

Board & Care Quality

F O R U M

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L'Arche: Communities Undergirded by Mutually Transforming Relationships

In 1964, Jean Vanier first became aware of the thousands of men and women with intellectual disabilities who were living in institutions throughout France. He felt moved by God and his concern for these adults to invite two men to move from the institution where they had been residing to live with him in a house in Trosly-Breuil, France. Since that time, L'Arche (French for "the Ark") has grown and flourished, with homes (referred to as "communities" by L'Arche) forming in countries around the world, and with the first L'Arche community being established in the United States in Erie, Pennsylvania in 1972.

Today, the International Federation of L'Arche consists of 133 communities in 35 countries around the world which are organized into nine zones. L'Arche USA is one of these nine zones. Each L'Arche community in each country and each zone operates independently, but all are united in their commitment to the L'Arche Statement of Identity and Mission:

Statement of Identity: We are people, with and without developmental disabilities, sharing life in communities belonging to an International Federation. Mutual relationships and trust in God are at the heart of our journey together. We celebrate the unique value of every person and recognize our need of one another.

Our Mission is to:

- * Make known the gifts of people with developmental disabilities, revealed through mutually transforming relationships;
- * Foster an environment in community that responds to the changing needs of our members while being faithful to the core values of our founding story; and
- * Engage in our diverse cultures, working together toward a more human society.

In this interview, Vicki Washek, R.N.-- Executive Director of the L'Arche Erie organization--gives an in-depth look into the life of L'Arche communities. Vicki, who holds bachelor's degrees in biology and in nursing, has worked professionally in the field of nursing as well as within the L'Arche Erie community. She has recently completed 30 years with L'Arche, including several years spent as the L'Arche Coordinator for the Eastern United States. Vicki talks about how L'Arche communities operate and what makes them so unique. She also shares ideas about how adult residential care settings of any type can implement some of the philosophies and principles that undergird the L'Arche communities around the world.

Please start by talking a little bit about the L'Arche communities, including how they are structured and the philosophy--as well as the theology--that is behind all of L'Arche.

"L'Arche communities are individual communities throughout the world that share in the same common vision, identity, and mission at the core of what we do. The communities are linked together in a federation that supports one another and are on the journey of carrying forth this mission together. We are not legally linked beyond being under the umbrella of L'Arche and sharing this common mission.

"There is an accountability to living that mission, and visits by regional coordinators and national coordinators provide supports and resources to help each community do that. But each community is its own legal entity and is incorporated as a non-profit within the state where it is located. A community has its own board of directors that is responsible for the community's financial well-being and to monitor that the community is following the L'Arche mission, keeping us accountable to that as well as to state regulations relative to reimbursement for the services we provide.

"When I am asked what L'Arche is, I like to say that I see

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the government regulations as being there for the health, safety, and well-being of the individuals who live in our homes. That is like a black-and-white picture. The L'Arche philosophy, then, for me, puts the color into that picture. As we live out the core values of our mission and vision, it enriches the health and safety of those who live in the communities, and it brings the colors to the lives and the homes that we have.

“The basic philosophy of L'Arche is to create relationships and a family-like atmosphere in each of the homes based on core values of mutual respect and tending to the strengths, gifts, and growth of every individual in the home. This is for both assistants (what other homes might refer to as staff) and the individuals with disabilities who also reside in the community. The relationship between the people in the home is at the core of that mutual respect and the bringing to life of the family environment.

“We have a lot of traditions, ongoing ways of operating, and expectations that support and nourish those relationships and help them to flourish. Relationship building is at the heart of L'Arche, because the transformation of people then occurs through that family-like environment. The individuals with disabilities have their growth points and experience the transformation. But the core value of L'Arche that adds that color occurs when the assistant--the person who originally came to be of service--discovers he or she is being transformed because of recognizing, appreciating, and benefitting from the giftedness of the individual with the disability.”

[L'Arche] Community members are transformed through relationships of mutuality, respect, and companionship as they live, work, pray, and play together.

*L'Arche USA Website:
Who We Are © 2008*

So, L'Arche is not just about providing services or developing relationships from a top-down model--it appears that it is a very egalitarian model, with assistants being equal to the persons with disabilities with whom they live and work.

“The best way to think about it is living life in a circle, or as St. Paul uses the analogy of the body in Corinthians. In either of those perspectives, it is recognized that each person within the circle or within the body has certain roles and responsibilities that add to the life and the gifts of the home.

“My role and responsibility right now as community leader here in Erie comes from my gift of leadership. But we don't view that as any more important than the particular gift of any of the individuals in our homes. One of the core members (what other homes might call residents) in one of our homes could

teach anybody in the world how to welcome somebody to his home. His gift of welcome is every bit as important as my gift to provide leadership to the organization.”

The belief in the inner beauty of each and every human being is at the heart of L'Arche...and at the heart of being human...We do not discover who we are, we do not reach true humanness, in a solitary state; we discover it through mutual dependency, in weakness, in learning through belonging.

