

Learning about life, thinking and community

# Forming community leaders

**Pat Santoianni**

*The Diploma in Community Leadership is sponsored by the branch of the Sophia University in Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC).*

*A shared economy, fraternity, sustainability, social transformation: these are the key words of the training course which is available to the entire region of Latin America and where learning is takes place in the community. Pat Santoianni, the coordinator of the project, speaks to us about it.*

Despite its enormous natural resources, Latin America is the most unequal continent in the world. Systemic violence, corruption, crime and especially poverty represent major problems and challenges for the people.

On the other hand, the sense of belonging and community that characterizes the region offers enormous potential for the shared search for possible solutions. However, this requires the presence and action of leaders who are able to interpret the profound significance of these challenges and can attempt to solve them through the active involvement of different sectors of society.

As in so many other parts of the world, such leadership is scarce in Latin America. It is no surprise that in an initial exploring of the issues affecting the continent carried out by the working team that promoted the opening of a Latin American branch of the Sophia University Institute (Sophia-ALC), we were faced with the request to dedicate the first academic offering to the training of community leaders. It needed to be a training experience, therefore, which started from a dialogue with the surrounding reality and which sought concrete answers.

## **Community leadership**

The word "community" is not simply a term which has been 'tacked on'. It is the central feature of the kind of leadership that is needed in Latin America and this has had a great impact on the design of the training program where learning focuses on what it is that makes communities.

The methodology of the course has three fundamental pillars: a community experience; an experience that integrates thought and life; and a look at the context from the viewpoint of

a Latin American world-view whose source is contained in the spirituality of its peoples, in the historical religions and in all the different expressions of spirituality present on the American continent.

An attempt is made to look at reality by integrating thought with life starting from personal experience and from contact with the "wounds" of one's own community in order to explore the possibilities of a new style of leadership.

The training of the teaching staff and the preparation of the curriculum included the active participation of specialists from various fields. As well as opening up to the ongoing experiences at other universities and to exchange ideas with other institutions, the professors seek to understand public policies according to the particular environment in which the students are living.

In this way, small communities are formed where experiences are shared, reading is carried out together and everyone takes an interest in the other's projects. Each community is supervised by a tutor who gives feedback to the professors.

Altogether, professors, tutors and students form an even larger community. The participants are quite varied: leaders of indigenous communities, pastors, priests, religious, school directors... from different countries and with different academic and cultural backgrounds.

### **Concrete commitment**

By virtue of the commitment to the idea of integrating thought and life, it is proposed that students identify an area in which they already work or would like to work in in order to implement community leadership. Thus, each individual transformation should also have a social repercussion as well.

Since the first session, which had 80 taking part, a wide variety of projects have been undertaken in different areas: educational, legal, corporate, domestic, neighborhood, ecclesial and pastoral. One of these, for example, was a person from Argentina who was motivated to work with Caritas in housing construction projects in poor neighborhoods. Because of what she learned during the course, she was able to enrich the project by strengthening, on the one hand, the natural leadership that arises in communities and, on the other, promoting networking with other institutions and colleagues already involved in similar projects.

In the second edition of the course, the majority of the participants were already working or wanted to apply their final project to areas related to social education and to church or religious activities. One student, for example, presented a project for the inclusion of people with hearing impairments who wanted to study for a law degree through the implementation of a series of tools and practices so that both faculty and students could adapt learning and curricula to cater for this part of the population.

Of course, the fruitfulness of this community goes beyond the formal duration of the course. In fact, the experience continues even after graduating, giving rise to communities that continue to be alive, to support each other and to the sharing of projects and work.