiously. Innovation implies a risk of being altered and changed.

(Nicolas Capelle, FSC)<sup>1</sup>

The Miguel School Movement in the United States is a recent explosion of new, alternative, Lasallian schools: an *innovation*, a new form of association, and a new birth in a family committed to the children of the world.<sup>2</sup> The birthing process included a founding event and three distinct stages of development: start-up, innovation, and association. With Isaiah we say, “For a child has been born for us, a son given to us; authority rests upon his shoulders; and he is named Wonderful Counselor” (9:6).

Few words are yet written about this movement, this new birth. Although the

Miguel Schools have attracted much attention and feeling in the Lasallian world, nationally and internationally, only recently have writers begun to articulate the self-understanding and history of the movement. What follows is one person’s reflection on the Miguel School Movement from the perspective of a participant who is a member of the founding faculty at one Miguel School, an administrator at another Miguel School, and the founding co-chair of the Lasallian Association of Miguel Schools (LAMS). This article in no way represents a systematic analysis or history of these events; I offer it as a contribution to greater self-understanding of the movement that gave birth to LAMS, an innovative form of Lasallian Association.

## **Start-Up, 1993–2000: Founding a Vocation**

The initial phase of the Miguel School Movement is the story of individuals making radical choices and commitments based on an understanding of their own personal vocation within the broader Lasallian context.<sup>3</sup> First in Providence, RI, in 1993, followed by Chicago in 1995 and Camden in 1997, several Lasallians became

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1. Capelle, FSC, Nicolas. *Lasallian Educational Innovation*. MEL Bulletin No. 4. Rome: Brothers of the Christian Schools, June 2003.

2. A Miguel School is defined as a small, Lasallian, elementary or middle school that is not tuition driven and serves predominantly low-income children and families from all faiths and cultures. Source: Lasallian Association of Miguel Schools, [www.miguelschools.org](http://www.miguelschools.org).

3. For further information about the influences that led up to the founding of the first San Miguel Schools, see MEL Bulletin No. 7, *Priority to the Poor: The Schools of San Miguel in the United States*.

founders.<sup>4</sup> Within this “founding act,” as Capelle calls it, these individuals found (or re-found) their own, particular, and unique vocation within the general vocation of the Institute.<sup>5</sup> A simple response to unmet needs did not generate this act; instead, the founders and co-founders were all prepared to see and respond to those unmet needs through the Lasallian charism they had nurtured in themselves. The charism “is in ourselves: it lives in us, it molds us; it is that of a founder, of a sacred history, founding texts, common mythology which influence the way we look, listen, relate to others.”<sup>6</sup> In this process, these individuals chose “to put themselves at risk without being able to define all the factors in advance, . . . to reorder [their] reasons for living.”<sup>7</sup>

The first phase of the Miguel School Movement, then, is marked by a group of individuals discovering or rediscovering their identity and vocation as Lasallians in their own particular way within the larger context of their District and the unmet needs of children and families. With each new Miguel School, the same weaving of a personal and unique vocational choice within the broader Lasallian context repeats itself. In fact, the context today is frequently one of multiple charisms acting as a background to each individual vocational “founding.” Christian Brothers are no longer the majority of new founders. Today lay associates, men and women, are also taking the risk of being “altered and changed” in a founding act.

What is unique about the vocational risks that took place during this first phase, however,

is that the first three Miguel Schools originated without strong organizational or personal ties among the individual founders and co-founders of each school. As a result, the first three schools are unique in various ways: organization of the school day and year, curriculum, relationship to the local neighborhood and church, structure of its Lasallian community, and so on. Only with the founding of San Miguel Middle School in Minneapolis and of De La Salle at Blessed Sacrament in Memphis in Fall 2000 does a significant sharing of experience, ideas, structures, and vocational and founding stories take place. For example, Lawrence Schatz, FSC, President and Co-Founder of San Miguel Minneapolis, worked at San Miguel Chicago for two summers and two months of a school year prior to opening San Miguel Minneapolis.

