

# Formation Programs to Support Association

Greg Kopra

The word *association* has been part of the Lasallian vocabulary since the beginning of the Institute. More importantly, the *experience* of being associated has been part of the reality of our Institute from the time the first Brothers began working intentionally as a team of educators for the benefit of their students—more than 300 years ago.

The shape of this experience of association, which has evolved over the years, is evidenced by the change in language that Brother John Johnston notes in “Lasallian Association for Mission,” an article in this present collection. What people once referred to as Brothers’ Schools are now known as Lasallian Schools. The Brothers’ mission has become a mission shared by Brothers, priests and other religious, and tens of thousands of single and married men and women. This shared mission is now evolving into what Brother John calls “Lasallian Association for Mission.”

How do programs of formation for Brothers and colleagues support this growing association? Let me begin with a story.

## Once Upon a Time

My first experience of Lasallian formation came in June 1991. The month before, I had decided to join the faculty and staff at La Salle High School (Milwaukie, Oregon). Although my teaching responsibilities (and other duties assigned by the principal) would not begin until August, I was invited to participate in a five-day

conference for Religious Studies teachers from the high schools of the District of San Francisco, which was to take place in June at the Christian Brothers Conference Center in Napa.

*District?* What is a District? *Christian Brothers?* Who are the Christian Brothers? What makes them different from the other religious communities with which I had rubbed elbows during twenty-eight years in Catholic education as a student and as a professional? I was soon to find out—at least I was to begin the journey of discovery.

After checking into my room, I ventured into the living room for the pre-dinner social. There I met a Christian Brother. We began to talk; he welcomed me to Mont La Salle and to the District. (That word again: *District*. What’s a District?)

As we visited, the conversation turned to the declining number of Brothers in the District and in the *Institute* (What’s an Institute?) and the growing number of laypeople involved with the schools sponsored by the Christian Brothers. This Brother who, I later discovered, was the Visitor (*Visitor?* What’s a Visitor?) explained that the workshop I was attending was part of a series intended, among other things, to strengthen relationships among people in District schools. “After all,” this Brother mentioned, “we want all of our schools to remain open and strong, and the only way to do that is to train our laypeople in our mission. That’s why you—all of you—are here this week.” What a refreshing thought: before working

even one day at La Salle, I am invited into the mission of the Brothers.

Having worked with a number of other religious communities in Catholic schools, I was aware of the decline in the number of people entering religious life that was true for all Catholic religious communities and that had been a reality for a number of years. This decline in numbers was affecting the ability of religious to continue to operate schools and other ministries in their accustomed way. Many religious congregations were in the process of consolidation—closing or merging some ministries, turning others over to the local diocese.

The Christian Brothers, however, were different: they saw the hand of the Holy Spirit in what would otherwise appear to be a desperate situation, and they had a plan in place to assure the survival of their educational mission—and that plan included me . . . somehow.

As I drove home at the end of the workshop, I felt energized and excited about my new work at La Salle High School, and I felt a kinship with twenty-five other Religious Studies teachers from Lasallian Schools. It was so clearly a valuable experience for me to spend the week with these teachers, and yet it was the first time I had experienced such a gathering in ten years of teaching in Catholic schools. I asked myself, “Why don’t other religious congregations who sponsor Catholic schools do this?” I had begun my formation as a Lasallian.

Over the next few years, I began to hear and learn the story of John Baptist de La Salle and the Brothers of the Christian Schools. I discovered the many and varied works sponsored by the Brothers throughout the world. What I heard gave words to what I had been looking for over many years. What I learned about Lasallian education resonated deeply with my own beliefs and my best hopes for young people through education. After many years of searching, I had found an educational charism that fit perfectly with my beliefs and my person.

The more I learned, the more I felt at home in Lasallian education. The more I

learned, the more I came to realize that I was not living alone in this home—not at all alone! In fact, I was joined by many thousands of people who work together to provide a human and Christian education to nearly one million students around the world. The more I learned, the more I wanted to learn. I was getting hooked.

