

L'Arche - Community Living for People with Handicaps

A movement of small family-type homes, L'Arche offers to the adult with a handicap the possibilities of security, dignity and the challenge of growth and development. There are two L'Arche communities established at present in Ireland.

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History and Description

Twenty-five years ago in a small French village a dilapidated little house was sold to a scholarly Canadian philosophy professor. It became home for him and for two men with mental handicaps who until then had lived in a psychiatric hospital. They were the first such men to be welcomed into this new community which became known as "L'Arche" ("the ark") after the first little house thus named by its purchaser, Jean Vanier.

In the quarter-century since this humble start, L'Arche has grown to an international federation of 80 communities in 20 countries spanning all five continents. Jean Vanier never intended to start a worldwide movement. He merely wished to lead a quiet life of service with the two men with whom he shared his home. However, what he had done caught the imagination of the 1960's. The spirit of the times was one of experimenting with new ways of living and of new awareness of the social injustice of institutionalisation. Others got to hear of what he was doing and came to join him. New houses were purchased in the village to take more people from the mental hospital. The idea was brought back home to Canada, India and England and little by little L'Arche communities were started in these places and elsewhere.

Young people saw in L'Arche a way to express their idealism and generosity. Many came to help for a short while and stayed for months or years. There grew a realisation that L'Arche was something different in today's world. Living with people with mental handicaps in the late 20th century materialistic culture in some sense provided a foil to this culture. Those who came to live in L'Arche discovered much about this world and themselves - for people with mental handicaps cannot keep up with the fast pace of 20th. century living. They score poorly in a world where brains, beauty and money are indices of success. Being with them involves slowing down, learning to take time, to value the simple things of life.

Valuing Simplicity

The essence of L'Arche is this valuing of simplicity. L'Arche provides a home for persons with handicaps and those who have chosen to live with them. The home is usually a family-type house with five or six people with handicaps and five or six assistants or

helpers. Work is very important; the people with handicaps usually go out to work to a L'Arche workshop or one run by some other agency or perhaps to open employment. The assistants may work in the workshop or in the home. They are paid, usually poorly, and L'Arche is as much their home as it is that of the people with handicaps. There will usually be a number of houses in a community. They may be close together or situated in different parts of a particular neighbourhood. Over the years structures have evolved whereby each community has a committee, formed of local people who live in the neighbourhood, who take legal responsibility for the community, support it and keep a watchful eye on it from the outside.

The community itself is headed by a director who has overall charge and is answerable to the committee. Each house has a house leader. In recent years the communities have become so numerous and widespread that structures have evolved to facilitate national and international exchange among them. So it is that the communities in France for instance, who are relatively affluent, give much material and personnel help to the small poor communities of Bethany in the West Bank or Bouake in the Ivory Coast and Ouagadougou in Burkina Faso. L'Arche communities usually welcome adults with mental handicaps who need a home, but some - particularly those in the third world - welcome children also. Some of the communities welcome people with physical disabilities. The degree of handicap varies from mild to profound. In France the founding community at Trosly has established some houses especially designed to cater for those with severe and profound, often multiple, handicaps.

Community Living

Life in a L'Arche community is simple and ordinary. It is a place where people live their daily lives, celebrate, share the sadnesses and joys of life together. Still, to be successful, community living entails thought and planning. During twenty-five years of L'Arche a great deal has been learned about living in community, about how to enhance it, how to nourish community life, and about the problems and difficulties that can arise in community. Some features of life receive particular attention: celebration is seen to be of great importance and birthdays and other special events are marked by joyful celebrations which have been carefully planned. L'Arche has evolved creativity in devising ways for helping the people with handicaps to participate in the celebrations, through music, movement, art, humour and play. Welcome is an important feature of L'Arche - keeping an open door to visitors and in particular welcoming the neighbours and friends of the locality. Getting to know the local people and joining in the life of the district is very important. A L'Arche house is usually no different from other houses in the area. It aims to be as near as possible to a family home.

Philosophy

The philosophy which guides L'Arche derived initially from Jean Vanier's christian beliefs and his desire to live the gospel message in a radical way. It is summed up in the following extract from the Charter of the Communities of L'Arche:

"We believe that each person, whether handicapped or not, has a unique and mysterious value. The handicapped person is a complete human being and as such he has the rights of every man: the right to life, to care, to education and to work.

Because of his handicap and because he feels rejected, a wounded person may shock or repel. But given an atmosphere of security, where his latent capacities can develop, he can also radiate simplicity, welcome, joy and peace.

The world of suffering and the number of handicapped people rejected, denied work, or shut up in mental handicap hospitals causes deep anxiety. But this anxiety should not paralyse us. It should incite us to work for the rejected by creating communities of peace and to do all we can to encourage our society to develop a greater sense of justice and brotherly concern for all men."

Thus L'Arche is founded firmly on a concern for social justice, in this case rooted in christian beliefs. The communities are christian in orientation, but not exclusive. All religious beliefs are welcomed as are those without any religious beliefs. While the communities are predominantly christian in practice and connected to the wider church, nothing is imposed. In some communities, notably in India, there are people of several religions - Christian, Hindu and Moslem live together. L'Arche believes that every person has a spiritual side to their being which needs nourishment and expression. Provision for this is built into the daily life of L'Arche where the community comes together at the close of day for a quiet time of prayer and reflection for those who wish to partake.