#### **Founding Event, November 30– December 3, 2000: The San Miguel School Roundtable**

In the millennial year 2000, a group of Lasallians—women and men, associates and brothers—followed a star to the town of Camden, New Jersey. While looking for something, they found it within themselves. With no prior expectations, the **San Miguel School Roundtable** became the founding event of the Lasallian Association of Miguel Schools. How did this occur?

In Spring 2000, the steering committee of *Lasallian Partners for the Economically Poor (LPEP)*<sup>8</sup> saw a potential opportunity to bring together the leaders of the existing Miguel

4. Most founders in the first phase were Christian Brothers, with one notable exception. The first San Miguel School in Chicago was co-founded by four people, two Christian Brothers and a married couple who are Third Order Lay Franciscans. Lasallian Volunteers, many of whom are women, also played an important role in the founding faculties of the first schools.

5. Capelle, p. 22.

6. *Ibid.*, p. 19.

7. *Ibid.*, p. 19.

8. Rooted in John Baptist de La Salle's founding mission of educational service of the poor, Lasallian Partners for the Economically Poor (LPEP) coordinates and shares information and activities among involved members and those entrusted to their care; advocates globally for justice and peace concerns; issues an invitation to others to experience Lasallian programs in service with the poor; encourages any activities that build relationships to improve the life of economically disadvantaged youth and families. For more information, contact LPEPUSA@aol.com.

Schools. The LPEP Steering Committee asked the leaders whether they would be interested in gathering to share best practices and offered to host the event, make all necessary arrangements, and cover all costs. The response was enthusiastic, and LPEP began planning the logistics for the event and scheduled the San Miguel School Roundtable for November 30–December 3, 2000 at the Romero Urban Retreat Center in Camden, New Jersey.

Two other preparatory events helped create the environment that transformed the Roundtable into a watershed moment. First, through a series of providential encounters, a venture capitalist and philanthropist, B. J. Cassin, came to visit San Miguel Chicago in May 2000. Taken up with the mission and the model, when he heard about the Roundtable, he offered to cover all the expenses and send a representative<sup>9</sup> to the meeting.

The second event was the 43rd General Chapter of the Institute (May–June 2000), with the theme “Association for the Educational Service of the Poor in the 21st Century.” Many leaders of the Miguel School Movement felt affirmed and energized by the General Chapter. Roundtable participants arrived in Camden with the Chapter documents in hand.

The trajectory of the Roundtable—planned as a weekend of communal sharing of experiences and best practices—gained unanticipated spiritual energy and momentum during the opening prayer service on the first evening. One by one, in a prayerful and ritualized atmosphere, each participant shared his or her hopes, dreams, and prayers for their weekend together and for the Lasallian mission in which they were engaged. By the time everyone had offered

a reflection, the participants realized that something special was happening: they were entering a liturgical time when outcomes are unknown. What had been a group of people tired and weary from travel and ministry looking for a place to rest became a community of educators alive with God’s Spirit, prepared once again to take the risk of being changed.

In another founding act, the Roundtable participants, Brothers and lay associates, gave birth to a new form of association when they wrote the following mission statement:

As a response to the call of the Spirit and the challenge of the 43rd General Chapter, the Lasallian Association of Miguel Schools wishes to follow the path that leads to the poor. We acknowledge that God calls us to bring a creative and generous response to the world of the poor today and to live in fidelity to the founding charism of John Baptist de La Salle. Associated together, we will serve, support, and empower the Miguel Schools in their Lasallian mission.<sup>10</sup>

### **Innovation, 2000–2003: A New Form of Association**

[An innovation is] an initiative which produces something new in terms of relations, procedures, understanding, and in the last resort, of structures. It is not simply an adaptation to a new situation, but a different way of seeing reality, of relating to it, of allowing oneself to be transformed by this new relationship.<sup>11</sup>

9. That representative is Jeff Theilman, then the Director of Development for Cristo Rey Jesuit High School. In January 2001, Jeff became the first Executive Director of the Cassin Educational Initiatives Foundation, a foundation dedicated to support the replication of three models of education, the Nativity Middle School Model, the San Miguel Middle School Model, and the Cristo Rey High School Model.