Now here’s the thing: I didn’t learn all this by picking up books and articles on my own, although I did my share of research. Rather, I learned most powerfully about our heritage and charism by participating in formation programs sponsored by leaders at my school, in my District, and in the USA/Toronto Region. Local orientation programs sponsored by my District’s education office, workshops for Religious Studies teachers and for Deans of Studies, District retreats for teachers and staff, the first Lasallian Leadership Institute sponsored by the Region—these and many other gatherings began to shape me, invited me to reflect about my vocation as an educator, led me to prayer as I pondered God’s hand in all this, drew me in step by step, leading me to deeper and deeper commitments. Like a lump of clay, I was allowing myself to be molded into something more authentically myself than I had ever imagined possible.

Moreover, these programs also strengthened the sense of community among the participants, constantly reminding us that we are in this *together* and that together we will be most effective in shaping the life of the students entrusted to our care.

Finally, these programs, combined with my daily experiences at La Salle High School, slowly—almost imperceptibly at times—strengthened my *commitment* to this group and this educational venture that we call Lasallian education. Often, my mind and heart hearken back to De La Salle’s words:

Apparently, then, it was for this reason that God, who directs all things with wisdom and gentleness, and who is not accustomed to force the wills of [persons],

but who wanted to lead me to take complete direction of the schools, did this, in a very imperceptible manner, and over a period of time, so that one commitment led me into the next one without my having foreseen this in the beginning.

De La Salle's story was becoming my story.

### **Association: Part of the Fabric of the Lasallian Charism**

From the beginning of the Christian Schools, John Baptist de La Salle and the Brothers realized that students are better served by a community of educators than by individual teachers. De La Salle's formative efforts with these teachers involved them as a group: inviting them to his home for conversation over meals, inviting them to move into the family home, moving with them to a newly rented house. He never sent just one Brother to start a new school; it was always a community of Brothers that was sent. In fact, when he was invited to open a school with just one Brother, he refused.

As the number of communities grew, De La Salle began to gather them together for an annual retreat—not a private, individual, directed retreat but a retreat that strengthened the bond among all the Brothers. *The Conduct of the Christian Schools* was written by a group of Brothers after a number of conferences to discuss what worked best in the Christian Schools. Over time, this sense of community—*together and by association*—became woven into the fabric of an evolving charism. The whole has always been seen to be much more powerful, more salvific, than the sum of its parts.

Today we are an Institute with over 80,000 people committed to continuing the mission begun by De La Salle and the first Brothers. Only 4 per cent of this number are Brothers; 95 per cent are laymen and laywomen, and 1 per cent are priests, sisters, and brothers of other religious congregations. All seek to accomplish this educational and spiritual mission together. They are people of faith and goodwill. They are

people seeking community of one sort or another. They are people responding to a call no less than De La Salle and the first teachers were responding to a call from God to “provide a human and Christian education to the young, especially the poor.”

What we Lasallians have today that the first Brothers did not have is an educational and spiritual heritage that has been evolving and adapting itself to the needs of young people for over 300 years. This heritage—this story—forms the foundation of our formation programs today.

### **Important Elements of Formation Programs**

Generally speaking, programs of Lasallian formation educate Brothers and colleagues about the Lasallian charism in such a way that they are able to integrate it into their personal and professional lives. Programs range from orientation for new personnel to advanced, intensive formation programs such as the Lasallian Leadership Institute and the Buttimer Institute. These programs strengthen the commitment of participants to the mission and engage them intellectually, emotionally, and spiritually.

In San Francisco District schools, the invitation to associate with other Lasallians for the mission of human and Christian education is made right away, when well-formed administrators and program directors consider which applicants for job openings will be the “best fit” for the school. Once a school identifies and hires new employees and volunteers, they participate in an orientation to the Lasallian heritage—a time to “meet the family,” so to speak.

Many of them hear the founding story for the first time. They are introduced to the language of the Institute: the terms we use daily almost without thinking (Institute, District, Lasallian, Visitor, Chapter, Association, and so on). They are invited to share in a spirituality of education wherein they begin to reflect on their presence as more than a coincidence—as a

calling to make a difference in the life of the persons “entrusted to their care.”

Questions are planted: “Where do I fit in all this? What is God inviting me into?” The questions are planted, not answered. Only time and experience will begin to provide answers. This orientation is admittedly brief, providing only a cursory overview and a basic introduction to the Lasallian family, but it is enough—for the time being. . . .

