

Queen of Angels Montessori School

How Our School Began

By Dan Teller

Origin of an Idea

In 1996, Dan Teller conceived of the idea of a Catholic Montessori school, a school that would provide Montessori education within a Catholic spiritual environment, while working as principal at St. Bernadette School. Initial encouragement from Sr. Kathryn Ann Connelly, then superintendent of archdiocesan schools, and David Kahn, director of North American Montessori Teachers Association (NAMTA), lent impetus to this idea. When Dan learned about the Catechesis of the Good Shepherd and visited Betty Hissong's school in Cleveland, the idea took more definite shape: a Catholic Montessori school integrating Montessori education with the Catechesis of the Good Shepherd.

Sharing the Vision

Dan sent letters to a number of local pastors requesting the opportunity to offer a parent meeting describing the concept of Catholic Montessori education. Using a NAMTA video about Montessori education, slides from the atrium at Mrs. Hissong's school, and insights from his own experience as a public Montessori teacher and Catholic school principal, Dan sought to elicit enough parent interest to help his initial vision take shape.

One of these letters crossed the desk of Fr. Giles Pater, pastor at St. John Fisher Church in Newtown. Although great interest had surfaced in Mason, where over 30 people attended the meeting and where demand for parochial education far exceeded neighborhood school capacities; and interest was also high in Madeira, where over 20 people attended a meeting at Dan's home parish, St. Gertrude; the most successful of these informational meetings took place at St. John Fisher, where just two people attended. One of those in attendance was Fr. Pater. Fr. Pater listened intently to Dan's presentation, particularly the part describing the Catechesis of the Good Shepherd. A day or two later, he continued the conversation, which led to the possibility of using a small 15' x 22' room in the parish education building to start this yet-unnamed Catholic Montessori preschool. Furthermore, Fr. Pater suggested approaching the Parish Council to see if this arrangement could be rent-free!

Putting a Foundation Beneath a Dream, with Help from the Blessed Mother

With Fr. Pater's interest and support, the possibility of a real place provided a cornerstone for building a "concrete foundation" to support the concept of Catholic Montessori education. The next steps were to establish a founding Board, begin necessary legal arrangements, and give the idea a name. Drawing from parents who had attended the parish informational meetings and from several generous friends, Dan gathered the founding Board for a Catholic Montessori school.¹

Still, there was no name for the potential school until one evening, while washing the dinner dishes together, Dan's wife Maureen suggested naming the school for Mary.

¹ One of these founding members, John Gruber, is still a Trustee for the school, and two others, Stephen-Albainy Jenei and Keith Boehme, recently resigned after three full terms on the Board.

Looking through a litany to honor the Blessed Mother, the Lord inspired them to choose “Queen of Angels” as the nascent school’s title. And thus, in this quiet and humble circumstance, the vision was placed in the hands of the Blessed Mother and took on a name in her honor.

Dan’s father, an attorney, helped draft the necessary articles of incorporation for “Queen of Angels Montessori School” and using the kitchen table, Dan completed the necessary paperwork for tax-exempt status for the school. In the spring of 1997, the State of Ohio returned the official articles of incorporation. The state had dated this official beginning of Queen of Angels Montessori on March 25 – the Feast of the Annunciation.

Setting Goals and Developing a Plan

Now the two major tasks facing this infant organization were to raise funds and attract students.

An initial grant proposal set a goal of raising \$25,000 for start-up costs. This figure was based on the cost of Montessori materials and furnishings for one classroom, plus a few pieces of office equipment. Quickly, this figure was revised. Advisors stressed the importance of a much higher goal – one that would create a cash reserve for an endeavor likely to run at a deficit for its first year or two; a goal that would support start-up costs for the first several years of the school’s growth plan; and a goal large enough that any potential major funder would not need to assume the lion’s share of support in starting up the school. So the start-up fundraising goal was set at \$100,000.

His wife enduring the late-night glare of his bedroom computer screen, Dan re-drafted a proposal that included a \$100,000 budget and outlined an ambitious growth plan for the new school: starting with one class of preschool and kindergarten students, the program would grow one grade level per year through eighth grade.

Parents’ feedback at the early informational meetings had clearly indicated their desire to select a school that extended through eighth grade. For most parents interested in a Catholic Montessori program, the alternative choice for schooling would be a traditional K-8 Catholic parish school. The idea of a Montessori program that ended after sixth grade was unappealing because it would entail moving the child to a new environment for the two years of junior high school at a socially-sensitive time of development. Even though their children were just toddlers or preschoolers at this early planning stage, parents clearly indicated that they wanted Catholic education through the junior high years. Therefore, from its genesis, Queen of Angels took on the vision and mission of educating children through eighth grade.

On the one hand, this ambitious growth plan committed the school to a demanding pace for growth that has provided real challenges. QAMS has not been able to follow the more traditional model of growing a Montessori school by firmly establishing one level before starting the next. Parents have taken an even greater leap of faith than most Montessori parents with a rapidly-growing school that is creating a track record as it matures. Staff difficulties common to any school have had a greater impact on QAMS

because of the fragility of its new, rapidly growing program and the anxiety of many parents who have committed their children to unchartered educational waters.

Nevertheless, this rapid growth plan has been a major reason for the school's significant growth in its short history. An important value for most parents in selecting QAMS has been the school's clear commitment to developing its program through eighth grade. It has been this unwavering commitment, stated from the outset in the QAMS Mission Statement ("the education of children ages three through fourteen") that has both attracted many parents to the school and helped them make the decision to remain there through their child's elementary years.