10. The mission statement continues: We seek to accomplish our mission by **gathering** to support one another personally, spiritually, and professionally; **strengthening** our mission to alternative Catholic education; **advocating** for the growth of the Miguel model of Lasallian education; and **inviting** others to join us directly or through partnerships.

11. Capelle, p. 15.

The creation of LAMS over the next several months, and continuing for the next few years, certainly produced something new at many levels. Within forty-five days of the end of the Roundtable, LAMS obtained formal approval from the Regional Conference of Christian Brothers and secured a significant start-up grant from the newly formed Cassin Educational Initiatives Foundation. Within less than six months, LAMS hired a Network Builder to implement its mission statement.

A true innovation does not fit normal categories of thinking. Capelle perceptively observes that under normal circumstances,

everything works as if our collective experience of 300 years had taught us to respond with already known educational and methodological structures. It is perhaps only the new school networks concerned with education for poorer people . . . that avoid more easily the risk of resorting to what is already known.<sup>12</sup>

When an initiative becomes an innovation, it always challenges, without wanting to, the educational and ecclesial scene and positions adopted by the District [the Regional Conference in the case of LAMS]. It is always accompanied by argument and disturbance, because everyone's personal view of life is once again called into question. . . . Innovation always awakens good arguments but also old fears.<sup>13</sup>

In response both to a call from God and to unmet needs, the founders and co-founders of the Miguel Schools took a risk in opening schools that do not depend on tuition income. Many Districts responded with similar courage

and risk-taking by providing a creative space where these schools could grow. The participants at the San Miguel Roundtable also took a risk in the founding act and creation of LAMS. The leadership of the Regional Conference responded with courage and not a small amount of risk in providing a creative space where LAMS could form.

Certainly, both individual Miguel Schools and LAMS sometimes generated a mixed response of support and suspicion. They challenged existing structures "without wanting to" and generated no small amount of "argument and disturbance." However, the Districts and the Regional Conference opened themselves to be "altered and changed" by these new members and "put themselves at risk without being able to define all the factors in advance."

By the end of this particular phase of the Miguel School Movement, in Spring 2003, LAMS had established itself as an excellent resource and support for new Miguel Schools. The LAMS National Conference, held annually beginning in 2002, is a remarkable experience of formation, celebration, vocation, and professional development for all new and existing Miguel Schools.

The innovation phase was also characterized by incredible growth. At the time of the Fall 2000 Roundtable, there were five Miguel Schools, two of which had just opened. By Summer 2003, fifteen Miguel Schools existed, including De La Salle North Catholic in Portland, Oregon, the first Lasallian Cristo Rey model high school.<sup>14</sup> On the first evening of the 2000 Roundtable, when one participant shared his dream of "15 or 20 of these schools," little did any of us know how quickly that dream would become a reality.<sup>15</sup>

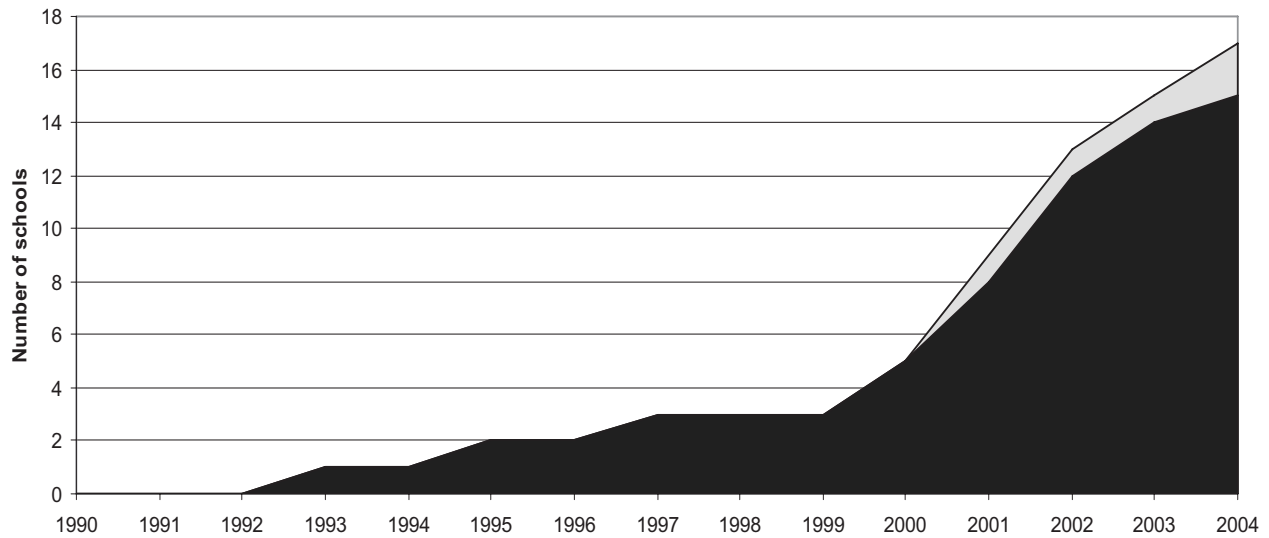
12. Capelle, p. 12.