One facet of the founding story that I find most compelling and most human is the reality that De La Salle only comes to understand in bits and pieces what God is calling him to. Little by little, as De La Salle reflects in prayer on his experience and the experiences of the first teachers, he comes to see God’s gentle yet persistent presence in his life. He clearly admits later in life that God would have lost him entirely if God had shown him the end result—the establishment of the Christian Schools and a life devoted to the salvation of poor and working-class children through education—at the beginning, when Adrien Nyel first invited him to help start a school in Reims.

In De La Salle’s mind and heart, God is smarter than that; God shows him just one small piece of the design: the next piece, in fact. We can almost hear Nyel pleading with De La Salle, “Please, Monsieur de La Salle, just one school. All I ask is for you to help me with your connections in Reims.” De La Salle thinks to himself, “Well, it is only one school. All he wants is to use my connections; I can do that much.” And so it begins.

Why do I tell this story? Because this belief that God meets us where we are and lovingly guides us over time to places we never imagined and to commitments we never thought possible also runs like a thread through our heritage and informs our formation efforts. Little by little, step by step, honoring where people are in their faith journey while at the same time stretching them to grow, realizing that association is not achieved overnight: this is the attitude we must take when designing formation opportunities for

Lasallians— gently, almost imperceptibly, yet persistently.

Once the initial invitation has been extended, what then? It is time to allow persons *to live the story* for a period of time, accompanied by more experienced Lasallians at the local level. It is time to experience the reality of the mission, complete with its challenges, successes, disappointments, fulfillment, and much hard work, all the while supported, encouraged, and guided by others in the community. Slowly, perhaps without even realizing it, a person becomes a more active member of the Lasallian community.

Some of the most impressive formation programs that I have seen develop at schools in the San Francisco District over the past ten years are those for new teachers and staff. They offer direction, mentoring, guidance, and community for periods of one, two, and sometimes three years. They provide regular time for new employees to gather with more experienced colleagues to share successes and challenges, to ask questions and seek answers, to learn the many and varied facets of our educational and spiritual charism. Ultimately, these programs invite new employees to work *together*—with one another and with more experienced members of the community—to provide a human and Christian education to those entrusted to their care. *Together and by association*: even before hearing the words, they have the experience.

Those of us at local and District levels must provide teachers, staff, and administrators with regular opportunities to gather for reflection and prayer, times to revisit the questions planted at the beginning: “Where do I fit in all this? What is God inviting me into?” Such experiences of prayer, of retreat, allow people to put their experience in dialogue with the Lasallian heritage and to deepen their understanding of and commitment to our educational and spiritual mission.

New teachers and staff at San Francisco District schools participate in a twilight retreat in the middle of their first year at the school. This retreat, of two hours’ duration, provides

time for participants to review and reflect on significant pieces of our mission (for example, recognizing the presence of God, special concern for poor students) in light of their own real-life experience, brief as it has been thus far.

Slowly, incrementally, people make connections between the mission and their own experience. Gradually, they discover their role in accomplishing this mission. Little by little, the Lasallian mission begins to resonate in their hearts. More and more, they begin to see, practically speaking, how they live the Lasallian mission in their daily interactions with those entrusted to their care. They begin to feel not only more connected to the broader mission but also part of the community of educators at their site.

This growing commitment to mission and community certainly needs to be encouraged and developed at the local level through retreat experiences, ongoing exposure to the Lasallian family through workshops, readings, and video reflections, and other creative methods. Examples include a quote from one of De La Salle's meditations at the top of the daily announcements, banners prominently displayed throughout the building that articulate key components of mission, a prayer reflecting a piece of the Lasallian story to begin each faculty and staff meeting, and so on.

Ongoing formation must also take place in larger venues in the District and in the Region. It is important that people experience the Lasallian family by coming together with Lasallians from other District or regional works to reflect, pray, share, and build a larger community. Such gatherings can be, and often are, powerful experiences that strengthen personal commitment to a mission that participants come to experience as shared by a rather large group of people around the world.

