

The Contribution of L'ARCHE to the Lives of People who have an Intellectual Disability and to Canadian Society

Those who know the size of some other groups that provide housing or day programs for people with intellectual disabilities—Community Living Associations, for example—will know that L'Arche is not very big. In its 29 communities across Canada, L'Arche provides services for fewer than 800 individuals. So, why is L'Arche important? Why do many people point to its contributions?

1. L'Arche is respected as a model for the quality of life it offers people who have an intellectual disability. In L'Arche homes, workshops and recreational programs, people with and without intellectual disabilities share life together.

Beyond the need for good housing, the lack of friends and then lack of interesting activities are most often cited as the deepest suffering of people who have an intellectual disability. L'Arche holds up a standard that goes beyond just good care and offers a life together with others who do not bear the label of being disabled. In this shared life, relationships of friendship and reciprocity (mutuality) develop, in which each person gives and receives. L'Arche also seeks to ensure each person has



meaningful work or daytime activities. It has many creative workshops and recreational programs where people of differing ability can develop and contribute their gifts and where, as they work together and genuine friendships can develop.

When Canada Mortgage and Housing conducted a survey of housing for people with disabilities in 2006, it declared L'Arche “the only best practice it could recommend” among group homes. It was named a best practice because of its family-like environment. (See note on the

L'Arche model on p. 3 of this document:

<http://www.cmhc-schl.gc.ca/odpub/pdf/65011.pdf?lang=en>

See below for responses to some FAQs about life in L'Arche communities.

2. L'Arche has had a respected voice in public policy-making from the beginning of the de-institutionalization movement. In France in 1964, when Jean Vanier started L'Arche by inviting two men from an institution to share a home with him, he was doing something very radical. Not only that, but he soon realized that the men he had welcomed had important



lessons about life to teach him—lessons about the importance of living from our hearts and not just our minds, about acceptance of “the other” who is different from us, and about forgiveness and celebration and laughter. Today, Jean Vanier continues to live in the original L’Arche community and to write and speak about those who are marginalized, calling young people especially to work for peace and justice (for peace begins with understanding those who are different from us), and calling our society to recognize and receive the contributions of people with disabilities.

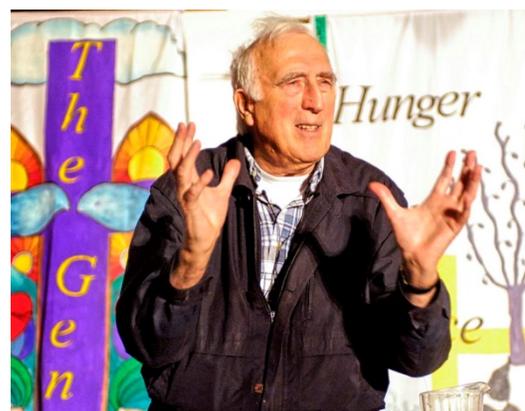
When L’Arche was started in Canada in 1969, Steve and Ann Newroth, who had lived with Vanier and the others in France, planted this same radical vision of a shared life as friends in homes in ordinary neighbourhoods. L’Arche joined with families and others opposed to the institutionalization of people with disabilities to fight for funding and for their rights as citizens to live in our society and to share their contributions. (For more on this, see the documents “Some Early Advocacy Work by L’Arche in Canada” and “The Seeding of L’Arche in Canada.”)

In the 1970s, when there were very few options for people with intellectual disabilities other than living in an institution or living their entire life with their parents, L’Arche opened 16 communities across Canada. These communities welcomed many people from institutions. Today, there are 29 Canadian communities (see map at www.discoverwith.ca). With more options for people who need homes, L’Arche has been extending the spaces and opportunities it can offer in its communities that are already established and has been opening new communities at a slower rate. At the same time, L’Arche continues to collaborate with other organizations to work for the rights of people with disabilities to full inclusion.

3. L’Arche Canada creates well-regarded educational resources for intermediate and secondary schools that encourage inclusion and the valuing of diversity. A number of these resources are recommended by Curriculum Services Canada. L’Arche resources have been used by the Alberta Ministry of Education to create the online resource, “Jean Vanier: A Canadian Inspiring the World.” (See www.larche.ca/en/education .) Many local L’Arche communities also offer speaker teams to give presentations in schools or host visits of senior students to their communities.

4. Jean Vanier and L’Arche have long worked to change attitudes in society so that all people can belong and contribute. (Vanier photo: WP Wittman, Youth Forum, 2009)

From the 1960s, Jean Vanier has spoken out about social justice issues, focusing especially on the situation of people who are marginalized. Vanier often visited prisons and nursing homes as well as institutions where thousands of people with disabilities were

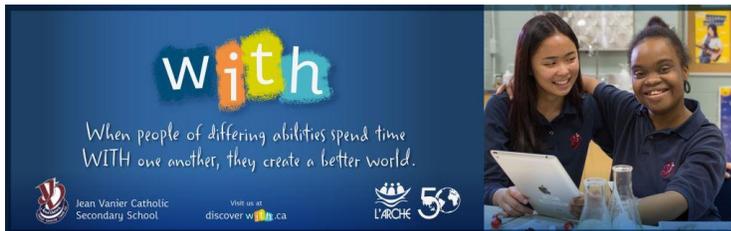




housed, often in very barren conditions. In his CBC Massey Lectures and in many other public talks and in his writings he has urged us to create a society where every person can belong and contribute. As an internationally recognized humanitarian, Jean Vanier has received many awards and honours including the Companion of the Order of Canada, the Legion of Honour (France).