13. *Ibid.*, pp. 16-17.

14. A Cristo Rey model high school is a non-tuition-driven school that offsets costs through a Corporate Internship Program: students work one day per week in an entry-level position at an area business or organization. A second Lasallian high school of this type, San Miguel High School in Tucson, AZ, is scheduled to open in Fall 2004.

15. That same person now dreams of 50 or 100 Miguel Schools. How long will it be before this dream becomes a reality?

Number of Miguel Schools from 1990 to 2004



[Beginning in 2000, Lasallian Cristo Rey Model Schools are added to the total.]

### Association, 2003 to the Present: Structuring an Innovation

Our Institute has a very marked character trait: concern with structures. There's nothing we can do about it: it's like that. We need to remember that it was born in France in a century marked by analysis, debate, the search for rules.<sup>16</sup>

LAMS is in the midst of establishing more permanent organizational structures that will stabilize and strengthen its ability to support and advocate for the Miguel Schools. In collaboration with the leadership of the Regional Conference and individual Districts, LAMS is finding a place for itself within the existing structures of the Region and Districts. This work is not yet complete, and new structures to integrate and make room for LAMS at the District or Regional level might still need to be created. This part of the story of the Miguel School Movement is yet to be written.

### Lessons from the Field

The Miguel School Movement and the creation of the Lasallian Association of Miguel Schools represent a rich story of an innovative form of association that needs to be told and retold so that we continue to draw lessons from it. This article is my personal recollection and reflection on this story today. Were I to tell the story tomorrow, different insights or perspectives might surface. These are the lessons I draw from this story today:

- Lasallians must keep telling the story.

The responsibility to pass on the Lasallian charism is the greatest responsibility that God has given to the Institute, for it is through this charism, alive in the hearts of human beings, that children are saved. An integral part of the story of each Miguel School is the coming together (the association) of individuals who make a personal, radical choice and commitment through which they discover, or rediscover, their personal call from God and their unique vocation within the Institute and the

16. Capelle, p. 11.

Church. Initiation by the Spirit and reception of the Lasallian charism into the depths of the heart by a person combine to form an integral precursor to the awakening and discovery of that vocation. Formation programs for teachers and staff, like the LAMS Conference, are critical prerequisites for the awakening of each unique Lasallian vocation. In addition to formation programs, stronger structures of accompaniment for lay partners and associates are needed.

- Lasallians must sharpen their educational and theological skills.

A call from God and a radical commitment to respond to the unmet needs of children and families does not automatically bestow on us the professional and ministerial skills to perform such work.

We are justified in asking ourselves whether, as Brothers and Partners, we study sufficiently the needs of those we meet, whether we understand them essentially. This takes time, patience, and always a certain cultural mobility if we are to put at risk mentally and spiritually something of ourselves.<sup>17</sup>

In particular, I suggest three focus areas for developing professional and ministerial skills: (1) Middle-Level Education and the Characteristics of Early Adolescents, (2) Preparation for Cross-Cultural Mission and Ministry, (3) Poverty and Youth Development and a Critical Pedagogy for Empowerment of Children and Families.