*Jean Vanier in his book, Becoming Human
From L'Arche USA Website: Spirituality © 2008*

These core principles are so important, and they require assistants and core members to all be very active in identifying and recognizing each others' gifts. How are these core principles conveyed to assistants and core members, and how are they helped to grow into the living out of these core principles in daily life within a L'Arche community?

“When a new core member or assistant comes, we verbally introduce the concepts that underlie L'Arche communities. Every person has a journey in learning what it means, understanding it, and accepting it; or choosing to say, ‘No, this is not for me.’

“So, initially, it is just to explain our traditions and home life in whatever way the person can understand it. We discuss that this is the way we live and this is how life is within one of our homes. Then we answer any questions they might have.

“Then, to support growth in understanding, we have a mentoring process of ‘accompaniment.’ People are accompanied by someone who is further along in his or her journey and who has been participating in L'Arche for a longer period of time. That mentor accompanies them and meets with them on a regular basis to see how things are going, to answer questions, to provide insight, and to guide them in their development of living within the community.

“There are weekly meetings for the assistants from individual homes, as well as weekly house meetings. At the house meetings, the functional elements of the week are discussed, such as the schedule for the week, who is doing the grocery shopping, and who is doing other tasks. These are the necessary organizational pieces of those meetings. During those gatherings, however, we may also take the opportunity to share with one another about a specific topic; answer a question together and consider how it affects us; or discuss various writings of Jean Vanier and Henri Nouwen, different L'Arche publications, and other relevant publications and resources that help us to deepen those core values.

“One of L'Arche's core values is trusting in God and the providence of God. Our faith life is a big part of who each of us is

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as an individual. L'Arche is not its own faith or church, but our goal is to support every individual in the faith that he or she has chosen.

“Here in Erie, we have time every Friday afternoon when people--assistants, core members, and administrators--come together in a space we have for worship, and it is led by different members of our community--members of a pastoral team. It is not the worship of any one denomination, but it does have a certain format to it. We sing a song together; share a reading from scripture or another spiritual text; and engage in a gesture of some kind together, whether to share a word or to say a prayer. One time, we made a link of love, in which each person identified how he or she wanted to be loving in the coming week. We took all the paper links on which they wrote their goals for being loving and made a big chain that was hung around the room.

“We have different traditions and ways that we try to bring people along and help them deepen in those core values. We also use modeling for this--being very conscious of our core values and inviting assistants and core members to model and teach those core values to new people as they have come in. We had a new core member come to one of our homes a little over a year ago; he had been living with his family, and he had a little trouble figuring out how to relate with the others in his home. Part of his transition and his integration into the home included talking with the other core members--the other three people who had been living in that home for a number of years--and inviting them to participate in helping him to understand and learn about the home's traditions. At the same time, those core members learned about his traditions and found ways to blend his traditions within the community. We try to include everybody in those discussions to help with the transitions that occur.”

Can you talk about who Jean Vanier is and how he came to found L'Arche?

“Jean Vanier came from a wealthy, political family in Canada. His father had been a Governor-General, and Jean had joined the English Navy at the age of 13. These were his roots.

“When he was in his 20's, Jean discovered that he was no longer interested in staying in the military and instead began more of a spiritual journey, which included earning a doctorate in philosophy. He grew close to a Dominican priest, Pere Thomas Philippe, who was living in France. Through Jean's conversations with and through the leadership of Pere Thomas, Jean came to realize that he was meant to live out the Beatitudes by dwelling among those who are in poverty. Pere Thomas at the time was connected with a small institution for men with intellectual disabilities. That was Jean's introduction to persons with this type of disability.

“Originally, Jean simply invited two men to move out of the institution and into a house with him. This was how he was going to serve the poor. Immediately, the transformation for Jean began to take place when the two men with whom he was

living insisted that they be treated with respect, emphasizing that they had something to say, too. It was easy for Jean to come to this arrangement from a military background, believing he would be in charge and give the orders and that the others would do what he said to do. But through the relationship building of friendship with these men, he discovered that they also had a part to play and gifts to give within this family as it was growing.

“His original vision was just something he wanted to start for himself, but he found that other people were attracted to it as well, and it just took off from there. It started to grow and, within a few years, there were communities being founded in India and in Canada, then in other countries, such as the United States.

“It became an international and an interfaith movement. Jean Vanier and Pere Thomas were both Roman Catholic, so L'Arche had Roman Catholic roots in France. But when L'Arche went to India, it was welcoming people who were Hindu and Muslim. The Daybreak community in Toronto, Canada, was founded in an Anglican tradition. So, as I said, we are not a church, but we are faith-based because the communities were founded on the basis of various faiths. We have that ecumenical aspect to us as well.

“L'Arche was founded out of respect for others, and a lot of people were attracted to this way of living. As a result, communities started growing up all over the world.”

L'Arche believes that these qualities, expressed through vulnerability and simplicity, actually make those with a disability our real teachers about what is most important in life: to love and be loved.

