

Being Brothers Today

A Response by the Brothers of Great Britain

Report of the discussions of Lasallian Days in Advent and Lent,
prepared by Michael Curran and Terry Collins

District Profile

We are eighty-nine Brothers, of whom eighteen belong to the Malta Sector and six others are working outside the District. Most of us are retired from teaching in schools. Only fifteen of us are under the age of sixty-five, and only one Brother is under fifty. This response is the result of discussions among the sixty-five Brothers in Great Britain, firstly in their Community meetings and then in larger assemblies known as "Lasallian Days", which we hold every year during Advent and Lent.

Reactions to the Document: Being Brother Today

The initial reaction from some Brothers to the Document was that it did not relate to their lives, since they are not involved in active ministry with young people because of age and infirmity. Some Brothers thought that the European "Voice" in Chapter 2 was too negative and depressing, especially when compared to the uplifting statements from the other Regions.

As we became involved in the interactive process, the Brothers realised that it was the process that was important and not the document. The process was often challenging and provocative, and it encouraged us, both as individuals and as a group, to face some hard questions. The result was that it helped us to clarify our thoughts and our vision for the future.

Major Changes in Great Britain over the last twenty years

One Community said that, *'the major change for us is that the Institute is much smaller than it was twenty years ago. The vast majority of us are of retirement age and few Brothers are involved in schools in any capacity'*. It was pointed out that our ageing has resulted in us having to let go of positions of authority. We are no longer in control. For some Brothers the ageing process has also led to infirmity. All this has an affect on our individual and group identity.

At the beginning of the interactive process some Brothers expressed the opinion that the *'future for our own Community and our District is un-*

clear'. This was not intended as an expression of a problem to be solved, but rather a statement of the reality. We are now, perhaps, more conscious of this uncertainty, because it is underlined for us by the *'rapidity of change'* that is evident in the society in which we live today.

Brothers are not well known outside of the Lasallian Network. This may be inevitable, since the word 'Brother' is a relationship term and implies a personal contact. As one Community said, *"We are not easily recognised and our vocation is not easily understood."*

Some other changes mentioned were: the personal computer, immigration, the rise of Islam, greater awareness of child abuse, the rise in the elderly population, credit cards, digital technology and its rapid change, and the promotion of individualism.

One Brother said, *"We belong to a different Church and Institute. I am now much happier with the Institute. There is a greater concern for the poor. The idea of Association is a good one, and I am proud to be a Brother."*

Community Life

The quality of Community life has become more important to the Brothers as they have become older and are less involved in active ministry. In the past, the work tended to predominate, often to the detriment of Community life. Some Brothers even used their work as an excuse to *'escape'* from the Community. Now, however, the Brothers find that in their present situation the structures and ethos of the Community are very important to them, and many voice the view that one of their ministries is now to care for the other members of their Community.

Where good Community life exists, Brothers are normally happy and where it does not exist, dissatisfaction and individuality often occur. The fact that the Brothers Directors had been responsible for promoting the interactive process had highlighted the importance of the role of the Director in facilitating the life of the Community.

It was stated that we need to be aware that changes in society have altered our Community life, sometimes for the good but sometimes not. Concern was expressed about the way in which credit cards have enabled Brothers to avoid asking for permission before spending Community money, and about the way in which personal televisions and computers have encouraged individualism. We know we cannot turn the clock back; but we do need to create new structures and routines to encourage and support Community life.

Icons

The idea of 'icons' was given prominence during our 'Lasallian Day' assemblies, by the use of power point presentations designed to help the Brothers grasp the modern use of this term and the broad range of images it includes, such as Lasallian Icons and Personal Icons.

The principal icon extracted by Brothers from the reading of the Voices from the Five Continents was the icon of the Emmaus Story. This was viewed as two separate Icons: the *Journey to Emmaus* and the *Revelation at Emmaus*. We realise that we are journeying together. At times we cannot see very far ahead, and all around us there appears to be a barren desert where once there was green country. We know that this is our reality, but we do not become upset by it because we know that Jesus is walking with us. We are aware that Jesus is revealing himself to us today, not necessarily in the fine structures of our *Temples* of the past (our large schools), but in the humbler structures of the small, often temporary projects which are our *Inns of Emmaus*.

Many other icons were mentioned, but it was the Biblical and Lasallian ones that resonated most with the Brothers and from which they could draw reflections concerning their own identity as De La Salle Brothers.

One Brother, aged seventy-two, produced a graphic Icon of his life at the present time. It was a composite picture made up of a series of small images, mostly of people who care for him, such as the doctors, nurses, and care assistants. Interestingly, it did not include any pictures of schools or young people. This was the picture of the reality of that Brother's present situation. The situation from which he was reading the Document, *'Being Brothers Today'*, and asking himself questions such as: Where do I fit in all this? What part of the document is voicing my reality of being an elderly Brother today?

The Future

Following the Icon of the 'Emmaus Journey', we recognised that we are like the disciples travelling with Jesus. We are unable to predict the future, which is in the Lord's hands. However, we do know that we are an ageing District and some Brothers voiced the concern that it may now be unfair to invite young people to join us as Brothers. Our last novice came to us over ten years ago. However, the Brothers did not want to look at our situation in a negative way. They preferred to ask the question, *'To whom shall we pass on our Lasallian heritage?'* The answer was obvious. We must pass on our Lasallian heritage to the wider Lasallian Family, who are eager for us to share our Lasallian knowledge with them. This view was reinforced by one Community, which stated that, *"we must be ready to share our spirituality which has been developed over years, through programmes of formation, retreats, regular prayer and devotions, with many other Lasallians."*

Looking back over the past few years, we can see that our Lasallian Family has developed to the point where it is now beginning to place demands on us. The LAMB project in Bristol was conceived by our Lasallian partners who begged us to join them in promoting the spiritual and pastoral dimensions of the Catholic schools in the Bristol area. This project is a perfect example of the energy, enthusiasm and dynamism for the Lasallian Educational Mission manifested in our Associates. Another example of this enthusiasm is seen in the way schools are asking for Lasallian formation courses for their staff. This request has led us to plan the creation of a new Lasallian Centre to promote formation for the Lasallian mission.

Community is also seen as a key element in our future. A well-functioning Community is a *'power house of prayer'* for the Lasallian mission and the wider Church. Given the right structures, the Community enables the Brothers to continue to be part of the Lasallian mission *'together and by association'*. What we need for the future is the development of new kinds of Lasallian Communities, as we have begun to do in Kintbury, Newcastle and Bristol. This means the future also calls on us to explore new ideas on the diversity of the Lasallian vocation. The future of the traditional form of the Religious Life may not be a bright one, but the future prospects for Lasallian Life in Great Britain seem to give us good grounds for hope and enthusiasm.

The following quotes give some idea of the flavour of our discussions on our future.

"The future lies with the Associates."

"We must take risks or nothing will happen."

"We need to listen to our Associates."

"Lasallian Formation (for our associates) is essential."

"We have a wealth of treasures that we can share with the hard-pressed teachers."

"Today there is a vast spiritual vacuum in people ...and in school."

"We have always had temporary vocations in our Institute. More Brothers have left than have stayed."

"We must remember the Lasallian Icons of the Heroic Vow and of the First Vows. Those Brothers were a small but effective group. God often uses the small and the insignificant."

"It appears that the future does not hold too much for us."

"It takes as much faith to live as it does to die."

"I do not see our situation as a death. I am very optimistic about our Lasallian Associates."

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