- Lasallians must imagine new forms of association.

New forms of association, like LAMS, at some point must concern themselves with structures and with relationships to Districts, the Region, and the Institute. This organiza-

tional, institutional component is natural, normal, and part of our Lasallian heritage. The history of the Miguel School Movement shows that new forms of association need creative space and adequate time to develop while not being overly restricted by existing institutional structures. The development of LAMS between 2000 and 2003 is a good example of existing structures (the Regional Conference and Districts) providing support and guidelines while allowing for creative space in which LAMS could evolve. New structures then follow to accommodate the new forms of association. Equally important is the awareness that a new form of association, while requiring new structures, might also reveal the need for a change in existing structures. We must continue to have the courage and trust to make these changes when they reveal themselves.

### **Conclusion**

In February 2004, Brother William Mann, FSC, Vicar General of the Institute, spoke during the LAMS National Conference. Brother Bill likened LAMS to a baby that brings delight to the whole Lasallian Family:

If we stay in this together, the baby will be cared for in wisdom and grace. The elders will be reminded of who they are. All of the nurturing and all of the hopes and dreams in the rest of us will come to the surface as simply as [a baby draws delight] out of me. If we can remember, it is said that “all might have life.” We’re founded so that everybody has a fullness of life. Therefore some of us have to go out to bring in those who haven’t yet been welcomed.

May we continue to welcome and delight in the new forms of association born in our midst that enable us to bring fullness of life to all God’s people, especially the poor.

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17. Capelle, p. 13.

**San Miguel Roundtable**  
**November 30–December 3, 2000**

**List of Participants**

Paul Ackerman, FSC  
 \*De La Salle Blackfeet  
 Browning, MT

Michael Anderer-McClelland  
 San Miguel School  
 Chicago, IL

Nancy Baker-Crellin (LPEP Facilitator)  
 La Salle School  
 Albany, NY

Jim Day  
 \*De Marillac Middle School  
 San Francisco, CA

Lawrence Goyette, FSC  
 San Miguel School  
 Providence, RI

Gordon Hannon  
 San Miguel School  
 Chicago, IL

William Johnson, FSC  
 San Miguel School  
 Camden, NJ

Benjamin Murray  
 San Miguel School  
 Minneapolis, MN

Edward Phelan, FSC (LPEP Facilitator)  
 Highbridge Community Life Center  
 Bronx, NY

Matthew Powell  
 \*De La Salle North Catholic  
 Portland, OR

Lawrence Schatz, FSC  
 San Miguel School  
 Minneapolis, MN

Robert Schieler, FSC  
 Regional Conference of Christian Brothers  
 Landover, MD

Edmund Siderewicz, FSC  
 San Miguel School  
 Chicago, IL

Mark Snodgrass, FSC  
 De La Salle at Blessed Sacrament  
 Memphis, TN

Jeff Susor  
 San Miguel School  
 Chicago, IL

Bob Sweeney  
 \*De La Salle at Saint Matthew's  
 Saint Louis, MO

Jeff Thielman  
 Cassin Educational Initiative Foundation  
[www.cassinfoundation.org](http://www.cassinfoundation.org)  
 Newton, MA

\* indicates schools that were in the planning stage at the time of the 2000 Roundtable.



Michael Anderer-McClelland is currently Director of Community Outreach at San Miguel Schools of Chicago, Back of the Yards Campus. From 1997–2000, Mike was a founding faculty member of San Miguel School in Camden, NJ. Mike lives in Chicago with his wife, Karin, Director of Mission and Formation for the Midwest District, and their two young children, Jack and Clare. With Thaddeus Smith, another teacher at San Miguel, they recently moved out of the main community house in the Back of the Yards and opened a new, smaller Lasallian Community nearby. Mike served as a founding member and Co-Chair of the Leadership Team of the Lasallian Association of Miguel Schools from 2000–03. He currently serves on the Steering Committee of Lasallian Partners for the Economically Poor and as Chair of the Advisory Board for the Lasallian Social Justice Institute.