Jean Vanier writes, “Can we reasonably have a dream, like Martin Luther King, of a world where all people, whatever their race, religion, culture, abilities or disabilities...can find a place and reveal their gifts...?” (*Becoming Human*, p. 98) For more information on Jean Vanier visit: <http://www.jean-vanier.org/en/home>

L’Arche seeks to spread awareness that our society is enriched when people of differing abilities share life together and truly come to know and appreciate one another. L’Arche members are out and about in their local towns and cities, joining in recreation programs, shopping, banking, eating out and so forth, often with an assistant or friend. Together, they model the message that spending time with



one another is fun for both of them—because it is. In 2014, to mark the 50th anniversary of L’Arche, L’Arche Canada launched the **WITH** ad campaign. Ads in magazines, on public transit and in other locations show two people engaged in some activity and clearly enjoying being together. The message on the ad is, “**When people of differing abilities spend time WITH one another, they help create a better world.**”

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SOME FAQs ABOUT L’ARCHE

What is an intellectual or developmental disability?

L’Arche welcomes adults who have been identified as having an intellectual disability. A person who is labeled as having an intellectual disability (sometimes called a “developmental disability”) is just as fully a person and a citizen as is anyone else. He or she has the same range of likes and dislikes and character traits as any other person. People with intellectual disabilities have limitations in their ability to learn and perform certain daily life skills. Some may learn differently. Some may have other physical or emotional challenges. Often people who have intellectual disabilities are less preoccupied with competition and success than is typical in our society, and they may have a keen sensitivity to relationships and a gift for celebration and for creating unity. L’Arche believes that people with intellectual disabilities

have important contributions to make to others--contributions that help to make our society more welcoming and compassionate for all. To be healthy, a society needs all its citizens.

Reflection question: Do you know someone who has an intellectual disability? What are ways they add to your life or make your life special? Are there things they have taught you or that you could learn from them? (You may think of attitudes that they have, or attributes such as spontaneity or generosity.) With your class, you may want to watch the short video "I AM..." on the Education page of www.larche.ca or lead a process in your class using the suggestions in the Guide that is available with the video.

In L'Arche, people with and without intellectual disabilities live together in homes, much like other families. These homes may not be very different from the one you live in! They also share together in creative daytime and evening activities in and outside the homes.



What does L'Arche mean by "Sharing Life Together?" What is life like in L'Arche?

The big difference between L'Arche homes and other group homes is that L'Arche houses are home for the assistants as well as for those who have intellectual disabilities. Usually each person has their own bedroom. A L'Arche household of eight people might have four people who need help with daily tasks and four assistants. As people living together they become friends and they actively create community among themselves, celebrating one another's special occasions and sharing in one another's losses or sadness, like a family. In a similar way, in L'Arche workshops and day programs, creativity is fostered and friendship and mutuality are encouraged between those who work there and those who help them.

Mutual relationships (relationships in which both individuals give of themselves and receive from the other) are central in L'Arche. L'Arche is not just a place where assistants come to "look after" or "do things for" people who need help. A L'Arche home is a place of growth, where assistants do things "with" those who have a disability and each person is supported to attain his or her full potential. In the sharing of life together, assistants and core members (as the people with disabilities are called in L'Arche) grow as individuals--in their abilities, in awareness of their gifts and the





freedom to share these with others, in self-understanding and the understanding of others. Decisions about the home are made as much as possible at a weekly house meeting, bringing together all the voices of those living in the home, not just those without disabilities. People with intellectual disabilities have choices in their lives, something that historically has been denied them.

Respect and acceptance of one another are key. People with disabilities sometimes have a sense that they are a disappointment. Often people who are very anxious or sad gradually relax and find peace as they discover they are safe and accepted just as they are in L'Arche. Laura, a young person who lived in L'Arche as an assistant and now works with children with autism in schools talks about how L'Arche was important for her: "My time living at L'Arche has enriched my life and has taught me that EVERY ONE has a story to share, a gift to be recognized, a song to sing, moments of vulnerability, and a need for love, respect and acceptance. Living at L'Arche has made my time with family, friends and co-workers rich and meaningful, and I am thankful to all who have opened my eyes and heart to see a beautiful way to live life."