The San Francisco District has sponsored many such gatherings in the past several years, including retreats or workshops for Deans of Studies, Deans of Students, Athletic Directors, Admissions Directors, Development Directors, Social Studies teachers, Mathematics teachers,

Science teachers, Support Staff, and Counselors. These gatherings hark back to the Brothers' meetings in the early 1700s that resulted in the early editions of *The Conduct of the Christian Schools*.

People with similar responsibilities in Lasallian Schools gather for a few days to pray, share, and discuss. What's working? What challenges are you facing? How do you respond to this question? What does it mean to be a Lasallian educator in this particular field? It is a time to network, realizing that the wisdom of the group always far exceeds the wisdom of an individual.

It is also a time to be reminded of the mission we share, a time once again to ask ourselves those critical questions: "Where do I fit in all this? What is God inviting me into?" Participants come away from these gatherings renewed, reenergized, inspired. They bring all this energy and inspiration back with them to their local community, where everyone benefits.

A long-standing and inspiring Regional formation program is the Buttimer Institute for Lasallian Studies. For nearly twenty years, Lasallians from across the Region (and increasingly from other parts of the Institute) have gathered in the summer for three weeks of prayer, intensive study, and community-building focused on our Lasallian educational heritage. As one who is privileged to teach in the program, I am inspired each summer to share time and conversation with a rich mix of Brothers and Partners from the United States, Nigeria, Ireland, Kenya, Australia, Mexico, and other parts of the world. Teachers and administrators and staff in elementary schools, middle schools, secondary schools, colleges and universities, child-care centers, and other various works share their experiences, form lasting friendships, and commit themselves even more deeply to the one mission we all share: the human and Christian education of those entrusted to our care, especially those on the margins.

One of the most influential regional programs of formation to arise within the past ten years is the Lasallian Leadership Institute (LLI).

Over 250 Lasallians—Brothers as well as lay colleagues—have completed the Institute’s three-year program, and another 200 have just completed the first year. More than any other formation program in my experience, the LLI has fostered a spirit of association that stretches beyond the boundaries of individual schools and agencies—sometimes even beyond District boundaries.

The formation offered by LLI has been directly responsible for three new schools in the San Francisco District, as well as at least one other, to my knowledge, in the Region. Graduates of the LLI have a broader and deeper sense of Lasallian “family” because of both the formation and the community fostered among participants over three years’ time. Several laymen and laywomen graduates have answered the call to serve at other District schools in the past several years. A spirit of cooperation not previously present to such a degree exists among schools that is nothing less than inspiring: established schools, for example, work as older brothers and sisters to new works, sharing labor, ideas, personnel, and camaraderie.

The intensive and long-term formation offered through the LLI inspires and empowers participants to take on greater leadership in advancing the educational and spiritual mission and in strengthening community at the local level. Beyond a doubt, graduates of the Lasallian Leadership Institute live “Lasallian Association for Mission.”

### **A Final Thought**

I want to return to the question I asked at the end of my first formation experience in Lasallian education: “Why don’t other religious congregations who sponsor Catholic schools do this?” Since 1991, many of them have begun programs of formation for those who serve in their ministries, and many congregations are very interested in how Lasallians—Brothers and lay colleagues—do formation. New programs of formation are springing up around the country. It is good to see the growth and good to share our experience.

I am convinced of the tremendous value of our formation programs in advancing the Lasallian mission. Not only are our works surviving, they are thriving, and new schools and other works are being added to the family each year. Such growth does not happen by accident. It happens because of the dedication, spirit, and faith of many people who have been formed into one family—the Lasallian family—to continue to respond to God’s call to love, serve, and save young people, especially those who are poor, through education. We must and we will continue to cooperate with God and with one another in molding and fashioning these educational communities.

Live, Jesus, in our hearts!

— • — • — • —

Greg Kopra has been the Associate Coordinator of Lasallian School Programs for the District of San Francisco since 1999. He is responsible for coordinating and facilitating programs of Lasallian adult formation in District works. He is also the Local Processing Coordinator on the West Coast for the Lasallian Leadership Institute, a teacher in the Buttimer Institute, and chair of the Regional Education Board’s Formation for Mission Committee. He lives with his wife Maria and their son Tim in Napa, CA.