*L'Arche USA Website:
Welcome to L'Arche USA © 2008*

What have been some of your personal experiences of the power of the mutually transforming relationships that develop and thrive within the L'Arche communities?

“One powerful story is of a woman who is currently in her 70's; I will call her Mary. She moved into one of our homes in 1986, coming directly from Polk Institution here in Pennsylvania.

“I was an assistant on the team that was welcoming Mary to L'Arche. She came with a great deal of anxiety that we could actually observe because when she was anxious, she was always fiddling with something in her hands. When she was very anxious, she would walk in a circle around the dining room table. She also engaged in a lot of negative self-talk, saying ‘She can't have no dolls,’ ‘She can't have no gift.’ We interpreted it as a painful reaction to Mary feeling rejected by her family when she was placed in an institution.

“Within a few years, she was developing strong

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relationships with different individuals within the community. She started to thrive a little bit more with those relationships, and suddenly, after about six years, this woman who had always said, 'She can't cry,' and 'She ain't going to cry,' was crying at everything. It was as though years of pent-up emotion and holding back her tears suddenly began to overflow, and for a few years, she cried 'at the drop of a hat.'

"She finally was able to ask people to be in relationship with her. If she saw people who had been assistants in her home in past years, she would ask, 'Did you miss me?' She would ask people if they were going to bring her a present. Mary finally got to the point of wanting to receive gifts whereas in the early years here, she couldn't even accept a present.

"Now, Mary is the most peaceful and loving woman. She is proud of herself and she smiles all the time. When she comes to see us here in the office, she'll say, 'Did you hear about it? I went shopping!' or 'How are you feeling?' Her capacity to be part of a relationship has grown, and that transformation has occurred because she is in an environment where she is valued for her friendship and as a person."

How have you received from your involvement with the core members at L'Arche Erie?

"I was in a highly competitive major my first time in college: I was in a pre-med program. I have always been achievement oriented, and I think one of the big changes in me has been to learn to value things that don't have 'achievement' written all over them. Working with someone, learning how to be patient, learning better how to express my own feelings--these are ways that L'Arche has changed me."

You comment on the gifts that all members of the L'Arche community--including core members--bring to their homes. What are some of the gifts that you have experienced from the core members of L'Arche Erie?

"One man, who died several years ago, had the most beautiful faith life and prayer life. I learned so much from how Joe trusted in God and prayed to Jesus, as well as his praying of the rosary and deep faith in Mary. That was a gift that Joe had. There is another gentleman who lives in one of our homes who is non-verbal and who uses a wheelchair; his peacefulness is so evident; assistants will just sit next to him to experience the peacefulness and acceptance that radiates from his eyes.

"Yet another gentleman has the gift of teaching us how to accept trials and challenges in our lives. He also uses a wheelchair and has now moved to his own apartment, but he is still a part of our community. He takes his struggles and 'makes lemonade out of lemons.' Another gentleman who lives here has amazing forgiveness that comes on like a light switch. He can be struggling with you, such as when he is experiencing fear about something like his TB test. There may be fear and anger and

frustration, but as soon as the incident is over, he is immediately able to forgive and forget the situation and move on to the next thing. People learn a lot from that--instead of holding on to grudges, we should instead let go and forgive. We have thirty-three different core members, so I could go on and on about the gifts they bring to our community."

What can the owners and operators of more traditional board and care homes take from the L'Arche model and apply to their own residential care settings?

"One of the easiest things to take from what L'Arche has learned over the years about how to interact with each other in the home and create the kinds of growth and relationships that we experience is to be very conscious of listening well to each other. That is a key place where we keep calling ourselves and each other back to our basic principles--to truly listen to what each person is saying. That is where heart meets heart and where relationships are really developed with each other.

"Nobody really grows from being told where they have deficiencies. But when you accept somebody else's weaknesses and struggles and appreciate their gifts and strengths--and when you really do that, without faking it or being insincere--that's where we discover that people really grow. People do not grow when you tell them, 'You are doing that wrong, let me show you the right way.' People grow more when they are recognized for the gifts they have to give. People can then grow past their struggles and flourish into those relationships.

"It all comes down to those heart to heart listening moments, and appreciating the values and the gifts of everyone authentically. You don't make something up; you look for what is there, because God has put something there in each person to be discovered and celebrated."

The secret of L'Arche is relationship: meeting people, not through the filters of certitudes, ideologies, idealism, or judgments, but heart to heart; listening to people with their pain, their joy, their hope, their history, listening to their heart beats.

Jean Vanier
L'Arche Founder
L'Arche USA Website: Who We Are © 2008

For more information about L'Arche USA, go to their website at www.larcheusa.org. This website offers information about L'Arche, resources to identify communities throughout the country, an application for persons interested in becoming assistants, and links to *Letters of L'Arche* Magazine and letters written by Jean Vanier. The L'Arche USA office can also be contacted at 1130 SW Morrison Street, Suite 230, Portland, Oregon, 97205

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