Many of those who come to L'Arche have previously lived in psychiatric hospitals or other institutions. They often bear the scars of institutionalisation. Some may feel the pain of rejection, of being a constant disappointment in a world which has no time for them, a disappointment which perhaps began with their parents. They may need the security of knowing they are loved, of knowing there are people who accept them for themselves, understand their pain and are willing to share their lives. It is thus that the L'Arche home needs to be a small place where the person with handicaps can experience deep human relationships. It needs to be a house integrated into the local town or village where the bonds of friendship and of neighbourliness with the larger community give added strength and security.

A L'Arche home aims to be part of the larger community. In developed countries it is usually funded from statutory sources and as a recognised centre providing a home for people with handicaps is subject to the rules governing such centres and to inspection by statutory officials. The communities usually have psychologists, psychiatrists and other professional staff working on a sessional basis. It organises inservice training for assistants and a 'renewal' programme for those with handicaps.

Assistants

Assistants in L'Arche are predominantly in their twenties - young people who come

and give a year or perhaps a few years of their lives. Increasingly, a core of older people who have put down roots in the communities are serving to provide permanence and stability. The constant turnover of assistants can be seen both negatively and positively: the people with handicaps may form strong relationships with an assistant, who then leaves, thus perhaps reinforcing a pattern of rejection and underlining the hard fact that it is the assistants and not the people with handicaps who can freely choose to stay or leave. It is true that within L'Arche, wherever possible those with handicaps who are capable of living independently and wish to do so will be helped towards that goal. but in reality many cannot do so. The positive side of the large turnover of assistants is the new energy and life it brings to a community. The enthusiasm and commitment of these young people are to be welcomed and help a community to remain young. The young people themselves often leave L'Arche enriched from their contact with people with handicaps, and with a renewed perspective on the sources of divisions in our world.

Difficulties

The danger of becoming an institution is ever present in L'Arche. The original idea was to provide an alternative to institutionalisation for people with mental handicaps. It is easy to imagine how a growing organisation can develop so many rules and regulations that eventually it becomes as rigid as the institutions it was meant to replace. This danger is there and it is truly difficult to attain the fine balance between providing security for people who may have become used to and dependent upon a high degree of structure, and creating a true family-life atmosphere with some flexibility. In order to maintain this atmosphere the community has to live with uncertainty, which is the price to be paid for deinstitutionalisation. Dealing with this uncertainty can be a major task for those in the community and calls for much wisdom on the part of the leaders to resist the temptation to slide into the patterns of institutionalisation. It calls for a good deal of support for the assistants from skilled people who understand community living. L'Arche provides a system of "accompaniment" both for the assistants and the people with handicaps, to help them to live and grow in community, and sees the importance of constant reflection and renewal, lest the original vision be lost.

L'Arche in Ireland

There are two L'Arche communities in Ireland. L'Arche Kilkenny began in 1978. Six people with mental handicaps from the local area were welcomed into the community at Moorefield House in the small village of Kilmoganny. A second house in West Street, Callan has recently opened, where at present there are two people with mental handicap with two others soon to join them. L'Arche Cork began in 1985 in "An Croi" in Wilton where there are six people with handicaps and six assistants. A second house will open soon in the Wilton area. In both communities the majority of those with handicaps came from psychiatric hospitals. There is in both places a substantial waiting list. In these years there has been a regular flow of young people willing to live in L'Arche as assistants. Many young Irish people have gone to live in L'Arche communities abroad. Funding for L'Arche

comes from small annual grants - from the Department of Health to L'Arche Cork and from the South Eastern Health Board to L'Arche Kilkenny. The D.M.P.A. (Disabled Person's Maintenance Allowance) and occasional fund-raising provide the balance. The communities' funding is precarious and they are forced to live very poorly. In the present economic climate obtaining further funding is extremely difficult. Transferring a person with a handicap from an institution to the community does not entail automatic transfer of the funds required to maintain that person. A large number of people would have to leave the institution for this to happen.

Towards the Future

Although L'Arche has a role to play as part of the provision for people with handicaps, and the need is there, it is growing very slowly in Ireland. It is hoped eventually to establish a community in Dublin and one in Galway. The nature of L'Arche is such that primacy is placed on the individual person with a mental handicap and on her/his growth; on the forming and deepening of human relationships within which the person can grow. This takes time and patience. It would not be possible within the L'Arche framework to transfer large numbers of people from institutions. Nonetheless, Ireland needs alternatives to institutional living for people with handicaps. In *Towards a Full Life: Green Paper on Services for Disabled People* (1983) it was stated that the *Report of the Working Party on Services for Mentally Handicapped* (1980) revealed a considerable level of misplacement in residential care, that one third of those with mental handicaps (2227 persons) who were in residential accommodation in 1974 could suitably be maintained in the community. This was balanced by 2307 persons with mental handicaps in the community who were considered to be in need of residential care. In addition, this report states that a further census of the mentally handicapped in 1981 revealed that 29% of the census population (2377 people) were being maintained in psychiatric hospitals. Much needs to be done to provide a range of suitable options for people with handicaps and their families. L'Arche is an example of one type of option which ought to be available. Many other options are also needed.