Early Successes

An endeavor such as Queen of Angels could only get off the ground in a culture of idealism and generosity. Fortunately, the school's vision touched the hearts of people with these qualities. The first major contribution came from the mother of David Meconi, a young Jesuit seminarian and friend of the Tellers. Attracted by the school's vision, David took the grant proposal to his mother in Paw Paw, Michigan, where she had run St. Julian's Winery. He left her reading the proposal in her armchair late at night, and returned to Cincinnati with the news that she would give \$3,000 to the cause! Family lent support as well. Dan's parents contributed, and his mother-in-law, Dorothy Grant, donated the proceeds from a large life insurance policy that her friend had left to her.

At this time, the school's physical reality was confined to Dan's bedroom computer and a post office box in Newtown. Although periodic checks of this box yielded the expected letters of rejection to the grant proposal, two local foundations sent letters awarding \$5,000 gifts: the Thomas Emery Memorial and the Louise Semple Taft Foundation. The fact that there had been no personal contact with these foundations made these gifts even more surprising and delightful – a testimony to the strength of their trustees' conviction in the concept of combining Montessori education with spiritual values.

Another Door Opens; Parents Commit to the Vision

By early 1998, the school had raised \$40,000. At this time, a second important door opened (the first being the opportunity to locate at St. John Fisher). Spotting a school listing in a local directory for Miami Valley Christian Academy in Newtown, Dan called to inquire about the possibility about leasing classroom space there. Two days later, the pastor of the school's sister church, Faith Christian Fellowship Church, was giving Dan a tour of the spacious unused classrooms in the old brick school building that housed FCFC and their own fledgling school, MVCA. True to their name, the elders of FCFC responded to Queen of Angels' interest with fellowship. In addition to their openness to hosting a Catholic organization within their own non-denominational facility, they offered the incredible rent of \$300 per month, heat included! Furthermore, the upper wing of the building had a series of empty classrooms that offered Queen of Angels the opportunity to expand after its first year (FCFC gave just a two year commitment to QAMS at the outset).

And so in February 1998, the venue for the new program changed from the tiny 300+ square foot space at St. John Fisher to the spacious 900 square foot schoolrooms at FCFC. With warm sentiments of gratitude to Fr. Pater and his Parish Council (and hopes for a continued relationship that were realized in the near future), the QAMS Board entered into a one-year lease with FCFC with a verbal agreement for a one year extension but probably no more.

With funds coming in and a firm site secured, it was time to attract students. This posed the challenge of setting up the school's first classroom before the school owned any furniture or equipment. Drawing upon friends in the local Montessori community, boxes stored in his attic from his earlier years teaching at North Avondale Montessori, and ransacking his own house for child-sized furniture and shelves, Dan began loading his old pick-up truck and carting materials over to the second-floor classroom at FCFC. He dusted off weathered old tables found in an empty classroom down the hall and covered them with sheets and tablecloths. He posted photos of children working from his own Montessori classroom on the classroom's slate boards and walls. He displayed home-made and borrowed Montessori materials with placards explaining the educational aim of the equipment. A model altar and several atrium materials on loan from the sole CGS catechist in Cincinnati were available. Slowly, what resembled a Catholic Montessori classroom took shape – at least enough of a shape to give parents a sense of what the new environment would offer to children.

Invitations were mailed to anyone who had attended an early informational meeting, notices were published in parish bulletins, and a series of Open Houses began. Two local Montessorians, Keith Boehme and Nora Frei were members of the young QAMS Board and joined Dan in greeting prospective parents and explaining the value of a Montessori education.

The Board faced the dilemma of tuition for the inaugural year: how to charge enough to support the new program, set a tuition precedent that was not unduly low for future precedence, yet still attract parents to a totally new, unproven program that could offer only a clear and exciting vision for children in the corner classroom of an aging school building? The Board settled on tuition of \$2,000 with a 10% discount for those parents who broke the ice by registering before mid-April. On the one hand, this tuition level expressed the school's commitment to be as affordable as possible for local families, and reflected the reality of the risk parents faced as they enrolled their children in a program whose real attraction was the founder's vision and passion. On the other hand, the low tuition rate began the ongoing challenge of supporting a high-quality program whose major revenue is tuition dollars. Since the school's inception, the Board has wrestled with this challenge of funding high-quality education with low-end tuition, with not a few creative ideas for finding ways to stay true to both ideals.

Taking the Leap

Throughout this entire process, in the background loomed the big question for Dan – when to take the leap from his secure position at St. Bernadette to the commitment to support himself and his family with a fledgling preschool. By late April of 1998, the

school had raised \$53,000 and had enrolled 13 students through its ongoing Open Houses. This was the time to make the move, and that spring Dan informed his pastor at St. Bernadette that he would not be returning the following year.

Borrowed materials were returned and new ones ordered. Friends and Board members helped paint the classroom and unpack furniture and equipment. More families continued to call about the school, and in August of 1998, Queen of Angels opened its doors to a total enrollment of 28 children in its morning and afternoon sessions. By the end of its first year, the enrollment would grow to 33 as word-of-mouth news spread about the new program. Thus ended the “Part I” of the remarkable story of the founding of a new school. But one further note must be told.

The school continued its start-up campaign into the fall of this inaugural year. The most significant gift of the entire campaign was a \$20,000 grant from the Joseph Schott Foundation, thanks largely to the support of trustee Tom Hiltz. The check arrived at Dan’s home on September 8 – the Feast of the Birth of Mary. Praise God and Our Lady for their quiet guidance of this work to further the Kingdom through their little children!