(http://www.larchefoundation.ca/en/impacts/the_impact_of_larche_on_young_leaders)

Click on this link to hear from Kim, a woman with an intellectual disability who lives in L'Arche. She tells us in her own words what it is like to live in L'Arche:

http://www.larchefoundation.ca/en/impacts/the_impact_of_larche_on_people_with_disabilities

This link will lead you to some short videos in which assistants speak about what they have learned in L'Arche. (<http://larche-work.ca/assistants/>)

Reflection question? Did learning about L'Arche make you think about people with disabilities differently? If so, in what ways? If not, why do you think this is?

L'Arche calls itself "Faith-Based." what does this mean?

Jean Vanier is a Roman Catholic and L'Arche has Catholic roots in France where it started. However, very soon, L'Arche became ecumenical and interfaith. The religious composition of individual L'Arche communities generally reflects the composition of the local population. The L'Arche Charter states that L'Arche is committed to help each person grow in their own faith tradition. It does not proselytize.

There are simple customs for a common prayer in most L'Arche homes--lighting a candle at the end of the evening meal where all gather around the table, and a time of prayer and giving thanks for the day, in which anyone may participate.





Forgiveness and celebration and trust in God are at the heart of L'Arche. Although not all who live in L'Arche are religious, those who come to L'Arche accept these basic principles. What is most important is that people respect one another's beliefs and religious practices, and that assistants support the core members to live their own faith traditions.

Why are there not more L'Arche communities?

L'Arche grows slowly for a number of reasons. It is dependent on assistants who want to live in its homes and on funds to purchase homes that are large enough to house both assistants and core members. L'Arche International also has certain requirements in terms of leaders who have L'Arche experience and a stable group of committed local people who can form a circle of friends and a board and together can raise funds.

Also, the L'Arche model does not suit everyone who has a disability. Some people want to concentrate on learning the skills they need to live independently in an apartment, for instance. (Some people in L'Arche do live in apartments, usually with a roommate, but for them to be in L'Arche they must want also to be part of the life of the community...to attend community gatherings and so forth.) As well, life in L'Arche can be too intimate for some people. A person who comes to L'Arche has to be able to live together respectfully with others.

How does L'Arche operate?

The 29 L'Arche communities in Canada stretch from Cape Breton to Vancouver Island. There are also small groups in various locations who are working to eventually start a L'Arche project. (An example is the Cornerstone society in St. John's, NL.) Each community has an elected board of directors. Most L'Arche communities consist of a few homes and often, day programs and creative workshops. Each house will have a house leader, and each community a community leader chosen by its members every 4 years. In larger communities there will be coordinators for the homes and programs and for the assistants and some office staff. In Canada, each community operates autonomously with an elected and unpaid Board of Directors. L'Arche communities in Canada receive provincial government funding, like other organizations that run group homes, but L'Arche also is a registered non-profit organization and raises funds to support the enriched life it offers with its high ratio of assistants. In some provinces people who have intellectual disabilities receive funding directly from the government so they that can purchase a service such as L'Arche.

How is L'Arche Organized beyond the local communities?

L'Arche communities are part of an International Federation of L'Arche and abide by a common charter and key elements document. In Canada, a national umbrella organization, L'Arche Canada, and regional coordinators ensure L'Arche standards are maintained in all of its 29 communities. The office for L'Arche Canada is in Montreal.



In Canada, some L'Arche communities are Anglophone or Francophone and some are bilingual, depending on the predominant languages where they are located. L'Arche Canada prepares all its major documents in both French and English. At the level of L'Arche international, Spanish is also included as an official language. Many other languages, nationalities, and ethnicities are represented in the 146 L'Arche around the world.

Further reading, videos, listening:

You will find other documents related to questions in the Ontario Social Studies, History and Civics curriculum (2014) on the Education page of www.larche.ca . You may want especially to check the documents on “The Seeding of L'Arche in Canada” (the story of Canadian founders Ann and Steve Newroth and the establishment of L'Arche Daybreak in Richmond Hill, Ontario, just north of Toronto), “Some Early Advocacy Work by L'Arche in Canada” and “Institutions and de-Institutionalization.”

A portal to L'Arche in Canada: Here you will find other educational resources, past issues of “A Human Future,” some of which have interviews with Jean Vanier, and also a map with links to the communities across Canada: <http://www.discoverwith.ca/>

A website about friendships: How you can make your school a better place for ALL to belong: <http://www.ibelong.ca>

Two CBC radio documentaries were made in 2014, to mark L'Arche's 50th anniversary: <http://www.cbc.ca/ideas/episodes/2014/09/02/how-to-do-ordinary-things-part-1/>

<http://www.cbc.ca/ideas/episodes/2014/09/09/how-to-do-ordinary-things-part-2/>

Learn more about the founder of L'Arche, Jean Vanier, a Canadian who has been described as “inspiring the world” (Maclean's magazine) and as A Nation Builder (The Globe And Mail): <http://www.jean-vanier.org>

In French: A blog about life in the nine communities of L'Arche in Quebec: <http://www.surlaroutedelarche.org/>

Message from Jean Vanier to “We Day” (2013): <http://youtu.be/UImpZwbVQ2U>

Message from Jean Vanier on bullying: <http://youtu.be/3YPLrbQZkDg>

L'Arche International: www.larche.org